

I wanted to give my own personal story as a parent of two boys currently trying to navigate working from home and home schooling as part of the response to the impact of COVID-19 on us as a family, and importantly, our children.

Firstly, I am based in the Radyr and Morganstown area, and I have one son aged 8, and another aged 3.

Both my husband and I are working parents, and we have both had to continue working throughout the lockdown window.

My work involves supporting families caring for children and adults with learning disabilities, and my husband's job is in Finance. Neither of us have been in a place where we can decide to reduce hours. Equally, our mortgage and household bills do not allow us that privilege either.

My 8 year old son has received weekly emails from his school with a long list of work tasks for him to complete – but there has been no phone call check ins/no pre-recorded lessons or support. The presumption has been that we as his parents would take over teaching him full time while also trying to work. We started off with best intentions to try and make the arrangement work, but it became clear very early on that it was an impossible task. He required adult support and supervision to guide him through the core tasks, and to keep him motivated.

Pressures were enhanced by having our 3 year old at home with us too. At the age of 3, you cannot leave a child to their own devices. He has required constant management and support, and the time away from his peers has slowed some of his milestone achievements.

Both boy's behaviour has also changed as a result of being isolated from peers and the lack of the usual routines. As we have not been able to offer either of them the full support they really needed, they have shown signs of frustration. Our eldest has cried/had angry meltdowns etc. While we know some of this will naturally be due to the pressures and oddities that the

lockdown has brought to us all, for children and young people, finding a way to express those feelings is more challenging.

We recognised the need to apply an extremely cautious approach at the beginning of the pandemic, and we also recognise the need to have plans in place should we sadly need to have localised lockdowns in the future. However, we are all very tired and frustrated with the assumption that a 'blended learning' approach has been a success for children and families alike. The evidence is mounting that for the majority of families it clearly hasn't been! There also appears to be an assumption that we are living in some 1950's culture, whereby women will take up the reigns of teaching at home as a primary care giver parent. Not only is this insulting to the progress we have collectively made in Wales towards equality in gender, it also refuses to acknowledge that the majority of families now have two working parents. If the blended approach is allowed to become the planned 'normal' going forward, many families will be faced with very stark choices around educating their children or putting food on the table. In a modern culture, we should not be placing society in such dilemmas knowingly.

The harm that the lockdown has done to people from a mental health perspective should now be recognised as an equal threat to any physical risk. After all, what good is life if people, especially young ones, feel like it may not be worth living? The increase of depression concerns around children and young people, and for working families has been well documented in recent weeks and I know the Health and Social Services Ministers are aware of these wider concerns.

Alongside this stands the issue of the rights of children, and specifically the right to access a meaningful education. There are already inequality gaps of attainment across Wales and differing community groups. Many parents, alongside time issues, do not feel equipped with the necessary knowledge and training to successfully 'teach' their children. This is reflected in the fact that teaching is held in society as an admired and respected profession - where skills are honed to be able to inspire the next generation.

We have recently experienced the 'catch up' day offered by the proposals, and while our eldest loved returning to school, it did not address the significant gap he has felt since mid march as there was simply not enough time. Therefore, if we find ourselves with the same system, I can only expect that he will fall further behind and become even more disillusioned. This is not a reflection on our teachers, but on the system that has been put in place, and a real concern that some feel it may be a medium to long-term answer.

There is also some hypocrisy as far as our situation is concerned, as our youngest has been offered the chance to return to nursery for his full three days. Considering the issues that pre-schoolers have with social distancing, and the fact that he will be mingling with other young children, we find it hard to say to our eldest that he has to suffer such rigid constraints. There does not appear to be any real logic around the differences in approach? Why our 8 year old is more of a risk in catching/and or spreading the virus we do not know?!?

Finally, in addition to all of the very real issues we, and many other families are experiencing right now, there is the growing weight of evidence that children and young people are at low risk of suffering significantly, and appear to be, at lower risk of spreading the virus. That, coupled with expert opinions from epidemiologists, GPs, front line Consultants etc from across both the UK and the World, would suggest we are doing our young people in Wales a disservice from not planning to return to normal schooling. The arguments being made about returning when everything is 'safe' feel fundamentally flawed, as we know that vaccines etc are a long way off. Therefore, we will all need to acknowledge risk as part of everyday life going forward for the foreseeable future, and that includes for children and their access to education.

For us as a family it feels like Wales has prioritised the economy, opening up shops/outdoor venues etc, but not the current set of working age parent families or the next generation, who are bearing the financial burdens caused by covid right now, and will bear those burdens sadly for the years to come. This is not fair, and is not in keeping with the prosperous Wales plan being channelled. The economy cannot flourish unless people can return to work, and working families can not fully work without adequate childcare. Schools are part of that plan too, alongside nurseries.

I would ask members of the Committee to consider these issues in challenging decisions being made, and to push for a detailed plan that puts a return to school first, with a necessary back up plan in place should some localised school closures be necessary going forward. Our children and young people have sacrificed enough for this virus, we don't want them to sacrifice their futures indefinitely.

I have also attached some anonymised case studies from families who wanted to share their concerns but did not feel they had time to write personally.

Many thanks for your time and consideration,

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