

**OUR
VOICES
MATTER**

**Summary
Report**



The impact of Covid-19 on children and young people's play and education in Northern Ireland



A child wearing a blue puffer jacket and tan pants is climbing a blue rock wall. The child is seen from the back, reaching up with their right hand to grasp a blue rock hold. The wall is made of vertical wooden planks and has several blue, irregularly shaped rock holds attached to it. The background is a dark, textured wall.

The Child's Right to Play

The child's 'Right to Play' is enshrined with Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The UNCRC grants all children and young people (aged 17 and under) a comprehensive set of rights and was ratified by the UK government in 1991, committing all branches of government to ensuring that children are afforded the rights and protections contained within its articles.

"That every child has the right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts."

"That member governments shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity."

In 2013 the UN adopted General Comment 17 clarifying for governments worldwide the meaning and importance of Article 31. The purpose of the general comment was to highlight the critical role of play in children and young people's lives and to emphasise the central role of play in supporting the development of health, wellbeing, education etc.

It is important to recognise that all rights in the Convention are indivisible and interdependent. Article 31 is central to the realisation of many rights. Equally, other rights must be respected in order to guarantee the realisation of Article 31.

Background

The rapid spread of Covid-19 has brought unprecedented challenges for our society leading to the implementation of severe measures by government as they have sought to contain the spread and reduce the risk of contraction to individuals.

In Northern Ireland the measures adopted included school closures, home isolation/quarantine for those at most risk, community lockdown and social distancing. The impacts of such measures have been far-reaching, transforming the lives of individuals and bringing about significant changes to how we as a society operate and engage with each other.

During the period of lockdown PlayBoard NI, the lead organisation for Play in Northern Ireland was in regular contact with children, parents and childcare practitioners as we sought to provide essential support and guidance. Through those interactions we became increasingly aware of the impact of the restrictions on the health, wellbeing, education and development of children and young people.

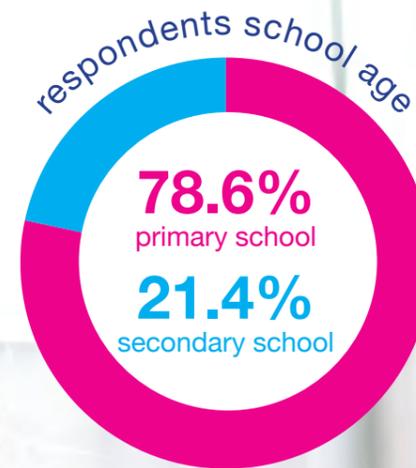
Based on these concerns, and to get a better understanding of the impact of lockdown on their lives, in June 2020 PlayBoard commenced the 'Your Voice' research project to capture the voices of children and young people. Researchers from the School of Psychology, Ulster University provided advice on both the development and analysis of the research survey.



"I felt like lockdown was never going to end."

Overview of Respondents

Research was undertaken between June and August 2020 with an online survey targeted specifically for completion by children and young people themselves or with the help of a parent/carer. By the end of the survey period a total of 280 complete surveys had been received.



The majority of respondents (78.6%) were primary school aged with the remainder (21.4%) of secondary school age. The mean age of respondents was 8 years 11 months with the youngest respondent aged 5 years and the oldest 18 years. Whilst the research did not seek to explicitly explore the play needs of children with disabilities during lockdown, a significant proportion (11.4%) of respondents identified as having a disability.



280

fully completed responses



mean age
**8 years
11 months**

"I've felt creative and have made lots of stuff."

Impact on Play

Children and young people have a natural desire to play and the opportunity to engage in a range of play activities is critical to physical and mental health and wellbeing, social development, and the learning and development of new knowledge and skills.

Whilst the primary focus of the research was on the impact of lockdown restrictions on play experiences, children were asked to give a sense of how being able to play made them feel prior to the introduction of restrictions.

Overwhelmingly, respondents highlighted the positive impacts of play:

- 81% stated that being able to play made them feel very happy

- 70% reported that play put them in a very good mood
- 72% highlighted the positive role of play in tackling boredom
- 51% reported that play made them feel very excited, with a further 44% reporting that play made them feel a little bit excited

The 'Your Voice' research highlighted that the social restrictions associated with Covid-19 lockdown had a significant impact on the types of play children were able to engage in.

During lockdown there was a decline in the proportion of respondents who were active through play (53.2% to 31.4%) and, unsurprisingly, in the level of social play children were able to engage in (58.9% to 5%). A decline in active play was particularly noted by the post-primary respondents with 71% reporting a decrease in active play, raising concerns regarding potential impact on physical health and wellbeing.

The survey found that during lockdown on a daily basis there was an increase in more solitary types of play including wheeled play (30.4% to 45.7%), creative play (35.7% to 45%), messy play (30% to 35.4%) and daydreaming (27.9% to 33.9%). For some, this was a positive change as they were able to explore new play activities which would not ordinarily have been part of their play experience.

"I got more time with my mum & sister, we got to learn new things, plant vegetables we had fun."

"I've felt creative and have made lots of stuff."

In line with other studies¹ the survey showed an increase in daily technology-based play during lockdown from 33.9% to 55.7%.

Whilst technology-based play can have positive benefits in terms of supporting learning and promoting social connections, there are potential long-term concerns such as the impact of more sedentary play activities on physical and social play, both of which are essential for long-term health and wellbeing.

Unsurprisingly, lockdown impacted significantly on the locations that were available to children and young people for play. For primary school children there was a significant increase in daily playing in their garden (32.3% to 85.9%) with parallel decreases in play in friend's gardens (79.7% to 7.3%). Wider community play opportunities declined significantly with reduction in play in the street from 51.4% to 33.3%, on pitches from 80.8% to 5.1% and in local areas (52.2% to 20.9%).

"I STARTED ANIMATION AND HAVE CREATED A YOUTUBE CHANNEL WITH MY FRIENDS WHICH HAS KEPT US IN TOUCH."

KEY MESSAGES

The period of lockdown has seen a shift in terms of the range and type of play experiences available to children and young people:

- On the negative side, active play opportunities were reduced raising concerns regarding mid to long-term physical health and wellbeing, whilst the reduction in social play has the potential to impact negatively on social development and mental health.
- From a more positive perspective, some children reported that lockdown allowed them to explore new, often more creative play activities that supported the development of new skills and experiences.
- Increased reliance on more sedentary, technology-based play raises concerns regarding mid to long-term physical and social development. Research indicates that children who are more sedentary tend to be less active in later life, raising concerns for long-term physical health and activity levels.



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Impact on Mental Health

The pandemic, and lockdown in particular have been characterised as causing a widespread sense of uncertainty and anxiety leading to increased levels of stress. For children, this increased level of stress has in part been connected to reduced social contact through reduced opportunities for play and social engagement, exacerbated by the closure of schools².

Emerging research into the impacts of Covid-19 indicate a direct impact on children and young people's mental health through a forced change in how they 'grow, learn, play, behave, interact and manage emotions'³. From a long-term perspective concerns have been raised regarding the potential impacts of social isolation on rising behavioural and psychological problems amongst children and young people⁴.

Within the 'Your Voice' survey, the impact of the lockdown on individual emotional health was found to be broadly negative with over 60% of respondents reporting a feeling of sadness during lockdown and over 50% reporting feelings of frustration, upset and worry.

Comments included:

"I FELT LIKE LOCKDOWN WAS NEVER GOING TO END."

"I had mixed emotions including loneliness, boredom and fear."

"I felt uncertain and confused."

Children reported exposure to a broad range of 'stressors' during lockdown which were deemed to be beyond their normal, pre-lockdown experience. These included a sense of isolation from friends and close relatives, concern and worry over relatives who were in vulnerable

One of the starkest areas of impact associated with the lockdown restrictions implemented as part of the fight against Covid-19 has been on mental health and wellbeing.

groups, broader fears regarding Covid-19 and potentially contracting the virus as well as the economic impact on families.

"It has been hard not having enough money. My mum has two jobs and only one paid her. She worries about the bills and says she can't afford them all. Sometimes she is angry and says she would be better being on benefits than working because she wouldn't have all the bills. Then she says to ignore her because she wants me to work and not get benefits."

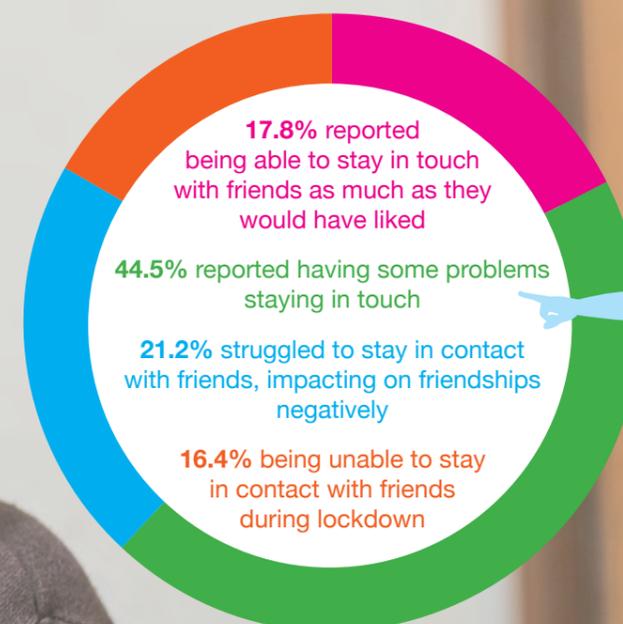
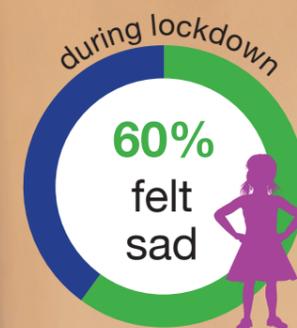
Additional stressors identified by participants within the survey included the disruption to daily routine resulting from the closure of schools. For some this led to sleeping difficulties whilst for others it led to concerns regarding educational attainment and long-term impact on career aspirations.

Social relations and the opportunity to engage with others are a key part of children's development, providing opportunities to develop positive connections amongst peers and significant others/adults. Within the survey only 17.8% of respondents reported being able to stay in touch with friends as much as they would have liked during lockdown. Of the remainder, 44.5% reported having some problems staying in touch, 21.2% said they had struggled to stay in contact with friends with 16.4% being unable to stay in contact with friends during lockdown.

For those children and young people with access to technological solutions during lockdown (smart phones, tablets, webcams etc.) the use of social media, online platforms and videogames was identified as a key tool for maintaining social connections.

KEY MESSAGES

- The increased levels of stress, emotional disturbance and extended period of social isolation have had an immediate, short-term impact on children's emotions and feelings.
- During lockdown many children experienced an overwhelming mix of often negative emotions connected to fears regarding Covid-19, the disruption of daily routines and concerns regarding the impact of lockdown on social relations.
- During lockdown the use of online and electronic means of communication provided a key mechanism for some children and young people to maintain social relations as well as accessing online learning. Children without access were at a distinct disadvantage both in terms of continued learning within the home environment and the ability to maintain social connections.



"I feel like I have grown up and become more responsible. This makes me sad. I want to play on the swings and climbing wall and go swimming without worrying about the virus but I don't think I ever will. I feel like I have been looking after my friends on Roblox and taking charge when things are stressful. Sometimes I wish I didn't care as much as I do but I can't."

² Shah et al., 2020
³ Shah et al., 2020
⁴ Di Pietro et al., 2020

Impact on Education

During the initial period of lockdown normal practise within all schools across Northern Ireland changed and many were forced to close in an attempt to reduce the transmission rate, preventing the spread of Covid-19. With a view to maintaining children's access to education, remote learning was introduced in an attempt to reduce disruption to the learning process.

Children's views on the impact of school closures were generally mixed with just over half (55.48%) reporting that they felt 'a little bit' happy to be out of school –

"Great. School is boring. I'm too young for writing and I don't play enough. I need to play."

Whilst there was for some a sense of happiness at being off school, others noted a degree of sadness, particularly as time went on:

"VERY VERY BORED AND EXTREMELY LONELY."

"I miss seeing all my friends and lockdown is boring."

For some being off school compounded the uncertainty of the situation and exacerbated their concerns at the pandemic and the wider lockdown adding to the sense of confusion, frustration and stress.

When asked what they missed about school during lockdown the vast majority of the respondents (90.6%) reported that "meeting up with friends" was what they missed most alongside "playing in the playground" (70.4%), "talking to teachers" (51%) and "learning new things" (53%). For some the lack of routine associated with attending school and lack of access to afterschool activities were identified as key misses.

With regards to the remote learning experience, a small majority (53.7%) reported that it was a positive experience. Reasons given included the convenience of not having to travel to school, being able to spend more time with family members and being able to concentrate without distractions.

Those who did not enjoy the experience identified a range of issues that had impacted on the experience including a lack of appropriate technology or competition with siblings to use it, inability to concentrate due to siblings and/or parents working at home and finding the work and/or learning instructions confusing.



"At the start it was good but I start to miss my friends and my teacher a lot."



The majority (64.9%) reported looking forward to going back to school when they reopened in September with the opportunity to meet up again with friends and get out to play again being key factors. Whilst there was general happiness at the thought of returning to school, a number of children did voice concerns about returning including concerns regarding:

Covid-19



"Fearful there will be another peak."

"Scared of there still being germs."

"I'M WORRIED ABOUT CORONAVIRUS. MY (RELATIVE) IS SICK AND HAS HAD TO LIVE IN A DIFFERENT PART OF THE HOUSE. WE HAVEN'T BEEN ABLE TO GET CLOSE TO (THEM) SINCE MARCH - I'M WORRIED I WILL CATCH THE VIRUS IN SCHOOL AND BRING IT HOME."

"Mummy has told us how to keep ourselves safe but I'm worried other people won't stick to the rules."

Education and learning



"I'M AFRAID I WON'T KNOW HOW TO DO SOME OF MY WORK OR FORGET THINGS I LEARNED."

"New teacher, different rules, failing at school work, catching up!"

"I'm very nervous about going back and getting things wrong."

Social relationships

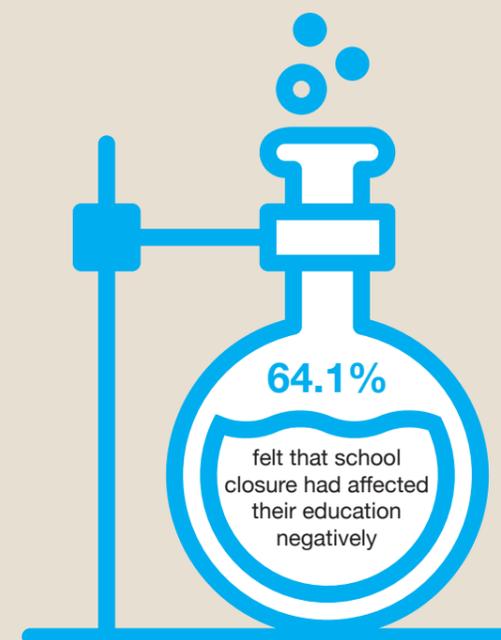


"I'm worried my friendships won't be the same as before."

"Not being able to properly socialise with friends."

"I FEEL A LITTLE SAD BECAUSE I DON'T KNOW WHAT IT WILL BE LIKE AND WHO WILL BE IN MY GROUP AND IF MY BEST FRIEND WILL BE ABLE TO PLAY WITH ME."

"Scared my friends will have forgotten me."



In terms of the learning process, a majority (64.1%) felt that school closure had affected their education negatively. Particular issues noted included a lack of access to practical subject elements (e.g. science experiments) impacting negatively on the learning process, concern that subjects were not being explored in the same depth as they would have been in school and a sense of being ill-prepared for GCSE and A-Level examinations due to time out.

Children were asked to suggest what schools could do to make the transition back to school easier for them. Suggestions were wide ranging and included a focus on allowing children to spend time getting to know their friends again, more time to play together outdoors and a focus on social contact (whilst socially distanced).

KEY MESSAGES

- Going to school provides children and young people with a daily routine that helps them to focus and better function throughout the day. It also offers opportunities for social interaction with other children through play and other activities as well as with teachers. Missing out on those interactions has been reported to be one of the most challenging aspects for those who completed the survey.
- Whilst the going back to school was largely viewed with excitement as it allowed children and young people to be with their friends again, there was a general sense of fear, anxiety and worry for some. Key concerns noted included fear of falling behind in the learning; losing friendships; contraction and spread of the virus.
- Whilst some respondents reported having the right environment and support to positively advance on their studies; others reported lacking the technology or environment leaving them with a feeling that they were falling behind. There was a significant perception that, although online classes were provided by the schools, students did not have the right materials for learning or enough support from their teachers.



Final Recommendations

The restrictions implemented as part of the fight against Covid-19 have impacted significantly across all sections of society in terms of social relationships and connectivity, emotional health, wellbeing and the wider economy. For children and young people, the impacts have been particularly significant in terms of changes to daily life and exposure to stressors above and beyond those they would ordinarily have to face.

As we emerge from the pandemic it is important to recognise that for children and young people the experiences of the past number of months have the potential to impact on a longer-term basis. Children and young people have a natural desire to play and for many, Covid-19 has fundamentally changed the way in which they interact and engage with the world through playful means.

This change, whether a decline in physical active play, reduced face-to-face social interactions with peers or increased solitary and sedentary play using technology, has the potential to impact on their physical health, emotional wellbeing, learning, and skills development as they grow towards adulthood.

As we seek to address the impact of Covid-19 on children and young people's play (and by connection their development) it is imperative we take steps to not only support them to emerge from the pandemic but to build a society that recognises the critical importance of play in their lives and on their development.

For that reason, PlayBoard advocate action at three levels. We believe that if delivered these actions would significantly enhance our capacity as a society to deliver the Right to Play, supporting our children and young people to not only develop and grow but to enjoy childhood through play.



Action 1: Policy Level

That the Northern Ireland devolved administration adopt and implement statutory protections for children's play akin to those currently afforded to children and young people in Wales and Scotland.

A statutory duty for play in Northern Ireland would meaningfully evidence the Northern Ireland Executive's commitment to, and respect of, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Respecting, resourcing and recognising the child's right to play is essential to upholding other rights associated with freedom of thought, freedom of expression, freedom of association and freedom to participate in the public realm.

Play Sufficiency Assessment (Wales) Regulations (2012) and the Planning (Scotland) Act (2019).



Action 2: Practice Level

That a practical focus be placed on the role of play as a developmentally key activity within our homes, in schools and across our communities.

Through play children and young people develop an understanding of their place in society; develop the skills they need to engage with different environments, people and situations; and are able to seek out challenges to develop their skills base.

To play in the way that their biological instincts demand, children need space: cultural, social and emotional as well as physical and geographical. That is, they need environments that afford play opportunities, and they need permission and confidence to use those spaces for play without the encroachment of adult agendas. For children and young people, the severe social restrictions associated with Covid-19 have not only exacerbated constraints on play, but have highlighted the need for focused action in the longer-term to develop environments and spaces that not only support, but which actively encourage play.

A nuanced understanding of play is critically important for parents, carers, teachers and early years practitioners as it is they who are able to provide - or deny - the time, space and permissions that enable play to occur.

The provision of focused, practical support and learning opportunities for practitioners and parents enabling them to value play whilst providing safe but challenging environments that support child-led play are key to creating a society that values, promotes and supports play.



Action 3: Research

That an academic research agenda specifically looking at play is progressed on an interdisciplinary basis.

Key messages from international research, and this study in particular, highlight the need for additional and localised research to help us better understand how play supports and improves outcomes for children and young people.

There is a general consensus that play is difficult to define. However, recently there has been a significant growth in the recognition of the importance of children's play within the wider policy and research arena. An example of this is reflected in this study which highlights changes in play routines due to Covid-19, for example reductions in physical play activity alongside a growing reliance on technological play during lockdown.

Such changes, whilst driven by unforeseen circumstances (e.g. the Covid-19 pandemic) have the potential to significantly impact on patterns of play moving forward, leading to a potentially negative developmental impact. Ongoing, long-term research will be essential if we are to adequately monitor, review and address the impacts of changes to play resulting from Covid-19 restrictions.

References

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Photo by Bruna Saito
from Pexels

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OUR VOICES MATTER

Summary Report

Contact Details



PlayBoard NI
7 Crescent Gardens
Belfast BT7 1NS
Northern Ireland
T: 028 9080 3380
E: info@playboard.org
www.playboard.org

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