



01 December 2021

Dear Parent/Guardian,

The ongoing efforts by parents and children to adhere to the public health advice during this pandemic has been fundamental to our work to drive down the incidence of COVID-19 in the community.

Our priority continues to be to minimise risk and protect as many people as possible from severe illness. As you are aware, the National Public Health Emergency Team monitors incidence of COVID-19 in all age cohorts and environments on an ongoing basis.

In a very short period of time, we have seen a significant and rapid deterioration in the epidemiological situation, and a resultant very high incidence in the as-yet-unvaccinated 5 – 11-year-old age group. This is a cause for some concern.

Schools are at the heart of our communities and they play a fundamental role in the social lives and wellbeing of our children; this is particularly true for children who have special educational needs, are disadvantaged or who may have been disproportionately impacted by school closures during the pandemic. It is therefore imperative that we move quickly as soon as we notice a significant change in incidence.

In addition to the **general public health advice to reduce discretionary social contact** and for at least the **next two weeks**, the following events and activities should be avoided:

- Indoor birthday parties and play dates – these should take place outdoors and should be kept small
- Sleepovers
- Indoor community gatherings involving children including communions, confirmations, nativity and other seasonal events

Further to this, parents should:

- **Not let children attend school or creche if they have any symptoms of COVID-19.** Help them to isolate at home and arrange a PCR test straight away.
- Reduce their own contacts. This means **work from home** unless it is essential to attend the workplace in person, it also means making difficult decisions to **avoid indoor social gatherings**.
- Meet others outdoors where possible.
- Wear a mask if you cannot keep a distance from others.
- Ensure that your child wears a mask if it is recommended for them.
- If anyone in your household is symptomatic, they should isolate and get a PCR test. You should not use or rely on the results of an antigen test if you have symptoms



- If your child is a close contact of a case in school, you may be asked to use antigen tests, supplied by the HSE, as an additional tool. If any stage your child develops symptoms of COVID-19 or an antigen test is 'positive' they should be isolated at home and parents should arrange a PCR test for them.
- One in five young adults are not yet vaccinated, please consider vaccination for any older children in your household not yet protected

I am keenly aware that these measures are not what any of us want to hear, particularly at this time of year. I know this is an additional burden at what has been a very difficult time for all of us, particularly those of us with young families.

That being said, parents have a key role to play in reducing transmission within and between households. At this time of year, young children often display respiratory symptoms, and we know that it gets increasingly difficult to isolate and arrange PCR tests repeatedly. But this remains an essential measure to protect families and the wider community.

When incidence of disease is as high as it at the moment across the country, it means that the force of infection is pushed down through the unvaccinated population and into our unvaccinated young children. While we know that most in this age group will experience a very mild form of this disease if they pick it up, for a small few, they may become severely ill. I am hopeful that if we all make a concerted effort to follow these measures for at least the next two weeks, we can make a real difference to incidence of disease in this cohort and in the wider public.

NPHET has recommended, on a temporary basis, the wearing of face masks for children:

- Aged 9 years and over on public transport, in retail and other indoor public settings as currently required for those aged 13 and over, with exemptions as appropriate; and
- In third class and above in primary school (guidance will issue to schools from the Department of Education on this).

This measure will be subject to review by NPHET in mid-February 2022.

I would also like to note that vaccines are doing an excellent job of preventing severe illness and disease in those who are fully vaccinated. This is really good news, and I welcome the European Medicines Agency (EMA) authorisation of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine for primary school going children (5-11 years). We anticipate receiving further advice from the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC) in the near future.

Many thanks for your continued effort to keep our schools and our wider communities safe.

Yours Sincerely,

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Dr Tony Holohan  
Chief Medical Officer



### **Why is the public Health Advice Changing?**

The measures being announced today are proportionate, to maintain control of the virus, suppress its further spread and to avoid further restrictions.

Incidence of COVID-19 is the second highest it's been since this pandemic began. The only time it was higher was in the second week of January this year.

This means that there is so much infection in the community, it is that little bit harder to avoid picking up this virus.

Vaccines are doing an excellent job of preventing severe illness and disease in those who are fully vaccinated; this is good news, and we expect an update on vaccines for primary school going children (5-11yrs) in the near future, from the EMA and subsequently NIAC.

1 in 3 children between the ages of 12 and 15 years are yet to come forward for vaccination, and 1 in 5 between 16 and 18 are yet to come forward. It is important that anyone who is eligible for a vaccine come forward to get it as soon as possible.

It does however mean that the force of infection is pushed down through the vaccination-eligible population and into our unvaccinated young children.

While we know that most in this age group will experience a very mild form of this disease if they pick it up, for a small few, they may become severely ill.

### **What is the updated advice for parents?**

Parents have a key role to play in reducing transmission within and between households. We know this is an additional burden at what has been a very difficult time for all of us, particularly those of us with young families. At this time of year, young children often display respiratory symptoms, and we know that it gets increasingly difficult to isolate and arrange PCR tests repeatedly. But this remains an essential measure to protect families and the wider community.

Protecting our education system is one of our key priorities. For at least the next two weeks, we can do this by cutting down on our socialisation in other settings.

Therefore, parents should:

- Reduce your own contacts. This means you should work from home unless it is essential to attend the workplace in person, it also means making difficult decisions to avoid indoor social gatherings.
- Meet others outdoors where possible.
- Wear a mask if you cannot keep a distance from others.
- Do not let your child attend school or creche if they have any symptoms of COVID-19. Help them to isolate at home and arrange a PCR test straight away.
- If anyone in your household is symptomatic, they should isolate and get a PCR test. You should not use or rely on the results of an antigen test if you have symptoms.
- If your child is a close contact of a case in school, you may be asked to use antigen tests, supplied by the HSE, as an additional tool. If at any stage your child develops symptoms or an



antigen test is 'positive' they should be isolated at home and you should arrange a PCR test for them.

### **What is the updated advice for children?**

Masks should be worn by children:

- Aged 9 years and over on public transport, in retail and other indoor public settings as currently required for those aged 13 and over, with exemptions as appropriate; and
- In third class and above in primary school.

Unfortunately, we need to ask children to meet fewer friends over at least the next fortnight. This is a really tough thing to do, as this includes many of the events and activities that our young adults and children enjoy the most. For at least the next two weeks, these events should really not take place at all:

- Indoor birthday parties and play dates – these should take place outdoors and should be kept small
- Sleepovers
- Indoor community gatherings involving children including communions, confirmations, nativity and other seasonal events

If you are arranging a birthday party or a play date, this should be with a maximum of one other household and should take place outdoors. No one with symptoms should attend these events.

Children with any symptoms of COVID-19 should not go to creche or school. They should stay at home and parents should arrange a PCR test as soon as you can.

As we have said time and time again, we can protect ourselves, even if we are unvaccinated or have yet to come forward for vaccination by continuing to follow the public health advice. We know this works and that, together, we can break the chains of infection.