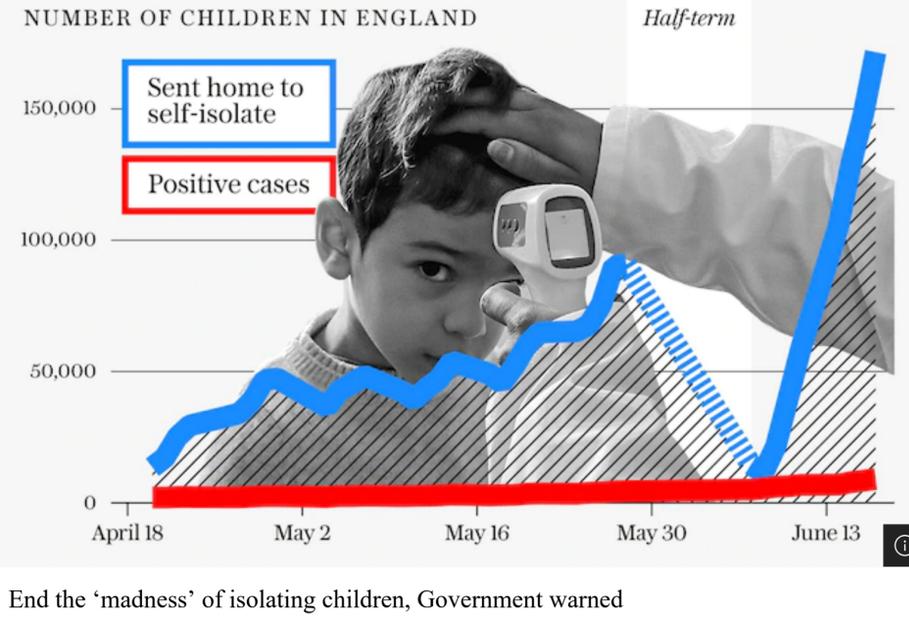


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End the ‘madness’ of isolating children, Government warned

As Telegraph launches a campaign to put young people first, the Children’s Commissioner calls for urgent action to prevent a lost generation

By Laura Donnelly, HEALTH EDITOR and Camilla Turner, EDUCATION EDITOR

28 June 2021 • 10:01pm

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Campaign for Children

Britain needs to end bubbles and self-isolation from schools as soon as possible, the new Children’s Commissioner has said as she warns of “trauma” being inflicted on a generation of children.

In her first major interview since being appointed, Dame Rachel de Souza called for urgent action to help get children “back to normal”.

Her comments come amid rising concern at the number of children being forced to self-isolate for 10 days because a child in their “bubble” has tested positive for Covid-19.

Almost 250,000 pupils are off school as a result of Covid, even though just 9,000 have tested positive for the virus.

They include 172,000 children forced to self-isolate because of a case at school, with others self-isolating because of contacts outside the school gates, or because cases were suspected.

The number has quadrupled in the space of a week and new figures due on Tuesday are expected to show a further rise.

There is concern that teachers are being overly cautious in sending children home and fears that some schools could close early for summer if too many children are in isolation.

Sajid Javid, in his first appearance in the Commons as Health Secretary, vowed to take “fresh advice” on the issue. And the Department for Education issued guidance to schools on Monday suggesting that isolation could be replaced with daily testing by September.



In his first appearance in the House of Commons as Health Secretary, Sajid Javid promised to take ‘fresh advice’ on the issue of pupils having to self-isolate | CREDIT: Jessica Taylor

It comes as [The Telegraph launches a campaign](#) calling on ministers to put children first as the country recovers from repeated lockdowns, with action to bring an end to the disruption of schools, and address the harm caused.

While children are at an exceptionally low risk from the virus, they continue to face the most disruption from the Government’s response to it, with a bubble system operating in schools, continued testing and isolating and the threat of yet another year of disrupted exams.

But experts warn that children may bear the scars of the pandemic for much longer, unless action is taken quickly to provide help, and to remove restrictions constraining their development.

Dame Rachel said Britain’s children had taken “a big burden” to protect older people, and were now at risk of long-term harm from policies which saw them repeatedly confined.

Bubbles are a ‘massive frustration’

She called for urgent action to address the issue, saying more needed to be done to ensure that future policies put the needs of children first.

She said the bubble system was an “absolutely massive” frustration, proving “very, very restrictive” in terms of the numbers forced out of school, and the limits it placed on normal social mixing.

“With bubbles, I think everybody would like it if we could get back to normal, as soon as possible. Obviously we have to be safe, and we have to take advice, but it’s very very restrictive,” said Dame Rachel.

“All these children going in and out of self-isolation; that is a really big issue, and it’s incredibly frustrating for children and teachers.”

Pressure mounts to scrap bubbles

Telegraph View: Time to end this mad Covid school regime

Revealed: Boris Johnson’s five-point plan to end schools chaos

Archbishop of York calls for end to school bubbles disruption

Face masks may still be needed in classrooms, says teaching union

A group of more than 100 charity and education leaders has written to The Telegraph saying that children have “too often” been overlooked during the pandemic.

The signatories, which include the National Children’s Bureau and the Association of Educational Psychologists, call for young people to be put “at the heart” of policymaking.

Four former education ministers – Robert Halfon, Sir John Hayes, Tim Loughton and Chris Skidmore – and two former education secretaries, Sir Kenneth Baker and Damian Hinds, also backed the call.

Lord Blunkett, the former Labour education secretary, said young people’s prospects were being damaged by continued “muddle and confusion”, at a time when thousands were allowed to attend the England vs Germany match on Tuesday.

Writing for The Telegraph, he urged ministers to “lift their eyes to the future” and think of the generation which had been disadvantaged by decisions taken on its behalf.

“You don’t have to be over-optimistic to understand that because one student in a particular group has tested positive, that you don’t have to send everyone else home,” he writes. “Continuing to test, as we are currently doing for the Fifa top brass, can ensure that anyone who shows signs of having Covid-19 can be isolated quickly and easily.”

The campaign is also backed by Peter Wanless, the head of the NSPCC, and Javed Khan, the chief executive of Barnado’s, who urged the Government on Monday to take urgent action to protect children from the “devastating” effects of the pandemic.

Steve Baker, the deputy chairman of the Covid Recovery Group, and Sir Iain Duncan Smith, the former Tory party leader, called on Monday for the “bubble” system to be dismantled.

‘It’s madness ... it cannot go on like this’

Mr Javid told the Commons that the effect of self-isolation on children was “something that none of us want to see”.

He added: “The impact that it’s having in terms of their education, mental health and in so many other detrimental ways. And that is exactly why I’ve asked for fresh advice on this. I want to see if there’s anything more that we can do, any more flexibilities.”

Sir Iain Duncan Smith, the former Tory leader who co-founded the Centre for Social Justice think tank, told The Telegraph he backed calls to scrap the bubble system.

“It’s madness [the self-isolation policy in schools]. The fact is now that most adults have either had one or two jobs, and children themselves are more likely to get flu than get Covid seriously.

“Teachers in the next two weeks should also have been jabbed. It cannot go on like this.”

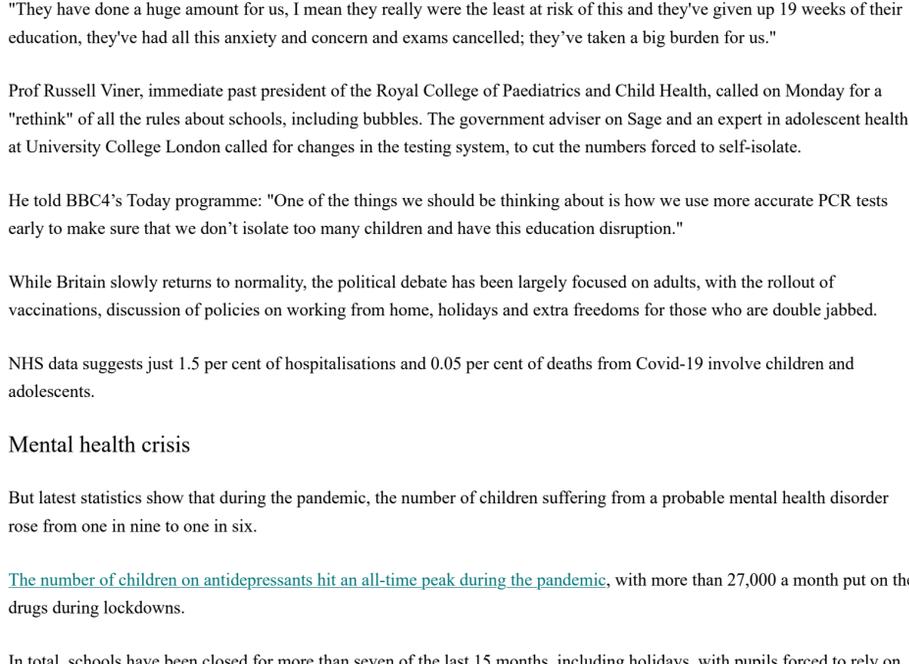
Dame Rachel said it was dangerous to assume that children could cope with everything the pandemic had thrown at them. Her ongoing commission on children has found that mental health is now their greatest concern, with four in 10 teenagers raising the issue.

Lockdown a ‘real trauma’ for children

She told The Telegraph: “The experience of lockdown has been a real trauma, and I think we shouldn’t underestimate it. Children are really troubled, and it’s right across the board.

“There is the risk that we just keep saying to ourselves, well kids are resilient, they’ll bounce back. Well they are telling us that they have got these worries and we need to listen to them ... we need an intensive recovery plan.”

Dame Rachel said children had sacrificed normal aspects of childhood - such as making friends, and having fun - in order to protect older people, with many now struggling with their mental health.



In her first major interview since taking up her new position, Dame Rachel de Souza told The Telegraph that ‘children have taken a big burden for us’ | CREDIT: Anthony Upton for The Telegraph

“They have done a huge amount for us, I mean they really were the least at risk of this and they’ve given up 19 weeks of their education, they’ve had all this anxiety and concern and exams cancelled; they’ve taken a big burden for us.”

Prof Russell Viner, immediate past president of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, called on Monday for a “rethink” of all the rules about schools, including bubbles. The government adviser on Sage and an expert in adolescent health at University College London called for changes in the testing system, to cut the numbers forced to self-isolate.

He told BBC4’s Today programme: “One of the things we should be thinking about is how we use more accurate PCR tests early to make sure that we don’t isolate too many children and have this education disruption.”

While Britain slowly returns to normality, the political debate has been largely focused on adults, with the rollout of vaccinations, discussion of policies on working from home, holidays and extra freedoms for those who are double jabbed.

NHS data suggests just 1.5 per cent of hospitalisations and 0.05 per cent of deaths from Covid-19 involve children and adolescents.

Mental health crisis

But latest statistics show that during the pandemic, the number of children suffering from a probable mental health disorder rose from one in nine to one in six.

[The number of children on antidepressants hit an all-time peak during the pandemic](#), with more than 27,000 a month put on the drugs during lockdowns.

In total, schools have been closed for more than seven of the last 15 months, including holidays, with pupils forced to rely on remote learning of varying quality.

Exams have been cancelled for two years in a row, with next year’s A-levels and GCSEs set to go ahead but with scaled-back content.

Each youngster stands to lose an average of £40,000 of earnings over their lifetime as a result of their disrupted education, according to the Institute of Fiscal Studies.

Rachel de Souza: ‘Children have forgotten how to make friends, how to laugh, how to be confident’

Before Dame Rachel de Souza became Children’s Commissioner for England, she spent her career in teaching, most recently running a chain of academies.

Schools were closed for 19 weeks because of the pandemic – a measure which the former headteacher describes as "horrific".

But she is not too worried about the academic challenges facing Britain’s youth.

"I was a headteacher for years, I know how to do educational catch-up. In some ways, that's the easy bit," she says.

What worries her more is that millions of children across the country have missed out on less tangible, but equally crucial, aspects of their development: how to make friends, how to laugh, how to blossom in confidence.

"The experience of lockdown has been a real trauma, and I think we shouldn't underestimate it," Dame Rachel says. "Children are really troubled, and it's right across the board."

This is a generation growing up with the most bleak of backdrops; bombarded daily with updates on disease and death, messages about social distancing, and the perils of human contact.

Hugs have been off limits; instead of exploring and making new connections, children have been ordered to remain in their "bubble".

In recent months, Dame Rachel has visited children all round the country, [as part of the biggest ever commission on childhood](#).

In Gateshead, an 11-year-old girl confided: "I don't know how to make friends any more, we have been living in this bubble, and now I just get really worried all the time, I don't want to worry my mum and dad but I don't really know how to talk to anyone."

Five ways children’s lives have been made worse by the pandemic

- One in six children now have a probable mental disorder, increasing from one in nine in 2017

Sources: NHS Digital. Sport England, National Foundation for Educational Research. NSPCC, Ofsted

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In Bolton, a 15-year-old boy appeared to have all the swagger – until he opened up, says Dame Rachel.

"You've got this guy, year 11, he's the cool one, he's the captain of the football team, you don't expect to get much chat, and then he's telling me that he is totally bewildered – that he is lost.

"He couldn't see his friends, he'd lost football, the only thing he loved, he didn't know what to do with himself."

Hundreds of these stories will be told in her forthcoming commission, due to be published in September, along with data from the biggest poll in the world, bar the US census.

‘The Big Ask’

More than 550,000 children aged from four to 17 have responded to "The Big Ask", commissioned just after Dame Rachel took up her post in March.

Shockingly, 20 per cent [said their own mental health was their biggest worry](#), a figure which rose to 40 per cent among those aged 14 to 17.

"These children are lovely, beautiful, they are wise, but they are troubled," she says, saying this is a generation we owe our help to.

"This has been tough on them. There is the risk that we just keep saying to ourselves, well kids are resilient, they'll bounce back. Well, they are telling us that they have got these worries and we need to listen to them; we need to meet them where they are, and we need an intensive recovery plan."

Summer of fun

Starting with the good times. Dame Rachel points out that when most of us think back to our schooldays, it's not the exams that we think about.

"I want a summer of fun," she says. "We have all these children who have gone through so much. I want to see sports, drama, activities, all the stuff that kids love.

"I want to see us use these holidays, we have these school buildings, we have children who have missed out on so much. I don't want their summer holidays to be all about English and maths; we need to give them a break."

And when schools return, she wants to see them functioning as close to normal as is safely possible.

[Government strictures on "bubbles" in schools](#), which have often limited contact to class groups, have killed off sports days, competitive team games and a host of playtime activities.

Fears of contamination have also meant some schools have reduced access to arts, science and sports equipment, leaving children facing an anaemic school day.

Dame Rachel says the issue is a point of "absolutely massive" frustration; she would like to see bubbles in schools axed as soon as possible.

"With bubbles, I think everybody would like it if we could get back to normal, as soon as possible. Obviously we have to be safe, and we have to take advice, but it's very, very restrictive."

Looking ahead to the next school year, she is concerned about the prospect of a stripped-down curriculum, and is keen to see the reinstatement of the parts of school which might prove more formative experiences – the field trips, the science experiments, and these days, the proms.

Real concern about youngest children

Dame Rachel is worried too about the youngest children; those whose earliest experiences denied them normal contact with other toddlers and preschoolers .

"I have real concern about that group at nursery age and those starting school, where they need to be playing and learning, and developing language skills, but instead they have been stuck inside, for too long."

When her commission reports, it will detail a series of demands which have one central aim: to put children at the top of the Government's agenda, after more than a year of neglect.

The commissioner is concerned that the generation which may be most affected by the pandemic has too often been "invisible" from the debate about it.

In future, every policy should be considered from the point of view of children before being introduced, she says.

She also urges the Government to give a senior Cabinet minister responsibility for children, ensuring that the needs of the young - not just their academic potential - is central to crunch decisions.

"Children said to us they weren't even visible during the pandemic," she said. "Everyone was talking about their worries and concerns about older people - and they were worried about older people, they were worried about their own grandmas and grandads - but they didn't hear anyone talking about them."

Urgent changes required

She is also calling for urgent help from the NHS to tackle mounting mental health problems.

[The Telegraph recently revealed forecasts suggesting 1.5 million extra children will need mental health treatment as a direct result of the pandemic](#), a demand which could outstrip supply three-fold.

Dame Rachel wants to see a series of urgent changes here: the rapid rollout of online counselling for children, and an acceleration of NHS programmes to provide more mental health support teams in schools.

"It's a good programme, but I would say it needs speeding up, it's not going quickly enough," she says.

We owe Britain’s children a significant debt, she suggests.

"They have done a huge amount for us. I mean they really were the least at risk of this and they've given up 19 weeks of their education, they've had all this anxiety and concern and exams cancelled; they've taken a big burden for us."

With holidays factored in, schools have been closed for more than seven of the last 15 months.

Whatever this winter brings, and whatever the threat from new Covid-19 variants, we should think twice before ever again inflicting such misery on children, Dame Rachel suggests.

"The thought of closing schools is horrific," she says, looking back at lessons we might learn from the pandemic.

"Everyone did the best with the knowledge they had – but I would think long and hard before ever closing schools again."

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