

SEPTEMBER 2023



**Save the
Children**

WHAT ABOUT

THE CHILDREN?

**How the UK's decision-makers considered children
and young people during the Covid-19 pandemic.**

ABOUT THIS REPORT



PUBLISHED 22 SEPTEMBER 2023 BY SAVE THE CHILDREN UK.

Written on behalf of the Children's Rights Organisations, a group established for the UK Covid-19 Inquiry incorporating Save the Children, Just for Kids Law and the Children's Rights Alliance for England.

Digital version only.

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Photographs by Save the Children unless otherwise specified. With thanks to William Britten who shared his photographs capturing playground closures between April and May 2020.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report was shaped and influenced by feedback and discussions with the Youth Advisory Board at Save the Children, an impressive group of 12-18-year-olds who agreed to share their experiences with us and provide detailed feedback on various drafts of the report. Thanks to Antonia Costas and Meg Briody at Save the Children for supporting these conversations.

The Covid-19 Project Team for the Children's Rights Organisations helped to source most of the evidence and content featured in this report – special thanks to Dan Paskins, Louise King, Clare Adam, Rosemarie Paul, Sinead Dineen, Jennifer Twite, Barney McDonald, Rajiv Menon KC and Donald Ideh for their knowledge and insights.

We reached out to a small group of experts who shared their research and provided crucial feedback at various stages of the drafting process. Thank you to Tim Gill, independent researcher and consultant; Professor Helen Dodd, University of Exeter; Sally Hogg, University of Cambridge; Arabella Skinner, UsForThem; Alice Ferguson and Ingrid Skeels, Playing Out; and Professor Helen Lomax, University of Huddersfield.

Thanks also to colleagues at Norton Rose Fulbright LLP and Garden Court Chambers who supported our evidence submission to the Covid-19 Inquiry and contributed their research to support the creation of this report.

SUPPORTERS

This report has been endorsed by charities, academics, NGOs and civil society groups listed below:

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Anne Longfield, former Children's Commissioner and Chair of the Commission on Young Lives
Article 39
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Campaign for State Education
Carers Trust
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Centre for Mental Health
Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education (CSIE)
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Disabled Children's Partnership
Early Childhood Forum
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INQUEST
IPSEA (Independent Provider of Special Education Advice)
Just Fair
The Kids Network
London Play
The Markfield Project
The Mighty Creatives
NYAS (National Youth Advocacy Service)
No More Exclusions
North East Child Poverty Commission
Our Time
Playing Out
Power2
Refugee Education UK
Safer London
Special Needs Jungle
Together with Migrant Children
Together Trust
Us for Them
WBTi UK Steering Team
What About The Children?
Youth Access
Youth Focus North East

If action is taken now and plans are put in place for future pandemics

recovery is possible.

The Covid-19 pandemic was a traumatic global event and as nations, communities and families, we are still picking up the pieces.

The pandemic affected everyone, but for babies, children and young people, the impacts will be long-lasting and era-defining. Important lessons must be learned for the future while the events are still fresh in our minds. And crucially, children need support now to deal with the consequences of decisions made during the pandemic – the years of lost learning, lost freedoms and lost hope.

All children suffered disruption to their education and made great sacrifices to slow the spread of the virus. The messaging was often confusing, and rules were not always clear, causing unnecessary stress, uncertainty and feelings of immense responsibility.

Their experiences were not uniform. Children and babies living in poverty, young people from racial minorities and those with special educational or mental health needs suffered disproportionately, which highlighted existing inequalities in society.

This did not need to happen. Children have rights enshrined in UK and international law including the right to an education, the right to play, and the right to live free from harm, abuse and neglect. They also have the right to be heard.

These rights were not sufficiently considered by decision-makers over two years of pandemic policy-making.

The valiant efforts of experts and campaigners ensured that children received some protection, but their advice was too often ignored. If it was clear to footballer Marcus Rashford that more support was needed to prevent children going hungry, there is no justification why decision-makers were not aware of this.

We are yet to discover the full impact of pandemic policies on children. At every stage there are concerns, from language and cognitive development in the early years to academic progress for school pupils and the mental wellbeing of teenagers. The tragic experiences of children living in unsafe homes or unsafe prisons will be felt for a lifetime.

But there is hope. If action is taken now and plans are put in place for future pandemics, recovery is possible. We include recommendations in this report that successive governments must enact: to mitigate the negative impacts of the UK's response to the pandemic; to protect children's rights across all areas of policy-making; and to build on children's incredible capacity for resilience in times of crisis.

Signed by,

The Children's Rights Organisations



Photo: UK child washes her hands during the Covid 19 crisis

It is our view that the Covid-19 pandemic disproportionately impacted children and young people because decision-makers did not consistently and robustly consider their rights and interests.

School and playground closures, social distancing rules and lockdowns meant many children missed hundreds of days of learning, missed spending time with other children and missed the services and people who were once there to support them.

Much of the harm caused during the pandemic could have been prevented if the UK's decision-makers considered children's rights or talked to children when they were creating laws and guidance. Instead, adult-focused policies caused great damage and saw children deprived of their right to education, right to play and right to live free from harm.

EDUCATION

Prolonged and unplanned closures of schools and nurseries, which remained closed while pubs re-opened, disproportionately affected children in poverty who were isolated in their homes without adequate replacements for learning, food and emotional support.

PLAY & SOCIALISATION

Rules that were easily communicated such as the 1:1 rule discriminated against younger children. Guidance failed to explicitly reference outdoor play which prevented children and young people from getting the physical activity they needed and the social benefits of seeing their peers, even when adults had many 'reasonable excuses' to be outdoors.

SAFETY

Pandemic policy-making made the assumption that all children lived in safe, happy homes and meant that the most vulnerable children, including those in custody and care, were exposed to brutal conditions, isolation and abuse.

Children's experience of Covid-19 was universal, but not uniform. Every statement below is true, to differing extents:

- Children were happy with their family life (80%).¹
- Children felt trapped (42%), scared (41%) and lonely (37%).²
- Young people felt more resilient after living through the pandemic (49%).³
- Young people felt less confident about their future (51%).⁴

What this report argues is that there are some universal truths which must be recognised:

(1) The UK's pandemic policies harmed children and young people.

(2) Their rights and interests were not adequately considered by decision-makers.

We must take action now to prevent a generation of children and young people being defined forever by their experience of the Covid-19 pandemic.

SUMMARY

OF OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

Protect children's interests in governance and policy-making:

- Appoint a Cabinet Minister for Children with cross-departmental responsibility for driving forward implementation of a Child Rights Action Plan.
- Enshrine children's rights into UK law by incorporating the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in full, making Child's Rights Impact Assessments a statutory requirement for all new legislation.

Improve our response to future pandemics:

- Classify schools and early years settings as essential infrastructure for future health emergencies.
- Test future pandemic policy guidance with children and parents and child- and youth-friendly information about accessing health services and staying safe that is accessible and relevant.

Invest in a full recovery for babies, children and young people:

- Publish a National Recovery Plan for children, young people and families which addresses issues outside of education and a National Play Strategy.
- Urgently publish a children and young people's Mental Health Plan that will address long waiting lists for services and hold technology companies to account for safety of children on their sites.
- Provide full and sustainable investment into educational recovery, children's social care, children's services and mental health.

LOCKDOWN

POEM

by Lincoln, age 11

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 safe, 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.

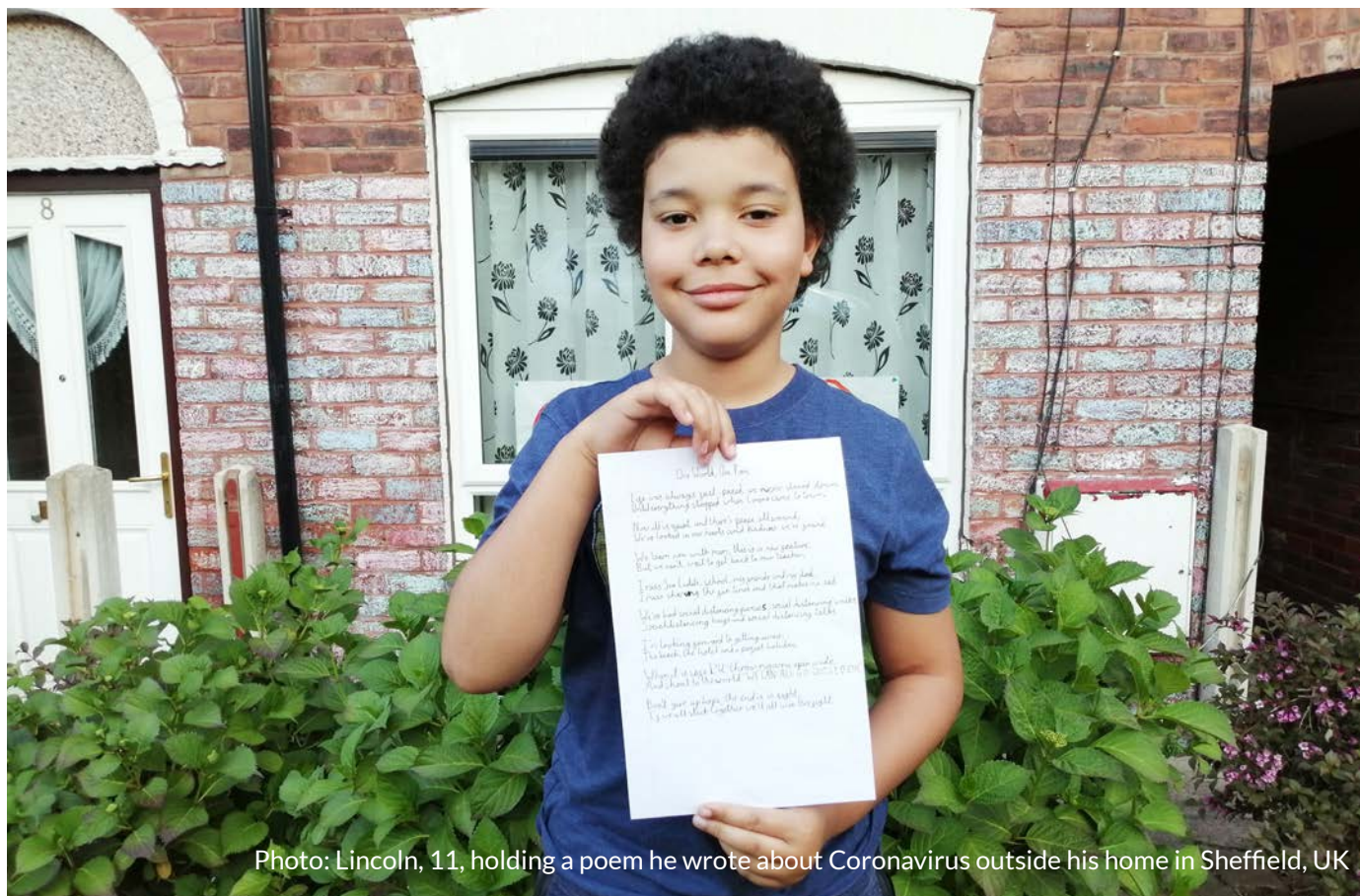


Photo: Lincoln, 11, holding a poem he wrote about Coronavirus outside his home in Sheffield, UK

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Photo: Lexi Mae, six, at her primary school, Sheffield, UK

CHILDREN HAVE THE RIGHT TO BE

HEARD ON ALL MATTERS

AFFECTING THEM

On 7 May 2020, 130 young people and leaders of 80 youth organisations sign an open letter calling on the UK government to talk to young people about Covid and include their questions in press briefings.⁵ This never happened.

On 14 August 2023, more than 40 of the UK's leading charities sign an open letter urging the Covid Inquiry to talk to children and young people about their experiences of Covid.⁶ This still hasn't happened.

Children have the right to be heard in all matters affecting them, but their voices were not heard during the pandemic.⁷ While Covid-19 did not necessarily threaten their lives, children suffered enormously because of policies designed to slow the spread of the virus. Even now, as pandemic policies are reviewed, they continue to be silenced.⁸

This report highlights how in many cases the UK's decision-makers ignored the advice of experts, leading to policies which caused unnecessary harm to babies, children and young people. The impact of new legislation on children was not adequately considered and even when a Child's Rights Impact Assessment (CRIA) was carried out for regulations in children's social care⁹, it was after new regulations came into force. The lack of prior consultation on these regulations was later deemed to be unlawful.¹⁰

The right to an education should mean that schools re-open before pubs. The right to play should mean

that young children play games in the park before adults play tennis. The right to safety should mean that face-to-face visits by health visitors take place as a priority before other professions return to work. But this did not happen.

As early as April 2020, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child issued a statement urging States to respect the rights and wellbeing of children in their response to the pandemic.¹¹ If this had happened consistently and robustly in England, the harm experienced by children during the pandemic could have been avoided.

All children made great sacrifices during the pandemic to save the lives of much older adults. We owe it to them as a society to listen to their experiences and invest in their full recovery.



Photo: Ayla aged 5, in the window of her home in Sheffield during lockdown

HEADLINE:

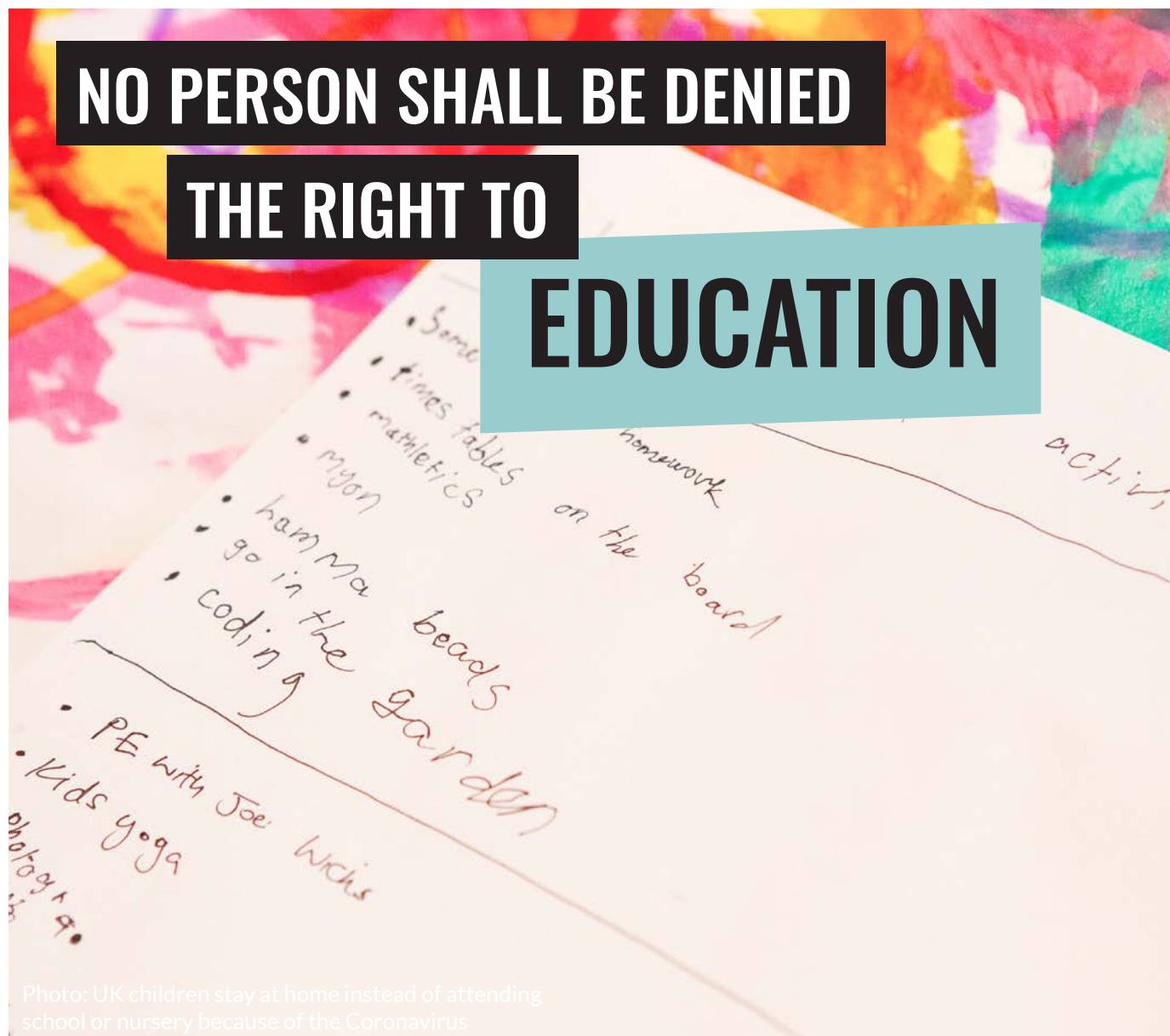
The worst impacts of the pandemic for children could have been prevented if their voices were heard and if children's rights were considered by UK decision-makers.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Enshrine children's rights into UK law by incorporating the UNCRC in full, including making Child's Rights Impact Assessments (CRIA) a statutory requirement for all new policy and legislation using the existing template developed by the Department for Education (DfE).
- Publish a Child Rights Action Plan to set out the government's vision for children with a clear road map for how it will meaningfully improve their lives.
- Appoint a Cabinet Minister for Children with cross-departmental responsibility for protecting children's rights across all policy-making and co-ordinating and driving forward implementation of a Child Rights

“Wouldn't it be amazing if one of the outcomes post-Covid was the overdue appointment of a Minister for Children and Young People in Cabinet?”

James Cathcart, May 2020, Director Young Voices Heard¹²



NO PERSON SHALL BE DENIED

THE RIGHT TO

EDUCATION

Photo: UK children stay at home instead of attending school or nursery because of the Coronavirus

“I never thought I would miss school as much...I’m lucky I have a big house and a nice garden to sit in. But for those that live in flats or places with no gardens or not much house space you would be struggling.”

13-year-old, April 2020, Member of Children’s Parliament¹³

In this section:

School and nursery closures

Remote learning and recovery

Wider role of schools in communities

Every child has a right to an education, even in a global crisis.

The decision to close schools and nurseries during the Covid-19 pandemic was taken by many governments around the world to slow the spread of the virus.

But closures were implemented poorly in the UK – from how they were communicated and how long they lasted, to how predictable harms were

mitigated for different groups of children. A growing body of evidence shows that this caused significant harm to children and exacerbated existing inequalities in society.

These negative impacts were predicted by many experts and well known to policy-makers, and yet still ignored.

SCHOOL AND NURSERY CLOSURES

Before the pandemic, mass closures of schools, nurseries and universities seemed unthinkable. But after multiple lockdowns, Covid bubble policies, teachers’ strikes and the RAAC crisis, it no longer feels like a priority to ensure schools are open for all pupils.

The UK government knew about the negative effects of school closures, particularly on children in poverty, young carers, children in households where there is domestic abuse, and children with

special educational needs. The evidence was not conclusive and mitigations and sensitive planning were recommended.¹⁴

Yet school closures in England were prolonged and unplanned, even after the first lockdown. Government support for children stuck at home was slow and restricted – replacements for learning, food provision and emotional support were largely provided by charities, fought for by celebrity campaigners or reliant on individual teachers.

HEADLINE:

Schools were closed in last-minute decisions which were poorly communicated and with no plan to mitigate the inevitable harms. This did not change over two years of pandemic policy-making.

RECOMMENDATION:

Classify schools and early years settings as essential infrastructure for future health emergencies. Ensure that the decision to close schools cannot be made by ministers alone and is considered only as a last resort.

CONTEXT

Over 9 million pupils and 24,400 schools in England were affected¹⁵

1.5 million pupils eligible for free school meals¹⁶

UK school closures were the second longest in Europe¹⁷

Only 2% of pupils attended school in the first lockdown¹⁸

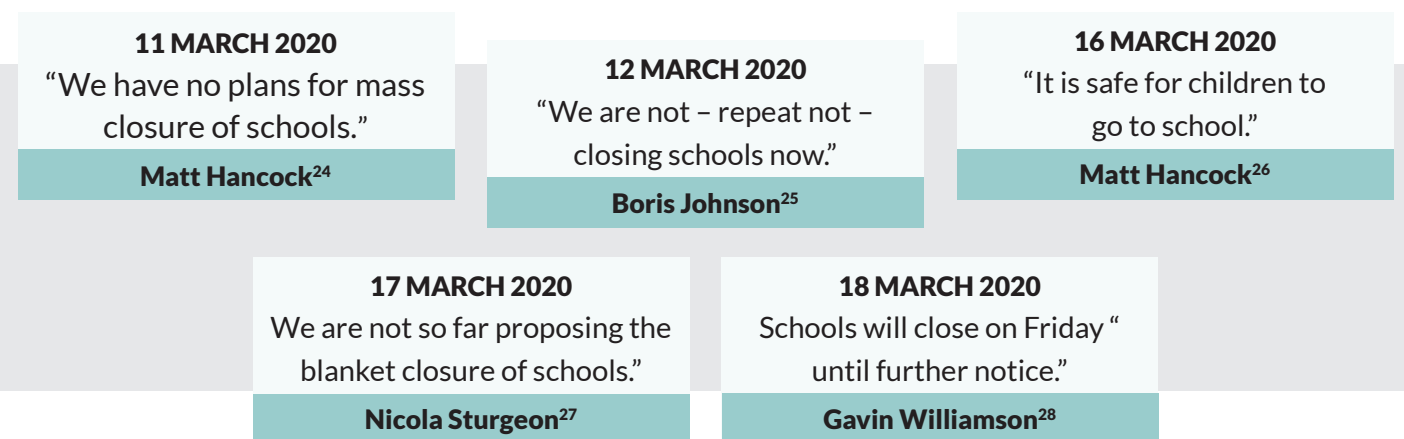
KEY ISSUES

Announcements on closures were always last minute and never child-centred:

- Headteachers were “blindsided” by the government announcement for the public to avoid non-essential contact on 16 March, asking, “What about teachers?”¹⁹
- There was a ‘clear steer’ from the Prime Minister not to make contingency plans for schools closing in winter 2020, even though there was no vaccine.²⁰

Schools and nurseries were not closed for everyone, but most priority children did not attend:

- When the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) advised immediate closure of schools in March 2020, they said that no more than 20% of pupils should be in school. In the first lockdown, only 2% attended.²¹
- Those allowed to attend school included those on Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs). By the end of May 2020, only 6% of children on EHCPs attended.²²
- Many parents were required to work during lockdowns without childcare support. Only 7% of children with formal childcare arrangements continued to attend throughout lockdown, causing parents (especially mothers) to feel stressed and overwhelmed.²³



CAMPAIGN PRESSURE

6 April 2020: University College London (UCL)-led survey concludes that the evidence to support the closure of schools to combat Covid-19 is “very weak”²⁹

17 June 2020: in less than 24 hours, over 1,500 of the UK’s paediatricians sign an open letter to the Prime Minister urging the government to make reopening of schools a priority.³⁰

August 2020: Children’s Commissioner for England demands that education be prioritised over other sectors: “first to open and the last to close”.³¹

“Never again must schools have to compete with pubs, theme parks and Primark to open.”

Anne Longfield, Nov 2021, former Children’s Commissioner for England³²



Photo: Lexi-Mae, six, at her primary school, Sheffield, UK.

FIRST ROUND OF SCHOOL CLOSURES

2020	SCHOOLS	COVID-19 POLICIES
16 March	De facto school closures due to poor attendance.	Work from home if you can; isolate for 14 days if anyone in your house has symptoms.
23 March	Government orders schools to close except for children of key workers and vulnerable children.	First national lockdown starts.
1 June	Schools return for Reception, Year 1 and Year 6 only.	People permitted to meet outside in groups of up to six people.
9 June	Government abandons plans to re-open primary schools.	
15 June	Some Year 10 and Year 12 pupils receive contact time with teachers in schools.	Non-essential shops reopen in England.
4 July		Pubs and restaurants reopen, and gatherings of thirty people legally permitted.
September	All levels of schooling reopened.	

CONFUSION OVER SAFETY

The initial effort to prioritise groups of children who could attend schools and nurseries was welcome, but low attendance³³ was not adequately addressed by the government to ensure that parents and children felt safe to go to school.

The “stay at home” message was effective,³⁴ leading many people to feel concerned when restrictions were relaxed for priority groups. Centralised communications around school closures in England lacked context and nuance³⁵ and were not child-friendly, leading to confusion and mixed interpretation.

- Many parents felt it was too risky to send their children back to school or early years settings in June 2020 when the phased reopening began, even if they were eligible.³⁶
- Some schools were advising parents of children with special educational needs to stay at home, even when parents felt school was the best place for their child to be.³⁷
- Early years settings closed with little notice, even to key workers.³⁸

IMPACT OF CLOSURES

1.7m children now regularly absent from school³⁹

Students lost out on 35% of a school years' worth of learning⁴⁰

Learning gap between wealthier and poorer children 46% wider⁴¹

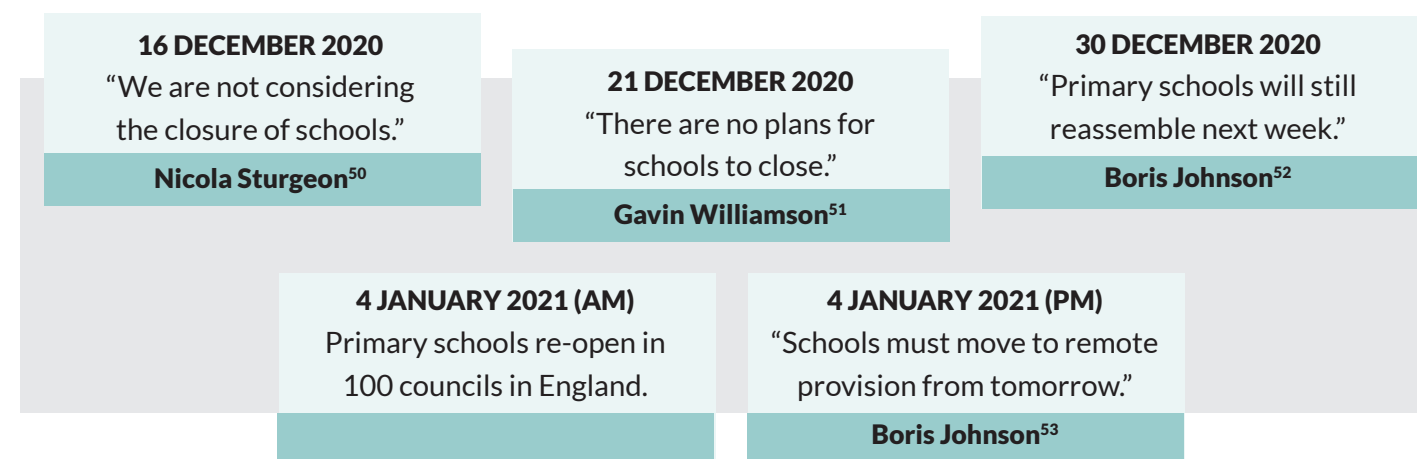
5 million children's language skills not age-appropriate⁴²

A growing body of evidence shows that school and nursery closures caused considerable harm to children and families, including high risk of poor mental health, obesity, and child abuse, as well as loss of learning.⁴³ Early years experts are particularly concerned about speech and language development, with some noticing delays in babies' physical development.⁴⁴

Children's organisations and experts predicted many of these harms. However, Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) reporting into impacts of school closures published in March 2020 focused mainly on the impact to parents (e.g. having to take unpaid leave) rather than children.⁴⁵

Covid exacerbated inequalities in society:

- The highest proportion of nursery closures happened in the most deprived areas in the country⁴⁶ even though middle-class parents are more likely to be able to work from home.
- Children in poverty experienced higher levels of learning loss than their peers⁴⁷ and were less happy with school on average.⁴⁸
- Children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) lost their absolute entitlement to educational support and health services, resulting in only 12% receiving speech and language therapy and physiotherapy during the lockdown.⁴⁹



PAUSE, REWIND, REPEAT⁵⁴

The third national lockdown in January 2021 brought a second round of mass school closures.

As in March 2020, last minute decisions by ministers were poorly communicated to the public. Decisions on school opening and closures seemed to change almost daily in December 2020 and January 2021. After months of insisting exams would go ahead in 2021, exams were cancelled for a second year in a row, despite improvements in understanding about transmission of Covid-19.

Educators and early years providers heard about policy changes at the same time as the rest of the world, giving them no time to prepare child-friendly messaging and deliver it with consideration and care.

It can be no surprise that children thought messaging throughout the pandemic was **untrustworthy, confusing, difficult to understand** and **overwhelmingly negative**.⁵⁵

"I feel like my hard work has been wasted somewhat, not only for the last two years but my whole school career. Even from primary school we are reminded that in the end it comes down to our GCSEs at the end of Year 11 and I almost feel like I haven't had a proper chance to prove myself."

15-year-old from Bristol, January 2021, interviewed for BBC News⁵⁷

POLICY U-TURNS

- Free school meals: after a successful campaign by footballer Marcus Rashford, the government at first refuses and then agrees to extend free school meal vouchers through the summer holidays.
- Exams fiasco: in place of cancelled exams, students were given a mark by an algorithm, partly based on their school's previous performance. The potential for "outlier" results with a big difference between teacher assessed and calculated grades was known to the Department for Education (DfE) before results were published.⁵⁶ After many disadvantaged students were marked down and missed out on university places, Gavin Williamson finally announced that grades would be based on teacher assessment only.

REMOTE LEARNING AND RECOVERY

The continual disruption over two years of closures caused what has been described as “an epidemic of educational inequality”.⁵⁸ Rapid decision-making left little time for schools to prepare and the legal requirement for schools to provide remote learning was not introduced until October 2020, leaving many pupils without any alternative for learning.⁵⁹ Even so, many children quickly received online lessons and offline worksheets produced by teachers and school leaders who were left to

reimagine the concept of school⁶⁰ with diminishing resources and only a few days’ notice. But remote learning exacerbated inequalities. It worked well for families with financial resources,⁶¹ proficiency in English, availability of a quiet space for learning, and parental engagement in school.⁶² Evidence shows this unequal access to resources had a significant impact on educational attainment, widening the gap between wealthier and poorer children.⁶³

HEADLINE:

UK government was too slow to act on advice about the disproportionate impact of remote learning on disadvantaged students, and too reliant on e-learning as a substitute for in-person teaching.

RECOMMENDATION:

Provide the full £13.5bn of educational recovery funding that’s needed directly to schools and colleges, giving them autonomy in how funds are spent.

KEY ISSUES

Children had unequal experiences of remote learning:

- Nearly 40% of children in low-income families were living in homes without enough desk space during lockdown.⁶⁴
- There were no standards set by DfE for remote learning and the law was changed to reduce the pressure on local authorities to support disabled children.⁶⁵
- Disabled students were the least likely to benefit from distance-learning because they often need specific teaching support to learn and may not have access to the learning aids that are usually available in the school environment.⁶⁶

E-learning disadvantaged students who did not have access to the right technology:

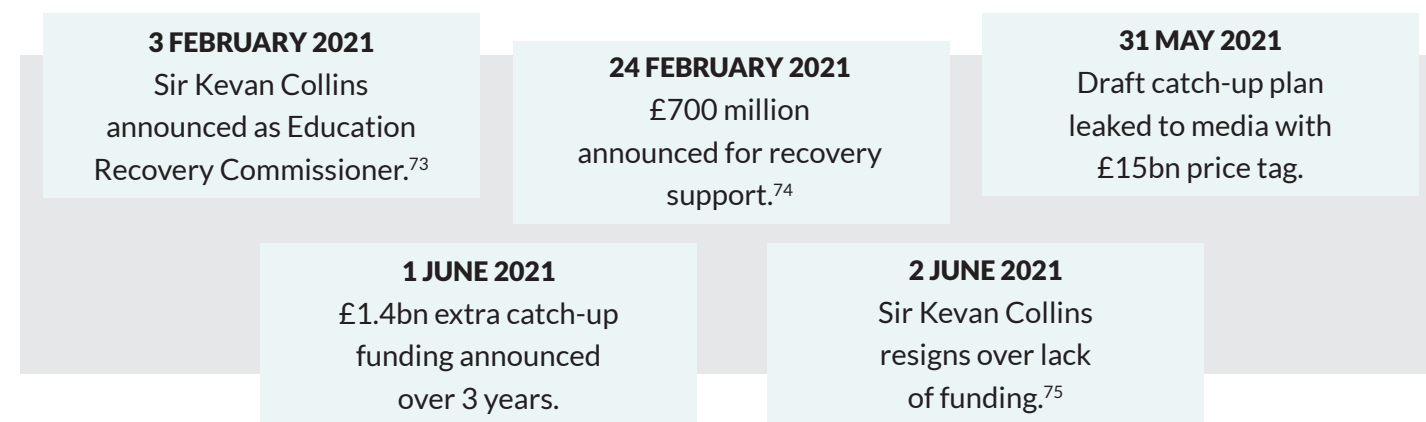
- The pandemic brought to light hidden

experiences of young people trying to complete education without adequate digital access, for example trying to complete essays on mobile phones or being reliant on library opening times to finish homework.⁶⁷

- 28% of pupils remained without proper internet access during the pandemic.⁶⁸
- Around one in five children did not have access to a suitable device for home learning during the pandemic and 3% of school children were unable to do any schoolwork due to digital exclusion.⁶⁹

Financially better-off students were better equipped to learn from home:

- The first lockdown baked in large inequalities⁷⁰ as the sudden move to home learning benefited those with resources and led to a substantial widening of educational inequalities.⁷¹
- 30% of teachers in private schools reported they already had a platform they could use to broadcast a lesson, compared to less than 10% at state schools.⁷²



FUNDING FOR RECOVERY

£4.9bn education recovery funding announced to date⁷⁶

£13.5bn catch-up funding needed according to the Education Policy Institute⁷⁷

Sir Kevan Collins, the “catch-up tsar”, did not get the opportunity to publish his plans for educational recovery which covered the three Ts – time, teaching and tutoring – with plans for an extended school day and funding of up to £700 per pupil over three years.⁷⁸

The government committed £490 per pupil which is significantly less than other developed nations – in the Netherlands catch-up plans amount to £2,100 per pupil and in the US it’s around £1,800 per pupil.⁷⁹ Funding so far has been restricted and schools

reported problems accessing tutoring through the centrally delivered National Tutoring Programme.⁸⁰

Recovery funding must not solely focus on academic work. It must also support children to get back into school, connect with friends and teachers, and remind them of the benefits of classroom learning. It needs to cater for children who are starting school after years of being isolated from other children, and young people leaving school after years of lost learning.



Photo: UK children stay at home instead of attending school or nursery because of the Coronavirus

DIGITAL POVERTY

At first, the government was slow to address the unequal experiences of remote learning – almost a year into the pandemic, only one in five schools were able to supply laptops and tablets to all pupils who needed one.⁸¹

However, once the UK government successfully rolled out technology to pupils, there were big improvements in the quality of home learning for children in poverty⁸² and these resources could benefit their education and employment opportunities for years to come:

- By March 2021, 1.3 million laptops, tablets and routers had been despatched, with a DfE analysis concluding that the UK had delivered considerably more equipment over 2020 than 19 other European countries.⁸³
- DfE also funded two free-to-use educational platforms that allowed the creation of virtual classrooms and funded online lessons and resources by Oak National Academy which were found to be a “helpful, high-quality resource”.⁸⁴

“We honestly hadn’t expected any support considering how busy everyone must be. The use of the laptop in order for our child to actually take part in lessons is brilliant and we remain grateful our SEN provider thought to provide our child with this.”

Parent, August 2020, Respondent in Parentkind survey⁸⁵

WIDER ROLE OF SCHOOLS IN COMMUNITIES

Schools provide much more than education – especially for children in poverty, young carers and children living in unsafe or unhappy homes. It is a place where they can be seen regularly by trusted adults and where they can get a hot meal and be surrounded by the routines and structure that they

may not have at home.⁸⁶

Schools are places for learning, playing and socially interacting with peers. They are places for welfare, and places to eat. In difficult times, schools can provide an important safeguard for children who may be at risk of abuse or exploitation.⁸⁷

HEADLINE:

Closing schools had severe impacts for children living in poverty.

RECOMMENDATION:

Ensure that crisis payments and increases to social security go to children as well as adults, recognising the extra costs that families with children face.

KEY ISSUES

31% of UK children living in poverty⁸⁸

One third of children in poverty miss out on free school meals⁸⁹

1.6 million living with parents with severe mental health conditions⁹⁰

800,000 children in England living with domestic abuse⁹¹

Financial struggles during Covid-19 were exacerbated by school closures:

- Free school meal provision was not immediately replaced and many families living in poverty struggled to buy food as online vouchers were hard to access and were not initially valid in all supermarkets.⁹²
- The £20 per week uplift to Universal Credit introduced at the start of the pandemic helped some families but did not provide any extra support specifically for children.

Schools provide informal wellbeing checks and referrals for vulnerable children:

- When children were kept at home, teachers were unable to identify those in need of protection, leaving many exposed to unseen abuse.⁹³
- Schools are crucial for young carers who are

often ‘under the radar’ and more likely to be identified through their school compared to health services.⁹⁴

Schools provide vital support to children who have no access to benefits:

- Children from families who cannot access the social security system rely on schools to access food banks, financial support and local authority care.⁹⁵
- Most migrant families cannot access vital welfare benefits and support in emergencies because they have a ‘no recourse to public funds’ (NRPF) condition attached to their visa.⁹⁶ Free school meals were extended to these families during the pandemic but still many were unaware or unable to access them.⁹⁷



“I went out to do my exercise which for me is skateboarding. I was told off by the police and made to go home. I tried to reason with them. This gave me a negative impression of the police. I am autistic and my one passion is skateboarding.”

15-year-old, North Yorkshire, July 2020, Leaders Unlocked⁹⁸

Children and young people are seen in policy terms through the lens of education – as this is the only government department which is set up specifically for them.

But play and socialisation are as important to a child’s development as education. Play opportunities are the number one predictor of adult life satisfaction⁹⁹ and help children make sense of things they find hard to understand.¹⁰⁰

Some children spent more time playing outdoors during lockdown, but this was dependent on their

access to outdoor space. Social distancing guidelines in England made few exceptions for children and, as a result, many lost out on freedoms during the pandemic which adults were able to enjoy. Furthermore, during the pandemic, parks and playgrounds were policed and often closed. Young people reported that the public and police interpreted trips to the park and teenagers meeting up as violations of lockdowns,¹⁰¹ and young people from racial minorities were more likely to receive fines in the first lockdown.¹⁰²

In this section: **Outdoor play**

Lockdown and children’s wellbeing

Social Distancing

OUTDOOR PLAY

Even after one week of lockdown, experts were urging the government to support children’s play to help them and their parents cope¹⁰³ and multiple campaigns over 18 months urged the government to clarify the guidance and let children play outdoors.

Play helps children learn how to interact successfully with others and process difficult experiences.¹⁰⁴ 1 in 3 children were reported to have brought Coronavirus or restrictions into their play during the pandemic.¹⁰⁵

Crucially, play is very important to children: one of the most frequently used words in the responses to the Children’s Commissioner’s The Big Ask was “play”.¹⁰⁶

HEADLINE:

Pandemic policies unnecessarily harmed children and young people’s social development and mental health because decision-makers did not consider the impact of the rules on children.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Develop a National Play Strategy that prioritises children’s free outdoor play, including a duty for local authorities to ensure sufficient provision for play in the community and ensure play is included in a ministerial portfolio.

KEY ISSUES

Play was not expressly included in guidelines around “exercise”:

- Police guidance on what constituted a “reasonable excuse” to leave home during lockdown gave specific examples of adult exercise such as running and yoga but did not

mention children or play.¹⁰⁷

- The confusion over whether play constituted exercise was not adequately clarified by the government, leading some families to avoid playing outside as they were afraid of being judged or fined.¹⁰⁸

Economic activity, like the Eat Out to Help Out scheme, was prioritised over playing out:

- Grassroots sports clubs and other spaces for children’s activity remained closed whilst pubs, restaurants and even schools reopened.
- In September 2020, following the Eat Out to Help Out scheme and other relaxations of the rules over Summer which encouraged people to go out, young people said they were frustrated about being blamed for rising Covid-19 infections.¹⁰⁹

Children without private gardens were forgotten by decision-makers:

- Playground closures disproportionately affected children in poverty and marginalised communities who are less likely to have access to a private outdoor space.¹¹⁰
- From 13 May 2020, adults were allowed to exercise outdoors but there was no change to the rules regarding playgrounds.

Even when playgrounds could officially re-open, many of them remained closed:

- The administrative burden of risk assessments and confusion about lockdown rules led to a postcode lottery – some areas were more likely to suffer over policing¹¹¹ and some areas suffered prolonged closures against government advice.¹¹²



CAMPAIGN PRESSURE

March 2020: Playing Out co-signed an open letter to the government alongside other play organisations and experts, calling for clarity in the guidance on outdoor play.¹¹³

June 2020: 100+ leading psychologists write an open letter to Gavin Williamson, “As experts working across disciplines, we are united as we urge you to reconsider your decision and to release children and young people from lockdown.”¹¹⁴

Nov 2020: the Telegraph’s Keep Kids Active campaign calls on government to prioritise children’s access to grassroots sport and physical activity during lockdowns.¹¹⁵

Jan 2021: Playing Out write an open letter to the Prime Minister urging him to provide clear guidance on outdoor play¹¹⁶ and launch their #OKtoPlay social media campaign assuring parents and carers that outdoor play is exercise and therefore is ok under lockdown rules.

May 2021: Summer of Play campaign launched by Playfirst UK, Save the Children, Play England, Play Scotland, Play Wales, Playboard Northern Ireland and others.¹¹⁷

July 2021: British Psychological Society launch Let the children Play campaign.¹¹⁸

SOCIAL DISTANDING

By July 2020, numerous studies had been published looking at how Covid-19 was transmitted. While there were no concrete conclusions, it was becoming clearer that:

- adults are more likely to be infected by other adults than by children;
- Covid-19 is more likely to be transmitted between people than on surfaces; and
- the risk of infection is much lower outdoors than indoors.¹¹⁹

However, relaxing of social distancing guidelines rarely mentioned children or made exceptions for young children who were less likely to be infectious.

Many parents questioned why adults were allowed to drink in pubs while playgrounds remained closed.¹²⁰ But despite pressure from children’s organisations and experts to allow children to play together, the rules continued to unfairly impact children and families.

HEADLINE:

Rules that were easily communicated (“1:1 rule”, “Rule of Six”) discriminated against younger children by not providing exceptions for them or their parents.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Test future pandemic policy guidance with families and create child- and youth-friendly information about accessing health services and staying safe that is accessible and relevant.

Rules that were easily communicated discriminated against children:

- The 1:1 rule in England allowed adults to meet a friend outside but prevented younger children from doing the same. Even in the third national lockdown in 2021, when children aged 0-5 were exempted from the rule, children aged 5 – 12 who required adult supervision were left out.
- “Rule of Six” included children, which meant six individual adults from six different households could meet, but two-parent families each with two children could not meet.

Decision-makers didn’t consider children’s needs over multiple lockdowns:

- The first real opportunity that many children had to socialise with each other, in a public place with social distancing, was from 1 June 2020, seventy days after the lockdown was put in place.
- In Scotland, from 2 July 2020, children under the age of 11 were no longer forced to socially distance meaning they could play normally with friends. But two metre distancing remained in England for much longer.
- Support bubbles were not in place for families during the first lockdown, meaning grandparents could not support with childcare and separated families could not see each other.

KEY ISSUES

Messaging unfairly blamed children for rising infection rates:

- The UK had only prepared for a flu pandemic where children were more at risk and considered “super-spreaders”.¹²¹ This was not the case for Covid-19.¹²²
- Decision-makers were aware of the limited role of children in spreading the virus but messaging such as the “Don’t Kill Granny”¹²³ campaign deliberately targeted children.

POLICING THE PANDEMIC

The police were granted increased powers to enforce emergency legislation during lockdowns which had the greatest impact on people from racial minorities¹²⁴ who already experienced over-policing in their communities before the pandemic.¹²⁵

In the first lockdown, between 27 March and 11 May, data analysis showed that people from racial minorities were 54% more likely to be fined.¹²⁶

Racial disproportionality during the pandemic was a key concern for young people who reported experiencing or witnessing young people from racial minorities being unfairly harassed by police during lockdowns.¹²⁷

Young people also reported concerns about disparity in policing in more deprived areas:

“As someone who lives between two households, I’ve seen significantly more policing around my mum’s neighbourhood, a council estate which happens to be mostly lower-to-mid income families. If you’re gonna patrol everywhere, patrol everywhere, including rich people.”

17-year-old, Greater Manchester, Leaders Unlocked¹²⁸



Photo: Elliott and Austin on bikes at the Reach Academy Feltham

LOCKDOWN AND CHILDREN’S WELLBEING

Lockdown rules which prevented children and young people from seeing their friends and other children will have long lasting implications on their development and mental health. Peer relationships are crucially important for children of all ages. They are unique because they require negotiation and compromise,¹²⁹ and friendships and peer interactions can play a significant role in children and young people’s mental health and self-esteem.¹³⁰

Rules in England were tweaked and changed throughout the pandemic but rarely made exceptions for babies and young children. While both Welsh and Scottish governments explicitly recognised the importance to children of being able to play outside with friends in their lockdown rules and guidance,¹³¹ there was a distinct lack of consideration or mention of this in the rules and guidance for England.¹³²

HEADLINE:

Not seeing friends for so long at an early age had significant impacts on children and young people’s mental health.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Urgently publish a children and young people’s Mental Health Plan that will address long waiting lists for services and place more emphasis on early intervention as well as prevention, including addressing inequalities that fuel poor mental health.

Developmental Impacts

- Over half of early years providers felt that children’s personal, social and emotional development had fallen behind during the first lockdown.¹³³
- Almost half (45%) of parents reported a negative impact on their child’s social and emotional development, and 20% felt their child’s language and physical development was negatively affected.¹³⁴
- Healthcare professionals also link lockdown to an “explosion” of children with disabling tics disorders and Tourette’s syndrome.¹³⁵

Mental Health Impacts

- Rates of significant mental health problems have increased significantly since the start of the pandemic.¹³⁶
- Loneliness in children and adolescents is a predictor for future mental health problems up to nine years later.¹³⁷
- Feelings of isolation and loneliness are further exacerbated for young people in particular circumstances, for example, those living alone, those with communication difficulties, and care leavers.¹³⁸
- The suspension of playgroups and local classes hit new parents particularly hard. “Parental loneliness” went from 38% pre-pandemic to 63%, with parents in the most deprived areas more than twice as likely to say they feel lonely often or always.¹³⁹

Physical Impacts

- Half of children play outside with their friends less and a quarter of children are less active than before the pandemic hit.¹⁴⁰
- Obesity levels among primary school children showed the highest annual increase between 2019-20 and 2020-21 since the National Child Measurement Programme began.¹⁴¹

EVERY CHILD HAS THE RIGHT TO LIVE FREE FROM HARM, ABUSE AND NEGLECT

“I’m really scared of my dad, especially when he’s been drinking. Sometimes he gets really angry and throws things at my mum. It’s been getting worse since the Coronavirus and I worry a lot. I have no idea what to do as I can’t escape because of the lockdown.”

15-year-old, Childline, NSPCC Insight Briefing (June 2020)¹⁴²

Safeguards and protections for children were weakened at a time when they were isolated in their homes and spending more time on their devices, exposed to different types of abuse and online grooming.

Regulations which support the welfare of children and babies were relaxed during the pandemic, meaning that some children went under the radar and abuse was undetected.

Children’s experiences of Coronavirus were not uniform. While many children enjoyed spending

more time with their families, for children living in homes which were unsafe or unhappy, 70 days without seeing a friend would feel like a lifetime. Surveys showed that lockdowns made 42% of children feel trapped, 41% feel scared and 37% feel lonely.¹⁴³

The rights of vulnerable babies and children were not adequately considered by decision-makers during the pandemic and they became invisible in policy terms. This exposed them to unnecessary harm, abuse and neglect.



In this section:

Children at risk of neglect and abuse

Covid’s hidden victims

Life online

Photo: A drawing of a rainbow in the window of a home in Sheffield

CHILDREN AT RISK OF ABUSE AND NEGLECT

Lockdowns and Covid-19 restrictions had a profound impact on babies, children and young people who were living in unsafe or unhappy homes. For children living with parents suffering from mental health conditions or toxic issues such as substance abuse, lockdown caused increased feelings of isolation and mental health issues.¹⁴⁴ For some children, being

isolated and cut off from support services left them more vulnerable to abuse and neglect. Directors of Children's Services have linked the recent significant increase in social services referrals, domestic abuse and child safeguarding concerns to the pandemic restrictions and the closure of childcare settings.¹⁴⁵

HEADLINE:

Not improving support for children at the same time as isolating them in their homes exposed many more children to abuse and neglect.

RECOMMENDATION:

Set out a comprehensive, long-term funding settlement for children's services that invests at least £2 billion a year in early intervention and therapeutic services.

KEY ISSUES

20% rise in serious child harmcases reported by councils¹⁴⁶

Over a third of children feel lonely¹⁴⁷

50% reduction in child protection referrals in some areas¹⁴⁸

The NSPCC helpline saw a 53% increase in concerns about abuse¹⁴⁹

Babies born during lockdown went under the radar due to the lack of health visits:

- Health visiting, a universal service which provides crucial early checks and referrals for babies, was allowed to stop during the pandemic or move to remote provision, and was slow to restart.¹⁵⁰
- A national review into the deaths of Star Hobson and Arthur Labinjo-Hughes which happened during Covid-19, acknowledges how pandemic policies affected the ability of schools and services to identify the horrific abuse they suffered.¹⁵¹

Changes to social worker visits made vulnerable children invisible:

- Child protection and social care services were no

longer seeing families face-to-face as a matter of course.¹⁵²

- Government relaxed many legal requirements for social workers when the Adoption and Children Regulations came into force in April 2020 including their duty to provide six-weekly visits to children in care.¹⁵³

Relaxing regulations on carers and placements risked the welfare of children:

- During the pandemic, relaxed regulations meant local authorities could approve temporary foster carers who were not "connected" to a child.¹⁵⁴
- Many organisations and charities issued letters to the government, calling for them to protect vulnerable children by withdrawing these regulations.¹⁵⁵

IMPACT OF ANNOUNCEMENTS

Children and young people were rarely considered when it came to public communications – there was no time built in for professionals to adapt messaging or prepare in advance of messages being made publicly. However, they were often targeted in negative messaging.¹⁵⁷

For most young people the messaging around coronavirus was confusing¹⁵⁸ and the news was scary.¹⁵⁹ But for those who did not have good support at home, or who lived independently, this would have felt even more frightening. Perceptions of young people and stereotyping may have contributed to the sense that children were responsible for increasing infections.¹⁶⁰ One survey showed that 49% of UK adults say they lean towards thinking young people have been selfish during the pandemic,¹⁶¹ even though the evidence suggested compliance was high across age groups.

“All the government adverts to scare us young people saying we are responsible for people dying is terrifying. This is not something I considered before and it's made me incredibly anxious that I had Covid in the past and I've spread it.”

Respondent in Young Minds survey, February 2021¹⁵⁶

UNEQUAL HARM

News stories during the pandemic often focused on the higher risk for people from racial minorities with the result that they were unfairly stigmatised as a public health threat.¹⁶² Some children even experienced attacks on their home.¹⁶³ Children and young people from these communities also experienced more difficulty accessing treatment for mental health problems, which were already deeply unequal on race.¹⁶⁴



Photo: UK child holding up soapy hands to show the importance of hand washing during the Covid 19 crisis

COVID'S HIDDEN VICTIMS

Many of the decisions taken during the pandemic made an assumption that children live at home with their parents. But this is not the case for some children in the social care system and the criminal justice system. Pandemic policies did not consider the unique circumstances of these vulnerable groups of children, in some cases leading to extreme trauma. Children went long periods without face-to-face contact with loved ones and trusted support workers.

HEADLINE:

It is our view that the most vulnerable children in society who don't live at home – including those in custody and care – were entirely forgotten by policy-makers during the pandemic.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Invest £2.6bn, as an absolute minimum, in children's social care targeted specifically at deprived areas.

KEY ISSUES

More children are now in a care system which is over-stretched and under-funded:

- There are growing numbers of looked-after children in England¹⁶⁵ and court delays during the pandemic mean that far fewer are now being adopted.¹⁶⁶
- Despite growing need and pressure on stretched services, spending on children's services has fallen by 10% in the most deprived local authorities.¹⁶⁷

Children's prisons are unsafe, and were even more so during lockdown:

- The number of children in prison is expected

to double next year, even though experts have called for child prisons to close as they are unsafe for children.¹⁶⁸

- Pandemic policies for prisons were always aimed at adults rather than children, leading to a ban on education and conditions akin to solitary confinement.

Stopping visits by family and support workers leads to increased trauma:

- Social distancing guidelines and pandemic policies had a severe impact on children in care and children in custody, who were deprived of face-to-face visits by family and support workers even after changes were made for the general population.¹⁶⁹
- For children in care, not being able to have contact with birth families and extended family or hang out with friends resulted in a sense of isolation.¹⁷⁰
- Some young people in prison suffered post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a result of their pandemic experiences, reporting that living through the pandemic in prison has brought further trauma, caused by extended periods of isolation and fear, without any face-to-face mental health support.¹⁷¹
- Children with parents in prison were also affected. Although some prisons reopened for restricted face-to-face visits over the summer months, several periods of national lockdown effectively stopped visits for almost 12 months.¹⁷²
- There were fears that some children with parents in prison during lockdown would not be able to recognise their parent after so long without contact.¹⁷³ It was asserted that this lack of mitigating measures amounted to an infringement of the right to a family life under the European Convention on Human Rights.¹⁷⁴

CASE STUDY: LOCKDOWN IN SOLITARY CONFINEMENT

“It's hard, because I'm used to being shown love on the outside, even just a hug is just nice... obviously you don't get to have that feeling in here it's a bit harder, especially with visits being off...that's the hardest thing I've gone through.”

Young respondent in Children's Commissioner report, May 2020¹⁷⁵

Children in prison are some of the most vulnerable in society and are often forgotten by policy-makers. Experts believe these children would be better served by a welfare-based response. And yet they were subject to brutal conditions during the pandemic.¹⁷⁶

Shockingly, amongst children and young people who are imprisoned, those from racial minorities make up the majority (53%).¹⁷⁷ Many of the children currently in custody are likely to be care experienced and to have special educational or mental health needs.

Average of 560 children in prison at any one time during 2020/21¹⁷⁸

40% of all children in prison are on remand¹⁷⁹

81% of children sentenced to custody have mental health concerns¹⁸⁰

74% of remanded children did not receive a custodial sentence¹⁸¹

The conditions for children in prison during Covid-19 have been described as “brutal”,¹⁸² “dire”,¹⁸³ “appalling”,¹⁸⁴ and akin to solitary confinement.

- Up to 23 hours per day locked alone in their cells.¹⁸⁵
- Eating all three meals inside their cells.¹⁸⁶
- Prolonged bans on family visits, with slow take-up once restrictions loosened.¹⁸⁷
- No education provided after it was banned in adult prisons.
- Limited and expensive phone calls due to restrictive credit agreements.

The government made no attempt to release children from prison over the pandemic despite calls to do so.¹⁸⁸ Emergency legislation did not consider the impact on children – remand regulations ignored them completely,¹⁸⁹ and

temporary release regulations were never properly implemented.¹⁹⁰ Without the campaigning efforts of Just for Kids Law and others, children on remand could have spent up to eight months in prison before they had a trial.¹⁹¹

RECOVERY FOR CHILDREN IN PRISON

Unsafe child prisons cannot be allowed to function as they currently do. Children who were in custody during the pandemic are more likely to be affected by increased trauma, violence and self-harm.¹⁹² It's crucial the government develops a national strategy and improvement plan to address racial disproportionality and repair the harms to children who were in prison during Covid-19, alongside a plan with clear timescales for closing children's prisons.

LIFE ONLINE

The internet is a resource that enables young people to connect with each other and global issues in a unique way that has come to define their generation. Evidence suggests moderate use of digital technology can be beneficial to children's mental wellbeing, whereas excessive use can be detrimental.¹⁹³

The lack of infrastructure and support for children during the pandemic meant it was harder to identify children at risk at a time when they were spending much more time on their devices and social media. Perpetrators took advantage of this, finding new ways to contact children during lockdown, creating "the perfect storm" in terms of children's online safety.¹⁹⁴

HEADLINE:

Driving children onto devices with no extra protections led to increased harm.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Hold technology companies to account for safety of children on their sites, provide a robust regulatory framework and create a child safety advocate to fight for children at risk of online harm.

KEY ISSUES

During the pandemic children had less support but were more at risk:

- Online grooming crimes recorded by the police jumped by more than 80% in four years and continue to climb.¹⁹⁵

- Parents reported needing more guidance to improve their awareness of online risks, knowledge and use of technical controls, and choice of mediation strategies.¹⁹⁶
- Offenders target children by contacting them on social media and gaming sites, and Snapchat was used by groomers more than any other platform, in a third of offences where a site was recorded.¹⁹⁷
- Reduced capacity in technology firms led to challenges in moderation and delays in identifying and deleting online child sexual material.¹⁹⁸

Online grooming increased during lockdowns as children were more vulnerable:

- Isolation during lockdowns exacerbated children's vulnerability and increased the risk of them experiencing cyberbullying and child sexual abuse.¹⁹⁹
- Young people spending more time online to connect with others experienced increased exposure to grooming²⁰⁰ at a time when demand for online sexual material was known to be on the rise.
- Child criminal exploitation (CCE) also increased further during the pandemic as children were more vulnerable out of school, receiving less contact with social services, and organised crime gangs moved to online forms of grooming and recruitment.²⁰¹

Excessive screen time had negative impacts on children's wellbeing:

- Rates of anorexia and other eating disorders in teens are rising with a 42% increase in girls aged 13 to 16 compared to pre-pandemic levels.²⁰²
- Young people online are exposed to pressures that can lead to addiction, sleep deprivation, mental illness, self-harm and even abuse.²⁰³
- Early years providers reported children spending more time on screens starting to speak in accents and voices that resembled the material they watched.²⁰⁴



Photo: Lockdown birthday celebration, UK

CHILDREN'S VOICES

Despite repeated calls for the government and the UK Covid-19 Inquiry to make sure children's experiences of the pandemic are recorded,^{205,206} there are currently no plans for national listening programmes which can include children's stories.

Many children's experts and organisations have run their own projects to talk to children about their experiences of Covid-19, showcasing the positive and negative aspects of lockdowns and highlighting children's incredible capacity for resilience.

IS COVID COMING FOR ME?

Room 13 Hareclive's 'Alone Together': a spoken word film in 3 parts, co-created with children aged 5 - 11 from Hartcliffe, South Bristol, reflects two years of Covid-19 and the impact of lockdowns throughout this time. It is made up of words, lyrics, thoughts and feelings gathered in and voiced by children from summer 2020 onwards.

Link to video:

<https://vimeo.com/690702747>

WHAT CAN WE DO? WHAT CAN'T WE DO?

'Our Voices' is an animation co-created with 16 children aged 9-11 during the 2020-2021 global pandemic which enables children, who have been barely seen and little heard during the pandemic, to voice their experiences in accordance with their aspirations. It was developed by children, artists and academics during a series of online interviews and workshops throughout the first year of the pandemic.

Link to video:

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/136078042211087276>

“Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different.”

Arundhati Roy, The Pandemic is a Portal, 2020

OUR

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations referenced throughout this report are included below in full. If actions are taken by successive governments to address the negative impacts of pandemic policies without

delay, recovery is possible. Lessons must be learned now to ensure that children’s rights and interests are protected in future pandemics.

Protect children’s interests in governance and policy-making:

- **Enshrine children’s rights into UK law** by incorporating the UNCRC in full, including making Child’s Rights Impact Assessments (CRIA) a statutory requirement for all new policy and legislation using the existing template²⁰⁷ developed by DfE.
- **Publish a Child Rights Action Plan** to set out the government’s vision for children with a clear road map for how it will meaningfully improve their lives.
- **Appoint a Cabinet Minister for Children** with cross-departmental responsibility for protecting children’s rights across all policy-making and co-ordinating and driving forward implementation of a Child Rights Action Plan to ensure this takes place at the highest levels of government.

Improve our response to future pandemics:

- **Classify schools and early years settings as essential infrastructure** for future health emergencies. Ensure that the decision to close schools cannot be made by ministers alone and is considered only as a last resort.
- **Test future pandemic policy guidance with children and parents** and create child- and youth-friendly information about accessing health services and staying safe that is accessible and relevant.

Invest in a full recovery for babies, children and young people:

- **Provide the full £13.5bn of educational recovery funding that is needed** directly to schools and colleges, giving them autonomy in how funds are spent to ensure students are encouraged to come back to school and fulfil their potential.
- **Ensure that crisis payments and increases to social security go to children** as well as adults, recognising the extra costs that families with children face.
- **Develop a National Play Strategy** that prioritises children’s free outdoor play, including a duty for local authorities to ensure sufficient provision for play in the community and ensure play is included in a ministerial portfolio.
- **Publish a National Recovery Strategy for children**, young people and families in the UK which addresses issues outside of education including investing in early years outside of childcare budgets, funding for speech and language development, and opportunities for families to socialise.

- **Urgently publish a children and young people’s Mental Health Plan** that will address long waiting lists for services and place more emphasis on early intervention as well as prevention and ensure this is backed up with adequate and sustainable investment.
- **Set out a comprehensive, long-term funding settlement for children’s services** that invests at least £2 billion a year in early intervention and therapeutic services.
- **Invest £2.6bn, as an absolute minimum, in children’s social care** targeted specifically at deprived areas.
- **Develop a national strategy and improvement plan** to address racial disproportionality and repair the harms to children who were in prison during Covid-19, alongside a plan with clear timescales for closing children’s prisons.
- **Hold technology companies to account for safety of children on their sites**, provide a robust regulatory framework and create a child safety advocate to fight for children at risk of online harm.

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