

## **Insights: How have the pandemic related school closures affected our children?**

with Birgitta Rabe and Tom McBride

Catherine McDonald

Hello and welcome to episode six of the new podcast series from Understanding Society, the academic study that captures life in the UK in the 21st century. Understanding Society is a longitudinal survey. Every year, we question every member of thousands of the same households across the UK about key areas of their life. In each episode of this. In this series, we're exploring how our data has been used in a key area. We're looking at what it's told us when analysed and what it's informed as a result. I'm Catherine MacDonald, your series host. In this episode, we're focusing on education and how children and parents have been affected by the closure of schools during the COVID 19 lockdowns. My first guest is Professor Birgitta Rabe from the Institute of Social and Economic Research at the University of Essex. My second is Tom McBride, director of evidence at the Early Intervention Foundation. I began by asking Birgitta how she conducted her research.

Birgitta Rabe

We used the Understanding Society study and importantly the COVID 19 survey, which was set up in rocket speed right at the beginning of the pandemic. And that enabled our team to look at mental health of children before and during the pandemic. And this is exactly where other teams struggle, because a lot of surveys were set up during the pandemic, but we have no pre measures, so we don't know how mental health changed and we're in a unique position with our survey to do just that. So what we did in our study, we looked at school closures, obviously, and as parents, we all remember that from 23rd March 2020, schools were suddenly closed. And then in England, in June 2020, the government issued guidance to open primary schools for some year groups. Those were reception and year one, so the very youngest in primary school and also year six, the ones that were getting ready to go to secondary school, they were prioritised to come back for six weeks until the start of the holidays. So that allows us to compare the mental health of children who were and were not prioritised to have an extra six weeks of schooling.

Catherine

And how did you measure mental health?

Birgitta

The way we measure mental health is through the so called Strength and Difficulty Questionnaire. And this is a screening tool that measures the emotional and behavioural difficulties that children have.

Catherine

And what did you find?

Birgitta

We found that the mental health effect of school closures was large and quite strikingly so. We found that over five domains added upscore of total difficulties, both by two. So this means that a child, for example, who was not fidgeting ever before the pandemic now started fidgeting all the time. Or to give another example of a behaviour, a child who never had tantrums before the pandemic now seemed to be having it all the time. That's about the extent of the change. We can also compare this to learning loss, because there are first assessments of the learning loss in year two. By the autumn term of 2021 was 15% of a standard deviation. And we find that the rise in mental health problems is more than twice as big as that. So this is a first indication that possibly the mental health toll of the pandemic has been bigger than the toll on the learning.

Catherine

And did those results differ by gender?

Birgitta

We weren't able yet to look in much detail at it, but first analysis indicates that boys were more heavily affected, especially in the hyperactivity domain. So anything to do with what I just mentioned, the fidgeting and things like those, it seems that boys suffered more from that. And we have first indications that possibly the girls actually had improved mental health in one domain, which is the peer domain, indicating that maybe some of the pressures of schools went away when the children were not at school.

Catherine

And were you able to get a sense of how long the negative effect on mental health might last?

Birgitta

Yeah, so that's a really interesting aspect of this and quite worrisome as well, I'm afraid to say. We were able to look at mental health again at the end of September in 2020. So this was after the summer holidays and we see that the differences between the children who did and did not have the opportunity to go to school for an extra six weeks still lasted until that end of September. So even when they were back at school for four weeks, those summer differences were still visible. And this indicates for us that just going back to school doesn't suggest there will be any automatic recovery. We think that you need to give other types of support other than just slotting back into the school day to help children catch up. And obviously in our study we can only look at this six week difference in school received. So we don't know the effect of these repeated school closures that we have seen over the past 18 months. And we don't know whether those negative effects might just be cumulative or are they exacerbating over time? We don't know that. But there is cause for concern there, obviously.

Catherine

And it is a real cause for concern, isn't it? Because as you say, you were able to compare those years that went back for that six weeks against those who didn't. But we all know that the majority of children have missed out on some schooling across the lockdown. So we're talking about something that's going to have affected most children, aren't we?

Birgitta

Yes, absolutely. I mean, all children miss some school and I think the cumulated number of weeks, I don't know off the top of my head, but I think it's something like 18 weeks. So much more than what we're looking at. And I think one important thing is that obviously we are worried about mental health. It's something that we don't like seeing. It's an aim in its own right for children to have a good mental health. But we also know from the way that children learn that having a healthy mind is really important for educational catch up, because you can't learn if you have mental difficulties. So if we're looking at a catch up now, recovery from the pandemic, looking at mental health is really central to that.

Catherine

Yes. And your findings also demonstrated though, didn't they, that school provides so much more than an education. It's all about the social aspect and many more things.

Birgitta

Yeah. This is something, you know, a broader view on schools that I think has been highlighted by the pandemic, that we can see that school is really important for daily physical exercise, it's important for eating meals, eating healthy meals that comply to school food standards and as you say, for socialising, for interacting, for practising interactions and all of that. I think the pandemic has really highlighted that and schools need support to be able to do all of that.

Catherine

Now you also looked at learning loss by comparing lockdowns one and two. Again, what did you find there for learning loss?

Birgitta

We were looking at the different inputs that were being given into learning because you have to think of this, of not just the children learning, but you obviously also have the parents helping with, with distance learning and then you have the schools that need to provide the resources for families to be able to learn. So what we looked at was the different inputs given by schools and children and parents. One thing that we found was that schools in their offering of online and offline lessons offered quite a bit less at the beginning of the pandemic, when everyone was still figuring out what to do. And by the time of the second school closure, there was a legal obligation to provide remote education resources. And we find that that actually did have bite. There's a large increase in both online live real time lessons and also offline materials giving to children both in primary and secondary school. And it was quite interesting for us to also see that the school materials offered did not really correlate with any of the school characteristics that we were able to look at. For example, we looked at the offset scores, the type of schools, were they academies or local authority maintained schools, and was it a deprived intake of students or not? And none of these things really had a large bearing on how many lessons were offered, both online and offline. And that sheds an interesting light on schools and on the role of school leadership, really. We speculate that it must have been the initiative of the school leadership that has led to children having different experiences in different schools.

Catherine

And were there identifiable circumstances for children at home which seemed to determine who was able to do better at home learning?

Birgitta

Well, this has often in the discussion there was often an assumption that children from deprived backgrounds weren't getting as much input. But looking just at the time spent by parents and children, we don't find that to be the case. Especially for parents, we do find they spend more time with younger children, which is kind of what you would expect. Younger children need more one to one help to actually stay focused and all of that. We didn't find any systematic differences by whether the households were the parents were highly educated or from high income groups. None of that was present. And this was quite surprising for us looking at the children more time. Older students were able to work longer than younger and girls, interestingly, were working more than boys. And here we found some small differences in children from high income and high educating households working more. But it wasn't a stark difference.

And another really interesting thing I thought was we also have information about additional learning resources, and these are learning resources that are not provided by schools, but that families seek out on the web or wherever they can get hold of them. And we have information about how much these were being used. And we see that especially in the first lockdown, a large proportion of families were looking for resources. So they weren't getting them from the schools in some cases that much. But we find that more than 60% of primary school families were looking for free resources elsewhere. And this then declined by the second lockdown when the schools were doing more. And similarly in secondary schools we find more than around 50% using them. And that declined by the second school closure.

And again, we don't find a big difference by family background and whether people were using or not using those resources. And that really paints a picture of families reacting quite flexibly to the situation, finding their own materials when they weren't provided and then using the school materials once those were coming forward and actually spending more time than by the second lockdown, which was exactly the intention of the legal mandate to provide resources. And none of this vary so much by family background.

So if it is true, and I think some evidence is already coming through looking at the outcomes of children, if it's true that children from more deprived backgrounds have worse learning loss than the more affluent children, then we think this is not because families didn't try or didn't want to engage. This is not what our research shows at all. We think it must be more to do with the structural situation that families are in, so forth. Example, the much discussed issue with accessing IT resources. Do children have their own laptop to work on or none at all, or sharing with other people? Do they have a quiet study space? Do they even have a desk to sit at? These kinds of things might be more important as well as where you live. So the days of school missed, obviously were much higher in the north of England, where infection rates were higher and so school people were home quarantining more often in all of this. So we think it's other factors and it's not the families.

Catherine

It's interesting you mentioned boys because they fared worse on both counts, haven't they, that you. You mentioned that they had suffered more from a mental health point of view and that they also found home learning harder.

Birgitta

Yeah, we found they were spending less time working at home, but we also found that when the resources were increased by the second time the schools were closed, that boys really benefited from online live lessons. So they found their own time studying increased a lot when they were given online life lessons to attend. And I think there's just a lesson there that, you know, this is a good thing, especially for boys, and that equalised the difference between girls and boys quite well.

Catherine

Now, you also looked at the effect school closures had on parents. What did you see there?

Birgitta

Well, we were interested in school closures because a lot of papers have come out showing how the pandemic overall all led to a decline in mental health amongst adults, amongst women in particular. But there was nothing about what school closures in particular did to the mental health of parents. And we might think that school closures are important because the burden of the home learning that we just talked about is quite large. The confusion around how do you work all the different systems online, the bickering potentially of children being sat at home all day long, it's quite stressful. And it also might affect the ability of parents to work when you have the children at home. So this is why we wanted to look at school closures. And we used the same difference in the ability to return to school in the summer 2020 as we did for children's mental health. And our findings are quite striking in that we find this big difference between mothers and fathers. We find a quite substantial decline in mental health for mothers, but not for fathers. Fathers seem largely unaffected by the school closures themselves. Then drilling down a little bit deeper and why that might be, we found that the decline in mothers mental health was not affected by their ability to work or to work more hours as much as loneliness. Loneliness increased alongside the school closures. So it might be the lack of socialising around school, school, peers, school runs, all of that might be driving the worst mental health amongst mothers.

Catherine

So, moving on to look at impact. So who's listened to and used this research so far? Both the mental health research and the learning loss research.

Birgitta

Oh, this has been really interesting and varied. To see who is picking up on the research, we have been cited in the Children's Society's the Good Childhood Report and in other Government reports as well. We have been asked by the American Chamber of Commerce in Cambodia to host a breakfast morning for their members, talking about the results because they are of interest to parents. And I guess our biggest and most exciting success has been our input into the vaccination decision, the

decision to vaccinate 12 to 15 year olds. For Covid, this came about, you may remember that the JCDI recommended not vaccinating children of that age group because they felt on ballast, the health benefits didn't outweigh the risk. Then the government asked the Chief Medical Officer for their opinion and they asked them to think a little bit more broadly about health. And this is exactly when the mental health then came in and the CMO recommended vaccination of 12 to 15 year olds because school closures would impact the mental health of children. And so it's important to prevent school closures at all costs, if you will. And we now find that more than 2 million children are eligible for the vaccine. And in the key published inputs to that decision, right at the top, we have our study cited because there aren't that many studies into this topic. And so we were obviously delighted to see our work have a real concrete impact on the lives of children, including some of our own in the team.

Catherine

And not only a concrete impact, but an impact that happens so fast. You know, when you think just how recent the researches and then already you've had a massive influence. That must feel amazing.

Birgitta

Yeah, that is amazing. And I have to say, you know, everyone is working at such high speed. The projects I've been talking about, they're both funded through rapid response calls. We have had to be really fast. The Understanding Society team, I have to stress this year again, they have been amazing in setting up a survey which went into the field in April, a brand new survey. This usually has years in lead up time and they had they basically a month and we're already running a module on homeschooling. They were so professional and responsive. And then our team as well, we were working flat out with children at home and trying to produce these results. And then, as you say, it's a big reward to see that this actually does improve hopefully the lives of people and that all that work was worth it in the end.

Catherine

So if you had to summarise your policy focused recommendations based on everything you've seen, both with the mental health research and the learning loss research, what would you be asking policymakers to focus on?

Birgitta

Well, my focus as an education researcher is on schools and I think what we have highlighted is the great importance of doing something about the mental health. We cannot just think that children go back to school and the mental health will cure itself. It will most likely not, according to our findings. So support is needed there and the research on learning loss. We also know that support in catch up for learning is needed. But maybe the recommendations are a little bit different than just to say we have to focus on disadvantaged families along the classical disadvantaged lines. Schools will obviously be assessing their students and finding out individually who has had the biggest learning loss. And we will learn about that over time. But what we, what we would recommend, according to our research, is that we learn the lessons from the pandemic. We give the type of support that we see is needed and this means providing high level of resources targeted to engage boys as well as girls and helping families use that support. They are willing and out there to engage and it just needs the right materials, the right type of communication and the right equipment for them to be able to do so. This would be.

Catherine

The Early Intervention foundation is a government what, work centre dedicated to ensuring that effective early intervention is available and used to support children and young people at risk of poor outcomes. I asked Tom McBride, their director of evidence, what that meant in practise.

Tom McBride

What that means in practise is that we generate evidence across a whole range of areas from the early years to mental health and wellbeing and childhood vulnerability, but then work very closely with

both central local government and other key stakeholders in this sector to Mobilise that evidence so it changes policy and practise.

Catherine

So, before we get into talking specifically about Birgitta's research, what has the Early Intervention foundation noted when it comes to children's experience of the pandemic?

Tom

That's a really interesting question, and I think we don't yet fully understand what impact the pandemic and lockdown has had on children and young people. But there's really powerful emerging evidence that has had strong impacts both on learning and mental health. And we need to really fully understand what those are and how they develop over time, but also think about what interventions and support is needed to help children who are experiencing those mental health difficulties or learning loss as a result of the pandemic.

Catherine

Particularly, I guess, because we're not sure we're out of the woods yet with regards to the pandemic, we can't be certain that there won't be further school closures, can we?

Tom

Absolutely. I've no insight here, but it seems to me that further lockdowns and school closures could be a feature of the landscape in the future. We obviously hope that's not the case and we hope that government will do all they can to keep schools and early years settings open, but we need to understand what impact this has had on children.

Catherine

So what's your response to Birgitta's findings that the mental health of children suffered significantly through the school closures?

Tom

I mean, this is fantastically important research. We really do need to understand fully what impact this has had, and it's only through analysis like this that we can really start to unpick what the mental health impacts have been. We can all hypothesise that school closures would have an impact on children's mental health, but it's only through research like this that we can understand what that impact has been, how quickly any deterioration in mental health rebounds as schools reopen, and if there's been differential impacts for subgroups within the population, perhaps by gender, ethnicity or age.

Catherine

Yes, because I think one of the things that struck me about Birgitte's research is the fact that the mental health didn't rebound very quickly, that the detrimental effects continued. That's quite concerning, isn't it?

Tom

Yes, it is, but it's hugely important that we understand that and how that changes over time. The policy response that is needed, obviously, is very different if we understand that children's mental health has deteriorated over the medium and long term as a result of school closures.

Catherine

And I think, for me, again, the other thing that the research highlighted is that for our children, school is about so much more than just learning. It's about the socialising, the healthy diet, the exercising. How do you react to that?

Tom

We know that school plays a hugely important role in the lives of children. And I think understanding that it's not just learning loss, but mental health, physical activity and so on and so forth has been impacted by school closures is not surprising, but it's very important to quantify that. As a parent myself, I really understood how much school meant to my children when they weren't able to go.

Catherine

So what can be done to get children's mental health back on track?

Tom

That's a really good question. Well, first and foremost, we need to understand the impact that lockdown has had on children's mental health. And this research is an important step on that. We also need to have systems in place that are able to identify children and young people who are having difficulties with their mental health and wellbeing. And then we need a range of services which can help support those children and young people, including evidence based services where appropriate. We also need a whole school approach, in our view, to about think making sure that mental health and wellbeing is at the heart of school policy, as this is an important factor in children's learning and development.

Catherine

And so when you talk about ways to identify the children that are in need of extra support and then the services that can then provide that extra support, can you give me some examples of what ideally you'd like to see?

Tom

Well, we would like to see a mental health support service that is well funded and takes the evidence on effective approaches seriously. In July of last year, we published a comprehensive review of effective approaches to supporting adolescent mental health through school based interventions, looking at a range of conditions and problems. And that really goes through in some detail what some of the most effective approaches are and also where the big gaps are in our evidence base on how to support children's mental health.

Catherine

So any policymakers listening to this podcast, what would you like them to hear and take away from this?

Tom

Would like them to understand that the mental health of children and young people appears to be deteriorating and we need to take that very, very seriously. Mental health and wellbeing in adolescence is hugely predictive of how well children do at school, but also later life outcomes. Children who struggle with their mental health are more likely to go on to struggle with their mental health throughout life. So we need to design and deliver services in a way that can identify children who are having difficulties, difficulties and make sure they're provided with the support they need. That includes looking at what we know about effective approaches, but also addressing some of the bigger gaps in our evidence base.

Catherine

And that actually raises a question in my mind, what was happening to children's mental health before COVID? So has, like many elements of our life, has Covid simply made worse problems that were already there?

Tom

It's a difficult question to answer this. It does seem to be that mental health of children and young people in the UK is deteriorating. There is evidence to suggest that, and consensus seems to be that that is not just greater awareness of the problems, but that is a genuine deterioration in children, children, young people's mental health, including greater incidence of anxiety and depression. What sits behind that is a very complex question, but it does seem to be something that we need to take very seriously.

Catherine

If we move on now to talk about the learning loss elements of Birgitta's research. So again, learning loss of across children has varied. What can be done about this? You know, how best do we move forward and try and address that loss?

Tom

So, similarly to mental health, the first part is just understanding who are the children who experience significant learning loss over the course of the pandemic, and then it really needs to be providing individualised and targeted support for those children. So I think there's been good progress in this and government has a nice, significant amounts of funding and initiative to support learning loss. But that's just something that we're going to have to keep a close eye on over the coming years to make sure that we don't lose that focus on supporting those who experience the biggest losses in learning over the period of the pandemic.

Catherine

The element of research that suggested that the loss was down to things like it and not the will of parents or, you know, the lack of will of parents to try and step in and help. For me, that was a reassuring reason in that it's a sort of a tangible reason. If it's down to sort of lack of it, that's something we can sort. It's not as simple as that though, is it?

Tom

Well, parents ability to support their children's learning is going to vary hugely and I think it's going to vary by age, it's going to vary by background, it's going to vary by employment status as well, and how much time parents can give to supporting their children alongside trying to hold down a job. So it's not simply a question of making sure that everybody has the it, but it is, yeah, that is clearly a necessary, if not sufficient step in supporting children when they're learning remotely, obviously.

Catherine

Another part of Birgitta's research was that the mental health of mothers in particular suffered. Does that resonate with what you would expect?

Tom

I mean, speaking just from a personal perspective, I'm not surprised by that. Myself and my partner had to homeschool two children and hold down jobs, and that is an extremely difficult and challenging experience. And there's no surprise that this has disproportionately impacted on mothers. I think one of the interesting things about the research seemed to be showing that mental health rebounded much more quickly than children and young people and seemed to be predominantly a function of the stress caused by trying to homeschool children alongside working.

Catherine

So, moving forward, what would the Early Intervention foundation like to see in place?

Tom

So we'd like to see a recovery package that prioritises identifying children who have experienced difficulties as a result of the pandemic and providing evidence based support to those children. And we'd like to see that it's a holistic approach that thinks about learning loss and mental health and wellbeing simultaneously and recognises that mental health and wellbeing is an extremely important component of children being able to do well in school and succeed. So we are pleased to see a focus on education catch up, but we'd like to see mental health and wellbeing services prioritised within that.

Catherine

You can read more about Birgitta's research via the publication section of the Understanding Society website. My thanks to Birgitta and Tom for contributing to this topic discussion and to you for listening.