

Dear Parents,

There are always a few nerves before the first day back at the start of a new school year. This year, understandably, there may well be some parents who have particular worries about their children returning to the classroom.

So first and foremost, I would urge you to keep in mind that all four of our country's chief medical officers, including Chris Whitty, are unanimous in believing the health risk posed by Covid-19 to children is extremely low.

An extensive study by the British Medical Journal this week said that the risk of severe illness due to Covid for children was 'vanishingly small' and the chance of them being admitted to hospital because of the virus was 'tiny'.

In fact, it is generally accepted that there is a far greater risk to children's health and wellbeing if they *don't* go to school. The chief medical officers said in their joint statement: 'Very few, if any, children or teenagers will come to long-term harm from COVID-19 due solely to attending school. This has to be set against a certainty of long-term harm to many children and young people from not attending school.'

But more than that, I want to reassure you that huge lengths have been taken to prepare all our schools for this moment.

Over the past few weeks, the Schools Minister Nick Gibb and I have been visiting schools and seeing for ourselves some of the fantastically innovative ways they will be looking after children.

And I'd like to reassure you how these safeguards will help minimise the risk of infection:

- Primary children will stay in groups to reduce the risk of spreading the virus.
- In the event of local restrictions being put in place, older children and staff will wear face coverings in communal areas where they can't easily social distance.
- Strict hygiene and cleaning protocols are in place and PPE is being distributed to every school to bolster their supplies for use in the unlikely event that a pupil develops Covid symptoms. A small number of home test kits are also being distributed to all schools for anyone who develops symptoms and is not easily able to get tested.
- Local authorities have been given an extra £40 million to increase school transport to reduce pressure on public transport. But it would be far better if any pupils who can do so, walked or cycled to school.

Based on this, our priority now is to get all our children back. It really is the best place for them to be. Nothing can match being in a classroom with a real teacher to inspire them and their friends to share their discoveries.

Your school will have undoubtedly talked you through all the measures they are taking to keep children and teaching staff as safe as possible. The National Association of Head Teachers has said *that 97 per cent of schools plan* to welcome all pupils full-time from the start of the autumn term and will be using all the recommended safety measures to do so.

For example, 96% of them have put in place extra cleaning regimes and 93% will be staggering lunch and breaktimes.

I know these past few months have been some of the most challenging that schools, parents and, most of all, children have faced. After all, we've been dealing with a previously unknown virus that caused a global pandemic. But I know you will want to join me in saying an enormous thank you to all our dedicated school staff for the incredible efforts they have made to keep children on track.

If a child is not in school, they stand to lose far more than just a few months of learning. It could well put a huge dent in their future life chances. Education is a birthright, so let's make sure we get all children back – back to learning, back to playing and back to being kids again.