

Unwinding the Lockdown – Let's not Forget the Children

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When the day of reckoning for the social and economic costs of Covid-19 arrives, it is important that the calculation includes recognition of its impact on children. They may have largely been spared the severe illness and death – and disruption - that Covid-19 cruelly brought to so many adults. But children's lives were upended in countless ways. Covid has forced sacrifices on many children, not least the children of front-line workers who must endure worry about or separation for safety reasons from one or both parents. Children have a rightful claim to support in recovering from the harms they have endured. As we feel our way towards unwinding the lockdown, it is important that we think also of how to restore normality as much as possible for children. In our planning, we should focus especially on those for whom the social costs of Covid-19 have been highest - the already vulnerable children in our society.

The isolation of lockdown may be hard on adults, but it may often be even harder on children. Closing schools has affected all children but especially those who live in challenging circumstances - and for whom isolation may be toughest. Children have lost out on their normal educational experience, but also on the emotional and social support that school provides. They have lost physical contact with their friends. Critically, they have also lost physical contact with their teachers who often are guarantors of the wellbeing of vulnerable children, and who flag concerns when necessary. Our national child protection system has been turned upside down by Covid-19 in so many ways, not least by the loss of schools as a vital source for identifying cases of concern. The isolation of lockdown may mean children are trapped in households riven by domestic violence or impacted by parents struggling with the mental stresses that Covid-19 has unleashed. And, sadly, it seems inevitable that COVID-19 leads to some children suffering maltreatment beyond the knowledge or reach of social work and other helping services, vigilant and active though those services are. For some children, home schooling may be a distant prospect. Parents may not have the 'head space' or the confidence to be the home teacher. And then there is the digital divide in education that Covid-19 has uncovered. Not every home has computers or reliable internet access or worry-free access to electricity. Some cash strapped families rely on pay-as-you-go electricity, and the internet eats up scarce units. When electricity runs out so does the internet. Children with special needs through disabilities may rely on school even more for support of different kinds. And they are the ones (and their parents) who have lost out on special supports such as respite care or the kind attention of Special Needs Assistants who are often like additional maternal figures in their daily lives.

If lockdown has been tough on children, how will the unwinding of lockdown play out in their lives? The initial road map on life beyond lockdown is largely silent on measures and certainly detail on steps to improve the daily reality for children. Accepting that all the plans for unwinding depend on ensuring public health safety, it still seems important to lay out an explicit plan for how to bring normality back

to children's lives within the constraints of social distancing. We need to be sure that children are high up the list in terms of rolling back the special hardships that Covid-19 has visited upon them. On schools reopening, there must be no slippage (Covid trends allowing) on a normal September return, not whether but how. Are we to have full-on school as normal? Or to accommodate social distancing will we have to divide schools' classes initially in two with half attending in the morning and the other half in the afternoon, or day on day off? Why not different models for different size schools / risk levels etc? How do we re-open sporting and other recreational activity to children? We can do so gradually, but it is important that the discussion about reopening sport is not just about elite adult sport. How is respite care to be restored as soon as possible to children and families living with complex needs? How can we offer additional compensatory summer programmes for children with extra social and emotional support needs? We need to bring some of the imagination, dynamism – and generosity – that marked the early public policy response to Covid-19 to how children are supported and compensated in this phase of unwinding lockdown. To those most in need, the greatest response – the children in family homeless hubs, the children in direct provision centres, the children robbed of respite care by Covid-19, the children with additional and social emotional needs who lost out on support programmes they attend through Covid-19, and so on. And in this phase of restoration, there must be no hint that resource problems hinder what is offered. Children have made their sacrifice; we must repay our debt to them. We must help children to regain any ground they have lost in their development and recover from any harm they have suffered. We must hope that the state, civil society and communities will all answer the call for children.

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