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**YST RESEARCH**

Insight driving innovation and impact

**Evidence Paper:**

**The Impact of Covid-19 Restrictions on Children and Young People**

June 2020

## Introduction

Youth Sport Trust is a children's charity that works to ensure that every child enjoys the life-changing benefits that come from play and sport. We do this by harnessing the power of sport, physical activity and PE to increase young people's life chances through improved wellbeing, healthier lifestyles and greater attainment. Our work reaches around 20,000 schools across the UK and we operate on a local, national and global level to build a brighter future for young people.

**This paper summarises key evidence relating to the impact of Covid-19 on children and young people. With an ever-changing landscape, limited ability to hear *directly* from children and with a narrow window for data capture, this document is "of the moment", condensing the latest quantitative evidence from a range of external sources. Additionally, it references qualitative and low-sample research, aiming to build a rounded picture.**

The paper covers the following themes:

- Young people's mental health & concerns
- Physical activity during lockdown
- The challenges of home learning
- What's helped during lockdown
- Returning to school
- Positives from the COVID experience
- Potential future trends

### Young people's mental health and concerns

**Pre-existing mental health problems are worsening:** There is growing concern that the mental health and wellbeing of young people is declining during the pandemic. 83% of children and young people with pre-existing mental health problems believe that their problems have worsened. They have particular concerns about their family's health, school and university closures, a loss of routine and a loss of social connection (to family, friends and trusted adults)<sup>i</sup>

**Calls to Childline have increased:** The NSPCC conducted over 2,200 counselling sessions to children and young people between 21 Jan and 8 April 2020, of which 1,600 were delivered in March when government restrictions were introduced. Children have reported issues with increased feelings of depression and anxiety, more frequent panic attacks, having difficulty sleeping and in feeling lonely or isolated.<sup>ii</sup>

**Government restrictions have placed families under increasing pressure and have the potential to turn relatively stable but difficult pre-existing living situations into higher-risk ones with consequent impacts on children:** 1.5mil children in England live with a parent who has a severe mental health problem and there are an estimated 102,000 young carers in England, many of which will now be shouldering significant additional responsibilities without the previous respite that school gave them.<sup>iii</sup> Young carers are an already at-risk group for mental health with an estimated two in five young carers currently experiencing a mental health problem<sup>iv</sup>. There are 270,000 children with an education, health and care plan, many of which are staying at home and whose education will be particularly challenging for parents<sup>v</sup>



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**Many children already live in dangerous circumstances** and have been forced to stay at home in places where they are likely to be scared or in danger: 50,000 children are on child protection plans<sup>vi</sup> and 830,000 children live in homes where domestic abuse had taken place in the last year.<sup>vii</sup> Issues will be amplified by the removal of many of the support networks and places of safety which are usually available to them.

**Two thirds of primary school children are currently (May 2020) feeling lonely** (this is up 50% on normal levels)<sup>viii</sup> A recent rapid evidence review indicates that loneliness as a result of COVID could precipitate long term mental health problems in young people and that strategies to prevent these should be an international priority. Children and young people aged between 4 and 21 years old have been found to be up to three times more likely to develop depression in the future as a result of loneliness during lockdown and that the duration of loneliness may be more important than its intensity in increasing this risk<sup>ix</sup>

**Unplanned endings:** Many young people will have experienced “unplanned endings” to their school life and research has shown these abrupt endings can lead to consequent feelings of disappointment, loss, abandonment, confusion and sadness<sup>x</sup>

Qualitatively, children report being unsettled and apprehensive. On a day to day level, they are starting to be bored with teenagers reporting being physically and emotionally drained. They are missing their friends, their “milestones” e.g. leaving school, outings, trips, celebrations etc and sports and activities<sup>xi</sup>.

**Amongst girls, 24% of those aged 11-14 and 50% of those aged 15-18 reported that Covid-19 and lockdown had had a negative impact on their mental health.** 33% of girls aged 4-10 said that they felt sad most of the time and 42% of girls aged 15-18 felt stressed or worried. Their key concerns were uncertainty about school and education (76%), loneliness and isolation (51%) and a lack of freedom and independence (44%). Younger girls (aged 4-10) reported that they missed their friends (95%), their teachers (79%) and playtime (59%). Older girls (11-18) missed school trips, events and celebrations (70%), learning (50%) and school sports (29%).<sup>xii</sup>

**Amongst an older mixed cohort, 58% of 14-25-year olds say that Covid-19 has left them unsure about their future and 65% said they were worried about their mental health.** Key concerns for them are about those close to them being at risk (61%), the strain on the NHS (42%) and about a future economic crisis (34%).<sup>xiii</sup> Covid is leading to uncertainty about future employment: More than a quarter (29%) of 16-25 year olds feel that their future career prospects may have been damaged, 46% believe that finding a new job now feels “impossible”, with a third feeling that “everything they have worked for is now going to waste”. 69% feel that their life is “on hold” and almost half (47%) don’t feel in control of their lives (rising to 65% for NEETs).<sup>xiv</sup>

**There are challenges for mental health services:**

**Fewer referrals are being made to CAMHS (Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services) in some areas of the country :** Whilst in some areas they have been able to continue to offer support by phone or digitally, for others referrals are down which means that children in need may not be getting the support they need eg. referrals to CAMHS in Birmingham have seen a 50% reduction since Covid-19 measures were first introduced in March 2020.<sup>xv</sup>

**Current restrictions mean that school mental health services are no longer available for most children** and community structures aren't in place to reach the children they need to. Additionally, only 15% of the emergency school places available for vulnerable children have been taken up<sup>xvi</sup>, which means that children are missing the vital interventions to support mental health provided in a school setting.<sup>xvii</sup>

**There are practical issues around the provision of *digital* mental health services.** For practitioners, these include having physical infrastructure (hardware, platforms, internet access), addressing GDPR/safeguarding (including accessing school records), lack of specific staff training/upskilling and difficulties in being able to do as effective a job when delivering remotely ie. when you can't see body language. For young people, they are experiencing issues relating to digital access, have reduced ability to find out about alternative support arrangements and they appear less inclined to want to access digital support. They may also struggle for the necessary privacy required to access support in their home environment<sup>xviii</sup>

### Physical activity during lockdown

**Parents report that around 36% of children are doing less physical activity than usual** (30% are doing more) and **only 22% are getting their RDA of 60 active minutes. A worrying 9% of children are getting no physical activity.** Nb. the CMO guidance is that all 5-16-year olds should be doing at least 60 minutes a day of moderate to vigorous physical activity a day.<sup>xix</sup>

**Exercise is seen as one of the best parts of an adult's day** alleviating some of more challenging elements of lockdown. They have seen the benefit of digital wellbeing services and content such as meditation audio, yoga videos and home workouts have become staples. Large scale "event" workouts have helped promote a sense of community. People intend to stick at this new focus on exercise when lockdown ends.<sup>xx</sup>

**Parents are valuing the time they are spending on activity with their children, believing that sports and fitness are bringing families together:** 53% of parents were doing more physical activity with their children than they did prior to lockdown and 61% felt that playing sport and keeping fit was helping maintain their family's physical and mental well-being.<sup>xxi</sup> Hopefully this enthusiasm may convert into increasing importance being placed on exercise within the family as restrictions ease.

### The challenges of home learning

**In the first week of June, 65% of parents reported that their children had been learning from home.** They were using laptops and tablets (73%) and accessing digital resources provided by school eg. lessons, assignments etc (61%) and digital on-line resources found by parents eg. BBC Bitesize (49%).<sup>xxii</sup>

**Home learning is presenting particular problems to some children and highlighting inequalities.**

Whilst there have been a host of approaches developed to help provide on-line learning, to access these (alongside laptops), children need a good internet connection, something unavailable to 8% of British households. Others live in over-crowded conditions where finding space to learn and play is harder: 4.6% of children live in crowded homes but in some part of London, this rises to 26% (Newham)<sup>xxiii</sup> **Around 60% of primary school children from the least affluent families do not have access to a dedicated learning space vs. 35% for the most well off**<sup>xxiv</sup>

**Parents often don't have other resources they need for learning at home** such as printers, stationery and craft materials which limits their children's ability to engage with learning. To support home learning, parents value good, regular communication from school, visual and verbal contact with teachers and friends, and more pastoral support to help with wellbeing and isolation.<sup>xxv</sup>

**Many parents are struggling to support their child's home learning.** Around 4 in 10 parents said that their children were struggling to continue their education<sup>xxvi</sup> and a report by the Institute for Fiscal studies found that almost 60% of primary school parents and around half of secondary parents say that they are finding it quite or very hard to support learning.<sup>xxvii</sup>

**School closures have the potential to further increase education inequality:** Children are spending about 5 hours a day on average on home learning with secondary school children most likely to have online classes. However, there are differences between the most and least well off in society: 64% of secondary pupils in state schools from the richest households are being given active help from their schools, such as online teaching, vs. only 47% from the poorest fifth of families, leaving children more reliant on their parents for help. Similarly, children from wealthier families are spending 30% more time each day on home learning compared to those from poorer families. By September, these inequalities will have created a 15-day gap in learning between rich and poor.<sup>xxviii</sup> It's estimated that school closures are likely to reverse the many of the hard-won reductions in attainment gaps made since 2011 between disadvantaged children and their peers, with some believing that the gaps could widen by 36% (median estimate). Even with mitigatory steps in place, catch up provision will be essential.<sup>xxix</sup>

Schools are looking to lessen the impact of closures on inequality: 34% of teachers have contacted specific parents to offer advice and 21% say that their school is offering laptops to those in need although this still differs between advantaged state schools (28%) and the most deprived schools (15%). To reduce the inequality gaps, teachers cite the need for providing food boxes for vulnerable families, government funding for the provision of tech devices and the sending out stationery and resource packs.<sup>xxx</sup>

### What's helped during lockdown

Qualitatively we've seen that during lockdown, young people have valued interacting via social media, volunteering, walking/activity, doing school work, playing, gaming, watching TV, enjoying more free time and spending time with family and pets<sup>xxxi xxxii</sup> They are looking forward to being able to do "normal" things again: socialising, seeing friends/family and watching and participating in sport. For young sports leaders, there are still many concerns and logistical questions about they will be able to get back to everyday life and sport safely.<sup>xxxiii</sup>



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For young people with existing mental health issues, they found some things to be beneficial to their mental health including face-to-face calls with friends (72%), watching TV (72%), exercise (60%), learning new skills (59%) and reading books (55%), whereas other activity was felt to be unhelpful for some such as watching/reading the news (66%) and using social media (36%).<sup>xxxiv</sup>

## Returning to school

**Parents are reluctant to send their children back to school and inequalities may result:** Surveyed on 15<sup>th</sup> May 2020, only 39% of primary parents and 45% of secondary said that they would currently send their children to school, but there are discrepancies by income: less than a third of parents in the poorest fifth of families would send their child back to school if given the choice vs. over half from more affluent backgrounds, which could further exacerbate educational inequality.<sup>xxxv</sup> (New data from 1<sup>st</sup> June shows 46% would keep children at home (50% of parents in disadvantaged areas) and 25% of teachers were likely to be absent because of health issues for themselves or their families).<sup>xxxvi</sup>

**Parents are looking for reassurances:** that the schools will be safe and that there is provision of emotional and mental health support, an emphasis on playtime, phased returns and extra help with learning, with no pressure to “catch up” straight away.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Of those reluctant to send their children to school, 70% said that a vaccine would ease their concerns and 67% said that reassurance that their school was fully prepared would also help their confidence.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

**Children have concerns about going back to school too.** These include worries about social distancing (and others not following it), their family catching the virus from them, pressures around schoolwork/pressure to catch up and transitioning (particularly for those in year 6).<sup>xxxix</sup>

On 1<sup>st</sup> June as some primary schools were allowed to re-open to a wider cohort, Head teachers reported “highly variable levels of attendance ranging from 40-70% of reception, year 1 and year 6 pupils.”<sup>xl</sup>

## Positives from the Covid experience

**A more positive view on technology for Children:** Around a third parents of 8-15 year olds have a more positive view on technology for children because of the role it has played in helping them stay active.<sup>xli</sup> and also in education and entertainment. They are using a range of apps and resources they haven’t accessed before.<sup>xlii</sup> Screen-time was up by at least 50% for 38% of 10-12 year olds and 32% of 6-9 year olds in March 2020.<sup>xliii</sup>

**51% of young people are making more effort that they normally would to help those in need**<sup>xliiv</sup>

**Young adults (16-19) believe that Britain will be more united after the crisis** (56% vs. 19% before).<sup>xlv</sup>

**Brands are likely to be judged by their response during COVID** with 85% of adults saying that it is now more important than ever that brands support local communities with 65% wanting brands to tell them how they have helped during the crisis.<sup>xlvi</sup> Similarly people may start to look more to Influencers who have “suffered” alongside them and engaged with them during the crisis.<sup>xlvii</sup>



**Becoming a doctor is now the number one career aspiration for all 5-18-year olds in the UK** and there has been a +9% increase in children who want to be scientists.<sup>xlviii</sup>

Whilst home schooling has been challenging, **families have valued the opportunity for more creative learning** e.g. exploring nature, reading, construction, freedom and choice.<sup>xlix</sup>

Girls identified some positive factors that affected how they were feeling including environmental improvements (61%), spending more time with family (52%), having more time for hobbies (50%), not going to school and less academic pressure (34%) and being more connected through video calls (22%) and to their community (11%).<sup>i</sup>

### Potential future trends

Experience of COVID will have some longer-term implications for future trends. Some possible scenarios include: A move towards more authenticity (vs. fake airbrushed Instagram 'reality'), the rebirth of quality family time, children having a greater say in family decision making, and an increased focus on community, inclusion and belonging.<sup>li</sup>



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