

# Play in Practice during the Pandemic

Nursery and Foundation Stage

June 2021

Summary Report



STRANMILLIS UNIVERSITY COLLEGE  
A College of Queen's University Belfast



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### Authors

- Dr. Glenda Walsh, Stranmillis University College.
- Tracey Woods, Controlled Schools' Support Council.
- Dr. Cira Palli-Aspero; Alan Herron and Angela Stallard, PlayBoard NI.



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# Background

The global health crisis caused by COVID-19 has brought unprecedented challenges to early years education. Nation-wide lockdowns, social distancing and a suite of restrictions, including the closure of schools and early years settings, playgrounds and public parks, as well as reduced access to extended family and friends have transformed children's lives in a way that no-one could ever have imagined. In Northern Ireland, as children began to return to classroom or Nursery settings after an extended period of school closure (from March to August 2020), teachers were presented with the unenviable task of managing the risks posed by the global pandemic while still ensuring a high-quality playful learning experience for children in practice. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic then once again forced the introduction of a second lockdown, with a second period of home learning extending from January to March/April 2021, with the exception of vulnerable children, the children of key workers and children attending special schools.

## Focus

It is within this context that a collaborative project between PlayBoard NI, Stranmillis University College and the Controlled Schools' Support Council was initiated to examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the quality of play in our early years classrooms with a particular focus on the contexts of Nursery and Foundation Stage.

## Overview of the Study

Research was undertaken between January and March 2021 with an online survey targeted specifically for completion by Nursery and Foundation Stage (Years 1 and 2 of primary schooling) teachers. By the end of the survey period a total of 291 complete surveys had been received.

## Breakdown of the respondents

### *By Class taught*

- 37.1% = Nursery teachers
- 29.4% = P1 teachers
- 21.2% = P2 teachers

### *By Experience*

- 40% of the respondents had between 16 and 25 years' experience
- 32.9% had 6 -15 years' experience
- 8.2% had 26-35 years' experience
- 10.1% had less than 5 years and two teachers had over 36 years' experience.



# Key Messages

## Impact of COVID-19 restrictions on practice

According to respondents, the most common measures that have been put in place to mitigate the impact of the pandemic within early years classroom/settings included staggered arrival and pick up times, the rearranging of classroom layouts, the creation of class bubbles, the use of PPE and enhanced hygiene and cleaning protocols.



*"Due to two sessions per day a huge effort has been undertaken by nursery staff to designate all play resources to specific groups. Each day all used equipment is sterilized in Milton and hung out to dry in net sacks. A steamer is used to steam the entire room and a thorough cleaning schedule is maintained to minimise any spread of the virus. A massive undertaking without complaint by any member of staff."(Nursery teacher)*

*"Desks all forward facing rather than in groups. No use of sand for play – including sand house. Individual playdough. Soft furnishings removed and no use of fabric items by children e.g. dressing up clothes, puppets." (P1 teacher)*

## Impact of COVID-19 restrictions on children

There were mixed responses from respondents as to the impact on children of the measures put into place in the classroom/setting to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. The majority of respondents (58.6%) were of the opinion that such measures impacted negatively on children in terms of their social skills, their levels of independence, their ability to stay on task and overall enhanced anxiety and in some cases obsessive behaviours. It is worth noting however that a sizeable minority (41.4%) adopted a more positive stance, indicating that children were more independent in terms of self-care routines, more settled in class, happier and more relaxed, and displayed increased levels of resilience and coping skills to manage this new world in which they now inhabit.

### More negative response



*"(...) Their attention and listening skills appear to be poorer than ever and story time had to take place in small groups. The narrative of coronavirus is evident in the children's home talk e.g. they talk about mummy wearing a mask, the bad virus and not seeing grandparents anymore. I have certainly found the behaviour of the children this year to be more exuberant and I have been implementing volume charts and focusing heavily on emotion talk with them." (Nursery teacher)*

### More positive response



*"In fact, the adults struggled more to settle into the new routines. The children just accepted things as they were and settled into the new normal from the start. It was actually amazing how they came into the class without the support of their parents. They were very resilient and enjoyed and chose activities such as role play where they were able to connect with each other physically." (P1 teacher)*

## Impact on play in practice

The survey highlighted that some changes to play in practice were required to ensure the health and safety of children and staff. In some cases, in order to reduce risk of infection certain play activities such as role play had to be removed from settings, as did certain play resources such as sand and playdough.

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*“In nursery we would usually have sand, playdough and water as play areas. These were all removed due to Covid restrictions which was okay initially as the children were all engaging with the other areas on offer but as time went on, these areas would have been beneficial to progress play and certain skills, particularly fine motor! We have begun to have playdough days, in which we make playdough and the children wash their hands before use. We then throw the playdough out that day. Additionally, all soft surfaces and things that can't be wiped down had to be removed. This meant removing role play costumes, cosy reading corner cushions, mats etc. At this age, a simple role play costume can really progress children's play and imagination so it's unfortunate for them to miss out on this opportunity in their play. We have also had to think about our reading corner to try and make it as inviting as possible without any cosy elements!” (Nursery teacher)*

Despite the negative impacts, a significant finding from the 'Play in Practice during the Pandemic' study highlighted the high level of creativity, improvisation and dedication invested on the part of early years teachers to ensure that young children still had the opportunity to engage in purposeful playful experiences. Almost two thirds of the respondents (65.7%) reported making greater use of the outdoors, over half of the respondents indicated that they now made better use of disposable (51.8%) and natural materials (29.6%), alongside plastic resources (48.6%) for ease of cleaning.

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*“We have worked hard and rearranged our rooms/ resources etc. to make sure the children still have all of the experiences that are essential to their development.” (P1 teacher)*

*“We played outside every day regardless of weather.” (P1 teacher)*

*“We provided the full experience but staff had to work hard on cleaning routines and changing sand etc daily but it was worth it to give the children the full provision.” (Nursery teacher)*

Interestingly, the majority (53.1%) of the respondents (both Nursery and FS) reported that, on average, the time available for children to play remained the same in practice post lockdown as it was pre-COVID-19.

Indeed, just over one fifth of the teachers (22.5%) reported that the time available for children to play had actually increased as a result of the pandemic.

The findings from this study suggest that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the state of play in practice is perhaps not as negative as anticipated due to the initiative and commitment shown by early years staff to maintain playful learning experiences in practice.



## Impact of the pandemic on the quality of play in practice

There were mixed views from teachers as to the impact of COVID-19 on the quality of the playful learning experience.

### *More negative stance*

The majority of teachers (68.7%) were of the opinion that the restrictions put in place to guarantee children a safe space to play, alongside intense cleaning regimes, had impacted negatively on the quality of play in practice, resulting in more sterile playful learning spaces. In addition, a lack of appropriate guidance to support early years staff and a lack of additional funding were reported as key reasons as to why the quality of play in practice had been negatively impacted.

“FS staff need to be released from the expectation that they will be able to provide the same quality of learning experience with limited guidance; no additional resources and no regard being given to their own safety and the safety of their loved ones. If play is truly recognised as a priority, then many of the obstacles can be overcome but teachers have been left to get on with it without any support.” (P1/P2 teacher)

“I feel nurseries could really benefit from money to go towards more outdoor play equipment as I feel outdoors is a safer place for our young children to mix and play during a pandemic (...).” (Nursery teacher)

### *More positive stance*

Almost one third of the respondents (31.3%) in this study saw the changes imposed on play in practice by COVID-19 as enhancing its overall quality in practice.

“Children’s role play has become more focussed on helping people. Even superheroes changed from typically fighting the bad guys, to helping to save people from the virus.” (P1/P2 teacher)

“I am surprised to say that this has been a positive. I presumed play would be difficult but the children have shown me that throwing the kitchen sink of selection at them does not make quality. Indeed, lesser materials encourage greater creativity and engagement.” (P2 teacher)

## Impact on children’s responses to play in practice post lockdown

On a positive note, the majority of teachers reported there had been little change in children’s response to play post the initial lockdown. 56.7% of the respondents indicated that their levels of engagement remained the same as pre-COVID times, as did 57.4% regarding children’s levels of social interaction and 62.2% in relation to their emotional well-being. This was principally as a result of the hard work invested on the teachers’ part.

Despite this, a sizeable minority of respondents (38.8%) expressed a degree of concern regarding children's response to play on their return to the classroom/nursery setting after the protracted period of home learning. Some teachers were of the opinion that children's levels of engagement during play had decreased significantly (11.9%), with 13.9% reporting a modest decrease. Almost one third of teachers were concerned about children's social interaction during play, 16.1% considering their levels of social interaction to have significantly decreased on their return to school. In addition, over one third of teachers (34.9%) believed that children's levels of anxiety had increased within their play, with constant reassurance required on the part of staff to encourage some children to try out new things and to engage in play. According to the teachers, the reason for such change in child behaviours during play stemmed from the required changes to the play environment and from the long period of time spent at home where important classroom routines had been forgotten and required re-establishing.



*"Requiring constant reassurance. Having emotional meltdowns with no triggers. Attachment and separation issues." (Nursery teacher)*

*"They are less confident playing with others. They are less confident talking about their play or answering questions. They can be reluctant to move from one activity to another." (P1 teacher)*

*"Reluctant to try new things or do things for themselves." (Nursery teacher)*

*"(...) Increased need for reassurance and adult attention." (P2 teacher)*

## Impact of further lockdown on children's learning experience

### *Impact on Play*

Almost half of the respondents (46.4%) expressed additional concerns arising from the introduction of a further lockdown commencing on 24th December 2020, and the subsequent closure of schools/nursery settings until March/April 2021. Foundation Stage teachers were particularly concerned about the lack of value attributed to play as a learning tool by some parents in the home. As a result, more formal aspects of learning in the form of paper-based Literacy and Numeracy tasks were likely to be assigned greater emphasis and importance by parents in the home-learning experience.



*"I am a great believer in the importance of play, this is hard to instil in parents at home who only want to do the 'important' parts of home learning. They are not understanding that play is how we all learn! This information needs to come from a higher authority than the teacher." (P1/P2 teacher)*

*"It is very hard to get parents on board with valuing play as part of the home learning school day. It is largely ignored and only paper-based work is completed." (P1 teacher)*

## Challenges of Remote Learning

Several teachers, in particular those from Nursery, noted that parental engagement was integral in terms of translating the playful learning tasks provided on a remote learning platform into practice in the home-learning environment. In order to engage in more playful tasks, children were often reliant on parents having the time to engage in and support their play, a challenge and impediment which was noted by several teachers.

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*“Young children are reliant on parents or older siblings to help them with remote learning activities. Parents may be working or working from home, concentrate on completing older children's work first. Limited time to engage their child in play. In nursery, we have had to reduce the amount of resources freely available as we wash everything daily. Had to reduce time in nursery by half an hour to allow for cleaning and set up. Had to stop parents daily stay and play sessions with parents.” (Nursery teacher)*

Further concerns were raised regarding how equitable the home play experience was during lockdown. Concerns included children from less advantaged backgrounds not having the same opportunities to avail of outdoor play due to the lack of usable garden space and not having access to the appropriate technology to enable regular contact between the children and their teacher.

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*“Internet access for some people is a problem, resources are a problem for some, some people really don't see the importance of doing activities with their Nursery children because their focus is on older children, like the last lockdown some start really well but after a few weeks there is a drop off...”(Nursery teacher)*

*“Parents reporting that they find it difficult to do some of the play suggestions with their child e.g. going on a hunt outside, art and craft, making shapes with natural materials etc due to work commitments, lack of outside space, older siblings at home that they need to support with school work” (P2 teacher)*

## Overall Conclusion

The findings from 'Play in Practice during the Pandemic' indicate that the global pandemic has resulted in unprecedented challenges for teachers and, more significantly, young children, impacting not only on the classroom/nursery environment but more importantly on the playful experiences through which young children learn best. Yet, the findings also suggest that despite the many challenges, thanks to the creativity, dedication and initiative shown by many 'early years' teachers, our young learners have, in the main, continued to enjoy a stimulating, playful and nurturing learning experience in as safe an environment as possible during this time of crisis.



# Final Recommendations

## Action 1: Need for greater value to be assigned to play in the home

There was a general consensus amongst respondents that there is a growing need to enhance parental understanding of the importance of play as a means of supporting learning, building resilience, improving health and wellbeing and contributing to the enjoyment of childhood. A key part of this will be supporting parents to develop and support play within the home environment. Teachers from both Nursery and Foundation Stage classes stressed the need to provide a bank of playful ideas that parents can reproduce in the home, that enable meaningful play and ideas to encourage child-led play activities at home with the use of minimal resources to avoid adding extra financial pressure to parents and carers.

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*“There needs to be an advertising campaign aimed at parents to emphasise the value of play especially during this lockdown. Parents do not want to play with their children, instead they want us to forward worksheets like the primary schools are doing.” (Nursery teacher)*

*“More funding for Home Learning resources please! Getting Ready to Learn has been fantastic however, other initiatives set up to avail of small amounts of funding to supply education resources to parents would be most beneficial.” (P1/P2 teacher)*

## Action 2: Need for further guidance on managing play during the pandemic

There is a need for specific guidance on how a play-based curriculum can be delivered remotely for future home-learning experiences, as well as further guidance on remote learning resources, remote learning platforms, and how remote learning can be effectively monitored. This was a particular concern for Nursery teachers who expressed the need for more playful ideas and resources to enable remote learning to meet the needs and interests of nursery aged children more fully.

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*“It is very difficult to post up a lot of what you do in Nursery because quality Nursery education revolves around quality language interactions between the children and the adults - it's all about the experience the child has at Nursery- no amount of online activities will ever replicate that. What do you suggest that Nursery teachers should be doing - maybe a discussion should be held?” (Nursery teacher)*

Additionally, some Nursery teachers expressed a need to organise a shared event to enable practising Nursery teachers to exchange ideas and activities that have been sent to parents during the months of lockdown.



### Action 3: Need to prioritise outdoor play and outdoor learning in the school environment post pandemic

There is a need for an enhanced focus on outdoor play and outdoor learning to be maintained in schools post lockdown and the need for policymakers to support such an initiative in practice by providing appropriate guidance and funding.

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*“I feel nurseries could really benefit from money to go towards more outdoor play equipment as I feel outdoors is a safer place for our young children to mix and play during a pandemic (...).”  
(Nursery teacher)*

*“(...) the children have been spending the majority of time outdoors – this of course provides an excellent range of holistic benefits to the children.” (Nursery teacher)*

*“We have embraced the use of outdoors and spend about 80–90% outside daily. Kids better engaged and love it?” (P1/P2 teacher)*

*“Better quality play as we are mainly outside– more space to move and be creative.” (P1/P2 teacher)*

*“We were outside most of the time anyway. We just sent home rain clothes for parents to dress them for arriving in the morning. We also made a seating area outside so they could listen to stories.” (Nursery teacher)*

### Action 4: Need for professional development in the early years

A demand for further training opportunities was also identified as a requisite by both nursery and FS teachers. They identified the following areas as of greatest need:

- Training on children’s mental health and wellbeing and mechanisms to help improving it or maintaining it within the school context.
- Training on outdoor learning, its conceptual underpinnings as well as methods and techniques for best practice.
- Training on therapeutic play, its conceptual underpinnings as well as methods and techniques for best practice.



## Action 5: Need for further research into the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on children's holistic learning and development

Although this research has gone some way to shed light on play in Nursery and Foundation Stage classrooms/settings during the COVID-19 crisis from the perspective of teachers, a much more in-depth study of a longitudinal nature is required to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the long term impact of COVID-19 on children's holistic learning and development.

## Action 6: Need to prioritise play more fully in practice across NI schools and early years settings post pandemic

Thanks to the extensive roll-out of the vaccine programme, restrictions are presently being slowly lifted and a degree of normality is returning to our schools and early years settings. The time is therefore ripe to ensure that we embrace the lessons learned from this small-scale study and indeed the COVID-19 crisis more generally in terms of the significance of play for young children's learning and development and invest in appropriate support to guarantee high quality play in practice across all Northern Ireland's early years classrooms/settings and indeed homes beyond the pandemic.

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*"I think teachers have reinvented play-based learning in a very short period of time. I have personally seen the benefit to children's play when it is well planned and the adult steps back to let the children engage free of adult direction or expectation. It has changed my approach to play for the better." (P2 teacher)*



# Contacts



Stranmillis University College  
Stranmillis Road  
Belfast, BT9 5DY  
Telephone: 028 9038 1271  
Email: [research@stran.ac.uk](mailto:research@stran.ac.uk)



PlayBoard NI  
7 Crescent Gardens  
Belfast, BT7 1NS  
Tel: 028 9080 3380  
Email: [info@playboard.org](mailto:info@playboard.org)



Controlled Schools' Support Council  
Second Floor, Main Building  
Stranmillis University College  
Stranmillis Road  
Belfast, BT9 5DY  
Telephone: 028 9531 3030  
Email: [info@csscni.org.uk](mailto:info@csscni.org.uk)