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Children's chatter: Daily reflections of young children during covid-19 lockdown

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Abstract

Adults perceive the world using existing knowledge and experience (Gregory, 1970). However, adults may then impose their perspectives onto their children, whilst failing to understand the world through their child's eyes (Christakis, 2017). This qualitative study provides an exploratory insight into the perspectives of nineteen children, aged 7-11 years, during the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic lockdown in the UK, when national restrictions on movement and online learning for all children were mandatory. Over a 10-day period, parents asked their children four short open questions at the end of each day: 1) 'What was the best thing that happened today?', 2) 'What was your least favourite part of today?', 3) 'What did you learn today that you didn't know yesterday?', and 4) 'What made you smile or laugh today?' Parents were specifically asked to make no mention of lockdown or school or virus (Covid-19). Thematic analysis revealed the importance of technology (both for online lessons, social communication, and recreation), proximity to family (parents and siblings), time with pets, and joint pastimes (walking, cooking, creative arts). This study provides insight into the world in which children were living and coping with the challenges of a lockdown during a national crisis and provides alternative methods for obtaining and evaluating qualitative data within a population of young children.

Keywords: child perspective; lockdown; qualitative; school; family

Ethics approval: The study has received ethical approval from the Science Ethics Review Panel at the University of Central Lancashire (Ref: SCIENCE 0100).

Introduction

The coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic has provided unprecedented opportunities to consider the impact of sudden and widespread changes in society on the lives of children and young people. Evidence from past health-related crises indicate reduction in mental health and wellbeing as a result of the perceived threat of a virus, confusion, disruption, and isolation (Sprang & Silman, 2013). It was predicted that changes to lifestyle in the Covid-19 pandemic, including school closures, lack of outdoor activity, and disrupted dietary and sleeping habits, could potentially promote negative outcomes as a result of distress and frustration (Ghosh et al., 2020).

Just prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, a qualitative study undertaken by the UK Office of National Statistics (ONS) considered the views of young people, aged 10-15, to determine factors considered important for happiness and well-being. Emergent themes included: Supportive family relationships and quality family time; friendships and time with friends; and relationships with pets (ONS, 2020). Similarly, good social relationships and support networks via parents, other children, siblings, and educators, have been also associated with stronger childhood resilience (Sameroff & Rosenblum, 2006). Comparisons of these previous findings in relation to the Covid-19 lockdowns can help validate supportive factors of wellbeing in younger populations and inform interventions, if required, to support post-COVID recovery.

Early studies relating to Covid-19 pandemic outcomes show that the direct impact of lockdown on the mental health and wellbeing of children has been mixed and research studies are beginning to highlight the reasons as to why some families coped more successfully than others.

Morgul et al. (2020) conducted a UK online survey of 927 caregivers with children aged between 5 and 11 years. More use of screens and less physical activity

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was reported, along with frequent symptoms of boredom (73.8%), loneliness (64.5%), and frustration (61.4%). Consistent with the recognised association between parental mental health and poor child outcomes (Leijdesdorff et al., 2017), the caregiver level of psychological distress was also significantly related to child symptoms of emotional disturbance during the pandemic (Morgul et al., 2020). Similar studies have revealed stress to be a mediator for the longitudinal effects of lockdown (Achterberg et al., 2021), although raised levels of anxiety in young people have been accompanied by increased appreciation of family time (Levita et al., 2020).

Mantovani et al. (2021) conducted an online survey, completed by 3,443 families in Italy. Again, findings were mixed. In the case of younger children, over 72% of parents reported noticing distress due to no longer being allowed to socialise with peers. However, there were observations of unexpected improvements in parent/child (40.8%) and sibling relationships (32.8%), adaptiveness, and autonomy on the part of children. Over 80% of respondents stated that their children had simply 'accepted the restrictions' imposed by the lockdown (Mantovani et al., 2021).

The University College London (UCL) Covid-19 Social Study, conducted throughout the pandemic in the UK, suggests that people without prior mental health conditions, living with children or others and less affected by the economic and social restrictions (higher incomes and able to work from home), were more likely to have reported enjoying their first lockdown experience (UCL News, 26th June, 2020). Having an enforced distance from work or school may have helped some parents to step back and evaluate their interests, beliefs, and values (Symonds, 2020). Also, the use of mediated communication, such as video calling with friends and family, has also been related to higher levels of wellbeing (Brown & Greenfield, 2021). This again corroborates findings that those who are less affected by economic and social

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restrictions and who are technologically able and have sufficient resources, were able to find compensatory ways to maintain social contact when in-person contact was not possible. This availability of resources, such as technology for communication with teachers, family, and peers, is therefore likely to impact on future child outcomes from imposed lockdown.

The findings from emerging qualitative data around the world indicates that although people were disturbed by the virus, parents managed to stay positive and took the opportunity to engage in more quality time with their children, provide more educational scaffolding, imparting social skills, exploring new enrichment activities, and sharing responsibilities (e.g., Simbarashe & Zirima, 2020; Vaterlaus et al., 2021).

However, in most published studies, the views of younger children have not been sought directly and the impact of the pandemic has been represented via their caregivers. As adults, we perceive the world using our existing knowledge and experience (Gregory, 1970) and then use this information to interpret our world (e.g., Covid-19 news, notions of education, etc.). This raises the risk of adult perspectives and preconceived notions being imposed onto children, whilst failing to understand the world through their eyes (Christakis, 2017). As a consequence, children's behaviour may be under- or misrepresented and seen as merely imitative of adults' behaviour and perspectives.

De Souza et al. (2020) conducted an online qualitative study with 10 children, aged 7-10 years, living in Brazil. Two generative themes developed: Positive points which included more time with the family, strengthening family ties, proximity to pets, and self-care; and negative points which included not being able to play with friends, unable to hug or celebrate birthdays. Alter et al. (2020) also took a qualitative approach to learn about the experience of 50 children aged 3-6 directly after lockdown. Three

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themes emerged: The role of siblings (substitute for friends, initiating games with younger siblings), helping parents (physically and emotionally), and being alone (learning to occupy themselves more).

Our study aimed to further explore the subjective experiences of young children directly during a lockdown period, using a qualitative approach. It was important to the authors that the children were at the centre of the data gathering, allowing them to reflect their interests and express their subjective views on their lived experience, using an appropriate method to both empower their rights but, at the same time, not influence their opinions (Freeman & Mathison, 2009).

The way that adults talk about experiences, or the narratives used to make sense of the world are important to a child's perception (Fisher, 2020). Children bring together events in their lives with their own reactions to create narratives to help make sense of the world and move towards psychological integrations (Siegal, 2015). With this understanding, the authors did not want to use an approach which might influence the responses and narratives. Consequently, caregivers were asked to not mention Covid-19, lockdown, or school, allowing children to express their own subjective views on their experiences of each day.

Research Aim

The study focused on the child's perspective during lockdown with no explicit mention of lockdown or school or virus. The aim of the study was to provide an exploratory analysis of patterns in language and emotions in order to provide an unprompted child's perspective during a time of national crisis.

Methodology

Design

A cross-sectional qualitative interview study was conducted by parents with their children. The data were collected across 10 working days during the Covid-19 lockdown in February 2021. Note, in the UK, national restrictions were imposed on 6th January 2021, and all schools and colleges moved to remote learning. Individuals were only allowed to leave home to shop for basic necessities, exercise outside the home was limited to the immediate household (or support bubble) once per day and travelling outside the local area was not permitted. Schools reopened on 8th March 2021.

Sample

An opportunity sample of parents and their children (aged 7-11 years), were contacted via university staff contacts and via social media. Responses over 10-days from 19 children were received which resulted in 745 separate responses (including 'don't knows'). All children regularly attended school prior to the pandemic but no further information relating to online school timetables or household structure was collected.

Measures and Procedure

On receipt of consent forms from both a parent and child, parents were provided with instructions to complete the study. Parents were asked to ask their child four open questions. The four items were simply worded without any reference to schoolwork, Covid-19 virus, or lockdown. Parents were instructed to ask the questions before bedtime for two weeks (excluding weekends). They were also instructed not to make suggestions or prompts and to record their child's exact responses.

Questions:

'What was the best thing that happened today?'

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‘What was your least favourite part of today?’

‘What did you learn today that you didn't know yesterday?’

‘What made you smile or laugh today?’

Parents noted down their child's answer immediately (paper or electronic). No recording was required as the process was intended to be as natural as possible without any academic formality (recording devices, Likert scales, etc.).

Before submission of responses, parents were asked to remove any names or personal information to ensure anonymity. It was also requested that, before submission, parents ask again, in age-appropriate language, if the child was happy for their responses to be entered into the study.

Data Analysis

The engagement of both authors with a background in qualitative research, ensured rigor, with independent and co-operative discussion at all stages of the data analysis process. Responses were transferred verbatim from parental response sheets into Microsoft Excel with removal of any identification (for example pet and sibling names). Using an inductive approach, a step-by-step thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was conducted. After familiarisation with the dataset, a set of initial codes were generated for each of the four questions, using colour-coding within the data spreadsheet. Separate codes were then sorted into potential themes and sub-themes. Each theme was reviewed, and some themes were removed (for example, if responses were too diverse), or collapsed into each other (for example, topics learnt via online schooling). Final themes were defined, and overarching names were designated.

Results

Responses were transcribed word for word and analysed using qualitative techniques. After removal of all superfluous words, leaving keywords from each of the 745 responses, a frequency analysis for each question was conducted and represented by word clouds via Edwordle.net (Figure 1).

<<FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE>>

This was followed by a more in-depth thematic analysis, paying greater attention to the qualitative aspects of the material.

Question 1. 'What was the best thing that happened today?'

Five themes emerged from this question (from 180 responses): 1) computer gaming, 2) being outside, 3) family and friends, 4) food and drink, and 5) creative activities (Table 1).

Computer gaming platforms, rather than use of computers for school or direct contact were mentioned on many occasions (21 responses) and, indeed, a couple of families bought new gaming equipment during this study. The games were played online with friends and together with family and the devices were used as a focus with which to socialise and meet friends and family.

Outdoor activities took place generally once a day and was a time to enjoy with family, especially when they met with friends or wider family (albeit at a distance) (30 responses). It is notable that the study took place in February, so time outside may have been limited due to inclement weather conditions.

Time with family, especially mothers, and friends was an important focus for the children (40 responses), and this socialisation became incorporated with their

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enjoyment of food (23 responses) or creative activities (24 responses). Food was seen as a time when families came together for dinner or takeaway treats. Participation in a range of creative pursuits, either as a part of schoolwork or family-generated, were also widely noted as favourite activities, often conducted with parents and siblings.

<<TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE>>

Question 2. 'What was your least favourite part of today?'

The most popular response to this question was 'Don't know', 'nothing', 'it was a good day' or 'bedtime'. In addition, three themes (from 202 comments) emerged from this question: 1) schoolwork-related, 2) family, and 3) boredom (Table 2).

Much of the daytime activity for the children was taken up with online schoolwork and, alongside enjoyable activities, some lessons were considered boring or difficult, or technological difficulties arose (56 responses). Family frustrations due to availability of parents to support or 'annoying' siblings were evident (11 responses). Boredom was also indicated (16 responses) and, whilst Covid-19 was specifically mentioned only once, there were indirect indications of the children's lockdown situation (e.g., missing friends, stuck inside).

<<TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE>>

Question 3. 'What did you learn today that you didn't know yesterday?'

This question received the largest number of diverse comments (from 154 responses). Children all attended lessons online each day and their responses reflected the topics they had been learning each day. Emergent themes could be divided into 1) schoolwork: maths or science (33 responses) and other lessons (44 responses), and 2) non-schoolwork: outside (10 responses) and inside activities (34 responses) (Table 3).

<<TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE>>

Question 4. 'What made you smile or laugh today?'

Four themes emerged from this question (from 174 responses): 1) parents, 2) siblings, 3) pets, and 4) computers and TV (Table 4). Pets (16 responses), siblings (15 responses), and parents (41 responses) were all strongly represented within this category and the children enjoyed going into detail about funny incidents that had occurred each day. Computers (games, incidents online at school) and TV programmes were also often discussed (31 responses).

<<TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE>>

Discussion

This exploratory study revealed a range of themes in relation to young children's perspectives of their lives during a national crisis. Unsurprisingly, given the nature of the questions, all the children were generally positive, and their responses were focused on day-to-day activities rather than the wider world. As reported by Mantovani et al. (2021), children generally accepted the restrictions and adapted to their imposed lockdown.

Family relationships emerged as significant in the responses to all four questions. Mothers, in particular, played a prominent role both in relation to support and administration of schoolwork, participation in creative activities and organisation of family life. Other family members, such as fathers and siblings were mentioned more in relation to quality family time, such as excursions outside, playing on computer games and other activities. Similarly, other studies have emphasised the effect of lockdown on the strengthening of family ties (Alter et al., 2020; de Souza, 2020; Levita et al., 2020;

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Mantovani et al., 2021) and the imparting of new social skills and exploration of new enrichment activities (Simbarashe & Zirima, 2020; Vaterlaus et al., 2021).

As also noted by de Souza et al. (2020), relationships with family pets were mentioned often (both cats and dogs). Relationships with pets has been found to be supportive of wellbeing prior to lockdown (ONS, 2020b), with pets providing something positive to focus on and a source of support, comfort, and reassurance (ONS, 2020b). Our findings confirm this importance, with pets maybe acting as substitute friends, helping to alleviate boredom and loneliness.

Use of technology emerged throughout the study in relation to online schooling, gaming, watching TV and social contact with family and friends. Whilst Morgul et al. (2020) implied increased use of screens as a 'bad' outcome, the use of mediated communication, such as video calling with friends and family, has been shown to be related to higher levels of wellbeing during lockdown (Brown & Greenfield, 2021). This study confirms the widespread use of technology to alleviate boredom and maintain social relationships, alongside online schooling.

Covid-19 was mentioned very little (twice), although its impact was implicitly indicated within the themes of schooling online, missing friends, lack of physical contact with wider family and boredom. Similar to the findings of de Souza (2020), parents, siblings, pets and technology were perhaps 'filling the gaps', allowing children to develop coping strategies and build resilience against negative outcomes.

The current study has limitations. Differences in cultural backgrounds and family structure (for example, sibling relationships, keyworker status, family bereavement) were not specifically identified. The impact of family circumstances on both child outcomes and parental mental health (and subsequent reflection in the child's responses) could therefore not be ascertained.

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The study was conducted during the second full school closure period in the UK. As a result, parents and children had experienced online schooling and home working previously and therefore the impact of the situation may not have been as great as the first lockdown. In addition, no specific information from parents in relation to access to technology and the organisation of online teaching was obtained.

Although not specifically asked, the families in our sample were likely to be more privileged compared to the average UK family, and parents were more likely to have sufficient resources to cope with the situation (technology, access to books, working conditions, etc.). This again corroborates the findings of the UCL Covid-19 Social Study (UCL, 2020) in that those who are less affected by economic and social restrictions were able to find compensatory ways to maintain social contact when in-person contact is not possible. Finally, children may have been reluctant to express their true feelings in their responses for fear of upsetting their parents.

However, given the limitations above, parents indicated that they had enjoyed taking part in the study and some continued with the questions after the study period, as they felt the process had established a good routine for both themselves and their child. The methodology used was simple and effective, putting both the parent and their child at the centre of the data collection. This enabled potential ethical and practical issues to be overcome and qualitative data to be obtained without the direct involvement of the research team. In addition, at the time of data collection, there was little published research in this area, with themes emerging without prior knowledge of the findings of other studies, further supporting this novel approach. Our findings have allowed the voices of young children to be heard, providing us with a valuable insight into a child's perspective from the heart of a national crisis.

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Table 1

Themes and associated illustrative quotes for Question 1: 'What was the best thing that happened today?'

Theme	Illustrative Quotes
Computer Gaming	<p><i>Playing Roblox with my friend.</i></p> <p><i>Playing monopoly (on Nintendo switch with family).</i></p> <p><i>Playing Splatoon with daddy.</i></p>
Going outside (walking, biking)	<p><i>Waving at friends in the park.</i></p> <p><i>Bike ride with daddy.</i></p> <p><i>Nanny came and sat in the garden for a cup of tea.</i></p>
Family and friends	<p><i>That you (mum) weren't at work and could help me with my schoolwork.</i></p> <p><i>Dancing with my mum at dinner time.</i></p> <p><i>Seeing nanny through the window was the best.</i></p>
Food and Drink	<p><i>When we all came down and ate dinner together.</i></p> <p><i>Daddy made me hot chocolate.</i></p> <p><i>That we had proper pizza for tea. It was well yummy.</i></p>
Creative Pursuits	<p><i>When we made an elephant with a milk bottle that was so good mum.</i></p> <p><i>Building a robot out of cardboard boxes with mum.</i></p> <p><i>When we designed our own cinema at home.</i></p>

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Table 2

Themes and associated illustrative quotes for Question 2: 'What was your least favourite part of today?'

Theme	Illustrative Quotes
Schoolwork	<i>Listening to my teacher read a story, it was a bit boring.</i> <i>Having to do work this morning when I was watching Horrid Henry on the settee, cosy.</i> <i>Trying to do the origami crane for art. It was too hard.</i>
Family	<i>Mummy doing meetings.</i> <i>That daddy is in isolation so I can't see him.</i> <i>Not having my friends to play with just brother who only wants to play cars and I don't want to always play cars.</i>
Boredom	<i>That I felt sad as I miss playing with my friends.</i> <i>Sitting in one place.</i> <i>Doing work and stuck in covid with nothing to do.</i>

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Table 3

Themes and associated illustrative quotes for Question 3: 'What did you learn today that you didn't know yesterday?'

Theme	Illustrative Quotes
Schoolwork – Maths and Science	<p><i>I learnt how to divide numbers by fractions.</i></p> <p><i>About decimal points with mummy.</i></p> <p><i>That people will be flying to different planets when I get older.</i></p>
Schoolwork – Other	<p><i>All about mosques and that you have to take your shoes off.</i></p> <p><i>Using more adjectives can make writing more interesting.</i></p> <p><i>I learnt that romans washed their faces in wee and they eat flamingos too.</i></p>
Non-schoolwork – Outside	<p><i>That it is not good to play football on wet ground.</i></p> <p><i>That squirrels pinch bird seeds.</i></p> <p><i>If you use both brakes, you need to lean back or you go over the front.</i></p>
Non-schoolwork – inside	<p><i>I learnt how to make a paper aeroplane at my brownie zoom club.</i></p> <p><i>How pizzas are made in Italy. Dad put a video on that showed us. I didn't know they go so close to the fire inside.</i></p> <p><i>Not to try and use Mums straighteners without her there.</i></p>

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Table 4

Themes and associated illustrative quotes for Question 4: ‘What made you smile or laugh today?’

Theme	Illustrative Quotes
Parents	<p><i>Mum singing while she was cooking tea.</i></p> <p><i>When dad called Boris Johnson Bojo, that was so funny.</i></p> <p><i>When I fell over doing gallops and you (mum) ran and nearly fell over too so we had to just stay still and laugh for 5 mins.</i></p>
Siblings	<p><i>When I played on the trampoline with my brother.</i></p> <p><i>My sister did as she was in a funny mood and kept trying to get everyone to laugh by playing funny faces.</i></p> <p><i>When my baby sister was trying to copy me dancing, it was really funny</i></p>
Pets	<p><i>***** (the cat) meowing while daddy was in a meeting.</i></p> <p><i>Playing tug-of-war with ***** (dog) with his ragger.</i></p> <p><i>Watching ***** (dog) run around when we went for a walk.</i></p>
Computers and TV	<p><i>Chatting to my friends on my Xbox.</i></p> <p><i>When the girls prank backfired (on telly).</i></p> <p><i>At the end of playing (video game), me and my friends all went on a drone together – this super speed car.</i></p>