

URGENT: Lockdown harms to children and young people

Children and Young People are the future of any society. In all actions concerning children, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration (Article 3 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child)^[1]. We should put children first in all we do.

Children are at extremely low risk from Covid-19, with not a single death of a previously healthy child^[2]. They are also much less likely than adults to transmit the virus, indeed living or working with young children reduces the risk of severe disease^{[3][4]}. The impact of the harms outlined below^{[5][6]} is thus disproportionate to any benefits to children themselves or to wider society.

- The overwhelming harm to children has been to their mental health. Surveyed in late August, 50% of 13-19 year-olds felt anxious ‘most days’^[7]. Half of young people aged 16-25 reported deteriorating mental health, with 1 in 4 feeling ‘unable to cope’^[8]. The number likely to have clinically significant mental health problems increased from 1 in 9 in 2017 to 1 in 6 in 2020^[9].
- Self-harm, eating disorders and suicidal ideation have all increased^{[10][11]}. Eating disorder units have reported a 3-fold increase in referrals^[12]. Children as young as 10 are self-harming^[13].
- Young people are lonely: lonelier than their parents. Loneliness is as damaging to health as smoking and obesity, is associated with suicidal thinking and impacts on mental health up to nine years later^[14]. With the current ‘Rule of 2’, children cannot even meet a friend.
- NSPCC calls re child abuse have risen by 43% and for domestic violence by 49%^[15].
- Social interaction through face-to-face contact is vital for healthy infant development^[16]. Face to face early years activities have all but disappeared. Postnatal depression has increased, 60% of parents concerned about their baby’s development^[17]. Calls to the charity Action for Stammering Children have more than doubled^[18]. Teenage years are also a critical developmental period^{[19][20]}, the brain ‘rewiring’ itself in response to social environment.
- Not surprisingly, educational attainment has been seriously affected, especially for more disadvantaged children without access to online learning, widening the attainment gap^[21]. The IFS calculate that 6 months of lost schooling equates to £40,000 loss of lifetime earnings^[22]

Many of the above harms will potentially persist into adult life^{[23][24]}. Other damage includes increased child poverty, hunger and homelessness^[25], delayed cancer diagnoses and treatments^[26], loss of sport and music, deteriorating physical health^[27] and eyesight problems including myopia resulting from increased screen time and loss of outdoor activity^{[28][29]}. As writer Sarah Vine reminded us, ‘No-one gets a second chance at childhood’^[30].

How to reverse these harms:

PHE has acknowledged the huge mental health and educational impacts of lockdowns and school closures and also that schools play only a small part in viral transmission^[31]. It is thus imperative that schools are reopened, as a matter of urgency. Professor Russell Viner, President, Royal College of Paediatrics and member of SAGE said, “When we close schools we close their lives - not to benefit them but to benefit the rest of society.”

Is this really what we want for the nation’s children? As leading Developmental Neuroscientist Professor Uta Frith writing for ‘Researchers in Education and Adolescent

Child Health and Wellbeing' (<https://reachwell.org/>) put it in July 2020, 'Children and young people need to know that the state cares about them'^[32].

[1] <https://www.unicef.org.uk/what-we-do/un-convention-child-rights/>

[2] <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/datasets/weeklyprovisionalfiguresondeathsregisteredinenglandandwales>

[3] <https://publichealthscotland.scot/our-areas-of-work/covid-19/covid-19-data-and-intelligence/enhance-d-surveillance-of-covid-19-in-education-settings/overview-of-enhanced-surveillance-of-covid-19-in-education-settings/>

[4] [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) related deaths by occupation, England and Wales - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](#)

[5] [SPI-B/DfE: COVID-19: Benefits of remaining in education - evidence and considerations, 4 November 2020 \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

[6] <https://downloads.unicef.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Unicef-UK-Children-In-Lockdown-Coronavirus-Impacts-Snapshot.pdf>

[7] [Many British Teenagers Feeling Anxious, Alone and Fearful in the Pandemic: new mental health research | Mental Health Foundation](#)

[8] <https://www.princes-trust.org.uk/about-the-trust/news-views/tesco-youth-index-2021>

[9] [One in six children has a probable mental disorder, according to new report | University of Cambridge](#)

[10] <https://reachwell.org/2020/07/29/prof-ellen-townsend-the-impact-of-lockdown-on-self-harm-in-young-people/>

[11] [Ofsted's second 'visits' analysis: what you need to know](#)

[12] [Paediatricians warn parents to be alert to signs of eating disorders over holidays | RCPCH](#)

[13] [Coronavirus doctor's diary: We're getting self-harming 10-year-olds in A&E - BBC News](#)

[14] [Dr Maria Loades: Lockdown loneliness in children and young people may continue to impact on mental health for years to come - Reachwell](#)

[15] <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/about-us/news-opinion/2020/>

[16] [Prof Helen Dodd: The importance of play for children's social and emotional wellbeing - Reachwell](#)

[17] [Early Years England - UsforThem](#)

[18] [Lockdown sees 57% rise in calls to stammering helpline - Action For Stammering Children](#)

[19] [Prof Sarah-Jayne Blakemore: The impact of the pandemic, lockdown and school closures on adolescent social development - Reachwell](#)

[20] [The effects of social deprivation on adolescent development and mental health - The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health](#)

[21] <https://www.msn.com/en-gb/news/uknews/children-have-gone-backwards-due-to-school-closures-during-lockdown-ofsted/ar-BB1b8bpv?ocid=msedgdhp>

[22] [The crisis in lost learning calls for a massive national policy response - Institute For Fiscal Studies - IFS](#)

[23] <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2020/05/200531200333.htm>

[24] <https://www.propublica.org/article/the-students-left-behind-by-remote-learning>

[25] [Poverty-in-the-pandemic.pdf \(cpag.org.uk\)](#)

[26] <https://blogs.bmj.com/bmj/2020/08/06/lockdown-measures-reduced-the-risk-of-covid-19-but-had-unintended-consequences-for-children/>

[27] <https://www.sportengland.org/news/reopening-schools-vital-boost-childrens-activity-levels>

[28] [Lockdown screen time having negative effect on nation's eye health \(aop.org.uk\)](#)

[29] https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamaophthalmology/fullarticle/2774808?utm_campaign=articlePDF&utm_medium=articlePDFlink&utm_source=articlePDF&utm_content=jamaophthalmol.2020.6239

[30] [SARAH VINE: No one gets a second childhood. Why must THEY pay the price for the virus? | Daily Mail Online](#)

[31] [Coronavirus: Primary schools could reopen safely, say health experts | Tes](#)

[\[32\] Prof Uta Frith: What can science say about the consequences for society of children missing out on schooling for 6 months? - Reachwell](#)