

Rt Hon Gavin Williamson MP
Secretary of State for Education

Dear Mr Williamson,

Play First: Supporting Children's Social and Emotional Wellbeing During and After Lockdown

We first wrote to you on 6th May 2020 as part of the #playfirst campaign to ask that children's social and emotional wellbeing be prioritised during the easing of the first lockdown. The campaign attracted a lot of media attention and support from the public as well as officials across the four nations. We were pleased to see the Government's position that schools should be last to close and first to open. Nevertheless, nine months later, children are still living under Covid-19 restrictions which prevent them from spending time playing with friends. Despite the positive impact of our campaign, over the past year we have seen unprecedented increases in children's mental health problems¹ as well as decreases in physical activity², increases in loneliness³ and reduced academic motivation⁴. As experts in children's mental health and development we write again to urge the Government to **prioritise children's social and emotional wellbeing in all decisions related to the easing of lockdown restrictions and children's education.**

We would specifically like to make the following evidence-based recommendations:

1. The easing of lockdown restrictions should be done in a way that provides all children with the time and opportunity to play with peers as soon as possible. In Scotland, children under 12 are exempt from the two-person rule, meaning that children are still able to socialise and play with their peers. We recommend that, as soon as it is possible to do so, this exemption be extended to all UK children and then to adolescents. During childhood and adolescence, social and emotional skills develop rapidly.⁵⁻⁶ This development relies on children interacting and playing with their peers and being exposed to a broad range of experiences. The longer that children are isolated, the more likely it is that their typical development will be affected. It is therefore wholly justifiable that children's social interaction be prioritised before adult social interaction.
2. Pressure on schools to ensure that children 'catch-up' academically must be eased and, instead, schools should be given guidance and resources that will allow them to focus first on children's social and emotional wellbeing. There is understandable concern about children's education but children will not learn effectively if their mental health is poor.^{7,8} The Government must honour the commitment they have made to children's mental health⁹, which is more important now than ever. Social interaction, play, physical activity and good mental health needs to come first. We wholeheartedly support Sir Kevan Collins' call for play, music, drama and sport for children and urge you to ensure that these activities are given protected time and allocated resources as children transition back to school.
3. This spring and summer should not be filled with extra lessons; children, teachers and parents need time and space to recover from the stress that the past year has placed on them.¹⁰ As part of a wider recovery process, children should be encouraged and supported to spend time outdoors, playing with other children and being physically active. Where it is needed, evidence-based mental health support must be made available. This is not an either-or decision; social connection and play offer myriad learning opportunities and are positively associated with children's academic attainment and literacy¹¹⁻¹⁴.

We recognise that these are complex decisions and there are many views to take into consideration but we urge you to give children's emotional wellbeing and mental health the priority it deserves when policy decisions are made in the coming weeks and months; poor emotional health in children leads to long term mental health problems, poorer educational attainment and has a considerable economic burden.¹⁵ Give children time to play.

Yours sincerely,



Prof Helen Dodd (University of Reading) on behalf of @playfirstuk: Prof Sam Cartwright-Hatton, Dr Kathryn Lester, Prof Robin Banerjee, Prof Alison Pike, Prof Nicola Yuill and Alison Lacey (University of Sussex); Dr Jenny Gibson and Prof Paul Ramchandani (University of Cambridge); Rachel Hurding (The Ellis C of E Primary School, Barnsley); Dr Maria Loades (University of Bath); Dr James Murray (Guernsey CAMHS); Prof Shirley Reynolds (University of Reading); Dr Wendy Russell (University of Gloucestershire); Zoe Singh (Lydgate Infant School, Sheffield),

Supporting evidence

- ¹ <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/2020-wave-1-follow-up>
- ² <https://bmcpublichealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12889-020-09429-3>
- ³ Ellis WE, Dumas TM, Forbes LM. Physically isolated but socially connected: Psychological adjustment and stress among adolescents during the initial COVID-19 crisis. *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science/Revue canadienne des sciences du comportement*. 2020;52(3):177. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cbs0000215>
- ⁴ <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.592670/full>
- ⁵ Denham, S., von Salisch, M., Olthof, T., Kochanoff, A., & Caverly, S. (2002). Emotional and social development in childhood. *Blackwell handbook of childhood social development*, 307-328. <https://gacbe.ac.in/images/E%20books/Blackwell%20Handbook%20of%20Childhood%20Social%20Development.pdf#page=1>
- ⁶ Blakemore S. J. (2012). Development of the social brain in adolescence. *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 105(3), 111–116. <https://doi.org/10.1258/jrsm.2011.110221>
- ⁷ Wickersham, A., Sugg, H. V., Epstein, S., Stewart, R., Ford, T., & Downs, J. (2020). Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis: The Association Between Child and Adolescent Depression and Later Educational Attainment. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaac.2020.10.008>
- ⁸ Agnafors, S., Barmark, M., & Sydsjö, G. (2020). Mental health and academic performance: a study on selection and causation effects from childhood to early adulthood. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00127-020-01934-5>
- ⁹ Department of Health and Social Care and Department of Education, 2017. Transforming children and young people's mental health provision: a green paper. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/transforming-children-and-young-peoples-mental-health-provision-a-green-paper>
- ¹⁰ <https://cospaceoxford.org/findings/changes-in-parents-mental-health-symptoms-and-stressors-jan-2021/>
- ¹¹ Wentzel, K. R., Jablansky, S., & Scalise, N. R. (2021). Peer social acceptance and academic achievement: A meta-analytic study. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 113(1), 157–180. <https://doi.org/10.1037/edu0000468>
- ¹² Jenny L. Gibson , Dianne F. Newbury , Kevin Durkin , Andrew Pickles , GinaConti-Ramsden & Umar Toseeb (2020): Pathways from the early language and communication environment to literacy outcomes at the end of primary school; the roles of language development and social development, *Oxford Review of Education*, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2020.1824902>
- ¹³ Quinn, S., Donnelly, S., & Kidd, E. (2018). The relationship between symbolic play and language acquisition: a meta-analytic review. *Developmental review*, 49, 121-135. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dr.2018.05.005>
- ¹⁴ Whitebread, D., Neale, D., Jensen, H., Liu, C., Solis, S. L., Hopkins, E., ... & Zosh, J. (2017). *The role of play in children's development: a review of the evidence*. LEGO Foundation. https://www.legofoundation.com/media/1065/play-types-development-review_web.pdf
- ¹⁵ Layard, R., Clark, A. E., Cornaglia, F., Powdthavee, N., & Vernoit, J. (2014). What predicts a successful life? A life-course model of well-being. *Economic journal*, 124(580), F720–F738. <https://doi.org/10.1111/eoj.12170>