**The winter season is a major challenge for schools when it comes to health and safety. In the first of a two-part series, Fiona Riley, Chair of the IOSH Education Group, examines the issues and how they can be overcome.**

The weather is getting colder and the nights are drawing in. It can only mean one thing: winter is coming.

For many schools, the onset of winter throws up a host of health and safety risks which schools have to manage to ensure that children and staff can go home fit and well at the end of each day.

Chief among these risks is that posed by bad weather. This, of course, comes in many forms, whether it be snow, ice, heavy rain or fog. All of them can provide risks.

While most schools do everything they can to remain open, there are occasions when the weather proves to be too problematic and the level of a risk out too great to remain open.

At some schools, including mine, there are grounds teams which can be on site very early to grit and clear the grounds, especially in the case of snow.

However for most local authority schools and academies, this is a resource they do not have. If the risk is too great, they sometimes have to take the decision to close for the day, which can bring with it other issues, especially for parents and carers.

Even if schools are able to remain open, bad weather brings with it many issues. There is the issue of transport problems. If there are areas that are not accessible for school buses, for example, students – and their parents or carers – are faced with having to find alternative means of transport.



**Inside schools**

One of the main risks that snow, ice and wet weather brings is from slips, trips and falls. This risk is not just restricted to outside either as wet feet lead to slippery floors inside schools. It is important, therefore, that good housekeeping is in place and signage is displayed to warn people of the risk.

If the weather is bad it is often not possible for children to go outside during break times and lunchtime. This loss of outdoor space provides added challenges as you have a large number of pupils confined within buildings, often with a lot of energy to burn off.

It is important to carefully manage situations such as this. Having students contained inside often small areas, unable to let off steam as they might outside, can lead to a host or problems.

One of those problems can be the spread of bugs. School pupils and staff alike are susceptible to illnesses like bouts of flu and colds at this time of year, and full corridors and classrooms often helps such things to spread.

In schools which offer boarding facilities, this issue can be multiplied many times. The more time children spend in school with each other, the more chance there is for bugs and infections to spread.

Clearly no school wants children to be off sick given the important work they can miss. But when the spread of bugs leads to staff absences this can be particularly critical. This is especially the case with smaller schools, church primary schools in little villages for example, where it is common they have to combined age classes.

There are some ways that schools can look to combat these problems. One example is offering flu jabs for staff. Though solutions may not provide a cast iron guarantee that absences will not arise, they certainly help to control the risks.

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