

The St Michael Steiner School
**Policy for Attendance at School and Remote Learning
during COVID-19 Lockdowns**
Spring 2021

The aim of lockdowns is to limit the spread of the virus during a pandemic.

The aim of the guidelines issued daily by the Department for Education is to maintain a good education for all children while also limiting the risk of transmission of the virus.

Since these are national guidelines for all settings, they are necessarily based on a general picture of education in state schools in the UK, which use broadly similar teaching methods for groups of up to 30 children.

However, because independent schools vary much more in teaching methods and class sizes, the guidelines are mandatory for state schools and discretionary for independent schools, and there are parts of the guidance which need to be interpreted for individual circumstances.

While issuing restrictions on school attendance, the government has also recognised, and expressed concern about, the effect on children of missing face-to-face education. Closing schools has always been a last resort, and the health benefits of lockdown have to be weighed against the harmful effects of keeping children away from school for long periods of time.

From this, we understand that the best outcome is where arrangements can be made for the children's education to continue without compromise, while minimising the risk of transmission of the virus.

Further points to which we need to have regard are:

The school's insurers have been clear that our insurance will be invalidated if we do not follow the government's guidelines, and it is illegal to operate a school without insurance.

The requirements of the Independent Schools Standards continue to be statutory regardless of the pandemic. Standard 2.2(d)(i) requires that our practice reflects the school's aim and ethos.

Taking these things into account, this policy has been drawn up with the aim of:

- Providing Waldorf Education for all of our pupils according to the school's ethos
- Fulfilling the requirements of the Independent Schools Standards
- Limiting the spread of the virus as far as possible
- Following government guidelines and the advice of the Independent Schools Association
- Taking into consideration the school's specific circumstances with regard to premises and class sizes
- Accommodating the right of parents to shield their children from the virus and the right of older students to decide this for themselves.
- Informing parents, students and staff of the measures we have put in place to minimise the risk of transmission of the virus and to maintain the quality of the education we offer.
- Informing parents of the rationale behind this policy so that they are able to make informed decisions about whether their children should be considered vulnerable.

Waldorf Education and remote learning

We are committed to providing Waldorf Education for all of our pupils at all times, including during the lockdown. However, since the pandemic began, and particularly because it has gone on for so long with no end yet in sight, problems are emerging and developing which need to be addressed for the sake of the long-term wellbeing of our children.

Young children

Our *Electronic Media Usage and E-Safety Guidance* states:

We ask that parents withdraw media exposure of all kinds from the daily experience of the young child. In this context, 'the young child' means the child under 9. We cannot over-emphasise how important this is - how much children benefit from it - and offer advice ... to parents about how to implement changes in this direction.

This means that for children under 9, 'live' education via Zoom or similar media is inappropriate. It is school policy to discourage screen time for young children as far as possible, and the kind of education we provide for them cannot, anyway, be replicated in this way.

The younger children in our school, if they remain at home, are not having the social interaction with their peers that would usually develop social awareness and skills at this age. This makes them especially vulnerable, as development in all areas is rapid in very young children and without normal human interaction, vital stages are missed.

Older children and High School students

At all ages, the nature of our teaching methods, which are an essential part of the educational culture of the school, makes it particularly difficult, and in some cases impossible, to provide this kind of education remotely:

- Throughout the school, lessons are delivered orally and much of the pupil's learning comes about through personal engagement with their teachers and classmates, questioning and discussion. This process is severely hindered by having to interact through a screen, and we have experienced that, whereas they were willing to try to overcome the problems at first, in many cases, children are no longer engaging with each other or with the lessons. In some cases, the children do not attend Zoom lessons and parents have said they are not able to get them to do so.
- Where work is sent for them to do at home, many children struggle to discipline themselves to do it properly, or at all, and parents feel unable to help.
- Arts, crafts, practical and experiential learning are central to the education we offer throughout the school, and the quality and full benefit of these things cannot be offered remotely. While techniques can be demonstrated via a screen, it is very difficult to manage problem-solving and putting right of mistakes. In some cases, parents have been able to support their children in these things, but more often they do not have the time or the skills to do so.
- Particularly in the Middle and High School, the students need specialist equipment and materials and to learn from expert craftspeople. Crafts like joinery, basketry, copper work, forging and stone carving are impossible to do at home, and without them, the pupils cannot have the education our school offers and which their parents have chosen for them.
- Outdoor curriculum subjects such as gardening, building and hedge laying, and sciences like ecology and botany cannot be done properly without hands-on practical experience. Apart from the fact that many children in London do not have gardens, parents do not have the time, skills or expertise to guide their children in doing these things.

Attendance at school

During the lockdown, schools are only open to the children of 'critical' or 'key' workers and 'vulnerable' children and young people.¹ The guidelines state that:

'Schools are expected to allow and strongly encourage vulnerable children and young people to attend. Parents/carers of vulnerable children and young people are strongly encouraged to take up the place.'

Government guidelines published in January 2021 show an awareness that more children may be suffering now because the pandemic has gone on for so long:

Education settings should also continue to encourage vulnerable children to attend and review whether there are other children and young people who might be newly vulnerable and benefit from on-site attendance.

¹ Restricting_attendance_during_the_national_lockdown-_schools February 2021

The government defines² 'Vulnerable children and young people' as including those who:

- are assessed as being in need under section 17 of the Children Act 1989, including children and young people who have a child in need plan, a child protection plan or who are a looked-after child
- have an education, health and care (EHC) plan
- have been identified as otherwise vulnerable by educational providers or local authorities (including children's social care services), and who could therefore benefit from continued full-time attendance, this might include:
 - children and young people on the edge of receiving support from children's social care services or in the process of being referred to children's services
 - adopted children or children on a special guardianship order
 - those at risk of becoming NEET ('not in employment, education or training')
 - those living in temporary accommodation
 - those who are young carers
 - those who may have difficulty engaging with remote education at home (for example due to a lack of devices or quiet space to study)
 - care leavers
 - others at the provider and local authority's discretion including pupils and students who need to attend to receive support or manage risks to their mental health

On these grounds, we will invite to attend school any children who we identify as being vulnerable for any of the above reasons, including: those who cannot or do not engage with remote learning; those whose parents are unable to support their remote learning as needed; and those whose mental/emotional health is being adversely affected by not being at school.

We also ask parents to let us know if they are worried about their children on any of these counts and encourage them to apply for them to attend school.

Because of the nature of our education, and the impossibility of delivering most of it remotely, it is inevitable that many of our children will become vulnerable and will need to return to school during the lockdown. Parents should not feel that they cannot or should not send them back if they need to attend.

Details of the measures currently in place to limit transmission of the virus on site are in our *COVID-19 return to school policy*, which is available on our website along with this policy.

Remote Learning Provision

We will provide learning material and guidance for pupils who are not attending school and for their parents:

- Packs of activities for Kindergarten children.
- For children in Classes 1, 2 & 3, we will not provide 'live' education via electronic media for the reasons given above. However, since the pandemic has gone on for such a long time, teachers may make some audio and video recordings, intended to be accessed with parental supervision, as part of their provision, in order that they can maintain a personal connection with the children during this time.
- Older children and High School students will have a comprehensive programme of lessons delivered via Zoom and/or email. See the separate document *Plan for Teaching during Lockdown Spring 2021* for more detail of what is provided for each class.

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-maintaining-educational-provision/guidance-for-schools-colleges-and-local-authorities-on-maintaining-educational-provision#vulnerable-children-and-young-people>

School hours

Because of the need to provide for pupils in the classroom as well as those at home, while the lockdown continues, school hours may vary from those published, for example to stagger home times in order to limit the number of parents and children congregating at the school gate.

We will provide supervision for critical/key workers' children and children identified as vulnerable from 8:25am to the end of the day (2:45 - 3:00pm) if needed.

Otherwise, children attending school can go home at 1pm if there are no scheduled lessons for them in the afternoons, especially where this will limit the number of journeys parents have to make to collect siblings.

Class Teachers will inform parents of their children's timetable.

To be reviewed as and when guidance changes.