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Children and young people's perspectives from UK lockdown: leisure-less experiences

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ABSTRACT

If researchers are to understand the impacts of lockdown on children and young people, then the experiences of lockdown need to be explored from the perspective of the child. Young people participate in leisure for a multitude of reasons, yet, within the UK, children were largely unable to access their regular leisure activities for a six-month period during the first national lockdown. Within the context of this paper, leisure includes outdoor sports and physical activities within blue spaces. Following interviews with parents and young people (aged 11–16) focused on experiences of leisure during the Covid-19 pandemic, this qualitative study identified that children felt an intense sense of missing out on opportunities and found day-to-day life without leisure monotonous. However, there were some positive impacts of reduced leisure, such as a greater appreciation for what was once a regular activity. This research empowered the voice of children, so their distinct experiences were made visible to those who aim to support their wellbeing. Findings suggest that the promotion of leisure activities in the current climate could mitigate poor wellbeing among children associated with the Covid-19 pandemic.

Introduction

During the national lockdown in England, almost all leisure spaces, including parks, sports centres, and beaches were closed to public use (Lashua et al., 2021). Physical activity as leisure is recognised as a significant factor in childhood for personal development (Sivan et al., 2019). Within England, over half of the young people aged 7–16 years surveyed by Sport England (n= 1,164) reported being less physically active during national lockdown (Sport England, 2020). This is reflective of other countries across the globe (Moore et al., 2020; Schmidt et al., 2020; Xiang et al., 2020) and is unsurprising given increases in screen time (Pouso et al., 2021; Xiang et al., 2020). Unfortunately, however, 60% of English children also spent less time outside throughout the national lockdown (Natural England, 2020). During the first lockdown, GovUK (2020) reported that young people coped 'generally well', but YoungMinds (2020) findings showed that 75% of the children they surveyed in England said the second lockdown was harder, and 67% believed the pandemic would have a long-term negative impact on their mental health. Although there is a wealth of literature focused on the impact of lockdown on children's education Holt and Murray (2021) called for research on the specific experiences of children during lockdown in other

domains such as leisure. Thus, this study sought to share children and young people's (CYP) accounts of the impact of lockdown on leisure activities from the perspectives of both parents and CYP.

Methods

This paper adopted a qualitative methodology to explore the experiences of CYP in lockdown. Data collection occurred at one Multi-Activity Centre based in the South of England. The centre is based on the coastline and offers a variety of physical activities including windsurfing, sailing, and high ropes. Authors employed a person-based approach (Yardley et al., 2015) due to the belief that CYP are the experts on their own experiences. Parents were included to provide a different perspective of their children's experience of leisure in lockdown.

Participants

The study included 19 participants, nine children and 10 parents. The characteristics of the CYP are shown in Table 1 below. Children were included in the study if they regularly participated in sport and physical activity for leisure purposes at the Multi-Activity Centre before the first lockdown occurred in England.

All CPY self-reported as White British and rated their socioeconomic status towards the middle/upper end of the MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status. Parents were all the same ethnicity as their children. Although not reflective of the wider city, these characteristics are reflective of those who generally attend the Multi-Activity Centre.

Protocol

Institutional ethical approval was obtained. Participants were contacted regarding the study through a Multi-Activity Centre based in the South of England. The Multi-Activity Centre emailed the parents of members aged between 11 and 16 years, inviting them and their child to participate in a semi-structured interview. Before the interview took place, children were asked to complete an online form where they reported their age, gender, ethnicity and were asked to complete the MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status. The aim of the interview was to understand young people's experiences of lockdown with a focus on leisure from both the perspective of the child and their parent. Interviews occurred at the Multi-Activity Centre ($n = 17$) and over the phone ($n = 2$). Participants and parents were informed that the interview would be recorded to assist in the development of a transcript and to support analysis.

Table 1. Participant characteristics.

Gender	Age	Usual leisure activities	Familial Placement in Society*	Personal Placement in Society*
Female	12	Sailing, tennis, cycling, and hiking	3	3
Female	12	Windsurfing, sailing, paddleboarding, kayaking, cricket, hockey, and netball	3	5
Female	13	Taekwondo, swimming, sailing, and cycling	5	2
Female	14	Windsurfing and football	6	5
Female	16	Windsurfing and cycling	5	3
Male	11	Football and sailing	3	2
Male	13	Sailing, cricket, and scouts	5	5
Male	13	Windsurfing, sailing, rugby and cricket	5	2
Male	15	Sailing and rugby	4	3

*Note: Using the MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status: score out of 10 with 1 being the highest rated in society and 10 being the lowest.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis has been described as well suited for qualitative research within the field of health and wellbeing (Braun & Clarke, 2014). As such, analysis was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework of thematic analysis, with a reflexive approach adopted. Interviews were transcribed by the researcher to help them become familiar with the data. Upon completion of transcription, each transcript was read two more times, before coding began. Data collected from parents and CYP were analysed together as a collective data set.

Codes were driven by the data and the researcher's role was to co-create, while minimising bias from their own experiences or research findings. This was due to the belief that lockdown experiences are unique to each individual. While codes represented one meaningful or unique facet within the data, they were used to help develop multifaceted themes (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This stage of the analysis was an active process where the researcher revisited codes and themes multiple times to check for accuracy and whether they were a credible reflection of the transcripts. To ensure methodological rigour, a critical friend provided feedback on the analysis.

Results and discussion

Table 2 demonstrates how codes were developed into multifaceted themes. The developed themes were 'missing out on opportunities', 'monotonous nature of life in lockdown', and 'positive impacts of lockdown'.

Missing out on opportunities

The first theme to be discussed, 'missing out on opportunities', refers to CYP's experiences of having milestone events cancelled and dealing with the emotions of returning to normal, but not actually being at their normal level of performance in their physical activity-based leisure activities.

Young people reported their limited ability to stay active during the lockdown, as well as feelings of missing out on their usual physical activities. During this time, English schools were closed, or partially open due to local lockdowns, and did not return to normal from 19th of March 2020 until the 8th of March 2021. There was also a *stay-at-home* order from the English Government, with children only being permitted to exercise in the local outdoors with one other person for an hour per day. Goals and opportunities that participants once had were no longer attainable due to these restrictions. For instance, one parent stated that:

Table 2. Development of themes.

Codes	Sub-themes	Final Themes
Goals	Opportunities	Missing Out on Opportunities
Uncertainty		
Body Image	Health	
Frustration		
Physical Fitness		
Variety	Lack of Adventure	Monotonous Nature of Life in Lockdown
Boredom		
Daily Routine		
Uncertainty		
Emotions	Disconnected Friendships	
Interaction		
Technology		
Walking		Positive Impacts of Lockdown
Appreciation		

She has missed out on her opportunity to go to the Youth Championships because that has been delayed. Her goal has always been to go and compete there and now she will never be able to do that because she will be too old. So she has just missed out (Mother of a 16-year-old female).

Lockdown impacted all areas of CYP's lives, with participants also discussing changes to examination structures, school induction days, and the ability of children to stay physically fit and healthy, as well as maintain friendships and improve their skills. One child explained:

I missed being on the water and the atmosphere . . . everyone knows each other and everyone is friendly. So, it made a real difference not being here [the Multi-Activity Centre] for such a long amount of time (Male, aged 15-years-old).

Restrictions on all outdoor leisure activities were lifted in March 2021 and indoor leisure activities from April 2021. Wider national surveys have concluded that 52% of children aged 7–16 years were less physically active during lockdown (Sport England, 2020). Restrictions regarding spaces and time to be physically active, in addition to online learning and the *stay-at-home* order, encouraged excessive use of technology and an increase in children's screen time and sedentary behaviour (Mondragon et al., 2021). Screen time specifically has been shown to have significantly predicted anxiety and depression symptomatology during the Covid-19 pandemic (McArthur et al., 2021). Decreases in physical activity and increases in screen time are associated with poor physical and mental health, as well as a reduction in time spent outdoors (Mondragon et al., 2021). During interviews with parents, it was described that sometimes the impact of lockdown was not visible for CYP until they returned to their regular routines, as one parent reported:

She can see for herself now getting back into things but also how, how hard it is to start training again . . . She cried, at taekwondo after her first session. One hour was fine but the second hour she was so exhausted . . . she felt like she used to be able to do more and she felt she would have done much better before too (Mother of a 13-year-old female).

Monotonous nature of life in lockdown

During the lockdown, children often described being bored due to multiple different factors, including not seeing friends, going to school, or participating in their usual leisure activities. Codes within the theme 'Monotonous nature of life in lockdown' represented children's unique feelings and experiences of a boring life in lockdown. Within the sample, CYP frequently commented on missing their friends and spending time with them. Reduced opportunities for social interaction also increased feelings of loneliness amongst CYP, something that is associated with poor wellbeing and mental health (Loades et al., 2020; Mondragon et al., 2021). Thinking specifically about the Multi-Activity Centre, one young person stated:

I couldn't see the friends I have here. I couldn't see any friends in general or even just like have fun (Male, 13-years-old)

Similarly, O'Sullivan et al. (2021) found in their study of Irish youth's experience of lockdown that poor mental health was provoked by experiences of loneliness and social isolation in children as young as 5 years old. In addition, McKinlay et al. (2022) labelled quarantine as a 'significant mental health threat' and that the impacts of isolation and loneliness are likely to persist after lockdown restrictions have relaxed due to anxiety around socialising after the pandemic. Children also perceived that the impacts of lockdown on mental health will continue beyond the lifting of restrictions, with 67% of 2,438 British children believing the pandemic would have a long-term negative impact on their mental health and wellbeing (YoungMinds, 2020). Parents commented on

their children's increased use of technology to connect with their friends. This was identified by one child as '*not being the same as real life*' (Female, 14-years-old) and parents expressed concerns regarding screen time and sedentary behaviours. Children within this study expressed frustration with not being able to see friends in-person. One participant stated that,

> *I missed seeing my friends here most and just chatting and socialising in real life, rather than online* (Male, 13-years-old).

Social interactions, in-person, contribute to health by enhancing a sense of belonging, which Oosterhoff et al. (2020) consider a crucial interpersonal need and Gennings et al. (2021) include as a crucial aspect of the conceptualisation of children's wellbeing.

Upon the easing of lockdown restrictions, many parents described their children as finding it difficult to deal with the emotional stress of a return to normal. Throughout lockdown, social media was used to mitigate the impact of loneliness and isolation from peers (Deolmi & Pisani, 2020). One parent expressed,

> *They're a bit more sensitive and they didn't have that interaction with friends for so long . . . maybe it is harder with the girls that age, maybe they have more problems, you know, with being face to face. They've got friends that they haven't seen that much and have just been chatting online and then they're suddenly back at school and having all those emotions* (Mother of a 13-year-old female).

Despite the negative long-term effects of social media, it was often identified by participants as their way of keeping in contact with friends and preventing boredom. Parents often expressed guilt in interviews about letting their children spend extensive time using technology/looking at a screen. Hammons et al. (2021) also reported that parents were concerned that their children were too attached to screens during the pandemic, but that screen time and use of technology was one of the limited things children and families could do. Although screen time has not been shown to impair psychological development (Ophir et al., 2021), it has been identified as a significant predictor of Covid-19 anxiety and depression (McArthur et al., 2021). The pandemic occurred while habits were being established by young children; meaning the potential (and possibly negative) long-term impact of an increase in screen time must be monitored by health care professionals to safeguard CYP's wellbeing and mental health moving forward (Hammons et al., 2021).

During the lockdown, CYP were isolated physically from friends, but not their families. Some parents reported this as a positive, as difficulties with friendship groups and lockdown brought their families together, particularly families who were forced to work from home. However, children did not have independence from their families and missed engaging in leisure activities. One participant described this: '*I just missed the freedom of going out and doing what I wanted*' (Female, aged 14-years-old) *while another added*:

> *It's just fun here [the Multi-Activity Centre], you get to see nice people and you get to sail which gets you fitter and gives you something else to do in the evening* (Male, 11-years-old).

While thinking specifically about their regular leisure at the Multi-Activity Centre, one participant explained how the variability of the environment provided them with a sense of adventure which being inside during lockdown could not provide for them,

> *There is always something new on the water. You don't get the exact same day twice and you know something is always going to be different* (Male, aged 15-years-old).

This highlights a lack of adventure and a disconnect between CYP due to the *stay-at-home* order and enforced social distancing. O'Sullivan et al. (2021) state that 'Children and young people were seen as having the worst experiences in the Covid-19 crisis because they could not be children' (p. 6). A parent stated that:

I think she certainly missed doing something that was her thing, rather than yes let's do something all four of us as a family. Which we do a lot of but it's nice for them to interact with someone else (Mother of a 12-year-old female).

Typically, in middle childhood, children's peer relationships optimise developmental health compared to parental/caregiver relationships, but quarantining and social distancing meant that these relationships could not flourish (McArthur et al., 2021). Parents described their children as *frustrated, vulnerable* and *trapped* people; particularly because CYP had no release and were not able to do what they were passionate about, which was mostly engaging in their leisure activities. One participant commented on this,

I like this [their leisure activities] because it means that I get a break from like homework and stuff. When I am on the water, I just don't really think about school at all, ever (Female, 12-years-old).

Before another added how:

Coming here gives you something else to think about so instead of focusing on exams for example, you have something to take your mind off it (Male, 15-years-old).

Having a lack of space to play in and other children to play with has been shown to exacerbate inequalities, alongside a reliance on online technologies to deliver education and connect with friends (Marston et al., 2020; Watts, 2020). During interviews, parents expressed concerns regarding the wellbeing of their children who they felt needed face-to-face social interaction with other CYP (something which leisure activities would typically provide) as online socialising was viewed as *not the same*. Findings also revealed that participants receive a sense of belonging and acceptance while at the Multi-Activity Centre. This sense of belonging was taken away from them during lockdown.

Positive impacts of lockdown

While the impacts of lockdown and quarantining are largely negative, the smaller benefits of lockdown should have recognition. Parents and children, while reflecting on their lockdown experiences, described some key positives such as developing an appreciation for what was once considered normal, spending time with family, and time away from school. Based on these meaningful facets within the data, the theme 'positive impacts of lockdown' was developed. Parents commented on some positive consequences of time away from school and an appreciation of what was once normal. Chawla et al. (2021) suggested a *'silver lining'* (p. 1) to lockdown is that some CYP were protected from issues that relate to attendance at school such as bullying, peer's disruptive behaviour, and examination pressure. Parents within this study reported that lockdown gave their children a break from social structures at school. Indeed, one parent noted how:

He enjoyed learning from home because he doesn't like the people in his class who distract the teacher (Mother of a 15-year-old male).

In addition, some children were reflective of lockdown and showed new appreciation for what was once their everyday leisure activities, such as sailing, going for walks, and spending time with family. These factors will have improved the wellbeing of some individuals (McKinlay et al., 2022). For instance, one child stated that:

There was a point where I would only really come [windsurfing] in the summer because of the cold. I have now got more into it even though it's still pretty cold, but I like coming here whereas during lockdown I couldn't, and I realised how much I missed it (Female, 13-years-old).

Parents also reflected on the implications of lockdown and how it enabled their family to bond and become closer:

Lockdown also had benefits for me not doing a commute to London. And so I was able to do stuff like go paddle boarding at six in the evening where I would usually be stuck on a train at that time (Father of a 12-year-old female).

Summary

The impact of Covid-19 on CYP is not yet fully understood, particularly from a qualitative perspective focused on CYP's leisure experiences (Holt & Murray, 2021; O'Sullivan et al., 2021). Yet, initial findings suggest that national lockdown restrictions had adverse impacts on young people's wellbeing. Children and parents discussed the impact of missing out on milestone events they had been planning for (such as examinations) or had goals aligned to (such as sporting competitions). Missing milestone events are not exclusive to this sample; O'Sullivan et al. (2021) reported that Irish adolescents mourned the cancellation of events and parents commented on the disruption that cancelled events had on children's routines.

A frequently used term by participants to describe lockdown during the interviews was *boring*. Reasons for this are likely to be multifaceted, but often included the lack of interaction with friends, not being able to participate in leisure activities, or leave their homes. Other research has commented on the lack of freedom and feeling of entrapment at home expressed by children (McKinlay et al., 2022; O'Sullivan et al., 2021). Whilst considering the experiences of CYP in lockdown, it is important to recognise that individual experiences of lockdown, and returning back to normal, will be different. In addition, there will have been both positive and negative impacts during and after lockdown on children's lives as demonstrated by the theme 'positive impacts of lockdown'. Here, children enjoyed time away from the social structures of school and developed an appreciation for what was once their usual leisure activities. The return to normal was both stressful and a relief for many.

Conclusion

This study aimed to give CYP a voice to widen the discussion of children's experiences of lockdown. The focus on leisure was to provide a narrative beyond the associations between the impacts of Covid-19 on education (Holt & Murray, 2021). Here the national lockdown had a significant impact on participants' lives, including their ability to engage in leisure activities, with supporting literature highlighting the prevalence of loneliness amongst CYP. Changes and disruptions to regular routines can also precipitate poor wellbeing and mental health for children (Drouin et al., 2020; Mantovani et al., 2021; McArthur et al., 2021). It should be noted, however, that this study is limited by a homogeneous sample of White British children who rate their socioeconomic status mid-high on the MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status. Thus, future research should seek to understand the experiences of those with differing ethnicities and families with a low socio-economic status. For these children, leisure-less lives may be the norm outside of lockdown. Research focusing on this issue is particularly important considering research relating to Covid-19, lockdowns and children has suggested exacerbation of existing inequalities (Chzhen, 2020). Nevertheless, the findings of this study have implications for policy, educators, and parents, whereby encouraging leisure and sporting activities post lockdown could mitigate poor wellbeing and loneliness in children (McKinlay et al., 2022).

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Disclosure statement

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Notes on contributors

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