

“Falling behind at school”

Summary of the free-text findings from Phase 2 (Oct – Dec 2020) of the Born in Bradford Covid-19 Child Survey

Rachael Moss, Charlotte Endacott, Bridget Lockyer, Halima Iqbal, Brian Kelly, Claire McIvor, Kirsty Crossley, Bridget Lockyer, Laura Sheard, Shahid Islam, Rifat Razaq, Melany Zarate, Zahra Anser, Halima Iqbal, Sally Bridges, Helen Smith, Deborah Lawlor, Kathryn Willan, Aamnah Rahman, Rosie McEachan, John Wright, Maria Bryant, Kate Pickett and Josie Dickerson on behalf of the Bradford Institute for Health Research.

Version 0.8

29.09.2021

*Born in Bradford (BiB) have carried out surveys of BiB participants during the first national lockdown (April – June 2020) and at a second Phase (Oct – Dec 2020). A third survey took place between June – July 2021. Participants were from either the BiB’s Growing Up (GU) or Better Start (BiBBS) cohorts and had children in pre-school, primary and secondary school age groups. **This report presents a summary of the free-text (qualitative) findings identified in Phase 2 (29th October 2020 – 23rd December 2020) of the Born in Bradford’s Covid-19 child survey.***

This report is to aid local policy and decision makers in Bradford to plan their response to Covid-19.
Further Information: www.bradfordresearch.nhs.uk/c-sag/

Survey / Report Queries to: Claire McIvor (Claire.mcivor@bthft.nhs.uk).

The following findings are from the Child Growing Up (GU) sample where we obtained data from 622 participants, aged 10-14 years. This survey was distributed between 29th October and 23rd December 2020. At the start of November, a second national lockdown came into force, with people having to 'stay at home'. The only exceptions to this rule were people being allowed to leave their home for exercise, food/essential shopping and medical reasons. However, during this time, schools were open for all children, but classes (and accompanying members of staff) were put into bubbles, to try and help control the spread of Covid-19. If an individual within a class/staff bubble tested positive for Covid-19, all individuals within that bubble were required to self-isolate for ten days. This lockdown lasted 4 weeks, after which England returned to a three-tier system of restrictions. The following summary provides an overview of the data gathered from the following free-text responses asked in phase 2 of our Child Covid-19 survey:

1. Can you tell us three things that you worry about at the moment (please write your biggest worry first)?
2. Can you tell us three things that make you feel happy / that you enjoy doing at the moment?

Worries

A total of 88% (n = 526) of children gave at least one response to the free-text response worry questions. Although the worry question asked respondents to state their biggest worry first, all free-text responses were analysed, and are subsequently presented together under the following categories: Health Anxieties (Covid-19 and non-Covid-19 related); School; Social Anxieties; Not seeing family/friends.

Health Anxieties

Covid-19 related concerns

As identified in Phase 1, children continued to express fears in regards to catching Covid-19. This was also the most prominent worry in the adult surveys. Many were concerned that they or their family would catch Covid-19 and some expressed worries in regards to their parents or grandparents dying because of the virus. The following responses illustrate this prominent concern:

Health

Losing someone I love

My family + friends getting covid

Somebody I know and love get Covid-19 and die

That my best friend or one of my family members end up in hospital because of COVID-19 or any other illnesses

One of my loved ones going hospital because of sickness

My Grandad because he has the coronavirus

Non Covid-19 related concerns

As well as anxieties about Covid-19, there were also references to non-Covid-19 related health concerns. Some mentioned concerns about eczema, putting on weight, eating too much or not sleeping well. For example:

Getting an illness

That something might happen to my health

About hurting myself cause I hate (cuts blood) or bruises

Taking medicine a lot longer than I want to

My weight

School

A large number of children reported being worried about school. Due to the large number of school related worries that were given, three different sub-codes were used to group children's responses. Some worries were related to 'school work' where children were finding homework and or school work difficult to manage. Children sometimes discussed school performance, mentioning mistakes or 'bad' grades. However, it was not clear whether this was related to recent school closures and/or Covid-19 related school absences. For example:

Not doing well in school.

The amount of homework we got.

Work at school, hard sometimes

Making a mistake at school

Not doing well in class

Bad grades

Other school-based worries focused on experiencing 'disengagement from education' where children were concerned about not being able to attend school for a long time (due to Covid-19 related restrictions), with some expressing concerns about falling behind with their education or their school closing again. It seemed that some of these concerns were a reflection of the second lockdown that had been imposed during this time, and the uncertainty of additional restrictions. For example:

My education

Falling behind at school

If school closes

Not being at school

Falling behind my studies

I worry how bad or good I be at school

All the schools shut down

The final code identified within the school-related responses were concerns over their educational and/or employment future. Children were worried about the impact the pandemic and

accompanying lockdowns is having or will have on their future. Respondents identified that they were concerned about the effect missing school would have on their exams, however, others were worried about the longer-term impact that poor attainment would have for their future employment. There were also some concerns about future worries that were broadly tied in to school-related concerns – for example, unemployment and the impact dyslexia would have for their future:

My future - exams

SATS

My SATS I don't know if I will pass or be good at them

Results for 11+

Results for Grammar Test

Getting a bad score from a test

My future since unemployment, poverty and depression are going up each year.

My future as an adult, I have Dyslexia

Social Anxiety

Responses showed signs that many children were experiencing social anxiety. Although the trigger of anxiety was different amongst children, concerns frequently came up about being able to maintain/keep friendships (some reported lockdown made this harder because they were not able to physically see their friends), losing friends and worrying over what their friends thought of them. Some reported loneliness, worries about being bullied or teased by others and concerns over their behaviour in social situations:

Panicking in school.

Being teased/bullied

Not many friends

Small friendship arguments

Bullies at school

I am worried that my friend don't like me

About being alone

Not seeing family/friends

Children frequently reported worries in regards to not being able to see their family and friends. They mentioned many different family members including grandparents, uncles/aunts and cousins. These worries are reflected in the necessity of the 'stay at home' message that was introduced again during the second lockdown. Some children were concerned about the impact that the lack of social connections was having for their family too:

Not being able to see my friends

Not being able to see my cousins.

Not seeing my family

If I can see my family (grandad etc.)

Positive Experiences

A total of 99% (n =592) of children gave at least one response to the free-text positive experience questions. We identified five prominent themes across all responses during analysis which are discussed below:

Spending time with family

Many children reported that they were able to spend more time with family in person, with either their immediate close family (i.e., siblings and/or parents) or members of their extended family. It is worth acknowledging that some of these responses may be referring to time spent with others before the second lockdown (before 4th November 2020, i.e., when there was more freedom around who you could see and where you could go). However, many of the close family-based experiences reported may have taken place in the second lockdown, when close family were the only people that individuals could interact and spend time with. These positive family experiences can be seen in these example responses:

Being with my cousins

With my family (aunties, uncles)

Going out with my family

Helping Grandad

Spending time with family

Playing with my little brothers

Being with friends/siblings

Coming home from school and having family time

Talking to family/creating memories

Family at home

Meeting friends and communicating virtually

Responses for this survey were received between 29th October and 23rd December 2020, during which England's second (4 week) national lockdown took place. Between 5th November and 2nd December (2020), the lockdown initiated a 'stay at home' message, during which people were asked not to socialise with others (outside their household/support bubble). However, after the second lockdown had ended (2nd December), people were given slightly more relaxed restrictions depending on which tier their local area had been placed in. This could explain why children's responses contained a mixture of excitement for both speaking with friends and being able to see and spend time with their friends. Some responses also contained detail about the activity they did with their friends:

Playing with my friends

Socialising

Having good times with friends

Talking to my friends

Going out with mates

Seeing my girlfriend

Playing cricket with my friends

Alongside enjoying meeting up with friends, children also reported enjoying communicating virtually with others. Many different technology methods were mentioned including texting and video calls and some reported that they enjoyed being able to play games online whilst simultaneously talking with their friends. For example:

Chatting to friends/family

Playing online with friends

Chilling with friends (online or as school)

Video calling Grandma and my friends

Talking and playing with my friends online

My friends – online

Socialising online with friends

Activities

Children mentioned that they had enjoyed taking part in a variety of activities during this time. Many of the responses included activities that could be easily done at home/inside (i.e., playing online games), however, responses did not typically specify whether they were engaging in these activities because of the (second) lockdown restrictions (i.e., requiring children to spend their free time at home).

It is therefore difficult to say whether children would have chosen to do these indoor activities if they had the freedom to go outside. Activities such as playing games (online), watching television, playing with toys, reading, singing and listening to music were mentioned:

Playing online games with friends

Watching my favourite show

Watching tv playing video games.

On my phone games and vids

Reading Manga

Reading

Playing with my toys

Singing

Listening to my radio

Sketching/drawing

Normality

Children frequently reported enjoying parts of their life that had given them that sense of 'normality', or that 'normality' was returning in some shape or form. For some that meant returning to school, but others also reported enjoying doing things they had been unable to do in lockdown, such as going to the cinema or shopping.

The timing and submission of responses may have altered the content of 'normality' within responses. For example, before and after the second lockdown, children had more freedom to see others and engage in activities outside of the home, so survey responses completed during these times may be reflective of this. However, if responses were gathered during the second lockdown, it is possible that seeing friends again at school would have felt like an element of their life that was returning to 'normality'. Unfortunately, the date stamps of completion were not included in analysis. Some example 'normality' responses can be seen here:

Going to school seeing my friends

I can go back to school and do my favourite lessons

Going out fun places

Eating out

Back at dancing

Planning for Christmas

Exercising and being outside

Although many parents of these children reported concerns about the physical activity levels in lockdown, it was found to be a frequent element of lockdown life that children enjoyed. Respondents frequently discussed enjoying engaging in exercise, and many different activities were reported too (i.e., horse riding, cycling, walking). It was sometimes difficult to identify specific activities as many children simply responded that they had enjoyed 'walking outside' or 'playing out'. Responses often linked 'exercise' and 'being outside'. Again, like some of the themes above, it is important to acknowledge that there may be some differences amongst the exercise 'types' that were reported depending on the lockdown restrictions that may/may not have been in place at the time:

Playing football with my mates

Dancing with my dance school

I am happy because goals open to play Football

Playing out

Playing in the garden

Walking

Going park

Conclusion

Overall, children reported that their biggest worries were around health anxiety, school, social anxiety and not seeing friends and family. Children expressed concerns in regards to catching Covid-

19 (either themselves or amongst their friends/family) and other non-Covid-19 related health issues. Amongst the responses, social anxiety was identified including the impact of being separated from friends with limited communication channels was a clear source of anxiety. Returning to school after a long time of home schooling was a worry for children, particularly those who were worried about bullies, the pressure of school and homework or starting high school. The impact of the pandemic on children's school life was noted by children, with concerns about the impact missing school could have for their longer-term future. Children reported that they missed seeing and spending time with their friends and family.

Children appeared to have enjoyed the slower pace of life during the pandemic. For example, many reported enjoying being able to spend more time with their family and friends, either in person or virtually. Children enjoyed having more free time to do their hobbies or play games, play outside and engage in exercise. Many children acknowledged that they had enjoyed returning to some normality, with responses listing an array of activities and hobbies that had been enjoyed.

It seems that Covid-19 and its accompanying lockdown measures have had an impact on many areas in children's lives. Some worries stemmed primarily on the concern surrounding Covid-19, but others focused on the impact lockdown restrictions had for them. The positive areas identified by the children are refreshingly honest and open about the 'extra' time the pandemic had given them, and the enjoyable things they were able to do as a consequence of this. This survey gathered responses pre, during and post the second lockdown (in England), and as a consequence, children's responses create a varied picture of the freedoms that were allowed at this time. For example, some responses stated enjoyment at being able to see and spend time with friends/family, however, others stated that they were worried school would close. The variety of responses obtained mirrors the complexity and confusion surrounding the frequently changing lockdown/tier style restrictions that were implemented by the Government at this time. On the 6th January 2021, just over a month since lockdown two ended, England entered its third national lockdown. The quick introduction of lockdown three emphasises the uncertainties surrounding the restrictions at this time, and highlights the importance of acknowledging both children's worries and things they have enjoyed as we begin to return to 'normality'.