



LIFE UNDER LOCKDOWN REPORT

CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCE OF THE PANDEMIC AND LOCKDOWN IN THE UK

Every child has the right to a future. Save the Children works around the world to give children a healthy start in life, and the chance to learn and to be safe. We do whatever it takes to get children the things they need – every day and in times of crisis.

This report was written by Save the Children's UK Impact team in July 2020, following a series of events aimed at understanding children's experiences of lockdown in the UK. In putting together this report, we have placed a premium on relevance and timeliness; we have worked to turn the report around in "real time", which is as a result necessarily incomplete. Rather than an end product, we hope this document serves as just the start of a conversation about building a movement for good childhoods and that you will join the conversation about #LifeUnderLockdown.

A final version of this report will be published and made available in September 2020. This publication may be used free of charge for the purposes of advocacy, campaigning, education, and research, provided that the source is acknowledged in full.

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SAVE THE CHILDREN'S GLOBAL POETRY CAMPAIGN: LINCOLN, AGE 11

Lincoln, 11, lives with his mum Kerry and 7-year-old sister Isha in Sheffield. Lincoln and his family have been involved in several Save the Children programmes over the years and lots of other families in their community received our Emergency Grant programme during the early part of the crisis in 2020. Save the Children got in touch with his family to hear about their general lockdown experience and to get them involved in our [Global Poetry Campaign](#).

Billions of children's lives around the world have been turned upside down and never before have so many children been forced out of school. To capture their experiences, Save the Children invited 15 children from four continents to write a poem about life under lockdown, sharing their hopes, fears and how the pandemic has changed their lives.

From the US, Italy, Peru and Colombia to Gaza, Yemen, South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo, their poems bring to life the experiences of children living through this pandemic. Despite their differences, their struggles are shared, and they remain united in their hope for a brighter future.

Lincoln attended one of our events to perform his poem in front of guests and agreed for it to be reproduced here.

**Life was always fast paced, we never slowed down,
Until everything stopped when Corona came to town.
Now all is quiet and there's peace all around,
We've looked in our hearts and kindness we've found.
We learn now with mum, this is a new feature,
But we can't wait to get back to our teacher.
I miss Sea Cadets, school, my friends, and my dad,
I miss sharing the fun times and that makes me sad.
We've had social distancing picnics, social distancing walks,
Social distancing hugs and social distancing talks.
I'm looking forward to getting away,
The beach, the hotel, and a perfect holiday.
When it is? I'll throw my arms open wide,
And shout to the world, WE CAN ALL GO OUTSIDE!
Don't give up hope, the end is in sight,
If we all stick together, we'll all win this fight.**

Lincoln, 11, Sheffield, 2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Although children in the UK have thankfully been spared the worst of the direct health effects of the coronavirus pandemic, their lives have been uprooted in almost every aspect. This short report explores children's experiences of the pandemic and lockdown, drawing on a series of online sessions with friends and supporters of Save the Children, conversations in the communities where we work, and insights from other organisations.

The intention is to curate a piece of social history to ensure that children's experiences, in all their diversity, aren't neglected in our collective understanding of the social impacts of the pandemic. We also want to ensure those experiences shape our national conversation about the 'new normal' as we're concerned that they have been missing from decision-making so far. We hope you're join the debate about #LifeUnderLockdown.

Family relationships

Most children have found that family relationships have been strengthened during lockdown and they have enjoyed spending more time with parents or carers and siblings. They've got involved in 'grown-up' activities like cooking and gardening and have played more with brothers and sisters – helping to drive a 'generational merge' within families. Parents have often become more confident about playing with their children and gained a deeper appreciation of their critical role as their child's first teachers.

Yet, some children have really struggled with family relationships during lockdown. Incidents of domestic violence have increased, often affecting children; and children living away from home have typically had no face-to-face contact with family. Parents caring for a child with special educational needs have experienced more stress than other parents and found their child's behaviour more difficult to cope with. The children of key workers have often seen less, rather than more, of their parents.

More time to play

Children have been enjoying more time for play during lockdown. Arts and crafts have been popular, and colourful pictures of rainbows have become a familiar sight in the windows of our streets and estates. The relatively good weather has meant that children have spent more time outside, exploring local streets and green spaces. The lack of traffic and pollution have helped too. Demand for trampolines has soared and bike rides and scooters have been popular as families take time to exercise together.

However, the lack of gardens and overcrowding at home experienced by some children have been tough, with playgrounds closed for several months. Some children were too scared to leave their home or parents didn't let them, as they made difficult choices to protect them. Lots of families lack reliable, affordable Internet access, which makes it hard for children to play online or benefit from digital ideas and resources for play.

Friendships and keeping in touch

Keeping in touch through social media, online games and video chats has been critical to maintaining friendships and a welcome distraction from worries about the pandemic. Three quarters of children kept in touch with friends through video chats, and WhatsApp, phone calls and social media were also popular with older children.

Yet, online contact can't replace real-life interaction, which tends to be more frequent and intensive. Not being able to spend time with friends has typically been the biggest concern for children about the lockdown, and many children have said they felt lonely. Staying in touch online has also been difficult for children who lack affordable Internet access and appropriate devices like a laptop.

Children's wellbeing and mental health

Many children have been remarkably resilient during the pandemic and helped the adults in their lives to cope better. But most children will have had difficult days or weeks, and some have struggled throughout or seen their mental health gradually deteriorate as lockdown ticked on.

Missing friends, a loss of routine and exposure to troubling media accounts and adult conversations have all put pressure on some children's wellbeing. BAME children might have been particularly stressed given evidence about the disproportionate impact of the virus on BAME people. Loss of routine can be particularly difficult for children with some kinds of special educational needs.

New, adapted, and lost sources of support

The lockdown meant that families lost most face-to-face support, but lots of services, programmes and groups were able to adapt to online provision. Social media has also been invaluable for helping parents stay in touch and re-energise, and many have loved online resources like [Hungry Little Minds](#), [Tiny Happy People](#), and parenting apps. Many nurseries and childminders have provided learning and play ideas. The majority of parenting and family support programmes have been able to switch to online delivery.

However, family support was patchy before the lockdown, so lots of families were already missing out. The lack of face-to-face contact has meant that lots of parents, especially new parents, are feeling more isolated and less supported. A lack of online access will be a barrier for many lower income families. Lots of support for children with extra needs has stopped, so these children might have fewer opportunities for play and learning.

Inequalities in access to formal education

Most children have been keeping up with schoolwork, as well as finding more time for family and play, and parents have put a huge amount of effort into supporting schoolwork at home. But there are large inequalities in the support that schools and nurseries, and parents, have been able to offer. Lots of these mirror pre-existing inequalities, with a real risk that education gaps will widen again.

Disadvantaged children are less likely to have a laptop and reliable Internet access for schoolwork. They've tended to do fewer hours of schoolwork and are less likely to return work to teachers for feedback. The cancellation of exams could disproportionately disadvantage BAME children and those from low income families. Schools and nurseries remained open for vulnerable children but relatively few took up their place.

Family finances under pressure

Lots of higher-earning parents have saved money through the lockdown, barely spending on travel, eating out and childcare. But many families have suffered financially. Child poverty was already high in the UK and the pandemic looks set to push more families into poverty. Job losses, the loss of self-employed income and being on furlough have already hit low income families disproportionately. Many parents have already started cutting back on essentials and are braced for more, as the furlough scheme ends, and major job losses are expected. Universal Credit has coped well so far but benefit levels are too low for many families to avoid poverty.

Life after lockdown: priorities for children

Although lockdown is easing and infection rates are improving, life will continue to be different for some time to come for children in the UK – and new challenges are being layered on top of pre-existing risks and inequalities. As we head towards the 'new normal', some of the areas this briefing indicates all of us in the movement for good childhoods should prioritise include:

- Protecting family time to capitalise on the boost to family relationships, by extending family-friendly pay and working hours, especially to lower earning parents
- Supporting parents by matching the creativity and resilience they have shown in the lockdown, with more help for learning at home and their own wellbeing
- Prioritising the early years to ensure the disruption caused by the pandemic doesn't overwhelm the services, by ensuring the childcare sector remains viable and other services get the support they need
- Protecting education to ensure children can keep learning and catch up in the next phase of the pandemic, by keeping schools and nurseries open as the default and ensuring every child can learn online at home
- Investing in outdoor play to help control the spread of the virus and boost children's fun and learning, by prioritising investment in outdoor spaces and building parents' confidence to use them
- Protecting family incomes to support families to weather the coming storm, by immediately adding £20 to the child element of Universal Credit and the Child Tax Credit
- Listening to children to make sure they aren't missing from the national conversation about responding to the pandemic, by providing platforms to share their insights and challenging ourselves to bring them into decision-making.

INTRODUCTION

The global pandemic has uprooted everyone's lives over the last few months – including children. Thankfully, the direct health risk to children has been surprisingly low (with some devastating exceptions). But in almost every other regard, children have made huge sacrifices to help protect the health of others. Children have missed months of school or early education, losing out on formal learning, friendships, and familiar routines. They haven't seen grandparents, and many have barely even left their home, as parents have made difficult choices to protect them. Yet, children have also been incredibly resilient, finding fun in simple activities, making the most of outdoor spaces and often enjoying extra time with their parents or carers and siblings.

Save the Children is on a continuous mission to understand what a good childhood looks like in the UK, and to show everyone whose choices touch children's lives what changes we need to get there. This short briefing draws on a series of online sessions held in June 2020 with parents, politicians, teachers, community leaders, journalists, and business representatives to shed new light on children's experiences in the UK during the lockdown. We also draw directly on conversations with children, parents and community partners generated through Save the Children's local partnerships in all four countries of the UK. And we draw on published research from other organisations and sources.

In combining these three sources of evidence, we hope to do two things. First, we want to curate a piece of social history: children's experiences are important in and of themselves and they deserve to be captured in the same way that the experiences of key workers, patients and scientists are already starting to be gathered and archived by museums and the media. Second, we want to invite everybody who cares about good childhoods to learn about what children think, want, and need and to commit to using their influence to bring about change.

Whether you're a parent, grandparent, aunt, uncle, neighbour or family friend, you have incredible influence over what happens to children. If you're in the children's workforce – a group that goes well beyond teachers, early years workers, paediatricians and health visitors to incorporate much of the NHS, local government and civil service, as well as a myriad of businesses large and small that touch family life – we hope this report will shape how you do your important work. And if you're in the children's volunteer corps – as a leader in the Scouts or Guides, or a volunteer for or supporter of a children's charity, or as one of the millions of people who give their time to helping out with children's sport, arts or play – we salute you and hope this report will inspire you to keep going as we work together to get young lives back on track.

Most of all, we want this report to stimulate a new debate about the kind of childhood we want to secure for every child in the UK. For some years now, Save the Children has worried that children have been missing from our national conversation – that the rights and interests of children simply don't feature in the headlines or the mainstream of political debate. The long-term marginalisation of children's concerns has been painfully illuminated by the crisis: as James Kirkup of the Social Market Foundation argues "we may, as a country, be able to reopen pubs, shops, hair salons and holiday cottages for the summer. But we cannot, it seems, find a way to educate our children ... that surely says something troubling about our national priorities."¹ Scotland's Children's Commissioner has said the country faces "a children's rights emergency" as well as a public health one, with children's voices being "lost in our decision-making about how to deal with the pandemic".²

It is long past time to push children to the top of the priority list in each nation and across the UK as a whole. The debate about the economy in the abstract must become one about family finances in the here and now. The decisions about lifting lockdown should be informed as much by evidence about children's learning, health, and wellbeing as by questions of consumer confidence. And the conversation about 'building back better' has to consider what it would take to help children already held back by poverty (and its intersection with race and disability) to be included in the new Britain we are building together.

If we get this right, we can ensure that no child gets left out of a school trip because buying lunch at the museum is beyond the family budget, no child feels they can't have a friend over to play because there's no room and not enough food in the fridge, no child has to do their homework on the end of a bed as that's the nearest thing to a table in the flat. Getting it right will take all of us doing our bit. We hope this report gives you both the evidence and the inspiration to do yours and that you will join us as we build a new movement for good childhoods across the UK.

FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

Many children in the UK have found that family relationships have been strengthened through the crisis, with more time to spend together. A major survey of children in Wales received what the authors describe as a ‘strikingly’ large number of comments about the pleasure of spending extra time with family members.³ Although it’s been stressful at times, many parents are enjoying extra time with their children, feel their relationship has become closer and are more confident about their parenting skills.⁴ There is emerging evidence that parents and children, and siblings, have been arguing less as lockdown has gone on.⁵

Georgina, a mum we work with in Sheffield, told us that she was determined to make the best of lockdown, nurturing a stronger relationship with her five-year-old daughter Lexi-Mae. “It has brought us a lot closer together”, Georgina said. Parents we surveyed in East Belfast told us that lockdown has often been fun and not as difficult as they initially feared. “I thought it would be a lot harder to keep them entertained but it’s good fun finding new things to do”, said one parent.⁶ Close relationships with a parent or carer help children feel safe and secure, and in doing so, provide a critical foundation for learning.⁷

Lots of children have spent more time helping with ‘grown-up’ activities like baking, gardening and household chores, while our partners at LEGO also report more adults are getting down on the floor to play with toys, build blanket forts or more generally see the world from a ‘child’s eye view’. Helenor Gilmour of Beano Insights describes this as one element of a ‘generational merge’ that’s occurred during lockdown, where extra time together is helping to strengthen bonds across generations (albeit also creating extra challenges for other cross-generational relationships, most notably between children and grandparents). Parents we work with have told us they now spend more time doing baking and cooking together, helping children to learn more about the adult world.⁸ Another aspect of this ‘generational merge’ has been siblings playing together much more and forming closer bonds. Claire Walker, of the British Chambers of Commerce, told us how this new closeness presents a challenge with different year groups of children going back to school at different times – some children now have a very strong sense of unfairness and separation anxiety as they see siblings return.

Following the closure of schools, nurseries and childminders, the role of parents as the first and most influential educators has become more crucial than ever – and increasingly recognised. Surveys of parents we work with in communities like East Belfast have found that a large majority of parents have learned more about how to play with their child during lockdown.⁹ For young children, extra time at home with a parent or carer could boost their early development, since this is best supported by lots of attentive one-to-one interaction.¹⁰ Lots of parents also told us they have really enjoyed seeing their young child’s language skills improve each week. For some families, lockdown has shifted perceptions so that parents are now more aware that they can help boost their child’s learning at home – where they previously felt ‘learning’ only happened at school or nursery.¹¹ This has created a new impetus to support learning at home among some families. However, there is likely to be a strong social class gradient to this learning boost: parents with higher levels of education tend to have greater confidence and capacity to do activities at home that support learning.¹²

Women have shouldered a greater share of the extra time that parents have spent with children, as well as more of the extra housework (mirroring pre-pandemic patterns). This appears to be true for lots of different mums, including those with a disability and BAME mums.¹³ While extra time with their child will have been positive for many mothers, it will also have been a source of a lot of pressure for some. For children at home, these patterns may further embed their conception of highly gendered domestic roles.

Despite many positives, lockdown has put family relationships under real pressure in a minority of families. In East Belfast, we found that about a third of parents surveyed felt anxious and stressed because they didn’t know what to do with their child at home. A small number told us they have really struggled through lockdown. Parents with a serious mental health issue or struggling with a crisis like job loss or bereavement might have found it harder to be sensitively attuned to their child’s needs or find time and energy for lots of one-to-one interaction. Incidents of domestic violence have increased across the UK; in Scotland, children affected by domestic abuse report having more severe experiences and lacking access to safe spaces.¹⁴

The Co-SPACE study of parents' and children's experiences of lockdown has found that parents with a child with special educational needs have been more likely than other parents to report feelings of stress across a range of issues related to both their children and their work.¹⁵ The study found that, while children's behaviour has rarely been a source of stress for other parents, it has been a major stressor for parents with a child with special educational needs. This could put parent-child relationships under significant pressure. Some of the most vulnerable children will have seen lockdown put huge strain on family relationships: children living in residential care homes or in care arrangements some distance from family will not have been able to have face-to-face contact with their families at all.¹⁶ However, some children in care have reported greater stability of placements during lockdown.¹⁷

More widely, lots of parents have kept going to work through the crisis – indeed, many have had to work longer hours than usual. Children of key workers have had a very different experience of lockdown to many of their peers, often staying at school and perhaps seeing less, rather than more, of one or both parents.

MORE TIME TO PLAY

Play enables children to explore and express their feelings, navigate social situations and is essential for their emotional wellbeing, as well as their cognitive development.¹⁸ Play is anchored in children's imagination and provides a dynamic way for them to explore the world around them through activity, physical and social engagement. The ability to play has been crucial in enabling children to find joy during lockdown, but access to play has been unevenly distributed.

Families have been creative about how to do more play with children and keep them occupied for longer. One parent we work with in East Belfast told us, "[We've been doing] much more cooking and baking – to keep him away from my home-working husband – more arts and crafts, [and] extended mealtimes that incorporate more games and singing". Arts and crafts have been popular. Beano Trendspotter Amaya (age nine) says, "I've been busy with art stuff and I've made a unicorn and rainbow pictures. My whole family has been getting involved".¹⁹ Children across the UK have embraced the rainbow as a symbol of hope during the pandemic, filling windows on our streets and estates with uplifting, colourful drawings.

The relatively sunny weather has made it easier for kids to get outside, helping with physical play and more time with nature. In April, in the most intense phase of lockdown, three quarters of parents in the Co-SPACE study reported that their child took part in at least 30 minutes of energetic physical activity each day; and over 80% of parents said their child was spending more than half an hour outside every day.²⁰ Parents have told us that, rather than 'slumping on a chair' after school, children have been spending more time exploring outside and discovering new things. Issac (Beano Trendspotter age ten) said "I've been outside loads this week playing on the trampoline, football and bike rides. We got the Wii Sports out again and have been playing boxing and tennis".²¹ Many families have taken the opportunity to do more exercise together and seek out new open spaces near home. Less air pollution and traffic has made it safer for children to get outside, especially in poorer neighbourhoods where air quality and congestion tends to be worse.

Access to a garden has been a big factor influencing how children have experienced lockdown and their ability to get outside and play. Some children experiencing poverty live in small, overcrowded homes with no play space or garden, making lockdown much tougher. Even though parks have tended to stay open, playgrounds have been shut until very recently, hugely reducing the outdoor play options for children, especially those without a garden and play equipment of their own. Interestingly, our partners at Beano report an increasing recognition from better-off families that things have been much tougher for others and that access to parks and playgrounds, if it has to be rationed, should go to families on low incomes first. Helenor Gilmour's framing of the question was "what would happen if Disney was in charge? There would be a queue, with wristbands, and everyone would trust their place in the queue."

The need to think creatively about the distribution of access to space and play will be extremely pressing in the case of another lockdown. Many children felt too scared to leave the house during the most intense phase of lockdown, and some parents did not allow their child to go out at all.²² Our partners at the Reach Academy in Feltham report that this fear has been particularly acute for single parents – the prospect of

becoming very sick while being the only caregiver for a child has been overwhelming for many parents. Even as lockdown has eased, families without a car (typically those on a low income or living in more crowded urban neighbourhoods) will find it harder to enjoy day trips and holidays, as fears about the use of public transport remain high.

Some families have also struggled to afford appropriate toys, games, play equipment and arts and crafts resources, limiting children's opportunities for varied, creative play at home. Save the Children's Emergency Response programme has been supporting families in crisis during the pandemic, offering a range of household goods, high street shopping vouchers, toys, and learning resources. One of the most popular options has been Argos gift vouchers, which some families are using to buy outdoor play equipment like sandpits and paddling pools, as well as puzzles and games. Struggling parents are clearly keen to ensure their children can make the most of the extra time for play, and we know that these new, joyful activities at home will help strengthen children's learning and sense of wellbeing. One of the parents we supported in our Smallshaw-Hurst partnership (in Tameside, Greater Manchester) told us, "It's been so hard keeping them entertained and to have [Save the Children's activity packs] with their ideas has really helped and eased some of the stress for me".

We have been particularly struck by how well even very young children have responded to the inclusion of gifts in the packages they receive. Parents, of course, take charge of how vouchers and early learning materials are used in the household, but children seem to know that the games and toys they've received from our partners like Hasbro and LEGO are 'just for them' and show that somebody is thinking about them.

Creating the sense that children are free to imagine and investigate on their own – that they exist beyond their relationship to adults – is key to building their sense of self-worth. One striking aspect of life in lockdown has been how children's sense of risk has become newly visible to their parents. Anita Grant, the chair of Play England, described how play is simply what children naturally do when left to their own devices, and that they can often navigate risk successfully when out of sight. Children naturally climb higher, cycle further or run faster than their parents would like, but normally stick inside boundaries that keep them safe. Now that parents and children are together more, parents have a newfound sense of how their children play on trampolines, skateboards, or bikes, and that they have been doing 'risky play' safely for some time.

Through our Emergency Response, we've found that many families in crisis lack access to computers or laptops and affordable Internet access – making online play and learning difficult at a time when lots of support and resources have moved online. Most parents have Internet access through a smartphone, but the data might be limited or expensive and families are often sharing one or two phones among adults and several children. Early learning packs and printed activity sheets have been in high demand among the families we work with, providing parents with fun activities easily at hand and without the need to go online. Being trapped on the wrong side of the digital divide has been a concern for many parents, particularly those on low incomes, but there are also worries about children being newly exposed to online harm, with more time spent in front of a screen. Our partners at LEGO have launched a new 'build and talk' activity to help parents talk about digital safety and wellbeing, while the NSPCC warn children face "a perfect storm for online child abuse".²³

FRIENDSHIPS AND KEEPING IN TOUCH

Most children in the UK, even relatively young children, were comfortable using social media and online games to stay in touch with friends before the lockdown. These routes have been invaluable in helping children maintain friendships and have been complemented by new attempts at video calls. For younger children, that might mean simply each friend playing with their own toys but with a video connection, while older children have been using games like Fortnite and Roblox to spend time with their friends and as a space away from the stresses of day-to-day life.

During the most intense phase of the lockdown, nearly three quarters of children were keeping in contact with friends via video chat, including younger children – and this was the most popular way of staying in touch.²⁴ Older children (aged 11-16) were also using WhatsApp, phone calls and social media in large

numbers, but these were less popular for younger children (aged 4-10). Video has been used for interactive play as well as chatting – a quarter of children have done arts and crafts activities with friends through video calls, and 21% have played with friends and family online.

James Purnell from the BBC told us that the number of children accessing news programmes and other content that helps to explain what is happening has “gone through the roof”, including programmes like Newsround and BBC Bitesize. In keeping with a ‘generational merge’, these programmes are also being watched by many adults who are looking for clear explanations of major events shaping what is happening in the world today. Children, however, aren’t just watching or chatting on video, they are also getting creative: nearly a third of children aged 7 to 14 have created and posted their own videos during lockdown.

Despite the ability of online services and TV to help children stay in touch, they can’t replace real-life interaction, especially extended, daily interactions at school, nursery, after-school clubs, and weekend groups. Online interactions are usually much less frequent and less intensive. Many younger children have struggled to engage with video chats and social media often isn’t appropriate. In June, a quarter of children in the Co-SPACE study aged 4-10 said they had had no communication with friends at all in the last week.²⁵ And, as outlined above, less well-off families often lack access to affordable online devices and Internet connections.

As a result, one in three children in the UK aged 5 to 18 have told parents that they feel lonely since schools have closed.²⁶ A major survey of children in Wales found that their biggest worry about lockdown was not being able to spend time with friends; and this has been echoed by Save the Children surveys of families we work with in Wallsend (Tyneside) and Smallshaw-Hurst (Greater Manchester).²⁷ One of the parents we work with in Smallshaw-Hurst told us, “It’s been so hard and emotional, as the six-year-old is missing his friends so much and has been really emotional ... sometimes he cries because he would enjoy something more if his friends were there”.

On the other hand, there is also some evidence of children being agents of ‘the new neighbourliness’, with a lack of self-consciousness driving children to be friendly to others in their neighbourhood their families don’t yet know. We have had reports of younger children knocking on doors to find anyone with a paddling pool and then dragging it to a local park to enjoy it together; and of older children taking charge of street singalongs or driveway dance parties.

Likewise, the Relationships Observatory reports how looking out for local children has helped one community come together: “We have a traditional red phone box which has organically become a place for swapping and dropping during COVID19. A box of chocolates was donated and then collected by a little girl who was having a rubbish birthday in isolation. People have left books and magazines as well as tea bags and other essentials for anyone who might be struggling to get out or just needed something nice. One little girl in Year 6 missed the last day before schools shut and didn’t get her shirt signed by her friends. She was so upset. The shirt is hanging in there with some pens and all her friends are signing it on their daily walk to cheer her up”.²⁸

CHILDREN’S WELLBEING AND MENTAL HEALTH

Many children have been remarkably resilient during the pandemic and helped the adults in their lives to cope better. Kerry, a single mum we work with in Sheffield told us that, “resilience is the thing I’ve learned from my children the most. They have just got on and embraced this situation.”

But lockdown has also been really tough for children – most will have had difficult days or even weeks, and some will have struggled throughout or seen their mental health gradually deteriorate as lockdown ticked on. Anita Grant of Play England taught us how to think about this: lockdown restrictions left adults feeling a loss of control and autonomy, and that impact has been magnified intensely for children, many of whom are subject to even deeper restrictions, with less understanding of why.

It’s hardly surprising, then, that at the outset of the pandemic, Save the Children’s survey found that just over half (56%) of parents in the UK were concerned about the impact of the pandemic on their child’s

mental health.²⁹ Top of parents' concerns are: the loss of routine associated with school or nursery; the lack of interaction with friends and other children their own age; and concerns that children will become too dependent or 'clingy'. Loss of familiar routines can be particularly difficult for children with particular special educational needs.³⁰ Young people themselves are also worried: 40% of Scottish young people aged 11-24 are concerned about their mental health in the wake of the pandemic.³¹ Save the Children's survey found that children's biggest concern at the outset of lockdown was that a family member would become sick, with concerns about not being able to see friends coming a close second.³²

Some parents have already noticed changes in their child's behaviour. A third of parents with a child over five have noticed negative changes in their child's behaviour since lockdown – including more tantrums, nightmares, unexplained stomach aches, fighting or crying.³³ By late June, just under a quarter (23%) of parents had accessed support in relation to their child's response to the pandemic, and one in five of these parent had not previously sought extra help for their child.³⁴

For older children, one of the sources of stress has been the cancellation of long-awaited events. Saul Parker, of the Good Side communications agency, told us about how 'disrupted trajectories' was one of the big emerging themes from their anthropological research, with teenagers in particular lamenting the cancellation of the festivals, proms and parties that they would normally associate with summer and that feel like important milestones on their way to adulthood. Even the youngest children now have 'graduations' when they leave nursery or primary school, and these precious moments will be difficult to recreate when lockdown is over.

Some children seem to be particularly worried about the direct impact of the pandemic and will have picked up on troubling media accounts and discussions between adults. One in five parents say that their child is concerned that a family member or close friend could die, and this seems particularly acute among younger children.³⁵ Children of key workers may be particularly concerned, though evidence from the young people's charity Reclaim (which launched a campaign called #TheIndispensables³⁶ to allow young people to thank the key workers in their lives) suggests children are also incredibly proud of the role their parents are playing on the frontline.

Similarly, BAME children and young people may be increasingly anxious given the increased risks of BAME people contracting and dying from coronavirus. Yet they are also in the lead of the Black Lives Matter movement and, through collective action, finding a voice and a power which can be a tremendous source of resilience and hope.

James Purnell of the BBC told us about the corporation's increasing sense that we might be entering a new age of active citizenship, with children becoming more active in their community, whether through drawing rainbows when younger, helping out with supporting grandparents and doing the housework when slightly older or becoming much more active in social questions as they reach their teens.

NEW, ADAPTED, AND LOST SOURCES OF SUPPORT

Despite the lockdown, many families have continued to receive support – including through schools, nurseries, children's centres, community groups and children's social services. These services, programmes and other forms of support have been heavily adapted to be delivered under social distancing rules and the extent to which support has continued varies significantly around the country.

Social media has been incredibly important in helping families to stay in touch with wider support systems like extended family, friends, and professionals. This has provided parents with much-needed emotional support, social interaction and new ideas and information. Parents are also using digital and online content to find new activities for play and learning with children. In England, the Sutton Trust found that 37% of parents reported using online resources like Hungry Little Minds and 31% used parenting apps.³⁷

For younger children, most nurseries and childminders have kept in touch with parents by phone and used email or apps to share tips and ideas for play and learning at home. The ability of providers to do this has varied hugely around the country, as they face the pressures of furloughing staff, a huge drop in parental

fees and juggling resources to retain places for key worker and vulnerable children. In England, 28% of parents say they have been receiving online support from their nursery or childminder during lockdown.³⁸

The vast majority of parenting and family support programmes have continued with major adaptations, which is good news for families who rely on this support.³⁹ Families have benefited from a variety of support – online resources, text messages, online face-to-face support or access to physical resources to use at home. Families who have been able to continue accessing this support are likely to have benefitted from extra headspace, strategies, and encouragement during lockdown. Parents have told us how important it is to hear from trusted individuals during lockdown, given the myriad information available. Some of the adaptations that providers have had to make have actually been positive for some families. Some of our community partners in Northern Ireland have told us that some families wouldn't usually come to groups we run in schools, because they feel intimidated, but are more comfortable attending online sessions from the familiarity of their own home.

However, family support provision was patchy before the lockdown and adaptation during lockdown has been highly varied too. As the Duchess of Cambridge has said "In the first few months as new parents there's a huge amount of support from midwives and health visitors. But from then, there's a massive gap before children start school."⁴⁰ This was the situation for parents before lockdown (and why Save the Children's UK programmes focus on helping fill this early years gap), but for many new parents even this early, intensive support has been missing. Lots of women are giving birth alone given hospital restrictions and when they get home, they are struggling with isolation⁴¹ and learning to breastfeed without face-to-face help.⁴² This increases the risk of mental health issues.

With reduced access to early intervention such as health visitors, early help, or local children's centres, families are often receiving more limited support⁴³ and some are finding that online options just don't fill the gap. At the same time, lack of home-visiting by children's social services has raised concerns about the ability of professionals to fully assess children's home environment and identify problems.⁴⁴ Home-visiting can also be critical for programmes that rely on face-to-face contact to model positive parenting approaches. Although online adaptations are possible, these may not fully support parents who are really struggling.

Families with a child with special educational needs are reporting major disruptions to the support they would normally receive, with reduced availability of health care services, a lack of face-to-face contact with children's social services and the loss of respite care.⁴⁵ Across the UK, among parents with a child with special education needs who was receiving extra help through health or education services prior to the pandemic, 85% say that support has stopped or been postponed.⁴⁶ This has potentially very significantly reduced children's social interaction and opportunities for fun, play and learning. Parents are facing enormous extra pressures and are missing the help from support workers and advocates.⁴⁷

For children facing particular risks, the significant disruption to standard safeguarding mechanisms is a huge concern. Regular contact at school is one of the main ways that safeguarding issues are picked up, and face-to-face contact with GPs and other health professionals can also be important. Referrals to children's social care fell sharply as we entered lockdown.⁴⁸ Referrals are now accelerating and there is also a cohort of newly vulnerable families that social workers have previously not had contact with.⁴⁹

Childline has experienced an unprecedented demand for its services during the pandemic, delivering nearly 7,000 counselling sessions about coronavirus between January and May 2020.⁵⁰ A higher proportion of sessions were about the child's mental health and wellbeing than before the crisis. Children are often talking to counsellors about similar issues to before lockdown (including abuse and difficult family relationships) but the lockdown has often exacerbated these pre-existing issues.

INEQUALITIES IN ACCESS TO FORMAL EDUCATION

The role of parents as children's first and most important educators has been reinforced by the pandemic and lockdown. Yet access to formal education has continued to be an important influence on children's learning even with schools and nurseries closed. In many ways, it's incredible how much schoolwork children have been doing at home, given the lack of structure that formal education provides and the

significant challenges that many families have encountered during lockdown. On average, school-age children across the UK were doing 2.5 hours of schoolwork a day, at home, in April – when schools were closed to all year groups (except key worker and vulnerable children).⁵¹ This is clearly much less than in a normal school day but is not insignificant.

However, there have been considerable inequalities in what schools and early years providers have been able to offer children in terms of access to formal education while at home. Some – although not all – of these inequalities mirror existing disparities, leading to major worries that school and nursery closures will reverse the narrowing of education gaps over the last decade and have a lasting effect on the life chances of disadvantaged children.

A study from the Institute of Education found that one in five children – equivalent to 2.3m children across the UK – did no schoolwork or less than one hour a day in April. This figure was higher for children eligible for free school meals (an imperfect measure of poverty), at 25% – compared to 18% for their better-off peers. Children receiving free school meals were also less likely to have their schoolwork checked by a teacher (possibly because they were less likely to do it in the first place). The Sutton Trust found that 50% of teachers in private schools reported receiving at least three quarters of work back, compared to 27% of those in the most advantaged state schools and just 8% in the most disadvantaged state schools.

There have also been well-documented differences in the ability of schools to provide live online lessons and online meetings with teachers. Two thirds (64%) of secondary school pupils from the richest households in England have been receiving this kind of ‘active’ help from teachers compared to just under half (47%) of the poorest children, and 82% of private school children.⁵² The cancellation of exams has upset many young people, as they’ve lost the opportunity to prove themselves and haven’t been consulted about how to mitigate the impacts. There are concerns that some young people will lose out disproportionately from teacher-assessed grades, as there is evidence that teachers unintentionally underestimate BAME and working class students; and this approach makes it impossible to credit young people who save their studying efforts for close to the exam (typically boys).⁵³

Inequalities in what schools and early years settings could provide have been compounded by inequalities at home. In England, the Children’s Commissioner reported that 700,000 children have no access to a computer or laptop for schoolwork.⁵⁴ Among children eligible for free school meals, one in five (20%) had no access to a computer at home, compared to 7% of children not eligible for free school meals and 3% of children attending private schools.⁵⁵ Government schemes to provide laptops have been slow and too small scale.⁵⁶ This is a huge problem given what we are learning about how children access education through technology. Despite the BBC’s extraordinary efforts in providing an educational curriculum on the ‘red button’ service, take-up has been lower than hoped, because children want interactive services on a laptop and not educational broadcasting through their television.

Many parents have been heroic in their efforts to support children’s schoolwork at home. Parents in England spent on average 2.4 hours a day helping their child with schoolwork.⁵⁷ Children eligible for free school meals received *more* help from their parents than their better-off peers – perhaps because they were more likely to have a non-working parent who had more time to help. However, better-off parents are more likely to feel confident about helping with schoolwork: just over 60% of parents with a degree say they feel confident supporting their child’s learning, compared to less than half of parents with A Level or GCSE qualifications.⁵⁸ Children from poorer families are also more likely to live in crowded homes without their own quiet study space.

Even among vulnerable children (those with a special educational need, children with experiences of being in care, or those with a safeguarding concern) who were able to stay in school during the lockdown, attendance has been very low. In England, throughout April and May, fewer than one in ten vulnerable children were attending school. By 9th July, attendance had only reached 27%. In Scotland, there have been significant concerns about the ability of children with special educational needs to continue accessing appropriate education.⁵⁹ Many families kept their vulnerable child at home in agreement with the school and social workers because they could be well-supported at home. We also heard from parents in Wallsend, Tyneside, that they weren’t sending their vulnerable child to school because they were worried about the stigma. Some families were too anxious about the risks of coronavirus to send their child to

school. Although many vulnerable children have been well-cared for at home, there are concerns that a minority might be left at risk of abuse or neglect due to being out of school for so long.⁶⁰

Even as schools and early years settings have started to reopen in some parts of the UK, attendance has been far from back to normal levels. In England, only a quarter of children who usually attend a nursery or childminder had returned by early July. Although many young children will have benefitted from extra one-to-one interactions with parents and more time for play, the loss of several months of early education could be a challenge for many others – especially those from struggling families or with special educational needs. There are also growing concerns about the sustainability of the early years sector following months of vastly reduced income. This could be compounded if large numbers of children don't return to nurseries and childminders, or if the ongoing costs of the pandemic escalate (like repeatedly needing to send groups of children home for two weeks if one child tests positive for the virus).⁶¹

Among primary school-age children, attendance in England on 9th July was below 50% for the three year groups able to return to school; and just 13% for year 10 students, given government restrictions on the proportion of Y10s able to attend. New rules for September in England should allow all children to return to the classroom, nursery, or childminder full-time but parents retain significant concerns about the health risks. These concerns are likely to be heightened among families from BAME backgrounds given evidence of bigger risks to health, creating an even greater burden of worry for some parents. Less well-off parents have typically been much more resistant to sending their children back to school.⁶² Early years attendance could be particularly badly affected, as it's not mandatory.

Although lots of children will have gained during the lockdown, through more family time and more time for play, there's no doubt that many children's learning will have suffered. Reintegrating children back into school or nursery will need to have many dimensions, including helping to rebuild relationships with friends and teachers; re-establishing routines and expectations; and addressing any mental health issues worsened or left untreated during lockdown. Some form of 'catch-up' in formal learning will be necessary for many children, especially those from more disadvantaged families or who have special educational needs. In England, the government has provided funding for schools to support this work, but the details have yet to be confirmed. It's disappointing that this funding doesn't extend to early years settings, where several months away from nursery or a childminder can make a huge difference to young children. There is strong evidence that proven early language, literacy, and numeracy interventions help young children make quick progress, for relatively low cost, so this should be a focus for government investment.⁶³

FAMILY FINANCES UNDER PRESSURE

The impact of the pandemic on family finances has varied hugely. Parents who have been able to work from home (typically middle and higher earners) have largely been able to protect their income while saving significantly on travel costs and eating out. Higher earners who have been furloughed have often had their earnings topped up by their employers, while lower earners have not.

Before the pandemic hit, the number of children experiencing poverty was already high and rising. In 2018/19, an extra 100,000 children fell below the poverty threshold, meaning that 4.2 million children were living in poverty – almost one in three (30%) children in the UK. Projections showed that this was likely to rise to 36% by 2023/24.⁶⁴

It is not yet clear what impact the pandemic will have on child poverty, but evidence is already starting to emerge which shows that more children are at risk of being pushed into poverty. IPPR has estimated that an additional 200,000 children will be under the poverty line by the end of 2020, compared with a situation where the pandemic had not happened.⁶⁵

In many families, incomes have already taken a serious hit. Some parents have lost their jobs, seen their hours or income from self-employment reduced, and those benefiting from the furlough scheme may still be faced with living on 80% of their usual wages – which, for families already on low incomes, could leave them struggling to make ends meet. A third of parents that we surveyed in our Smallshaw-Hurst partnership said they have had to apply for government benefits as a direct result of the current crisis.

Loss of income through employment has been a much more common experience for lower earners than higher earners, with one third of lower-paid employees having lost jobs or been furloughed, compared to less than one in ten top earners.⁶⁶ Excluding key workers, most people in the bottom tenth of the earnings distribution are in sectors affected by the lockdown, with 80% either in a shut-down sector or unable to do their job from home, compared with a quarter of the highest-earning tenth.⁶⁷ This is particularly pronounced for BAME workers from, who are more likely to have been made unemployed and less likely to have been able to benefit from the furlough scheme.⁶⁸

Modelling from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has shown that families already in poverty before the crisis have been hardest hit, with families in poverty being around 50% more likely to have seen at least one adult in their family become unemployed than families with children who were not already in poverty.⁶⁹ These families have lost on average £50 per week in total income – equivalent to a week's food shopping for a single parent family. This risks pushing families further into hardship.

At the same time as experiencing significant hits to income, families with children are facing extra costs which exacerbate their financial difficulties. Research conducted by Save the Children and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that the vast majority (86%) of families on low incomes have faced additional costs for essentials such as food, electricity, clothes and nappies, with almost six in ten families reporting extra food costs.⁷⁰ Torsten Bell of the Resolution Foundation told us that 37% of low income families with children have seen their spending go up during the pandemic, compared to just 4% of families without children.⁷¹

To navigate this situation and manage the impact of rising bills at the same time as falling incomes, families are cutting back on essentials for themselves and their children. Save the Children's research with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that seven in ten families are cutting back on basic items, including food, heating, electricity, clothes, and nappies. Almost half (43%) reported cutting back on food for adults or children.

This pressure on family finances has resulted in the use of food banks rapidly increasing during the lockdown, including parcels specifically for children. The Food Foundation has found that nearly 5 million adults and 1.7 million children are experiencing food insecurity, despite supermarket shelves now being better stocked compared with the start of the lockdown.⁷² Food bank use has seen a steep rise, with an 89% increase for emergency food parcels from food banks in April 2020, compared to the same period in 2019 – including a doubling in the number of parcels given to children.⁷³

The government has put in place the free school meal voucher scheme, to replace the free school meals children would have received at school, and recently announced they would extend the scheme to cover the summer holidays. This is welcome news, but parents and schools have reported multiple problems with the voucher scheme, with schools being unable to apply for the vouchers and parents not receiving vouchers or being unable to spend them at their local shops. This means that some parents are having to cover the costs of meals children would normally have received at school.

Save the Children and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's polling found that six in ten families on low incomes had borrowed money in some way since the start of the pandemic, with 20% using credit cards and 10% using payday loans – expensive, short-term options which risk leading to further debt.⁷⁴ Families are also going into arrears with crucial bills, with half of families falling behind with their council tax, rent or other bills. Debt was more common for BAME families: 65% of BAME respondents were behind with at least one out of council tax, their rent/mortgage, or other bills compared with 48% of white respondents, and 74% of BAME respondents reported that they have had to resort to borrowing compared with 57% of white respondents.⁷⁵

Going into debt not only causes families to struggle in the short term but stores up problems for the future as families begin to repay their debt or face falling into further arrears. StepChange has warned of a council tax enforcement 'cliff-edge' as bailiff visits resume in August⁷⁶ and as support for renters winds down, there is a risk that families face making repayments they cannot afford.

As lockdown eases, there is no guarantee that family finances will recover quickly. The pressure on low-income families is likely to get worse rather than better over the next few months: as the furlough scheme winds down, job losses will rise, and families on low incomes are likely to bear the brunt of this. Families

may already be ahead of the forecasters here: we have seen some early evidence of families husbanding the resources of our emergency response programme, even though they were already in dire straits, because they were ‘braced for impact’ of much worse to come.

Thousands of job losses have already been announced in the last few weeks, and the situation is unlikely to improve.⁷⁷ Unemployment is predicted to rise to levels not seen since the 1990s,⁷⁸ with the OBR forecasting that the UK is on track to record the largest decline in GDP for 300 years.⁷⁹ This means that family incomes will not recover quickly, and families face further struggles and hardship without more support from the government. Many are already worried about what will happen if the recession coincides with a second wave and further lockdown: queueing for hours with children outside the supermarket is hard enough in spring and early summer, it’s another thing entirely in the winter.

As the furlough scheme winds down, Universal Credit will become the main safety net for families who have lost their jobs or seen their pay reduced. The Universal Credit system has coped well with the crisis, with over 3 million new claims since the start of the pandemic⁸⁰ – but the levels of support are not enough to meet families’ needs.

At the start of the pandemic, the government announced a £20 per week uplift to Universal Credit and Working Tax Credits, along with other measures including a rise in Local Housing Allowance rates and the suspension of the minimum income floor for self-employed claimants. These were welcome interventions and have undoubtedly helped families, but despite this, many families continue to struggle. The flat-rate nature of the uplift does not take into account the difference in need between family types, with a couple with two children needing around 2.4 times the increase in income than a single adult to experience the same improvement in living standards.⁸¹

In addition, the benefit cap limits the extent to which families with children feel the benefit of these increases. Around 76,000 families were subject to the benefit cap before lockdown,⁸² and it is likely that this has since increased. While the benefit cap remains in place, these families will not see any improvement in their finances from uplifts to benefits.

LIFE AFTER LOCKDOWN: PRIORITIES FOR CHILDREN

Although lockdown is easing and infection rates are improving, life will continue to be different for some time to come for children in the UK – and new challenges are being layered on top of pre-existing risks and inequalities. As we head towards the ‘new normal’, some of the areas that this briefing indicates all of us in the movement for good childhoods should prioritise include:

- **Protecting family time:** we must capitalise on the joy that parents and children alike have experienced by having more time together and not allow this to be excessively squeezed when work and school are fully resumed. Efforts to extend genuinely family-friendly pay and working patterns to more parents could be crucial here, especially to ensure that lower earning parents can balance work and family time while ensuring a decent family income.
- **Supporting parents:** huge pressure has been placed on parents during lockdown and, in the next phase of the pandemic, the resilience and creativity that parents have shown must be matched with much greater support. This might include more help with home learning, especially in the crucial early years, as well as more readily available support when children encounter significant problems. We should build on the creativity of initiatives by the BBC and others, using brands and organisations that parents really trust to get support to parents when they need it and in ways that work for them.
- **Prioritising the early years:** early investment in children’s learning and family support can reap significant gains but has been hugely disrupted by the pandemic. Given the precarious nature of the childcare sector, local and national governments should keep a close eye on whether more nurseries and childminders are closing and whether this is affecting poorer families more, and be prepared to step in to ensure families can continue to access vital services.
- **Protecting education:** plans for catch-up support already announced by UK governments may need to go further and be more strongly targeted. Governments should make sure that early

education and provision for 16-18-year-olds get extra support too. Keeping schools and nurseries open should be the default position given the substantial risks of closures compared to the low risks to children and to transmission.⁸³ Even with schools and nurseries open, children will need reliable online access to help with catch-up and in case they need to isolate. Governments should ensure all disadvantaged children have Internet access and a laptop at home.

- **Investing in outdoor play:** spending time outside is low risk in the context of coronavirus and will be an important part of managing the pandemic in the medium-term. It's also fun and good for children's physical, social and cognitive development. Local and national governments, working with community groups and charities, should prioritise investment in places for children's outside play, especially in neighbourhoods where few families have private gardens. Creative approaches to safety, in play areas and on the streets children use to get there, will be needed to reassure parents that it's OK to let children play outside.
- **Protecting family incomes:** to support families to weather the storm of the coming months, the government urgently needs to invest in the social security system to target support at families. Government should immediately add a temporary £20 a week to the child element of Universal Credit and the Child Tax Credit; and suspend the benefit cap and two-child limit so that all families feel the benefit of this extra cash.
- **Listening to children:** children have been missing from the national conversation about the pandemic because they don't carry much weight politically. This needs to change. We all need to work together to build a movement that puts the interests of children more squarely on the political agenda. And we should start by listening to, and working with, children – making sure they have powerful platforms from which to share their insights and proposals; and making sure that everyone whose choices touch children are challenged to listen to children as they make decisions that affect their lives, during the pandemic and beyond.

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