

THE POWER OF PLAY



**GREAT
ORMOND
STREET
HOSPITAL
CHARITY**

FOREWORD

by Laura Walsh, Head of Play, Great Ormond Street Hospital (GOSH)

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a huge impact on our children. Their world has changed so much, and their ability to adapt to these challenges has never been more important.

Children have a fundamental right to play, as defined by Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The act of playing allows children to express themselves in their own ways, to explore the world around them with creativity and a sense of fun, and to pursue what they would like to do in the moment, for their own reasons.

But play itself is a serious business. Through play, children can imagine different realities; move away from the immediate worries they might have, engage with big life questions, and dream of the future and all that they could be.

Play offers a safe space to make mistakes, to learn through trial and error, to take measured risks and to build the skills that will empower children to manage risky situations in the future. By adapting as they go, children have a chance of building resilience to change. By choosing how they play, children have the opportunity to take control.

By its very nature play is hard to define and indeed the lightness of play can be lost if we weigh it down with too many hopes and expectations. Throughout this report you will see various studies cited that have helped shed light on this most ephemeral of activities.

Looking at play through the lens of a pandemic, it has never been so important for our children to have the space and time to play. And the role that parents and carers have in this, is absolutely critical.

In a year that has seen us all live through a range of restrictions, we have also become less connected with each other in many ways and there has been much debate about the wider impact on children's wellbeing. It is so important that we ask, what has the impact of all this been on our children and how they play, and what does that mean for our children's future wellbeing?

Read on to hear the experiences of parents from all four corners of the UK – telling us in depth, how they and their children have played and coped during the pandemic, as well as their worries and hopes for their children right now, and for their futures too. It is important to recognise that these experiences are varied, and while some families have the time and space in which to spend time together playing, for other families it will have been much more difficult due to their circumstances. The pandemic has highlighted and deepened inequalities in many ways.

Children play to process the here and now but the future impact on the younger generation in the world of COVID-19 is much more unknown. It is so vital that the support for play and further research in this area continues, and that we continue to listen to the experiences of children and their families to help us shape a future that works for all our children.

There is so much more at stake than simply child's play.

“Play is central to the psychological support that we offer to all our patients in recognition of its crucial role in managing the anxieties that come with a serious illness and associated treatment – a time that can be deeply unsettling. The principles of this can apply to any child, and any parent, during a worrying time such as the one we are living through now.”

Mat Shaw, Chief Executive of Great Ormond Street Hospital and consultant paediatric surgeon

“The research commissioned by GOSH Charity captures the experiences of parents living through the pandemic in the UK, helping us to build a picture of the way that children and their ability to play has adapted, and demonstrating the intrinsic value that play has for children and families. It also shows the challenges that some parents have faced when it comes to balancing play with other responsibilities like work or caring commitments, during the most difficult of years.”

Louise Parkes, Chief Executive of GOSH Charity



Mat Shaw



Louise Parkes



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There has been a lot of debate over the past year about the impact the pandemic is having on children's wellbeing; never have their lives changed so much and so quickly. At Great Ormond Street Hospital Children's Charity (GOSH Charity) we know how valuable play can be to help children deal with difficult times, but how much have they been able to use play to help them cope during the first year of this global pandemic?

This new research captures the views of parents with children aged 5-11 years to give a unique insight into how the lives of children have changed, through the prism of play. It explores how the repeated lockdowns and restrictions have affected how children play, with whom they play and what this might mean for their wellbeing, both now and in the future.

Our research reflects that children are worried about the pandemic with COVID-19 topping the list of issues that parents say their child worries about most (40%). But parents do recognise the power of play to help their child deal with these anxieties, particularly in relation to COVID-19. Parents that say the pandemic has significantly impacted on their child's confidence are more likely to have used play to help their child cope (41% vs. 22% respectively).

It is in this context of families recognising play as a way to help them during difficult times, that 61% of parents say that the pandemic has gifted them more time to play and bond with their child. More than half (53%) are enjoying playing with their child more than they did pre-pandemic. This is particularly true for fathers, with 55% saying they spend more time playing with their child than before, with home working cutting out long commutes for some.

The increased bonding for many parents and their children is important to consider, as it comes at a time when other social connections and children's freedom to choose who they play with have been lost. Two thirds (64%) of parents say their child misses playing with their friends as a consequence of different lockdowns and restrictions. Our findings suggest that younger children are more likely to be impacted by lack of play with grandparents, with 41% of parents saying their five-year-olds typically likes to interact with them whilst playing, dropping to 26% of 11-year-olds. Older children more keenly feel the loss of friends.

This freedom to play with whom, when and how they want gives children the opportunity to build broader relationships beyond the familial home and gain skills vital for their emotional and social development. Many parents express their concern at the loss of this freedom with 66% saying that they are worried that restrictions on how children play will impact on their child's future wellbeing. One in five (20%), say they are very concerned.

It is also important to consider in our research findings, the different experiences and freedom children have had to play depending on their family circumstances. While some parents and children have had the privilege of extra time to bond through play, that is not the case for all families.

COVID-19 has already highlighted many areas of inequality, including the reality that more white-collar jobs can be done from home, whereas more manual roles can't, as well as the unequal access that children have to safe outdoor spaces to play. Our findings show two-fifths (43%) of parents are struggling to balance work and other responsibilities alongside playing with their child. A further 72% of parents say outdoor play is the most popular way for them to play with their child, but many restrictions over the past year will have impacted how freely they can do this.

At a time when play has never been more important to the lives of children, at GOSH Charity we want to use this report to continue to highlight play's vital role to help children through this pandemic and beyond. We see first-hand, at the hospital, how play helps children to make sense of their feelings and cope with challenging times, which is why GOSH Charity funds the expert Play team at GOSH.

This report is clear that one of the best ways to support children's wellbeing is giving them the freedom to play. This is not only relevant in a hospital setting such as GOSH, but for all children as they try to cope with whatever challenges they face, including a global pandemic. Children are the experts in play and adults should have the confidence to let children determine how they want to use play to help them make sense of a world that has changed beyond recognition over the last twelve months.

METHODOLOGY NOTE:

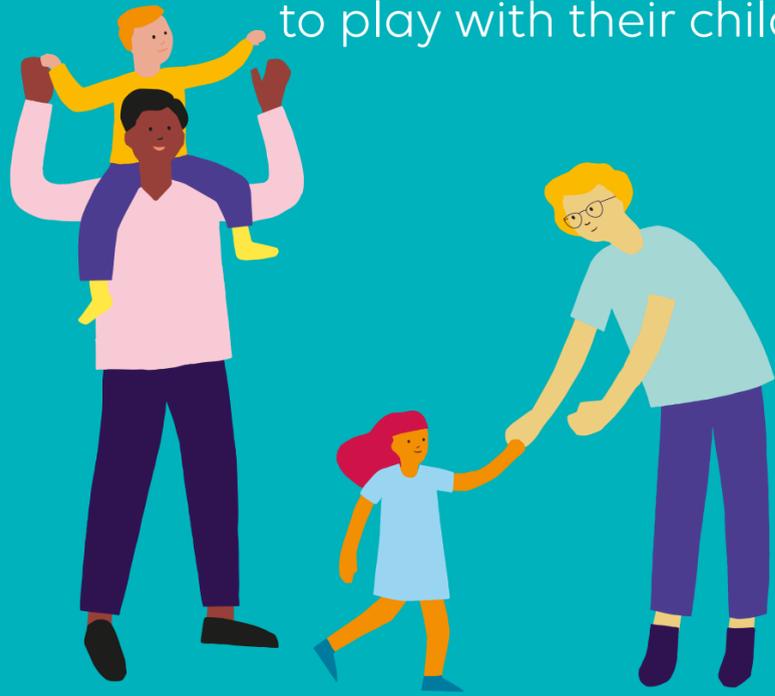
It draws on an online survey research among with 2,543 parents aged 5-11 years during December 2020 and a literature review written by Laura Walsh, the Head of Play at Great Ormond Street Hospital.

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3 in 5 parents

have had **more time than usual** to play with their child



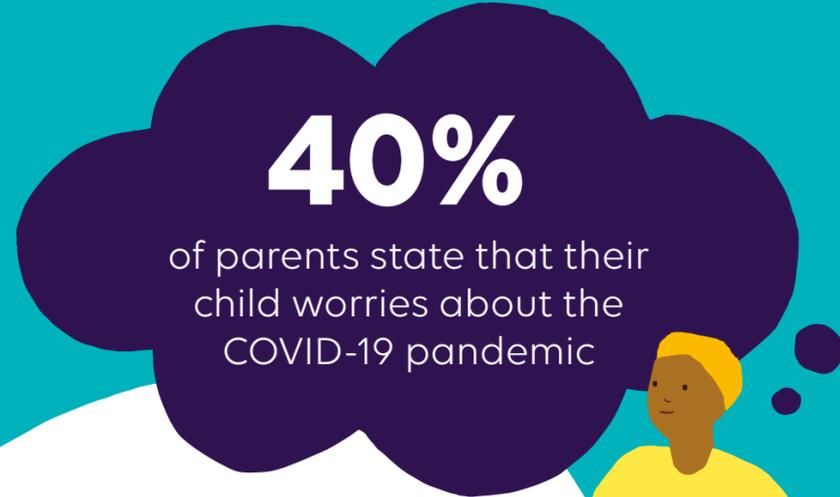
...and are **bonding with their child** more than usual

More than half say they are **enjoying playing with their child more** than they did prior to the pandemic



Two thirds of parents say **their child misses playing with their friends** because of lockdown restrictions limiting play with other children

66% of parents are concerned that the pandemic's impact on how children play will have **long-term impacts on their child's wellbeing**



Three quarters of parents agree that play has helped their child to cope with the pandemic

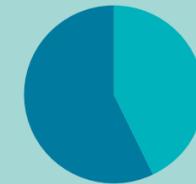


1 in 5 parents



are **very concerned** that restrictions on how children play will **impact on their child's future wellbeing**

43% find it **hard to balance playing with their child around work** and other responsibilities



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PRACTICALITIES OF PLAY DURING THE PANDEMIC

How we define play is important; it allows us to establish a shared and common understanding, as well as contextualising research findings. We wanted to find out how parents would define play and their experiences of it during the pandemic. Multiple sources¹ have highlighted the impact of the pandemic on children and young people and GOSH Charity wanted to look at that through the prism of play.

Through parents' voices, this research explores how children have been playing, the role of parents in supporting them in this and how play has helped children navigate the significant impact of the pandemic on their lives.

When asked unprompted, parents tend to define play as an indoor activity. Two thirds (66%) mention topics to do with playing indoors e.g., with toys, board games, building activities. A third (33%) say play can be defined as engaging in fun activities / entertainment / being happy.

"Anything which gives enjoyment and fun."

Parent with child aged 9, South West.

"Leisure time spent with a child for their own pleasure and enjoyment."

Parent with a child aged 10, East Midlands.

These quotes from parents who define 'play' in terms of fun, pleasure, and enjoyment, reflect the sentiment of psychologist and play theorist, Brian Sutton-Smith:

"The opposite of Play ... is not work, it is depression."²

Other parents focus on the bonding and connections that play can generate. A quarter define play as interaction with others e.g., family, friends, pets (26%). A quarter also define play as 'creativity / imagination / expressing themselves' (23%).

"Creative, fun, child-led activity."

Parent with child aged 9, South-West.

This definition captures something seemingly inherent in play, in that it is the child themselves who is in control, directing the activity towards what interests them, what they find enjoyable. This definition of play is supported by the literature:

"Children's play is freely chosen, personally directed behaviour, motivated from within."³

"What children and young people do when they follow their own ideas and interests, in their own way, and for their own reasons."⁴

Other findings include:

1 in 5 (20%) define play as engaging in sport / playing outside.

14% say play involves using electronics. Parents of older children are much more likely than parents with younger children to define play as the use of electronic devices. 20% of parents with a child aged between nine and 11 define play as using electronics, whereas only 9% of parents with a child between the ages of five and eight define play in this way.

13% say educational / learning games.

Considering that unprompted, parents mention mostly indoor forms of play, it is interesting that when presented with a list of forms of play they engage in with their children, outdoor play ('going outside') comes top. It also comes second to technology in the list of types of play parents think their children enjoy. This shows that tools of play i.e., toys, come first to mind when thinking about play, rather than the 'free' aspect of it.

1 in 5 parents rank both virtual play / using technology (21%) and outdoor play (18%) as their child's most enjoyable form of play. 'Going outside' (70%) is the most popular way for parents to play with their child, followed by three in five (72%) parents who say they play with technology with their child, alongside arts and crafts (62%).

"Play takes a variety of forms, from playing with toys for children to running around outside in gardens and open spaces to playing board games now my child is a bit older and also word / imagination games."

Parent of 8-year-old, West Midlands.

¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/explainers-55936928>

² Brian Sutton-Smith (1999, p254) - Evolving a Consilience of play definitions: playfully. In S. Reifel (Ed). Play and Cultural Studies, Play Contexts Revisited, 2: 239-256. Stamford: Ablex.

³ SPIRITO (1992) - National Occupational standards in Playwork. London: Sport and Recreation Industry Lead Body.

⁴ Charter for Children's Play (1998).



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Research⁵ has shown that outdoor play, the freedom to play in the natural environment, contributes to a child's development including their physical and emotional wellbeing and learning. Outdoor activities were found to have clear learning outcomes that include, but are not limited, to communicating and negotiating with others (especially in the playground); storytelling; and deepening their curiosity in living things.

The fact that 'going outside' is the top way in which parents play with their child prompts recognition that availability of safe, accessible outdoor places to play is not consistent across the population. The pandemic has highlighted inequalities, and one of these is that not all families have private gardens, and local parks have at points been restricted in use.

He wishes to go to the park and access the playground. ... They need to spend their energy on something every day, and at home there are not much [sic] options."

Parent of a child aged 11, North West

Some parents comment in the survey that their child has also been more reluctant to go outside.

"He feels more insecure when going out to play in the park."

Parent of a child aged 6, London.

"He is reluctant to go shopping, even to a toy shop, as he is worried about catching anything. He also does not like seeing other people out and about without a mask on."

Parent of a child aged 11, Yorkshire and the Humber

There will be differences in the quality of outdoor play available to families, dependent on the spaces available and their own living circumstances.

There are also differences in access to technology, the top form of play for children. Again, the pandemic has shown that not all children have access to computers, tablets or smartphones, or unlimited internet access. Considering the unequal access to both technology and outdoor space to play is vital in assessing the impact of the pandemic on children's wellbeing.

Three quarters of parents (76%) report their child typically likes to interact with them while playing – the top mention. This is a positive finding, as the literature shows that enabling families to value and engage in play can help enrich carer/child relationships⁶, improving both the adult's and child's wellbeing.

"Play helps the child to make meaning of everyday life, to express and work out feelings and within play, the growing child can reach out and be reached out to."⁷

Our findings suggest that younger children may be more impacted by lack of play with grandparents (41% of five-year-olds typically like to interact with their grandparents whilst playing, which drops to 26% of 11-year-olds), whereas older children may more keenly feel the lack of play with friends. Parents of five-year-olds are most likely to say their child typically likes to interact with them in play (81%), dropping to 67% of parents of 11-year-olds. The same pattern is held for grandparents. These findings are mirrored by increases in preference for playing with other children and pets as the child's age increases. The links between grandparents and other children, as those most likely to reside outside of households, should be considered in the context of the pandemic and is a topic we will touch on more later.

"He misses his grandparents."

Parent of child aged 7, London

"They all miss their grandparents."

Parent of a child aged 10, Scotland



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⁵ Thomas, G. and Thompson, G., 2004. A Child's Place: Why Environment Matters to Children: A Green Alliance. Green Alliance.

⁶ Daly, E., 2014 The Power of Play: Why we should and how we can promote and facilitate play. An Leanbh Og (OMEP Ireland) volume 8, pp.85-103.

⁷ Daly, 2015 p. 202.

"In both lockdowns my son really missed his grandparents that are really active in his life normally."

Parent of a child aged 10, West Midlands

"Both child and grandparents have missed each other a lot."

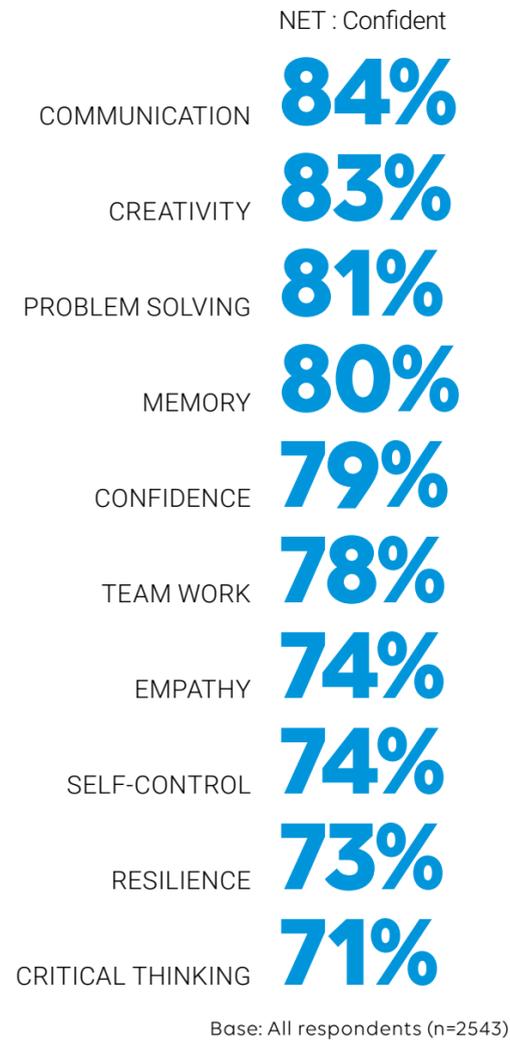
Parent of a child aged 5, South West

We asked parents if they felt confident that play was helping their child develop a wide range of skills and more than 7 in 10 think this is the case for all of the skills listed. Parents are most likely to say they are confident that by engaging their child in play they help them develop both their communication (84%) and creativity (83%). The literature identifies 30+ functions/benefits of play, including motor development, social and communication skills, neural development, cognitive abilities, and creativity⁸. Parents know play is a tool they can use to help their children develop a range of skills.

Almost all parents think play is important for children when they are worried about something (90%). The top reasons they give for the 'power of play' is that it helps children relax (61%) and it helps take their mind off their worries (60%). Children can 'play out' troubling or unresolved emotions when given the opportunity,⁹ and in play children are developing complex, adaptive systems that can help them recover from difficult circumstances¹⁰.



Q13. How confident or not are you that engaging your child in play is helping them to develop the following?



⁸ Burghardt, G.M., 2005. The genesis of animal play: Testing the limits. MIT Press. Coalter, F. and Taylor, J., 2001. Realising the potential: The case for cultural services—play. Report prepared for the Local Government Association, Centre for Leisure Research, University of Edinburgh.
⁹ Brown, F (2003) 'Compound flexibility; the role of playwork in child development', in Brown, F(ed) Playwork Theory and Practice. Buckingham: Open University Press.
¹⁰ Masten, A.S., 2007. Resilience in developing systems: Progress and promise as the fourth wave rises. Development and psychopathology, 19(3), pp.921-930.



KEY INSIGHTS

- / Play has the power to support children's development, and children and parents clearly know and utilise play to do this. Parents also know play is important in helping children with their worries, and we will touch later on how they have observed their children using play to help them cope with the pandemic. Drawing on GOSH's expertise in play for developing emotional resilience in adverse situations will help to support parents and children navigate the pandemic.
- / The pandemic has highlighted inequalities in many areas of life. The fact that outdoor play and technology are considered the top forms of play reflect this as not all children have access to safe places to play outdoors, or the equipment or connection to access virtual play.
- / Findings suggest that younger children may be more impacted by lack of play with grandparents, whereas older children may more keenly feel the lack of play with friends. This highlights the different needs of children of different ages.

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IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON CHILDREN AND FREEDOM TO PLAY

Children are worried, and missing playing with friends and family

The impact that COVID-19 is having on children is seen in our research as parents are most likely to report that their child worries about COVID-19, of all topics listed. In comments, they describe the negative impact the pandemic is having on their children.

“She worries more and has become more self-conscious.”
Parent of a child aged 10, South East

“She worries about germs more now than before the pandemic.”
Parent of a child aged 7, East Midlands

“He is aware of it and is wary about being close to people and he worries about my wife and I working and being around people.”
Parent of a child aged 9, West Midlands

2 in 5 parents state that their child worries about the COVID-19 pandemic (40%) and falling out with friends (39%). Falling out with friends, although a legitimate worry, can be considered a common experience amongst children between the ages of five and 11. A pandemic, on the other hand, is not. This shows that COVID-19 is a pervading concern that children even as young as five (33%) are worried about, highlighting just how susceptible children can be to what they see and hear in their environment. For example, news stories related to COVID-19 are frequently shown on TV or talked about on the radio, as well as children picking up on the concern displayed by parents or other family members. Children are very capable at absorbing such information and can in some cases internalise these worries.

“My child became much more anxious and suffered panic attacks.”
Parent of a child aged 10, South East

“Seeks more peer approval, plays class clown for attention. Worries a bit more about things.”
Parent of a child aged 7, Scotland

“Worried about the virus and being unwell.”
Parent of a child aged 5, South East

“She has a lot of anxiety about people dying.”
Parent of a child aged 5, East Midlands

Therefore, it is not surprising that our survey found the topic that has been most explored during play according to parents is the COVID-19 pandemic (30%). As identified in the previous section, parents recognise the ‘power of play’ in helping their child deal with these anxieties, with three-quarters (74%) of saying that it has helped their child to cope with the pandemic and only 3% disagreeing. Children appear to be drawing on play to help them deal with the adverse situation.

Men (78%) are significantly more likely than women (71%) to agree that play has helped their child cope with the COVID-19 pandemic. This is likely to be as a result of the increased time that they say they have been able to spend with their child during the pandemic, which we will highlight in the next section.

When asked why they think play is important for children when they are worried about something, one male parent said:

“It helps us (parents) deliver tools and ideas that may help.”
Dad of a child aged 10, South East

Whilst another said that play is essential for children when they're anxious about something because:

“[It] provides [an] external focus.”
Dad of a child aged 8, Wales

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If we delve further into topics exclusive to COVID-19, parents report that children are most worried about disrupting their connection with friends and family. More than half of parents say their child worries about not being able to meet up with friends (55%) and not being able to meet up with family members (51%) in relation to COVID-19 specifically. 3 in 5 (59%) parents also say their child's confidence has been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. While some parents report that the impact of COVID-19 on their child has been positive, citing more time to play with them having increased their child's confidence, many share negative concerns.

“Being away from school her social skills have been slightly changed and she's hyper aware of other people's hygiene which can be difficult.”

Parent with a child aged 7, East Midlands

“Less confident due to not seeing others as much and being cut off from family and friends.”

Parent of a child aged 7, North East

A significant challenge of the pandemic has been, and continues to be, sustaining and maintaining friendships and family connections whilst being apart. Throughout 2020 and into 2021, there have been different lockdowns and restrictions, meaning children have often not had the freedom to play together or play in the way they usually would.

The main consequence of this appears to be children missing playing with their friends. Two thirds (64%) of parents say their child misses playing with their friends because of different lockdowns and restrictions limiting children from playing together or playing how they normally would. This freedom to play with whom, when and how they want to gives children the opportunity to build broader relationships beyond the familial home and gain skills vital for their emotional and social development.

In this respect, it can be argued children are experiencing a form of play deprivation during COVID-19 at a time when they need the freedom to play more than ever. Many parents express their concern at the loss of this freedom with 66% saying that they are worried that restrictions on how children play will impact on their child's future well-being. One in five (20%) say they are very concerned.



KEY INSIGHTS

- / There is an overriding sense that children are being impacted by COVID-19 and the restrictions it places on their freedom to play for the most part, in a negative way. Parents frequently comment on their child's increased general anxiety, wariness around others and worry surrounding the health of relatives. The disruption to connectivity between the child and their friends and family is also highlighted as a driver of a reduction in confidence and wellbeing.
- / Reconnecting with friends is the top mentioned thing parents say children are most looking forward to when restrictions are lifted, with the freedom to play with whoever they choose highlighted as an important factor in improving their mental health and wellbeing.

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“As we are a larger family, we are affected by the rule of 6 which means we cannot interact with anyone else at all. This has made my children really struggle with anxiety as they are unable to live as they would normally.”

Parent of a child aged 9, South East

“Less time playing with other children has made my child more shy and awkward around other people.”

Parent of a child aged 8, South East

“Reduced opportunities to play with other children throughout the year. Reduction in confidence interacting with friends.”

Parent of child aged 10, South East

It is well documented that this loss of freedom on how children play can have an impact on their wellbeing. One study¹¹ conducted in mental health hospitals across England demonstrates that children may experience play and leisure deprivation during admissions to hospital, and that this may have an impact on their health and wellbeing. Moreover, this study noted that there is a therapeutic benefit for children who pursue their own passions as opposed to an imposed timetable:

“Everyday restrictions can be the most difficult and affecting for young people. These include restrictions on what television programmes they can watch, what they can eat, when they can exercise or go outside, and what leisure activities they can do.”¹²

Play specialists at GOSH reinforce the idea that play is an effective tool to help improve the wellbeing of children. Likewise, parents are recognising how important play is for their own child. Three in five (62%) parents say their child is most looking forward to rekindling these connections with family and friends once COVID-19 related restrictions are completely lifted.

“Be able to play freely with friends without restrictions.”

Parent of a child aged 7, South West

“Being able to meet up with friends from outside their school class bubble.”

Parent of a child aged 8, West Midlands

“Having a birthday party with her friends and to do an activity together outside of school.”

Parent of a child aged 10, Northern Ireland

COVID-19 is having an impact on the lives of children by disrupting their connection with family and friends. Literature shows the importance

of play in friendships specifically. Play supports children to develop the resilience to deal with the day-to-day challenges they face, such as making/consolidating friendships and dealing with conflict¹³. Therefore, play and connecting with others is crucial for building resilience in children.

However, these connections have been extraordinarily strained during the pandemic. Although play in a family setting will help children process their day-to-day worries, helping to avoid anxieties, the lack of play with friends poses a real challenge to the wellbeing of children in the UK, reflected in parents’ concern about the longer-term challenges they might face. This may well have an impact on children’s ability to build resilience, thereby affecting how well they deal with their everyday problems and conflicts as we come to look at in the next section.

Can parents fill this gap?

With a rise in COVID-19-related worries, and the associated challenges of connecting with others, our research shows that many parents are stepping up and filling this growing gap where they can.

3 in 5 parents (61%) say they have had more time than usual to play with their child, and are bonding with their child more than usual. More than half (53%) say they are enjoying playing with their child more than they did prior to the pandemic.

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¹¹ Dorling, K. (2020) A Safe Space? The rights of children in mental health inpatient care. Article 39.

¹² Dorling, K. (2020) A Safe Space? The rights of children in mental health inpatient care. Article 39, p18.

¹³ Mental Health Foundation, 1999. Bright futures: Promoting children and young people’s mental health.



“More time at home, working from home. An extra hour or so per day without having a commute.”

Parent of a child aged 7, East Midlands

“The pandemic means children are going out less, there are no parties for example which used to take up time especially at the weekends, and clubs/sports are greatly reduced, so we spend more time as a family at home together.”

Parent of a child aged 8, West Midlands

Alongside this, a sizeable group of parents (23%) say they feel more confident playing post COVID-19 with only 3% saying they feel less so. This implies that for many families, the time and quality of play between parents and children has improved over the past year.

Additionally, men (55%) are significantly more likely than women (46%) to say they spend more time playing with their child now than before the pandemic.

“Because I’m not at work as much, I hang around with my family more.”

Dad of a child aged 6, London

“We both now spend more time at home due to COVID, hence the need to spend more time together.”

Dad of a child aged 7, Scotland

But this is not the case for everyone.

1 in 5 (19%) parents say they have less time than usual to play with their child due to the COVID-19 pandemic and 2 in 5 (43%) find it hard to balance playing with their child around work/other responsibilities. Having more responsibilities at work or an increased workload was mentioned specifically in comments.

“Due to my workloads being higher and having to get more done in the time [I] have [at] home.”

Parent of a child aged 8, South East

“Work for [the] NHS, less time/energy.”

Parent of a child aged 5, Northern Ireland

KEY INSIGHTS:

- / Many parents have more time to play and bond with their children and have more confidence as a result of the pandemic. However, not all parents find this, and many are struggling to balance spending time playing with their children with work and other responsibilities. It is not a clear-cut picture.
- / This freedom to play with whom, when and how they want gives children the opportunity to build broader relationships beyond the familial home and gain skills vital for their emotional and social development. As we heard in the last section, many parents are voicing concern about the longer term impact this loss of freedom will have on their children. While play and increased bonds with parents have helped many deal with the here and now, it cannot replace this loss of freedom that restrictions and lockdowns have taken away.

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CASE STUDY

Jake's story

As told by his mum Danielle



Jake was four years old when he was blue-lighted to Great Ormond Street Hospital (GOSH) from his local hospital in January 2020. The oncology team found a brain tumour that was putting pressure on his optical nerves, causing him to temporarily lose his sight. Just six weeks later the UK-wide lockdown was announced, meaning his friends and family were no longer able to visit. He spent seven months on Elephant Ward at GOSH, with his mum, Danielle, until he finished his treatment in August 2020.

"When we first came to GOSH, I was very naïve about what children and their families have to go through when they're diagnosed with cancer," says Danielle. "The life of cancer is extremely hard and heart breaking. There were down times, but throughout Jake's journey, we always tried to stay positive and create as much fun as we could. He had just turned four years old. He never fully understood the enormity of it all. He was fighting for his life, and fought like a superhero."

Danielle describes how it was important for Jake to build a relationship with the play team. **"Play is about trust,"** says Danielle, "With Jake losing his sight you have to really empathise with what he was going through. Imagine getting cancer and losing your sight as an adult, let alone as a child? He was frightened and confused. The play team on Elephant ward knew this was a unique situation and spoke to the nurses about the best approach and didn't want to rush him. They would walk by his room and pop their heads in just to introduce themselves, so that he could get used to them. It was more than just distracting him, it was about forming a friendship and building trust."

Danielle talks about the impact of lockdown restrictions on Jake, "It's been hard with the rules changing so much. I'll be watching the news and then have to tell Jakey that **he can't see his friends anymore**. As I'm a single parent he's still able to see his grandparents as they're in our support bubble, **but I know he misses playing with children his own age. The hardest was the second lockdown. He had just started to be well enough to enjoy the 'rule of six' and see his family and people of his own age. As he'd been in hospital since early 2020, he hadn't seen his friends since 2019.**"

One of the highlights of Jake's time at GOSH was recreating the dance parties he would always put on at home: "Our play specialist, Alanna made sure to give him all the tools to make lots of noise and have his own party. She gave him musical instruments to play with, and some of the nurses helped him draw up some fliers for 'Jakey's Dance Party' to stick on his door. We'd pull the blinds down and play music for him and have a bit of a dance! They got him these disco lights attached to elastic bands he could put on his fingers. He'd lost his sight, but we weren't sure how much it had affected his vision. He could still see some of the colours, so he could really enjoy that part of it as well. At home he'll walk up to the speakers and put on some tunes, we'll pull the blinds down and have a rave in the living room!"

"What happened to Jake, all the treatment and procedures, losing his eyesight – was totally out of his control. **It's important now that when he does play and have fun, he's in charge and gets to decide what he wants to do. Play gives the child their control, independence, and choices back. They're allowed to be a child.**

"Every child has their own individual likes and dislikes, and it's really important to continue to offer the child what they like to do. Jake is cheeky, and loves music and dancing – all these things make him feel comfortable, happy and like he can be himself. **Through our experience of working with the play team, I now realise and appreciate the vital role play can have during difficult experiences, like being in hospital, or being stuck at home in lockdown,"** says Danielle. **"Even though it can be a dark time, play offers you some light, allows the child to express themselves, and gives them the opportunity to be a child."**



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CONCLUSION:

Our new research shows how vital play has been to help children cope with the pandemic over the past 12 months. It has enabled more families to bond and play with each other - the number of dads saying they have had more time to play with their child is particularly noticeable. Both parents and children clearly recognise the importance of play in helping them process the changing world around them, and it has helped a vast number of children build their resilience so they can deal with the pandemic over the past twelve months.

But parents are raising concerns that their kid's loss of freedom to play with friends and wider family will impact their future wellbeing. Parents frequently comment on their child's increased general anxiety, wariness around others and worry surrounding the health of relatives. The disruption to connectivity between the child and their friends and family is also highlighted as a driver of a reduction in confidence.

Our research has highlighted that this is also a story about inequity. Parents tell us playing outside is their top way to play with their child, but many restrictions over the past year will have impacted how freely children can do this. And with two-fifths of parents saying they continue to juggle childcare with work and other responsibilities, children's experience of play will have been very different depending on their circumstances.

In conclusion, play has clearly been an invaluable tool in helping children cope over the last twelve months with many benefiting from more time with their parents, but a key question remains. Will the short-term changes to how children play because of the pandemic - particularly lack of connection with friends and wider family meaning they are missing out on the freedom to play as they wish - have long-term impacts on children's wellbeing? Parents are clearly concerned that it will.

One year on from the start of the pandemic, we want to use this report, the voices of parents and our experience of play at Great Ormond Street Hospital, to highlight this and the continued importance of all children to simply have the freedom to play.



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