

Going to school of greater benefit than staying away

Experts say attendance outweighs risks

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THE benefits to children attending school far outweigh the risks to both children and the broader community, paediatricians have said.

The Paediatrician Management Group and the South African Paediatric Association have argued that there was no clear evidence that closing schools significantly reduced community transmission or overall Covid deaths.

The organisations called for all grades to be allowed to return to school as soon as possible. “Those school communities which are at risk, either due to high local transmission rates or poor infrastructure, should be identified and supported immediately to mitigate their risks so that schools can reopen as soon as possible.

“Where schools are unable to reopen, the Department of Basic Education must still ensure all learners continue to have adequate academic material via radio, television, cell-

phone applications and all other means necessary. Educators must be held accountable for providing academic support and material at all times,” the paediatricians said.

Dr Fiona Kritzinger, a paediatric pulmonologist, said children aged 0–18 in South Africa accounted for only 5% of Covid-19 cases. “Children and young people have a lower susceptibility to Sars-CoV-2, with 56% lower odds of being an infected contact.

“South African data on Covid-19 case distribution by age shows that children aged 5 to 9 years have an incidence of 15 cases per 100 000 population; 10- to 14-year-olds have an incidence of 22 per 100 000 population, and 38 per 100 000 in children 15 to 19 years old. In comparison, the incidence in the 20- to 60-year-old groups varies between 94, and 228 per 100 000 population.”

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Kritzinger said evidence points towards very limited spread of Covid19 between children: “There are no reported large outbreaks in schools in any country. This supports the argument that asymptomatic children attending schools are unlikely to be significant spreaders of the disease.”

The reopening of schools had also not resulted in any significant outbreaks at a population level, she said.

South African children remained at greater risk of death due to injury or pneumonia. “Even though there is scant data on the role of comorbidities in children, the Department of Basic Education has already made provision to allow high-risk learners to stay at home,” Kritzinger said.

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