

Senedd Cymru
Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg

Welsh Parliament
Children, Young People and Education Committee

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

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

COV 172
Ymateb gan: Menna Cook, Therapydd Plant

COV 172
Response from: Menna Cook, Child Therapist

As parents, we have been looking on in horror as the possibility of 'blended learning' (aka part-time schooling) has been discussed as a serious possibility for the next academic year. As such we have felt compelled to write to you with considerable urgency.

As a Child Therapist (Menna Cook)

From my perspective as a Child Therapist working with children adversely affected by domestic violence (DV), abuse and neglect, I am already deeply concerned at the devastating psychological effects becoming apparent as a result of school closures and social isolation on children. Decades of research has shown that these can have devastating lifelong implications (Blakemore et al, 2020)

School for most children is not just a setting where knowledge is imparted. As part of my work I go into schools to provide psychological support to children experiencing significant psychological trauma as a result of their adverse life experiences. The reason why this therapy takes place at school is that this is often the only safe (both physically and psychologically) and consistent space such children have. Schools act as a safeguard and are the eyes and ears for identifying abuse and neglect (as well as emotional and psychological difficulties). They play a vital role in supporting children holistically and supporting parents experiencing difficulties. It is through the relationships children form with school staff that concerns and safeguarding issues most often come to light and children feel safe enough to share them.

We already know that as a result of lockdown, instances of DV, neglect and child abuse are rising (<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-07-surge-domestic-child-abuse-pandemic.html>). Such negative effects are compounded by social isolation and the need for children to stay and learn for a large proportion of the time in the exact environments that are posing the danger. As well as the risk to physical health we already know, from decades of research, that to learn children need to be in a safe and containing environment (Bowlby et al, 1956; Parrett et al, 2012). As such,

part-time school will be responsible for an increasing number of children who will be significantly impacted educationally, and the divide between these children and those lucky enough to be in stable home environments will increase dramatically.

Over the past month I have been increasingly contacted professionally by families concerned their children are experiencing significant emotional and behavioural difficulties as a result of social isolation and school closures – due to the loss of routine, socialisation, support and safety these settings offer. They share serious worry as to how they will cope as families should schools not open fully in September.

I am frightened for the safety of the many children who are in unsafe home situations, without full-time school as a safety mechanism.

- How is the Welsh Government planning to address the psychological fallout experienced by vulnerable children before and after lockdown is eased?
- Further, what is the Minister for Education going to put in place, if schools are part time, to provide the safety net vulnerable children require?

I am aghast that in the light of continuing evidence that children are extremely unlikely to get ill from the coronavirus, and are less likely to pass it on to others compared to adults

(https://www.rcpch.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2020-06/open_letter_re_schools_reopening_2020-06-17.pdf), that the decision to reopen schools fully to all children from September hasn't been reached and set in stone already.

If children aren't brought back into the classroom, full time from September, we will be facing a greater mental health crisis than is currently predicted as a result of school closures and social isolation so far.

As Parents (Menna Cook and Tim Ferguson)

We are extremely dissatisfied both that our own child's education will be compromised and by the handling of schooling so far. We have witnessed first-hand the negative emotional impact school closure, home learning and social distancing has had on our daughter. As previously stated, decades of research show how detrimental social distancing is to all aspects of child development.

These negative effects have been further compounded recently by the decision to only open schools in Cardiff for three weeks (rather than the proposed four), thus reducing her contact with school to a single three-hour session, instead of the two we had prepared her for.

As parents we cannot prepare our daughter for what might happen in September, thus creating more anxiety for both herself and us. Home learning has proven to be difficult and we have been unable to step into the teacher role effectively enough so that her education has not been compromised.

This situation – should part-time school continue from September – will be further compounded when Mum returns to work after her current maternity leave ends in the autumn term. There will simply be nobody available at home to deliver and supervise home learning for our daughter (Dad works long hours and Mum's job takes her out of the house). As such, we would be left with a very difficult decision: do we effectively ignore and neglect our daughter all day, or does one of us give up our job in order to provide her with a sub-standard (compared to in school learning) home education, thus putting us under massive financial strain? In this scenario we would also have the full-time care of an infant at home to contend with, thus compounding our daughter's opportunity to access the learning she should be having, and our ability as parents to provide it, further.

In our situation, it will be likely that Mum would have to give up her job as Dad is the higher earner. If so, Mum would not be able to do her job of supporting and helping the very children who would have been most adversely affected by lockdown and school closures/part-time schooling.

As parents we are aghast that we have not been consulted about the feasibility of part-time schooling and home learning as it is us who will be required to implement it.

- Please share with us the parent consultations that have gone towards considering part time school as a feasible option and what support will be made available to families where parents need to work.
- Further, what provision is going to put in place to support parents in being able to deliver remote learning effectively at home if they are not already qualified teachers (especially if those parents will also need to be working at the same time)?

As parents without any teacher training we are a very poor substitute for the amazing and informed teaching our daughter receives while at school.

The UK government (www.gov.uk) states:

“Returning to school is vital for children's education and for their wellbeing. Time out of school is detrimental for children's cognitive and academic development, particularly for disadvantaged children. This impact can affect both current levels of learning and children's future ability to learn, and therefore we need to ensure all pupils can return to school sooner rather than later.

The risk to children themselves of becoming severely ill from coronavirus (COVID-19) is very low and there are negative health impacts of being out of school. We know that school is a vital point of contact for public health and safeguarding services that are critical to the wellbeing of children and families.

Lower academic achievement also translates into long-term economic costs due to having a less well-qualified workforce. This affects the standard of living that today's pupils will have over the course of their entire life. For many households, school closures have also affected their ability to work. As the economy begins to recover, we need to remove this barrier so parents and carers can return to work.

In relation to working in schools, whilst it is not possible to ensure a totally risk-free environment, the Office of National Statistics' analysis on coronavirus (COVID-19) related deaths linked to occupations suggests that staff in educational settings tend not to be at any greater risk from the disease than many other occupations. There is no evidence that children transmit the disease any more than adults.

Given the improved position, the balance of risk is now overwhelmingly in favour of children returning to school. For the vast majority of children, the benefits of being back in school far outweigh the very low risk from coronavirus (COVID-19), and this guidance explains the steps schools need to take to reduce risks still further. As a result, we can plan for all children to return and start to reverse the enormous costs of missed education. This will be an important move back towards normal life for many children and families."

We already know Welsh children have been less engaged in online learning compared to other parts of the UK (<https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/education/lockdown-homeschooling-wales-teaching-lessons-18439296>) and yet it is these same children who are threatened with the prospect of part time school, while their counterparts in the rest of the UK are going back full time in September.

- Could the Minister for Education please share with us the information that has informed the likely decision to bring Welsh children back to school part time, compared with all the other home nations where schools will resume full time?
- Given the relative success of Wales in dealing with COVID-19, could the Minister for Education explain why the strict 2m social distancing rule is likely to be retained in Welsh schools when it is either being eased or scrapped in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland?

- How does the Minister for Education propose the educational and attainment gap will be dealt with?

It is becoming increasingly likely we will need to live with coronavirus for a long time to come. It is simply not good enough that children appear to be 'collateral damage' of a virus that is both highly unlikely to make them unwell, and that they have a low chance of passing on.

We are astounded that from July children will be able to travel on a plane, visit a packed retail shop and go to McDonalds – and yet their fundamental human right to an education (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child) is being denied.

We are at a pivotal point where decisions made now can either compound the negative effects experienced by children over the past few months, or begin to heal the damage. Please don't cause further trauma by bringing schools back part time. Please put childrens' safety and wellbeing first. Please make their human right to an education and childhood a priority.

Please bring schooling back full time from September.