

Childhood Policy Programme

The Impacts of Covid-19 on
Children and Young People

May 2021

Virtual Workshop

Welcome and Introduction

Professor Ruth Lister FBA welcomed participants to the workshop and gave an overview of the Childhood Policy Programme more broadly. This workshop forms part of the second phase of the programme and will examine the impact of the pandemic on children and young people through the lens of the three Childhood Policy Programme themes (children's voice and participation; children's rights; and being/becoming). There will also be an emphasis on two cross-cutting aspects which cut across these three themes – namely inequalities and a focus on all four parts of the UK.

There is a widespread sense that children and childhood have been too often ignored in public discourse relating to the pandemic, and when they are considered, the focus is usually on the disruption to education and the effect this will have on children's future prospects (i.e. a becoming perspective). There has been much less emphasis on 'the whole child' and what their needs are in the present (i.e. a being perspective).

The workshop will explore the impact of the pandemic on children and childhood, looking both at what has already happened, and also looking forward to a post-pandemic future. Discussions will include a consideration of lessons learnt, and of priority areas for research and policy going forward. Discussions will inform the final phase of the childhood programme, and also the British Academy's wider Covid-related work programme.

Introduction to the Four Topics from Facilitators

Education

Professor Ann Phoenix FBA introduced this topic, outlining existing research in this area. Covid-19 has served to highlight much that was already known prior to the pandemic, but has made it much more apparent. For instance, that there are expectations on educational institutions that go far beyond academic attainment, school lunches are vital nutrition for many children, schools provide opportunities for the acquisition of language and speaking skills, and schools can be vital for children's emotional health and social skills. Schools provide a protective, and partly equalising, environment.

Covid-19 has underscored the inequalities that exist in relation to learning opportunities in the home. More deprived households are more likely to lack IT equipment, decent internet access or a place for children to work. Parents differed in terms of how much time they had to assist with learning (partly dependent on their work situation) and also varied as to how comfortable and confident they were with the school curriculum. There was huge variation, particularly in the first lockdown, regarding the learning resources and online lessons provided by schools. This included a divide between private and state schools, while research showed that children from lower socio-economic homes on average were less likely than other children to receive the same level of resources.

The impact of this inequality has been an increase in attainment gaps. Children from lower socio-economic households have fallen further behind, particularly in maths. While these attainment gaps are not new they have been exacerbated by the impact of

the pandemic. Also, uncertainty over exams and assessment has caused stress for young people, and in some cases will have exacerbated mental health issues. However for some children the experience of lockdown and learning from home has been preferable to being in school, such as those children who were bullied, or those with special educational needs (SEN) that were not being met at school.

Family life

Professor Ruth Lister FBA introduced this topic, noting that there is a sense that there has been less research on this topic from the perspective of children as compared to other three topics, which is itself a point of interest.

During the pandemic some families have spent much more time together than they would normally, while other families have been separated. There have been many challenges for a number of families, such as loss of income, more precarious employment, increased isolation, mental and physical health issues and bereavement. There have been higher levels of relationship breakdown, and an increase in the prevalence and severity of domestic violence. For some families the experience of the pandemic has been a positive experience in some way, and may have strengthened family bonds.

Inequalities are important to consider here, as these will have made a big difference on the impacts on family life. Factors including social class and housing situation are vital considerations, as are the impact of ethnicity and gender. The pandemic will have had particular effects on families in already vulnerable circumstances, such as those living in insecure housing or experiencing homelessness, or those families who are seeking asylum. Children and young people who are carers will have experienced distinct challenges.

Health

Professor Dave Archard introduced this topic, noting that while children are typically not affected severely by Covid-19 itself, they have been greatly affected by health issues that have arisen from the response to the pandemic. It may even be the case that these indirect effects on children have been more proportionately adverse than the effects experienced by adults. Children's diets have suffered (especially those in lower income families) and they have had fewer opportunities for exercise. There has been a withdrawal of some paediatric services, with some staff reallocated to Covid-related work.

Some children's mental health has suffered due to an increase in family tensions. For some children there will have been increased exposure to and harm from domestic violence. There have been rising levels of severe anxiety in children, and problems arising from social isolation and a lack of contact with peers.

The health impacts have not been experienced equally by all children and young people. Inequalities have meant that some have been more affected than others, for instance due to age, location or ethnic background. Children in the four parts of the UK will also have been affected differently in some cases.

Social relationships, play and creativity

Professor Jonothan Neelands introduced this topic. The pandemic has had a huge effect on access to children's leisure facilities, such as playgrounds and those in education settings. The limits on household mixing has affected how children can play, and has resulted in limited contact with other children and adults. For some families lockdowns have meant more time for play, creativity, and storytelling. But for other families the opposite will be true. As is the case in many areas of life the pandemic has served to exacerbate existing inequalities.

Play is central for children - it is essential for emotional, social, cognitive and linguistic development. Play is leisure but it is also how children make sense of the world. The question of what missing out on play in this period means for the longer-term formative development of this generation of children will take time to fully assess and understand. Surveys are already hinting at the impact, with many parents of 2-4 year olds reporting that not being able to play with other children has severely affected their child.

Children use play and the expression of creativity as a means of processing their lived experiences and representing their views, so how children play during this pandemic period will be vital in terms of understanding this.

Breakout Room Discussions

Education

The breakout discussion opened with a short presentation from Martin Kelly and Lauren McAreavey from the Northern Ireland Youth Forum (NIYF). NIYF is the only youth led regional body in Northern Ireland, and it is run by an executive committee of young people. During the pandemic NIYF carried out three pieces of youth led research, garnering nearly 4000 individual responses. The process also gave young people an opportunity to meet and engage with decision makers including the NI commissioner for children and young people, an education minister and an infrastructure minister, amongst others. Education related findings of NIYF's research comprised:

- The most prevalent education issues highlighted by children and young people were 1) widening inequalities, 2) access to resources and support, and 3) the digital divide.
- Education is a devolved issue, and so each of the four parts of the UK will be in a different situation, and may be subject to different policy interventions.
- There has been an infringement of UNCRC article 28 regarding the right to education for all children, and article 29 which states that education must develop every child's personality, talents, abilities to the full.
- Children and young people have felt the pressures of home schooling, and also the knock-on impact of their parents struggling to manage workloads, home life etc.
- The uncertainty over exams and grading led to stress and confusion, also frustration regarding the inconsistency of the grading system introduced.

- When asked to use one word to describe how they felt during the pandemic the top three responses from young people were ‘anxious’, ‘annoyed’ and ‘frustrated’.
- Covid-19 has highlighted the need for long term mechanisms that allow for young people to be heard from and consulted upon, both on education and other topics.

Points made in the following discussion comprised:

- Many young people and children are looking forward to getting back to face-to-face interactions and social contact. Digital fatigue has been a struggle for many students.
- We have to recognise that children’s rights have not been considered in legislation and policy over the last year or so and the voices of children and young people have not been adequately heard or represented. We must tackle this and put rights at centre of decision making.
- It is not just about what children have missed in terms of classes and content but also not being able to see friends, play and talk to peers. All of these are a central part of childhood development.
- It is important to consider how children and young people have made sense of this time, recognising that it has been a traumatic experience for some, and that this will have a bearing on their education, and on their perspectives on education.
- Communities that were already suffering from deprivation before the pandemic and where children and young people are less hopeful/ambitious about their future than peers from more affluent areas may require particular attention. Cultural capital is also a factor here.
- As a society we now have the opportunity to reconsider what ‘education’ means to us. For instance, bringing a focus on ensuring we create cultures, environments and support systems for children and families from the early stages of life onwards. Looking forward, what do we want from education beyond children ‘catching up’ academically? Including children in this process will be essential, for example listening to their views on what types of support they would find most valuable.

Family life

- Children have been exposed to more home life than what is usual for them. There has been also instances where children have been exposed to new family tensions such as seeing parents worry and struggle due to the pandemic.
- Unemployment and lack of reliable social security for many who are out of work is driving up child poverty rates.
- It is important to consider the sources of support that children have relied on during lockdown. These include online resources, a closer reliance on parents and siblings, and also pets. The isolation faced by children when these support systems were not available must also be considered.
- There is variability with regards to the impact of the pandemic, therefore we must study the impact of different lockdown measures in different regions, and the diversity of reactions and responses from children and young people, depending on their specific family contexts.

- During the pandemic children have taken on additional roles as young carers, and they may have further responsibilities within the family which are often not considered. The participation of children in family roles is often forgotten. Also, what is the level of agency that children have in their homes?
- A children's rights approach would have mitigated many of the negative effects created by the pandemic if there was a more coherent and joined up level of response from governments.
- Children and young people need their growing independence to be acknowledged and listened to, both at macro and micro level.

Mental and physical health

This breakout group opened with a presentation from Jane Houston from the Children's Commissioner for Wales and three young researchers. The office of the Children's Commissioner for Wales conducted a survey using a variety of research methods and tools in 2020 exploring young people's experiences of the pandemic, and this was followed in 2021 by a further survey. Key findings were:

- Many children and young people's mental health was negatively affected by the experience of lockdown. Lack of space and privacy in homes was a factor for some.
- For those young people requiring mental health support, getting an appointment with a doctor can be a struggle in itself. The fact that so many appointments were virtual and it was not possible to access face-to-face support also negatively impacted some people's mental health.
- Some children and young people who have experienced poor mental health linked to the pandemic will be able to 'bounce back'. For others, the effects will be more sustained and long term.
- When asked to describe how the pandemic has made them feel emotionally, the responses 'sad' and 'lonely' were used by many children and young people.

Points made in the following discussion comprised:

- There has been a move away from face-to-face consultations to virtual/phone consultations, which has led to difficulties for young people and children, and concerns that they have not always been receiving the diagnosis, treatment and support that they require.
- It was noted that, in terms of rights, one of the UNCRC rights is for all children to receive the highest possible level of healthcare provision.
- Research has shown that the pandemic has exacerbated existing mental and physical vulnerabilities amongst young people and children that existed prior to Covid-19.
- Research has indicated that primary school aged children have struggled more in maintaining social interaction with their peers. Adolescents on the other hand have been able to keep those connections through social media and other platforms, thus potentially mitigating mental health issues to some extent.

- Young people in secondary schools have had to struggle with exam stress, anxiety, and the lack of communication from policy makers on the various changes to schools. Some report struggling with a lack of motivation and feelings of hopelessness throughout the pandemic, which can make them feel disconnected from their studies.
- Timely communication with young people is essential. Many feel they have been left in the dark with little information on school closures, exams and have had to deal with very last-minute changes.
- Interventions for young people and children cannot be generalised. Approaches need to be varied and we must be cautious on making generalisations based on age, ethnicity, locality and so on.
- Policy makers and others should not rush to assume that all children and young people suffering mentally due to the pandemic require therapy or medical interventions. Rather, by listening to children's voices and hearing their thoughts, adults should work to ensure that children and young people have access to a supportive environment that contains the assistance they require to thrive.

Social relationships, play and creativity

- This breakout group opened with a presentation from Sara Rizzo at Ecorys and young researchers Ellie and Naqi on how young people have used creative means (art in particular) to respond to the pandemic. Art can express feelings and emotions, it can be used as a coping mechanism, and it can be an escape from the present. Young people have used art to deal with the feelings of powerlessness some have experienced during the pandemic, for example uncertainty over whether exams will be cancelled. Art can also provide access to a community and to meeting and connecting with new people.
- Looking forward and trying to plan for your future in such uncertain times can be scary, and young people may have lots of negative thoughts. The future may appear especially scary and uncertain for those children and young people who have lost access to services during pandemic and may have regressed. Access to speech and language therapy was also highlighted.
- Policy makers (and others) need to treat the play deficit that has happened during the pandemic as equally important to the education deficit. Play is just as important and has a vital role in terms of building skills such as creativity, resilience and risk-taking. However not all types of play have decreased during the pandemic, and some types of play will have increased.
- In their play children do not need to be literal and rational, instead play can go in any direction that feels right to the child, giving them autonomy and independence – play as a mindset rather than an activity. This is vital, especially when children and young people may feel that other aspects of their lives consist of things *done to them* rather than *by them*.
- Pre-pandemic screentime was sometimes seen as having an overall negative impact on children but during lockdowns screens provided a vital lifeline to the outside world and were the only possible means for socialising with friends or wider family.

- The pandemic highlighted how outdoor and public spaces do or do not work well for children, and to what extent these spaces meet their needs. In some cases opportunities for outside play may have increased particularly during the first lockdown when traffic decreased significantly, and it was suggested that this experience of quieter streets showed what is possible and what could be aimed for in terms of children's outdoor play.

Plenary discussion and closing comments

Comments from young people participating in the workshop comprised:

- Children and young people have had different experiences of the pandemic, they experience things differently, and at different times. Therefore, it is important for policy makers not to categorise all children and young people as the same and to assume that they all need the same support at the same time.
- It is important to maintain a focus on creativity throughout all of childhood, partly as creativity is such a good way of enabling children and young people to cope in difficult times, including during the pandemic. Young children naturally incorporate creativity, but this can get overlooked or forgotten as they get older. Also, as children get older there is less opportunity to pursue creative subjects (such as art or music) unless an individual actively chooses to pursue these. Creative subjects can be a really vital method of expression, and they should be appreciated and encouraged.
- The clarity of messaging is important for young people, and it needs to be delivered in a way young people will understand. For example, there is a lot of potential for confusion as to whether individuals need to listen to the Westminster government or to devolved governments in relation to Covid-19 restrictions.

Comments from other participants comprised:

- There has sometimes been a negative narrative around the pandemic of young people as reckless and irresponsible. Efforts must be made to articulate and communicate a new strong narrative that acknowledges the debt that older people owe to younger ones. The sacrifices that older people have imposed on younger people during the pandemic to restrict the spread of a disease that largely has little or no impact on them have been substantial. Society now owes it to young people to acknowledge this debt, and also to repay it in some way.
- It is encouraging that this workshop has looked at the whole child, as a lot of discourse on children and the pandemic has been dominated by a focus on education, and especially on attainment and exam grades. A 'being approach' as set out in one of the Childhood Policy Programme themes helps draw the focus to the whole child. From a rights perspective it is also important to look at the whole child, and not just at education.

- There is a need for a children's champion at UK level within government at Cabinet level. During the pandemic there has been a lack of oversight and overall responsibility – no one has been focused on what the cumulative impact of policies will be on children and young people. There is also a need to ensure that similar children's champions exist in other decision-making arenas such as the UK's devolved governments and within local authorities.
- Children and young people's voices need to be at the heart of the recovery. Vitally, their voices need to be sustained throughout the policy making process. Sometimes there is a tendency to consult children and young people in initial stages but then not to involve them at all during the remainder of the decision-making cycle. As the UK enters a post pandemic policy landscape children's voices and participation should play a key role.
- The pandemic will likely have negative economic impacts on the UK. A result of this may be pressure to cut public services, including children's services. Any impact assessment of potential cuts should consider their likely effects on children and young people.

Ruth Lister offered some closing comments, thanking all participants for their input, especially the young people who participated in the workshop. Ruth noted that there have been many overlaps between the breakout group discussions which emphasise the linkages between the topics and the importance of focusing on the whole child as life is not easily compartmentalised. The workshop discussion will inform the final phase of the childhood programme, and also the British Academy's wider Covid-related work programme.

Event Participants

Name	Role
Professor Dave Archard	Emeritus Professor of Philosophy, Queen's University Belfast
Naqi Azizi	Young researcher, Ecorys research
Nicola Berkley	Senior Policy Adviser, The British Academy
Ria Bernard	POST Fellow, UK Parliament
Dr Jean Cowie	Principal Educator, NHS Education for Scotland
Professor Helen Dodd	Professor of Child Psychology, University of Reading
Dr Matthew Elliot	Post-Doctoral Associate, University of Lincoln
Derwen Fay	Young researcher, Children's Commissioner for Wales research
Professor Anita Franklin	Professor of Childhood Studies, University of Portsmouth
Tim Gill	Consultant, Rethinking Childhood
Chloe Hellen	Young researcher, Children's Commissioner for Wales research
Jane Houston	Participation Officer, Children's Commissioner for Wales
Lynda Joyce	Educational Psychologist, Powys Local Authority
Martin Kelly	Youth Worker, Northern Ireland Youth Forum
Ellie Knox	Young researcher, Ecorys research
Professor Cath Larkins	Co-Director of the Centre for Children and Young People's Participation, UCLAN
Professor Ruth Lister FBA (workshop chair)	Emeritus Professor of Social Policy, Loughborough University
Cheryl Lloyd	Programme Head (Young People), Education, Nuffield Foundation
Dr Alex Mankoo	Senior Policy Adviser, The British Academy
Lauren McAreavey	Youth Worker, Northern Ireland Youth Forum
Cathy McCulloch	Co-Director, Children's Parliament Scotland
Dr Molly Morgan Jones	Director of Policy, The British Academy
Dr Gayle Munro	Deputy Director, Centre for Children & Families, NatCen
Professor Jonathan Neelands	Professor of Creative Education, Warwick Business School and Chair of Drama and Theatre Education, University of Warwick
Dr Nigel Newton	Lecturer in Education, Cardiff Metropolitan University
Stephen Parry-Jones	Coordinator, Seren Network for Welsh Government
Alex Paz	Policy Assistant, The British Academy
Professor Ann Phoenix FBA	Professor of Psychosocial Studies, UCL Institute of Education
Professor David Putwain	Professor of Education and Early Childhood Studies, Liverpool John Moores University

Sara Rizzo	Senior Research Manager, Ecorys
Dr Wendy Russell	Visiting Fellow, University of Gloucestershire
Alaster Smith	Head of Research Knowledge and Engagement, Department for Education
Professor Alison Stenning	Professor of Social & Economic Geography, Newcastle University
Alex Tennant	Head of Policy and Participation, Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People
Dr Jacky Tyrie	Lecturer in Early Childhood Studies, Swansea University
Dr Nadia von Benzon	Lecturer in Human Geography, Lancaster University
Donna Ward	Director of Children, Families and Disadvantage, Department for Work and Pensions
Anna Westall	Policy Officer, Children in Wales
Dr Adam Wright	Head of Public Policy, The British Academy
Luca Zenati-Parsons	Young researcher, Children's Commissioner for Wales research

