

Impact of Covid

Common Challenges

Impact on Play and Socialisation

Play is a fundamental right of children as established in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) Article 31. Play is crucial for healthy development and emotional wellbeing, with outdoor play serving a particular role for [physical and social and emotional health](#). Play can also mitigate adversity in that it reduces stress and anxiety and is therapeutic. Play is very often social and dependent on being able to meet other children.

During the pandemic

During lockdown, play opportunities were curtailed in multiple ways, while play at home activities were promoted. The closure of public play parks meant that local opportunities for outdoor play were limited, disproportionately affecting families living on lower incomes who were likely to have [less access to private outdoor spaces](#). Other research showed that where families made use of green spaces formerly not used as extensively, this led to community tensions. Play was missing from examples of acceptable activities outside the home, despite evidence that it would have been safe to do so (Mockett 2023), because children's needs were not appropriately considered. Some families also avoided outdoor play through fear of repercussions, as it was not clear if it could be considered exercise. This meant that many children did not leave the house during the pandemic. Overall, outdoor play was significantly reduced in the later stages of the pandemic, indicating a change in play habit which will be more difficult to overcome.

Social distancing rules meant that children were unable to meet with children from different households. When restrictions were eased in May 2020, one person was allowed to meet another for the purpose of open-air recreation. However, young children who depended on an adult, continued to be unable to see a friend.

The Rule of Six was introduced in September 2020 (and again in March 2021), which allowed six people from different households to meet indoors or outdoors. Children, regardless of age, counted towards these groups. This meant that two-parent families with two children could not meet, translating to a continued curtailing of social interaction and play for children. Scotland and Wales exempted children under 12 and under 11 respectively from counting towards the six people from different households.



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In the circuit breaker lockdown of November 2020, and again the third national lockdown in January 2021, children under five were exempt from restrictions to meet only one other person from another household for exercise. This still meant that families who had both a child under and a child over the age of five (or 12 in Scotland and 11 in Wales) were prevented from contact with peers.

The ongoing two-meter distancing was also effectively a curtailing of play. It is of course impossible to maintain two-meter distance when young children play, so many parents, to comply with rules, felt they could not let their young children play with friends even when this was allowed in principle.

Playgroups as well as all kind of parent support groups were no longer available. This had potentially the biggest impact on play as well as parent support, as these provide informal opportunities for peer support, learning about early parenting, and allowing babies and children to engage in the world beyond their home.

School and nursery closure also translated to less play opportunities for children, and a restriction to the range of play they could engage in, or number of peers they socialised with. Babies and young children were less likely to play outdoors or be involved in physical activity.

Ongoing impact

It is important for young children to be able to play with other children. This social interaction with peers and people outside of the family unit is critical for normal child development. Missing out on months of socialisation with friends has a particularly long-lasting impact on young children because of [the critical and sensitive period in child development for social learning](#).

This reduction of play opportunities during the pandemic is likely to have ongoing impact on the development and activities of children, with more sedentary behaviours and less variety in play opportunities. Parents have reported that the availability of community-based activities for their children remains lower in 2023 than pre-pandemic, making it harder to follow children's interests. This experience has been reported more strongly by parents living on low incomes in Scotland ([CEYRIS](#)). A focus on catching up on lost learning further restricts opportunities for outdoor and social play as children affected by the pandemic enter the school system, where there are pressures to prioritise meeting pre-pandemic numeracy and literacy targets.

