

CHILDREN IN LOCKDOWN: WHAT CORONAVIRUS MEANS FOR UK CHILDREN

Children's lives have been turned upside down by coronavirus. For some children, with the right support and resources, the situation will be manageable, but for others the effects of the pandemic will cast a long shadow over their lives. The response to coronavirus already is exposing the fragile situation that many children and young people live in. Hundreds of thousands of children who rely on school, health and social systems and the support of the voluntary sector are being left unprotected as these systems are weakened. Thousands more, unknown to the system, will likely find themselves in need of support over the coming weeks, but as yet remain invisible to authorities.

Every year, Unicef UK reaches over 2 million children in the UK through its work with schools, hospitals

and local authorities. We are mandated by the UN to uphold the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, of which the UK Government is a signatory, and in this capacity have undertaken a rapid assessment of the impacts of coronavirus on children and children's rights. This briefing paper lays out the complex issues facing children and their rights, and the multi-layered way in which the coronavirus presents a growing crisis for the worst affected families. Coronavirus also presents a huge challenge for authorities straining to serve existing needs whilst also facing unprecedented demand for support. In response to these challenges, Unicef UK draws on its global emergency experience to call for greater coordination at the top of the UK Government to ensure the voices of children are heard, that issues are identified and addressed efficiently, and that children's rights remain a priority for all.

Snapshot of the effects on children's rights

- 1. 700 million days of education will be lost** between now and summer, with alarming disparities in access to resources and support at home likely to further entrench and widen gaps in educational attainment between groups of children.
- 2. More children in the UK will face food insecurity** as job losses and debt take their toll on family finances and access to sources of emergency food is under pressure from loss of donations and volunteers.
- 3. New-born and older children's access to healthcare will reduce**, as services are stretched, limited or avoided, potentially storing up future long-term health problems for children.
- 4. Anxiety and stress from staying at home**, coupled with removal of coping mechanisms and reduction in support services is a worrying amalgam for children living with mental health difficulties.
- 5. Thousands of children are at increased risk of abuse in their homes** and online as pressure and tensions increase, online supervision decreases, and predators seek to take advantage of the situation.
- 6. Across the board, the voices of children and young people have been absent from decisions made about their lives.** They have not been consulted about the impact such decisions will have on them and their future and have yet to be addressed directly by the UK Government.



MATERNITY SERVICES AND INFANT NUTRITION

Around 750,000 babies are born in the UK each year.

There may be as many as 250,000 born during the lockdown.

For every child, early moments matter. The provision of maternity care will be significantly affected during the lockdown, with reduced capacity and new ways of remote working introduced. The pressures on health services are likely to drive increased risk for mothers and babies. With expected staff shortages, support for mothers following birth is set to be significantly reduced,

potentially affecting infant nutrition and maternal mental health.

Infant nutrition is essential for the health and development of babies. Evidence shows that breastfeeding offers many benefits, including protection from infection and reduced risk of obesity later in life.

Key concerns: impact on children

- **Maternity units:** There are concerns about staff shortages in NHS maternity units, with up to 1 in 5 maternity posts now unfilled. More than a fifth of midwife-led units have been closed due to a combination of staff shortages and the requisitioning of units for treatment of coronavirus patients. Antenatal care is also being affected with more appointments being carried out remotely, and some missed altogether. In parts of the country, reports suggest that home births have been stopped due to insufficient midwife numbers and fears about ambulance availability, while in other areas home births are being promoted to keep mothers away from stretched hospital services. The pressures that these services face will undoubtedly increase the risks for some mothers and babies.

- **Impact on mothers:** The loss of choice and the stress of giving birth in these circumstances will also increase the risk of postpartum depression and anxiety among new mothers, while support following birth will also likely be reduced.
- **Infant nutrition:** As staff across maternity care services are reduced due to sickness and redeployment, support for new mothers to breastfeed will be significantly reduced. Many new mothers rely on friends and family to provide support and advice, and professional or voluntary sector services will also be unavailable during this time. As a result, rates of breastfeeding may drop substantially, leading to potential health issues for baby and mum.



LOSS OF EDUCATION

Nearly 10 million children are out of school in the UK currently.

Over 700 million days of education could be lost across the UK.

Over 950,000 secondary level pupils will not sit external exams as expected this summer.

Every child has the right to learn. All schools in the UK are closed until further notice, with around 10 million students out of school for the foreseeable future. It is likely that school closures and loss of early years provision will widen the attainment gap, which sees children from disadvantaged backgrounds achieve poorer results at school. This gap, which can lead to entrenched

inequalities that follow children throughout their lives, is already a major concern in the UK.

The closures will also have multiple secondary impacts, many of which are highlighted elsewhere in this briefing. These include exacerbated food insecurity and child protection vulnerabilities, as well as increasing physical and mental health risks.

Key concerns: impact on children

- **The loss of nearly four months' education:** School closures will impact all children in the UK, but some will be far worse affected than others. While some children will receive parental support and education, others will face considerable challenges to continued learning at home. Children in families that cannot afford resources for home learning activities, where parents have low levels of educational attainment or are not fluent English speakers, or where there is inadequate space for effective learning, will likely fall behind during this period.
 - **Digital divide:** Schools, and organisations like the BBC, have made many learning resources available online. However, around 7% of children do not have access to a fixed broadband connection, and 2% do not have any access to the Internet at home.
 - **Early years childcare:** Early childhood education (ECE) provides an essential service both in preparing children for school and enabling parents to work.
- Quality ECE is critical for establishing the building blocks for learning. The foundation of education is established before primary school begins. Short-term closures and the potential loss of privately run nurseries in the longer term are likely to contribute further to inequality in education outcomes.
- **Refugee and asylum-seeking children:** For this group, who may have already had their education disrupted by displacement, school closure could cause further lasting disadvantage.
 - **Impact of alternative examinations process:** The alternative arrangements for examinations, which require teachers to provide marks based on past performance and a ranking of pupils based on marks and certainty of achievement, could negatively affect students working to improve marks or those groups historically affected by inaccuracy of predicted marks.



CHILD NUTRITION

Over 4 million children in the UK were already living in poverty.

Around 1.7 million pupils are eligible for free school meals across the UK.

Around 215,000 children received at least one foodbank parcel in 2018–19.

Families face uncertain financial futures as a result of the economic crisis triggered by coronavirus. For those already experiencing financial hardship, further reductions in income, and the increased cost of having children out of school, will exacerbate food insecurity.

Prior to the crisis, 10% of households faced food insecurity, affecting the quality, desirability and variety of their diets, or quantities and overall food intake were reduced or disrupted. Households with children typically have lower food security and 29% of households with

children under 6 have worried about running out of food before they had enough money to buy more.

For these families, the additional pressures of children being at home instead of school, difficulties in buying an appropriate range of foods within their budget, and the likelihood of job insecurity is likely to see many struggling to maintain adequate nutrition. The pandemic poses a short-term crisis for children in which many families will struggle to feed their children, with lasting health impacts for some.

Key concerns: impact on children

- Loss of Free School Meals:** School closures will have far-reaching impacts on the health and well-being of children, especially the 1.7 million children who are currently entitled to Free School Meal provision in the UK. Despite government schemes to provide £15 supermarket vouchers to eligible families each week or guidance for schools and local authorities to continue providing free meals to eligible pupils, there are concerns that families, especially those also facing job and income loss, will struggle to provide nutritious meals to their children for £3 per day, and that some lack the resources and an appropriately equipped kitchen to ensure that children eat healthily.
- Potential food availability shortages:** Households who are self-isolating may be unable to access food at all. Children who are already struggling with food

insecurity, and those with no recourse to public funds will be especially at risk.

- Charity sector capacity:** In 2018/19 an estimated 215,000 children received at least one foodbank parcel across the UK. Foodbank providers have seen rapid increases in the demand for emergency food parcels and are also reporting a drop in food donations. It is likely that low income and debt (two of the most common reasons for using a foodbank) will be an increasing problem for many in the coming months. At the same time, many food banks have had to close as a result of volunteer decline while others are operating at reduced capacity – coupled with a drop in food availability due to volume rationing from primary suppliers such as supermarkets, this will result in further barriers to access for the most vulnerable.



CHILDREN'S HEALTH AND ACCESS TO HEALTH SERVICES

Nearly 1 in 4 children report a long term health condition or disability.

Around 2.3 million children are due at least one routine vaccination each year.

Every child has the right to the best possible health. Although the evidence suggests that in general children experience coronavirus more mildly, there is still a lot unknown about the risks for vulnerable groups of children, including those who are immunocompromised or living with long-term respiratory conditions. This pandemic poses an unprecedented health crisis for children through a combination of reduced services, loss of healthy behaviours and exposure to additional risks. It also has the potential to store up serious health

problems for this generation in the coming years if adequate steps are not taken to catch up on the lost health protections that they would normally enjoy.

Nearly 1 in 4 children report a long-term health condition or disability and many due to receive ongoing or emergency care from NHS may find these services are postponed or disrupted during the pandemic due to staff shortages and redeployment. Delayed access to care can pose a serious threat to children's right to health.

Key concerns: impact on children

- Childhood vaccinations:** Routine vaccinations are essential health services, and disruptions to childhood immunisations can lead to further outbreaks of infectious disease, to which children are the most susceptible. Around 2.3 million children below school age should be vaccinated over the course of a year, many of which may be delayed or missed in this period. Any short-term loss of immunisations will put babies at increased risk of potentially serious illness and life-threatening complications.
- Reduction in healthy behaviours:** The pandemic will impact children's engagement in health-promoting behaviours. When children are out of school they are typically less physically active, have

much longer screen time, irregular sleep patterns, and less favourable diets. Prior to the lockdown 50% of children regularly took part in some extracurricular sporting activity and many more were active through school. We are likely to see an increase in obesity and an impact on children's mental health as a result of reduced exercise and poor nutrition, and both may have long-term effects lasting into adulthood.

- Sexual health:** Access to sexual health clinics and support will be significantly impacted by the current crisis. There are concerns around STIs, unplanned pregnancies as well as access to counselling for sexual assault trauma and young and vulnerable person safeguarding.



CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH

Over 350,000 young people accessed NHS Mental Health Services in England alone in 2018–19.

Around 110,000 14-year olds self-harm over the course of a year in the UK.

There are estimated to be nearly 800,000 young carers under the age of 18 in the UK.

In England alone, over 350,000 children access specialist mental health services in a year. Many more struggle with their mental health but do not access services. The impact of child mental illness can be devastating, with over 250 deaths by suicide among young people each year, and high rates of self-harm among teenagers.

The mental health impacts of this pandemic will be felt particularly strongly among children and young people. At a time when they most need support – professional and informal – it is least available. Mental ill-health in childhood and adolescence can last into adulthood with profound impact on all aspects of their lives.

Key concerns: impact on children

- Children living with mental health diagnoses:** Many young people who use mental health services are already unable to access essential mental health support. Sessions have been replaced with online or telephone support, or postponed. Some young people may find this less effective or may worry about maintaining privacy if sessions are held remotely with family members close by.
- Anxiety around coronavirus:** Children who already struggle with anxiety, and many who did not previously, are now feeling very anxious about coronavirus. They may worry about their health or the health of loved ones, particularly if parents are at high-risk or work in essential services.
- Loss of mental health support and protective behaviours:** Many of the ways in which young people manage their mental health – social support through friends and family, physical activity, being outdoors or engaging in hobbies – are now impossible. Disrupted routines can cause distress for those suffering from anxiety, eating disorders and other mental health difficulties. School is an important source of support for many young people, as well as being a respite for those who have a difficult time at home. For these young people, the period of school closure may be very hard to cope with.



PROTECTION FROM VIOLENCE, ABUSE AND NEGLECT

**160,000 children in England
are living in households with
domestic abuse.**

**20% of the adult
population are believed to
have experienced abuse
in childhood before
the age of 16.**

**79% of children (12-15) had
potentially harmful online
experiences over a year.**

Every child protected. We may never know the full extent of childhood abuse and neglect as so much of it remains hidden. An estimated 160,000 children are living in households where domestic abuse is taking place. While some of those who experience, or are at risk of, abuse

are known to social services, many more are not. Large numbers of children are therefore currently confined to a home which is not a safe place for them or for other family members. It is essential that children at risk are identified and supported as far as possible.

Key concerns: impact on children

- **Risk in the home:** While families are quarantined many children will face severe and immediate risks in their own homes. The stress of illness, confinement in the home and financial strain is likely to exacerbate volatile family situations leading to an increase in incidences of domestic violence, abuse or neglect. Stress for parents during this time might also contribute to an increased risk of substance misuse or worsening mental health symptoms.
- **Children falling through the cracks:** While the risks are increasing, opportunities to report abuse or seek help will be reduced during the pandemic. School and youth groups are important for identifying children who are at risk and providing support, while also being a safe haven for children who are abused at home, but these will not be accessed by most children in this period.
- **Strain on services:** For those children who are known to social services, support will continue, but is likely to be subject to pressures due to staff sickness and challenges of working remotely. Focus will be on those children who are thought to be most at risk of violent or sexual abuse, while those who are suffering other forms of abuse may receive less support.
- **Protecting children online:** 79% of 12-15 year olds have had potentially harmful online experiences in the previous 12 months. While schools are closed many children will spend longer periods of unsupervised time online. While this provides many opportunities for socialising and education, it also increases the risk of online harm.

CONCLUSION: BUILDING A BETTER TOMORROW FOR CHILDREN

The risks to children's health, wellbeing and future opportunities are serious and need immediate intervention. Hundreds of thousands of children will face hunger, violence, ill-health and lost opportunities that could follow them into adulthood.

While children are remarkably good at adapting, those with the fewest resources always find it hardest to adapt. This crisis is exposing the fragility of life for so many families. It is also highlighting the dependence of those families on schools, health services, social services, and the voluntary sector. When those infrastructures are weakened, children are left unprotected.

We need an evidence-based approach to helping young people pick up the pieces. Key to this is gathering the evidence and intelligence needed to understand who is at risk and to support them, both during this crisis and in

its aftermath. Data will be critical to ensuring children are not lost in the cracks and this work should start now to ensure that a generation is not left unprotected.

Children themselves show remarkable resilience, creativity and adaptability, yet they are rarely consulted on decisions that affect their lives directly, especially in a crisis. Young people from all backgrounds should have the opportunity to influence the decisions made during this time to ensure they reflect their best interests.

In the coming months, Unicef UK will look to work with other voluntary sector organisations, frontline services, policymakers and young people to respond to the coronavirus pandemic. We will continue to gather evidence and monitor the impact for children, and to ensure that all children in the UK enjoy their rights in full as we move beyond this crisis and build a better tomorrow.

