

Parents reject virus 'schools open' policy

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Brisbane mum Sunshine Wood has removed her children from school over coronavirus fears. Credit: AAP

As coronavirus continues to spread across Australia, social media is clogged with concerned parental chatter about the wisdom of sending kids to school.

Officially schools remain open and mums and dads are being told to keep packing lunch boxes and backpacks and sending children to class.

But it's clear many parents have no appetite for that advice, and are making up their own minds.

Parents chatting online see an inexplicable disconnect between the decision to ban "non-essential" indoor gatherings of more than 100 people, while keeping school gates open.

And they can't understand why private schools are rapidly gearing up for mass online learning amid plunging attendance rates, as public schools forge on under a business-as-relatively-normal approach.

As one Brisbane mum said: "Coronavirus is going to go through schools like nits go through schools".

To her, the risk seems obvious: Nits can't jump but they spread like wildfire anyway because kids will be kids, regardless of being told to stay away from each other. So what happens when a highly contagious virus takes hold in the same environment?

On the NSW Central Coast, mother-of-two Sunshine Wood has been keeping her two kids home since Monday. There have been two unrelated cases of coronavirus in her area.

She called "bulls***" on social media on Wednesday, when Prime Minister Scott Morrison again updated official coronavirus advice for the nation, but confirmed there's no plan to close schools.

For her family, the stakes are higher than most.

Mrs Wood's son Israel has heart disease, an intellectual disability and Down Syndrome, which makes him more susceptible to respiratory illnesses.

The nine-year-old has been thriving at a public primary school near her home at Tascott but for her, sending him there with his sister Miette, eight, does not seem safe or sensible.

Even without Israel's health complications, she's been concerned by what his specialists have been saying during their regular appointments - that schools should be closed.

"As of Monday we decided to self-isolate," Mrs Wood told AAP.

She believes keeping her kids at home is the right thing to do by them, but also by the health system, with some doctors publicly warning it simply won't cope when Australia's outbreak peaks and they have to also contend with the usual stuff - heart attacks, strokes, and car crash victims.

"If we don't have enough beds and ventilators, and it comes down to a decision between our son, and a 30-year-old woman with three little kids, I'd hate to be that doctor," she said.

"Their decision is not going to be our son, with an intellectual disability and heart disease."

Mrs Wood also notes there'd be few families in Australia without at least one one member who would be particularly vulnerable to coronavirus due to issues like heart disease or cancer.

In her mind, keeping the virus out of kids, who typically don't become severely ill, is a kind of insurance policy for everyone else.

On Wednesday, Australia's Chief Medical Officer Brendan Murphy tried to explain why a complete shutdown of schools - and society - was not on the cards.

"A short-term two-to-four week shut down of society is not recommended by any of our experts. It does not achieve anything. We have to be in this for the long haul," he told reporters.

He said some localised school closures might be necessary in areas that experienced big outbreaks, and schools of course were taking measures to reduce "potential transmissions".

That has included measures like cancelling whole-of-school assemblies, school camps and inter-school sporting events, and imposing social distancing.

He pointed to China's experience: "Most of the children infected were reported as having picked up the virus from adults in their household".

But he acknowledged: "We don't know whether children may be a vector of asymptomatic or transmission with low levels of symptoms".

It's that kind of messaging that has mothers like Mrs Wood scratching their heads, and opting to make their own decisions.

School is compulsory in Australia and state and territory laws carry penalties for parents who fail to send their kids to school, without a good reason.

Bridget Burton is the director of human rights and civil law at Brisbane's Caxton Legal Centre.

Under Queensland's Education (General Provisions) Act of 2006 parents are obliged to ensure their kids attend school, unless there is a "reasonable" excuse, she said.

If they don't, parents can be hit with hefty fines. But even outside a pandemic emergency like this one, she said that rarely happens.

Ms Burton believes the risk of parents being fined for non-attendance due to coronavirus fears is extremely low.

"These are unprecedented times. In terms of what constitutes reasonable, who knows at this stage. It's open to interpretation," she told AAP.

"We don't know what that means in this context, at this time, but I can say it's pretty unlikely that parents would face fines for keeping their kids home in the middle of a pandemic."

For Ms Burton, the more pressing legal issue for parents is if they run the gauntlet of letting their kids stay home, while they go off to work.

There is a provision in Queensland's criminal code about leaving a child under the age of 12 unattended.

"If you are keeping your kids at home due to the pandemic, you need to make sure they are properly supervised, and not at home by themselves," she said.
