

The experiences of children, young people and families during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Huddersfield Centre
for Research in
Education and Society

Why the research is important

The COVID-19 pandemic rapidly transformed the lives of children, young people and families. However, policy makers have not always been able to hear directly from these groups about their experiences. Children, young people and families were often 'talked about' but seldom 'talked to'.

This HudCRES policy briefing details key messages and recommendations from four separate research projects which:

- Explored the wellbeing, relationships, education and employment experiences of families, young people and children during the pandemic.
- Identified the factors that helped people cope well and those that threatened well-being and increased inequalities.



Radical and urgent action is required to promote social justice, reduce inequalities and improve the social welfare of children, young people and families to enable them to flourish and contribute to society.

Recommendations from the research



Whilst families described some positive experiences, overall, projects showed that the pandemic and lockdown had negatively impacted on children, young people and families.

Our recommendations are to:

- Promote working arrangements that give security, flexibility, dignity and choice.
- Develop a comprehensive plan to ensure the longer-term social welfare of young adults.
- Ensure support services for children with additional needs are maintained.
- Ensure access to quality urban and green spaces for children, young people and their families to play and connect.
- Provide quality internet access for all: this is vital for education, work and social connection.
- Ensure that the disrupted education of young adults and their negative labour market experiences do not become a lasting, generational disadvantage.

Working, learning and living together and apart



The lockdown rules and changing government advice created an unfamiliar and unpredictable environment.

People had to find ways to negotiate their different individual, familial and social relationships and circumstances. However, little was known about the effect lockdown rules had on the people and families working and learning at home and keyworkers who were continuing to go to work.

“ All these roles, and I was having to fulfil them whilst also replacing the social life of two teenage girls that had been totally cut off. I was desperately worried about everyone’s mental health... no one has gone into a black hole but it’s not been easy, and I definitely have been the lynchpin to that.

(Cathy, Mother of two)

“ Sometimes it got a bit too much, I would go outside and hear the sound of a thousand birds.

(Ellie*, aged 10)

The research findings



The four projects produced a mass of original new research material. They included;



interviews with mothers (n=12)



interviews with parents/ carers (n=35)



a survey with young people aged 14-30 years (nearly 1000)



arts-based activities, interviews, workshops and focus groups with children living in some of the most disadvantaged wards in the UK (n=16).

Projects explored the experiences of homeschooling for children and parents/ carers, of working from home or not working, of continuing work outside the home, and of being unable to see family and friends whilst living under lockdown.

Key findings: Wellbeing



- Many young people reported mental distress and ‘ill-being’ because of the pandemic and lockdown.
- Feelings of fatigue, stress and anxiety were commonplace among parents too, especially during the start of the pandemic and during initial lockdown and isolation periods.
- Time spent outside had a positive effect on children’s mental health, providing them with opportunities to connect with nature and their communities.
- Lone mothers were adversely affected with significantly increased workloads leading to tiredness, frustration and an enhanced awareness of inequality and loneliness.

“ I have lost my part-time job and so everyday consists of waking up at 3pm, doing nothing but binge watching Netflix until I go to bed at 3am. The same monotonous life, every day. Talking to barely no-one except my girlfriend and parents. Stuck, anxious with my own thoughts.

(Amy*, aged 17)

* Indicates a pseudonym

Key findings:



Education and work

- Disrupted education and the loss of jobs and income added to young people's insecurity and worries about the future.
- Children, young people and families experienced home learning in different and unequal ways. For many, it was difficult to maintain enthusiasm over the longevity of the pandemic.
- Working parents experienced challenges balancing homeschooling and work, with some changing their employment patterns or stopping paid work completely during homeschooling.
- Mothers reported increased housework, childcare, home schooling and other informal jobs on top of, for some, being a key worker.
- Withdrawn or reduced services for children with additional needs meant mothers were managing educational and/or behavioural needs in a very confined space with little respite.

“ I am scared about the future that people my age will face, economically and education wise. I'm worried that this will influence my grades for A levels next year and therefore jeopardise my future. I feel anxious this will hold me back. ”

(Cassie*, aged 17).

* Indicates a pseudonym



Relationships and caring responsibilities

- Overall relationships were strained, and caring responsibilities increased.
- Being at home, without direct support in school from teachers and friends, was difficult for all. School closure and home-learning raised anxiety. Children worried a lot about their families.
- Young people reported strained relationships with parents and siblings due to lack of privacy and outdoor space – and felt isolated from friends and partners.
- While some mothers had their partners take on an equal share of effort in the home, most mothers did more education and emotional work with the children.
- Some parents valued the opportunity to watch their child(ren) grow, spend time together as a family and get directly involved with their children's learning in creative and innovative ways.

“ I was scared about COVID-19 getting worse ... I was worried how it would end because my mum and dad were worried about their jobs ... mostly my dad because my mum is an NHS workerso my family were all worrying and I was worrying about them, because I don't like to see my family all worrying. ”

(Frankie*, aged 10)

Find out more about the research



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Professor Rob MacDonald

The Youth Under Lockdown project. With the support of the Youth Futures Foundation and in collaboration with North East Youth Alliance and Children North East, the project is gathering the experiences of young people aged 14 to 30 years in North East England. The research team comprises Prof Emma Murphy, Dr Hannah King, Wendy Gill, Simon Bees (University of Durham), and Prof Robert MacDonald (University of Huddersfield).



Dr Jim Reid

Mothers, COVID-19 and Work at Home: Their account in words and portraits. The research explores the experiences of 12 mothers during lockdown in May and June 2020 and use novel remote photographic portraiture to capture these. Visit the 'Mothers in Lockdown' exhibition.



Professor Helen Lomax and Senior Research Fellow Kate Smith

Corona Chronicles: Children researching their everyday lives during the coronavirus pandemic (CHEER). Co-produced with children, this longitudinal study uses participatory arts (animation, craft and

film) to enable children to chronicle life during and post pandemic. The team continue the work with children on a new project Backchat.



Reader Lisa Russell

Homeschooling – a parent's perspective in the advent of COVID-19 – A critical participatory action research project was carried out in one small village primary school (Mar 2020 – Feb 2021). The study included 35 interviews and 30 images depicting what homeschooling felt like from the parent's perspective; a visual and textual rainbow 2021 lockdown journey representation image with input from 16 parents was also developed.

Poster Top tips for parents/guardians as schools re-open to more children poster available free.

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