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Coronavirus in Kent: Parents, head teachers and experts respond to government plans to reopen schools

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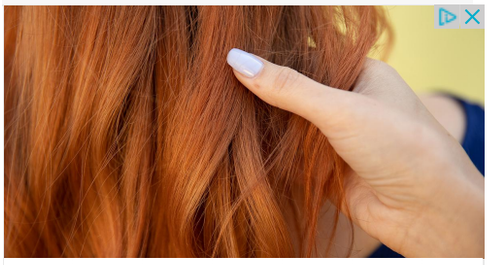
Almost one week since Prime Minister Boris Johnson **announced his plans** to try and reopen schools for children of certain ages, the argument about whether it is the right decision is still raging on.

The government has been at loggerheads with education bosses, teachers, unions and parents over how safe a return to the classroom really is for staff and pupils.

Boris Johnson addressed the nation on Sunday. Picture: BBC

It is also facing pressure from parents attempting to hold down jobs while home schooling their children.

The situation has already caused headaches in **Kent**, with many schools willing to ignore government advice and keep their doors closed "until it is ensured it is safe"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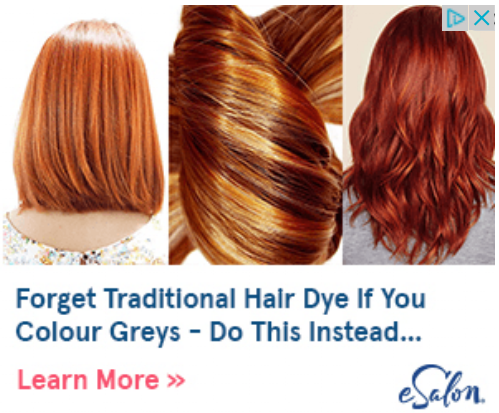
to do so, while others are preparing to greet pupils back on June 1.



Stuart Pywell, who has been head teacher of St Stephen's Juniors School in **Canterbury** for 31 years, is one of the education bosses willing to reopen for certain year groups.

He said: "I think every school's struggling to make its own decisions with regard to the paperwork that's coming out, and I know the minister's meeting trade unions this week, to talk through some of the issues.

"But the schools medical officer and the public health officer for England have both said that they think it's okay for children to go back. So we're actually on a government directive, which is what we're employed as to do, which is to go back. And that's what we actually have to do.

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Head teacher of St Stephen's Junior school, Stuart Pywell

"It's a bit like nurses and doctors saying 'well actually, I don't really want to go into a hospital because it's dangerous and I might die'.

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"We've been given a directive. We're assuming, and we have to trust our masters as it were, and say 'we're going to move forward and make that move'.

"We had a meeting with our trustees yesterday and they were quite happy that we've put things into place for staff and children to go back, we're emailing parents next week asking them what their views are, and then we'll see how many parents want to go back.

"If one headteacher says 'I'm not going back', that has to be their choice. But I'm not sure whether they're breaching regulations or not.

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"I know that we've been given a directive to go back so that's something we will do, and we're trying to take all the steps to make it safe for everybody."

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Boris Johnson suggested schools may return on June 1 Picture: Stock

Mr Pywell explained any pupils or staff returning will be given the choice to wear face masks and will be split across rooms with class sizes being reduced to between 12 and 15 children.

He also added they will be offering home-schooling for the next couple of months, for children who did not want to return.

On the other side of the argument **plenty of head teacher have questioned the Prime Minister's plans**, claiming it would not be possibly to come back into school and social distance.

Earlier this week the headteacher of St George's Church of England Primary School in **Minster**, Howard Fisher, said: "I can be truthful here and categorically tell you there is no such thing as social distancing in a school, it does not exist and would never exist.

"So parents, what can you do next? Well, all I can do is pass onto you information when we have it and you can make your own decision.

Minster head teacher Howard Fisher said it would be impossible for children to social distance if they returned

"Parent power is quite something when it is applied nationally, perhaps you too have some great ideas that can be brought before our politicians.

"I am only interested in my community and the families I serve and hope that you can reflect on my thoughts as the week unfolds."

Similarly, Skills for Life Trust, which has five academies in **Kent**, have said they **will not reopen their school for children of people who aren't key workers** until it is ensured staff, pupils and parents will be safe.

A letter to parents this week said: "Going forward, if we were to predict what might happen over the next year, quite possibly the 'new normal' may well need to engage school pupils in both school and home learning because a vaccine is unlikely to be found for around one year.

> **'I am only interested in my community and the families I serve...'**

"It is therefore important that we really analyse how well we are doing at the moment both with the supply of work to the pupils and giving feedback afterwards. As ever, your views are really important and we should have."

The debate about schools and safety was prompted by the Government's decision to announce a phased reopening from the start of next month in England.

There are no plans yet to follow suit in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and teachers' unions have expressed fears that the move would be too soon due to the risks of infection from coronavirus.

But Education Secretary Gavin Williamson has defended the approach, saying **he arranged Friday's meeting to brief teachers' representatives** on "the scientific advice underpinning our approach".

Mr Williamson said if the scientists said a "limited number" of children could be sent back to school, it was his duty to allow this to happen.

Local and Maya Shepelev are currently being home schooled

Tanya Shepelev, 44, has two daughters, both at Wateringbury Primary School, near **Maidstone**. Her eldest, Lola, is in Year 6 and will most likely be returning to in June.

Her other daughter Maya is in Year 5 and so will not be going back to school next month, although the government hopes that all primary children will return to school before the summer break, for a month if possible.

Mrs Shepelev, a Zumba instructor, would like Maya to be returning with her sister, as she is missing out on important preparation for her eleven-plus exam.

She thinks reception age children and those in Year One should perhaps stay at home until September, as it will be very hard for such young children to stay away from each other and teachers will be constantly disinfecting toys.

Speaking about whether she is worried about her daughter returning to school during the pandemic, she said: "There's an element of worry. But then you could get run over by a bus.

The Shepelev family: dad Alexey, Maya, Lola and Tanya

"If we lived in London where the classes are much bigger.... but it's such a little school. I have every faith in the school to follow the government guidelines."

Cheryl Butler, a writer and mum to Louie Butler in Year 6 at Wateringbury Primary, says her son is "desperate" to go back to school and see his friends but admits there are many unknowns.

She and her husband, who also have a 13-year-old son, are waiting to hear from the school about what measures will be put in place before making a decision about sending Louie back to the Bow Road establishment.

Even if her son does go back next month, it could be a very different experience, because of the measures enforced to reduce the risk of the virus possibly spreading, she says.

"They are getting very good at social distancing when they go for their daily walks. But at school won't be able to do what they did before.

"They can't play stick in the mud, I think they would have to be monitored closely. They could play football but when about the contact with the ball? There is all sorts to think about."

> **'I just think they need to be with their friends, they need to be socialising...'**

Kelly Wilson is mum to Summer, in Year 5, also at Wateringbury and Poppy, in Year 8 at Invicta Grammar School, in Maidstone.

Although neither of her daughters will be part of the first cohort going back, she is keen for them to return to as soon as possible, as long as proper safety measures are bought in.

Mrs Wilson, 45, said: "I just think they need to be with their friends, they need to be socialising.

"Poppy is still learning so much at home but I don't think it's good for them to be away from people."

Summer was also being tutored for her eleven-plus before the pandemic but that has been paused.

The Wilson Family: Scott, Summer, Kelly and Poppy

"Depending on what measures they have in place I would want Summer to go back for the last few weeks of school. She is missing out on quite a big chunk of learning, she still hasn't done percentages, decimals or degrees."

Mrs Wilson is also unsure about whether the eleven plus will even go ahead, with "lots of rumours" circling around, however there has been no announcement from the Government that the grammar school entry tests will be cancelled.

"Our other daughter goes to a grammar school so she want to as well. I just wish everything could go back to normal," Mrs Wilson said.

Stephen Curran, an education expert who has lived in **Kent** his whole life, said the government is correct in saying youngsters in Reception, Year 1 and Year 6 have been hit hard by the closures, and says children could progress through school at at a "real disadvantage".

Stephen Curran, an education expert from Kent, thinks the pandemic will affect children later in life

He said: "Reception and Year 1 children are learning basic numeracy and literacy and not going back will be a real setback for their development.

"Year 6 children are about to go up to secondary school and this interruption to their development in numeracy and literacy will have seriously affected the progress of many.

"Without some interventions they will enter secondary school at a severe disadvantage.

"It is a hole in their education that the school will struggle to make up even if the children return in June.

"If children leave primary school without a decent level of numeracy and literacy they will probably struggle right through their secondary education."

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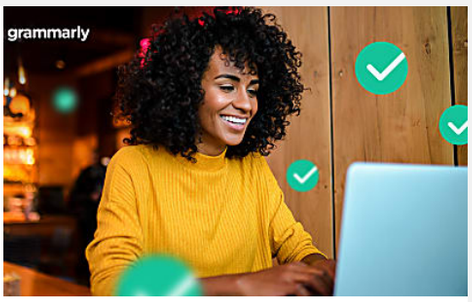

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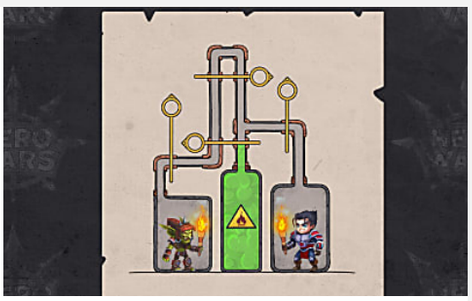

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