

Senedd Cymru
Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg

Ymchwiliad i effaith argyfwng Covid-19 ar
blant a phobl ifanc yng Nghymru

COV 112
Ymateb gan: Clybiau Plant Cymru

Welsh Parliament
Children, Young People and Education Committee

Inquiry into the impact of the Covid-19 outbreak on
children and young people in Wales

COV 112
Response from: Clybiau Plant Cymru Kids' Clubs

Background Information

Clybiau Plant Cymru Kids' Clubs exists to help communities in Wales by promoting, developing and supporting quality, affordable, accessible Out of School Childcare Clubs. Out of School Childcare Clubs enable children to play and develop within safe, quality environments, supporting parents/carers to return to work/education/training. They ensure children aged 3-14 years old are well cared for and benefit from positive play opportunities, before or after school, or in the holidays.

Across Wales, our Out of School Childcare community includes over 1,500 Clubs in 889 Settings providing 44,429 childcare places.

Summary of Impact on Children and Young People

The physical and mental health of children and young people.

Lack of social interaction with peers can impact children's mood and behaviour. Children and young people have had to react and adapt unexpectedly and at a rapid rate to a frightening situation. The way they play, learn and socialise with their friends and families has changed radically. Children have struggled with not being able to play with friends, more so as the lockdown has continued. Potential social distancing imposed on return to school or limits on who children can interact with, is likely to continue to negatively impact children's development. Social interaction is important for development and well-being and limitations on this through social distancing and lockdown may have even more of an impact if young children are not developmentally ready to understand and process this or it has not been properly explained to them.

Using Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory, some children may only be experiencing the very basic of physiological needs currently. Whilst psychological needs may be being met through immediate family and online interaction, this cannot make up for not being able to see, touch, or even be close to extended family/other loved ones at this time. It is difficult then to expect that communities and children are able to achieve self-actualization, or one's full potential during time of crisis and limited interaction. Childhood is a critical developmental period and concerted

effort will be required to reverse the detrimental effects imposed on children during this time.

Older children, who were already heavily reliant on online platforms for social interaction, have become even more dependent on them with no school, no sports clubs/other hobbies, no wider family relationships and limited parental interaction as parents continue to work. Helping children become social beings in the physical sense rather than through technology will become more challenging.

There will also be children and young people or family members directly impacted by coronavirus and their view may be very different to that of a child who has only heard of it through the news/conversations and impact on their mental health will be potentially very different.

Limited outdoor exercise and the closure of schools, gyms, childcare, leisure centres, pools, parks and playgrounds are certain to have had an effect on the physical and mental well-being of children in Wales. In addition, many families have been juggling working from home, childcare and school work. Children are unlikely to have been as physically active as normal and it is likely that children have been experiencing increased screen time, less physical activity, irregular sleep patterns, and worse diets. This could lead to negative consequences such as weight gain, decreased physical fitness, and diminished mental well-being.

Vulnerable and disadvantaged children (including pupils with special educational needs and disabilities, children in need, looked after children and children eligible for free school meals).

Children with a social worker, and children with SEN have been able to access school hubs during the crisis, but as numbers attending school hubs remain very low, many may have chosen not to (potentially due to health concerns).

Children with SEN may find it much more difficult to understand what is going on and having to drastically change their routine will affect their mental health and understanding. Children who usually need specialized learning support will not have received this and parents may have struggled to provide such support for their child's learning at home and there is a risk that those children will fall even further behind their peers.

Not all parents are nurturing and caring and have the time or inclination to talk things through with their children to ensure that they have a clear understanding of the situation. Disadvantaged children may be missing out on both vital education and social interaction if parents leave children to their own devices and will become further disadvantaged. Indeed for some children, the routine of school and the guarantee of a hot meal represents their safe haven from a neglectful/abusive home.

It has been widely reported that children and young people from poor socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to be vulnerable to the effects of this pandemic. Children from low income backgrounds are likely to be suffering isolation in substandard/overcrowded housing conditions further decreasing their access to physical activity and increasing tendencies towards poor mental health and well-being.

Children in receipt of free school meals are still expected to be catered for by schools and local authorities, and local authorities have been given the power to flexibly offer school hub places for those 'on the edges of receiving care and support if they are known to be vulnerable by the school or family support services' - <https://gov.wales/vulnerable-children-and-young-people-coronavirus#section-40061>. It is likely that even with this provision in place families will have slipped through the net.

In addition, whilst those in receipt of free school meals received a payment or a packed lunch, eating in school would have given them access to a nutritious cooked meal. Programmes targeted at such children such as Holiday Hunger and SHEP was provided to support families with nutritious meals and learning on making healthy food and exercise choices. It is a concern that some of these children will be in an even higher risk of childhood obesity.

Early childhood education and care, including impact on the childcare market and childhood development.

There will be a cohort of children that would not have received funded early childhood education and childcare and the associated benefits of playing and learning together. Some of these children will be transitioning to full time education from September and for these children time needed to settle in and anxiety levels may be greater.

Statutory school education, including arrangements for remote learning, continuity of learning, the impact on educational outcomes and the implementation of the critical workers policy.

Many children may be missing out on vital education particularly if parents aren't able or willing to 'home' school their children as they juggle work, childcare and home earning or perhaps lack the skills or motivation to provide such support.

Parents are not trained teachers so even with the best intentions and efforts, they don't necessarily have the skills, training or knowledge to help their child progress as they would with trained teachers and support staff. This may be particularly difficult for parents of children with SEN who may need very intensive or specialized support. For some children with SEN or those with few opportunities for varied play and learning at home, the 6 week summer break can be a disadvantage. This pandemic has already seen children out of school for over 10 weeks already with potentially many more to follow, which will be detrimental to their development especially if stimulation cannot be provided at home.

Exams and qualifications (including vocational qualifications).

If schools use 'predicted' grades, this will not benefit children who aren't able to complete course work but excel in exam conditions. They may not be able to demonstrate their full ability/potential. Students may also not feel that they are going to get the acknowledgement of their grades.

Support available for the workforce, including (but not limited to) health, social care, education, children's services, and youth workers.

The Early Years, Childcare and Playwork sector represented by Cwlwm comprises over 4,000 settings employing over 17,000 members of staff. We have contacted our particular Out of School Childcare community over the past few weeks, listening to their concerns and their immediate fears, as well as discussing their longer-term challenges. Many settings have had to close due to staffing pressures, lack of children attending in response to the medical advice to keep children safely at home, free childcare being provided at school hubs, and the impact of school closures on staff who are often carers to dependents themselves.

There is concern being raised by the sector about their inability to ensure sustainability of the childcare sector: during the current period of closure/limited opening for critical workers and vulnerable children and; once restrictions are lifted and they re-open. Settings are envisioning a decrease in places taken up due to reduced employment and parental confidence on using a range of services, an increase in costs relating to social distancing and infection control, alongside fears of losing valued qualified staff or committee members. (65% of Out of School Childcare Clubs have reported to us that they have significant sustainability concerns - data from April 2020). Sufficient funding needs to be available to support their sustainability once restrictions are lifted and they re-open.

The suite of supportive measures announced by Welsh Government and UK Government have not addressed the particular characteristics of the childcare sector and their workforce. Many childcare, early years and play settings will **not** be able to access the many one-off grants that have now emerged as they are neither VAT registered nor do they necessarily enjoy rate relief. New childcare providers will **not** be entitled to assistance under the Self Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS) announced and those who started after 5th April 2019 will not get any support and those that started their self-employment in the last 24 months will be penalised as the scheme does not allow 2019/20 tax year data to be included. There is confusion around the availability of furloughing staff via the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS) or under the SEISS scheme given the small print advisory note about public funds. Many settings are in receipt of small public funds (The Childcare Offer) but these - in the main - will **not** cover core costs (namely salaries). In addition, some voluntary managed settings in particular (with no incoming fees at this time), will have struggled to pay furloughed staff as they await HMRC to reimburse them.

“I have ongoing concerns that worry me daily. I have all these things I still need to cover expenditure wise and I have huge concerns about our sustainability when we return. I feel worried constantly, it makes me feel sick. I feel like we’ve [our sector] been forgotten about.”

Childcare is hugely significant to the foundational economy and we remain concerned that unless these particular characteristics are recognised and support is provided, the childcare sector will not survive the pandemic’s effects. Many individuals (some sole traders, childminders, private business owners) and groups (voluntary management committees and charities) will not be able to sustain the pressures they face and will face the unenviable task of having to make staff redundant or simply close down.

Parents and carers.

Many parents will find being at home a comfort and are enjoying additional time with their immediate families, a better work/life balance, and noticing an increase in wildlife activity due to the significant reduction in pollution and traffic.

Some parents and carers also have had the challenges of:

- New/increased financial pressures from redundancy, job insecurity or being furloughed with decreased wages.
- Stress of home schooling.
- Many working from home juggling work, childcare and home schooling.
- Reduced/diminished face to face support including from friends and family.
- Increased abuse in the home as there are limited opportunities of respite and the stress associated with the crisis manifests in violence/abusive behaviours towards partners and/or children.

Children’s rights

Ensuring children’s participation in decision-making processes on the pandemic is essential and we welcome the Childcare Commissioner’s survey on children and by children. Recent easing of lockdown by Welsh Government has seen libraries, recycling centres and garden centres re-open with shops alerted to prepare for opening – services unlikely to appeal to or contribute significantly to the well-being of children and young people.

Appropriate action by Welsh Government in response to the Children’s Commissioner’s final report will satisfy children’s right to be heard (Article 12).

Children’s rights to an education (Article 28) has been negatively impacted whilst schools are closed and uncertainty remains about grading and what will occur once schools are reopened. This effect will likely be a negative occurrence for most children, but especially for those with no/limited access to the technology required

for successful home learning. Learning opportunities also seem to vary considerably between schools/authorities.

The uncertainty of Covid-19, isolation rules, and financial uncertainty can cause high stress and volatile environments and increases the risk of violence against children within the home. As children continue to spend time at home the amount of screen time is likely to increase, with this comes increased risk of online abuse and exploitation.