



Children in Lockdown - The impact of COVID-19 on children in Northern Ireland

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COVID-19 has increased many of the risks facing children and young people, not just in terms of the epidemiological risk, but also in terms of the additional risks that the lockdown itself has created, such as an increased risk of poor mental health (Barnardo's 2020), exposure to domestic violence (Humphreys et al., 2020; Imran et al., 2020), addiction in the home, and exposure to exploitation. These risks have been exacerbated by the closures of schools for the majority of children and limited access to other services. The COVID-19 pandemic represents an inflection point in history and will be generation defining for our young. Some have called the pandemic the "9-11 of Generation Z" and note the creation of a new generation of "Quaranteens" or "Coronials" (Knight, 2020).

COVID-19 and Children's Development

Children and young people have been significantly affected by the restrictions associated with lockdown, which has the potential to impact on their long-term health, wellbeing, education, and development. Since March 2020 most schools in Northern Ireland (NI) have been closed, with the vast majority of children learning at home, isolated from teachers, friends and a life they knew. Although out of sight, they should not be out of mind. The PlayBoard NI 'Your Voice' research project implemented an online survey with 280 children and young people aged 5-18 (mean age of respondents

was 8 years 11 months) between June and August 2020 to capture the voices of children and young people. 'Your Voice' research highlighted that the social restrictions associated with the COVID-19 lockdown significantly impacted upon the types of play that children were able to engage in. Being active through play dropped from 53.2% to 31.4%, participation in social play dropped dramatically from 58.9% to 5%, and technology-based play increased from 33.9% to 55.7% (PlayBoard NI, 2020). COVID-19 restrictions have fundamentally changed the way in which children interact and engage with the world and this raises long-term health and wellbeing concerns such as activity levels and socialisation. 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 move through, and emerge from, this global pandemic we must prioritise children's right to play and their education. If we fail to do so we ultimately let down a generation of children who need our respect and support (PlayBoard NI, 2020).

Mental Health and Wellbeing Impacts

A new report by Barnardo's Northern Ireland (New Term, New Challenges, New Opportunities) based on a

recent survey of 167 education professionals revealed that teachers are concerned about the long-lasting impact of COVID-19 on children's mental health and wellbeing. Nearly 90% of respondents believed that the pandemic was likely to have an impact on the mental health and wellbeing of pupils, and more than 80% of respondents indicated a need for increased funding to support mental health and wellbeing (Barnardo's NI, 2020). For many children, school is their lifeline, their safe space, and going back to school will offer vital support. However, the return to school cannot focus solely on academic achievement, especially given the importance of mental health and wellbeing to children's ability to learn (Gutman and Vorhaus, 2012). The mental health and wellbeing of pupils needs to be prioritised in the recovery curriculum and increased investment for mental health support in schools to improve outcomes for children. Schools cannot take on this challenge alone: support and guidance from our Government will be crucial to supporting the emotional health and wellbeing of pupils as they return to school (Barnardo's NI, 2020).

The coronavirus pandemic has had a direct impact on the mental health of many of our children and young people in NI. This has been reflected in recent data from Childline, which shows an increase of more than 25% in young children in NI getting in touch about their emotional wellbeing during lockdown. The

NSPCC-run phone helpline has carried out 373 counselling sessions with NI children about their mental health, which is a monthly average of 124 sessions. This is compared with 99 prior to lockdown (Campbell, 2020). Similarly, 60% of children and young people who took part in the 'Your Voice' survey said they felt sad during lockdown, and half felt frustrated, angry, or upset. Furthermore, almost two thirds of children thought that school closures had negatively affected their education, with 90% reporting that meeting their friends was what they missed most (PlayBoard NI, 2020). It is imperative that services such as Childline can continue to help support children and young people to cope and recover from the aftermath of this crisis. Barnardo's NI (2020) are calling on the NI Executive to ensure that its Coronavirus recovery plan prioritises the needs of children and young

people. This should include plans to provide adequate and appropriate support in both education and health, with a particular emphasis on the identification of vulnerability and trauma and meeting children's needs. Increased investment in children's emotional and mental well-being in schools and child and adolescent mental health support for children and young people is required to ensure access to vital services.

Undoubtedly, the pandemic is having a devastating effect on the childhoods of children and young people across the country and will likely continue to do so for a long time (Cheng et al., 2020). It is vital that we can sustain the support needed for them both during and after this pandemic, particularly in areas of mental health, wellbeing, and education where the effects of the current situation may not be seen immediately. While the NI Executive

has taken unprecedented steps in response to the crisis, the impact on children must be more central. The voices of children and young people must be included in the significant decisions affecting them, their lives, and their futures. Without dedicated resource invested in managing the response and looking to the future, a generation of young people could be left behind in the wake of this pandemic. It is imperative that the impact of this crisis on children is urgently addressed in the Government's immediate and long-term response (UNICEF UK, 2020). The Government needs to protect our children by ensuring their voices are being heard, and that issues affecting them are being identified and addressed efficiently across the range of services and organisations involved including civil society. Children's rights remain a priority for all both now and into the future.

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