

# What young people want to help them recover from school closures

January 11 2022, by Michaela James

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Many children suffered from too much time spent playing alone during lockdown. Robert Collins | Unsplash, FAL

Children need help to recover from the disruption COVID has brought to their schooling. Much of the focus—and [government funding](#)—has been on academic catch-up. Some schools are [beginning to trial](#) adding an hour to the school day.

But young [people weren't just missing out on study time](#) during [school](#)

closures. They also lost out on [physical activity](#), extracurricular activities, school meals and social interaction.

Working with colleagues, [I surveyed](#) more than 6,000 young people in Wales aged from eight to 25 from the [school setting](#) to [higher education](#) (including postgraduate students) between September 2020 and February 2021. We wanted to explore what young people felt had affected their [wellbeing](#) during the pandemic. The results showed, in particular, the importance of social interaction and mental [health](#) support.

## **Protect play**

The [younger children](#) we surveyed showed concerns around coronavirus. They told us that they wanted "for the virus to go away," and for "no more COVID rules."

For these younger children, social play was a key source of wellbeing. Those who said they often played alone also reported higher emotional difficulties during lockdown. The children told us that they wanted to "be with my friends more" and be "able to play places I want to with my friends."

This chimes with what we already know about the [benefits of play](#) from pre-pandemic research. Play helps to develop social skills, confidence and fundamental movement skills.

If longer school days or greater pressure on children to study leads to less time playing with friends, this will be detrimental to children's wellbeing. Together with colleagues, I have also [conducted research](#) on primary school teachers' recommendations for schooling after the closures caused by COVID-19. The findings show that teachers think wellbeing—both of pupils and staff—should be a priority.

Our study suggests that [children](#)'s emotional wellbeing could be improved if they are supported in socializing.

## **Bolstering mental health**

The responses from participants aged 11 to 15 in our survey suggest that better communication about [online learning](#), exams and mental health would have supported their wellbeing during school closures.

These participants felt that they had lacked communication about how to get mental health support during the pandemic. Now students are back in the classroom, the provision of mental health resources in schools, as well as information on how to access available services, could help young people find the help they may have lacked during school closures.

This is especially important for girls, who are more likely to experience [poorer mental health](#) than boys. This gender gap increases as young people age. One girl told us: "the worsened depression and heightened anxiety caused by coronavirus has almost pushed me to drop out of sixth form."

Secondary school pupils were particularly concerned about assessment and worried that they were falling behind in their education. One respondent to our survey explained their concerns as follows: "exam cancelation, predicted grades changed, stress of university choices without having to visit them. Unsure of my future in education." They reported that they felt they had been left in the dark about changing assessment requirements during the pandemic.

Online learning was a cause of anxiety for many secondary school pupils. As lockdown prompted a move to more independent learning and away from teacher-led classes, this may have proved difficult for young people at a time of uncertainty, particularly those in exam years.

However, some survey participants told us that they were able to learn better at home and at their own pace. While it is important to learn from the negative impacts the pandemic has had, such positives are also instructive.

Children and [young people](#) must be listened to. Protecting play, socialization and opportunities to be active, as well as prioritizing mental health support, is vital and should be essential to any COVID-19 recovery plans.

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