

Children's Right to Play in Times of COVID

By Jennifer Babisak

Children throughout the world have suffered under the COVID-19 pandemic in a myriad of ways, from health and safety to the loss of loved ones. In the discussion of children's rights impacted by the pandemic, one right is often overlooked: the right to play. The global loss of play during prolonged COVID-19 school closures and community lockdowns promises wide-ranging negative impacts on children's physical and emotional health. Communities must find ways to facilitate children's access to play while at the same time following safety precautions such as social distancing, virtual learning, and other restrictions imposed to guard physical health and safety.

Play is an essential part of a child's healthy development in all societies. That is why the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) recognizes "that every child has the right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts."¹ The CRC urges member governments to "respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and...encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity."²

The loss of opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational, and leisure activity negatively impacts all children's intellectual development and physical and mental health, but it has especially harmful effects on vulnerable children, including those living in poverty and those at risk of discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, or disability.

The COVID pandemic has interfered with children's opportunities to engage in structured and unstructured play around the world. Lockdowns and the closure of schools, parks, museums, and extracurricular activities have altered children's recreational landscape. An estimated 1.6 billion school-age children, 90% of the world's K-12 population, have been impacted by school closures and the loss of school-based recess.³ Younger children have also suffered from school closures too, with 40 million children losing early childhood education, including its emphasis on play and social and emotional learning.⁴

Poor children and children of color have been disproportionately impacted by the loss of play. Although the closure of public parks, school playgrounds and other play spaces has affected all children, minority children in urban areas are significantly less likely to have access to private green spaces such as backyards. In one alarming example, the Office of National Statistics found that "just over one in five households in London don't have

¹ UN Commission on Human Rights, *Convention on the Rights of the Child.*, Refworld (March 7, 1990), available at <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3b00f03d30.html>.]

² *Id.*

³ David Robson, *How COVID-19 Is Changing the World's Children*, BBC (June 3, 2020), available at <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200603-how-covid-19-is-changing-the-worlds-children>.

⁴ *Id.*

access to a private garden (21%), and this is also true of 37% of people nationally who describe their ethnicity as Black.”⁵

Further, parents living in poverty may not have the time, energy, or knowledge to engage their children in play-based social and emotional learning activities. According to UNICEF, “In 54 low- and middle-income countries with recent data, around 40 per cent of children aged between 3 and 5 years old were not receiving social-emotional and cognitive stimulation from any adult in their household.”⁶ Since COVID impacts children of color and children living in poverty to a greater extent than their wealthier white peers, they need greater outlets for play to support physical, mental, and emotional health.

Mental Health Consequences of Missing Play

As COVID rages on throughout the world and lockdowns linger, the mental health impacts of the pandemic are beginning to surface. Not only can lack of play *cause* physical and mental decline in children, but play can mitigate mental health challenges brought on by the pandemic. Thus, the loss of play is a double-edged sword that may prove to cut children deeply.⁷

Children experiencing disruption in their lives due to COVID-19 face significant mental health struggles. Writing in the *Journal of Pediatric Psychology*, researchers predicted the potential impact of COVID-19 restrictions by analyzing studies from previous pandemics. They found “social isolation and quarantining practices exert a substantial negative impact on child anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and fear symptoms. Potential risk factors such as living in rural areas, being female, and increasing grade level may exacerbate negative mental health outcomes for children.”⁸

After reviewing these studies, the authors predicted a coming psychosocial wave from COVID-19, apparent already in Japan’s release of 2020 data that revealed a doubling of suicide among K-12 children.⁹ The authors urged action, insisting that “governments must begin to consider balancing social isolation to reduce COVID-19 deaths and mental health needs to mitigate psychosocial ramifications such as child abuse, family violence,

⁵ Intergenerational Foundation, *Green Space Inequality*, Intergenerational Foundation (May 20,2020), available at <http://www.if.org.uk/2020/05/20/green-space-inequality/>.

⁶ Anna Gromada, et al., *Childcare in a Global Crisis: The Impact of COVID-19 on Work and Family Life*, Innocenti Research Brief (2020), available at <https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/IRB-2020-18-childcare-in-a-global-crisis-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-work-and-family-life.pdf>.

⁷ Stuart Brown, *Play Deprivation Can Damage Early Child Development*, Child and Family Blog (October 2018), available at <https://www.childandfamilyblog.com/early-childhood-development/play-deprivation-early-child-development/>.

⁸ Vanessa C. Fong, MSc, Grace Iarocci, PhD, *Child and Family Outcomes Following Pandemics: A Systematic Review and Recommendations on COVID-19 Policies*, *Journal of Pediatric Psychology* (October 21, 2020), available at <https://doi.org/10.1093/jpepsy/jsaa092>.

⁹ *Id.*; Ayai Tomisawa and Marika Katanuma, *Suicide Spike in Japan Shows Mental Health Toll of COVID-19*, *The Japan Times* (October 9, 2020), available at <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2020/10/09/national/social-issues/suicide-mental-health-coronavirus/>.

depression, substance misuse, and suicide.”¹⁰ A huge part of this mitigation could come in the form of play.

Without compromising public health, communities can prioritize children’s right to play through creative, socially distanced solutions that will support physical and mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Solutions to Restore Play

Play therapy, a long-established therapeutic discipline based on psychological theories that allow children to express their mental and emotional state through play, offers an outlet to address children’s mental health struggles during COVID.¹¹ However, the reach of this modality faces both logistical and equitable challenges. During lockdowns, play therapists may not be able to see children in-person, and tactile therapy methods can be difficult to replicate virtually. Play therapists have achieved successful virtual connections with clients, using toys and art supplies already in the child’s home, or utilizing virtual, interactive play therapy offices. Private initiatives to address access to play therapists include sliding scale fees, increased coverage by insurance companies, and grants. In situations where private access does not avail, US-based schools should consider remedies such as a Section 504 designation that would give children greater access to play therapy.

Non-profit organizations are using play, recreation, and cultural programming to address the heightened trauma that COVID allows worldwide. Right to Play, an international humanitarian non-profit, has worked with children in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East for 20 years. The organization used what it learned from the 2014 Ebola crisis in Liberia to address children’s needs in the COVID-19 pandemic.¹² Lack of educational and recreational opportunities presents particular threats for children in the developing world, where economic stressors can accelerate rates of genital mutilation and child marriage in the pandemic.¹³ Right to Play counters these threats with targeted, entertainment-based messaging such as radio dramas broadcast to 4.9 million Tanzanians, which challenge social pressures and empower girls.¹⁴

Broadcasting recreational content over television, radio, and internet can provide needed physical, emotional, and intellectual stimulation to children from all demographics. Right to Play teamed with Jordan’s Ministry of Education to provide “videos focused on exercises and activities that help children cope with stress, burn off energy from being cooped up, and develop a positive relationship with their bodies” to

¹⁰ Vanessa C. Fong, MSc, Grace Iarocci, PhD, *Child and Family Outcomes Following Pandemics: A Systematic Review and Recommendations on COVID-19 Policies*, *Journal of Pediatric Psychology*, (October 21, 2020), available at <https://doi.org/10.1093/jpepsy/jsaa092>.

¹¹ Play Therapy International, *How Does Therapeutic Play Work?*, Play Therapy International (Last accessed November 9, 2020), available at <http://playtherapy.org/Helping-Children/About-Play-Therapy>.

¹² Right to Play, *Rising Up Against the Mistreatment of Girls*, Right to Play (last accessed October 29, 2020), available at <https://www.righttoplayusa.org/en/news/rising-up-against-the-mistreatment-of-girls/>.

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *Id.*

1.4 million of the nation's children.¹⁵ Children's author Mo Willems, Kennedy Center Education Artist-in-Residence, engaged children in free art lessons for three weeks early in the pandemic.¹⁶ Similarly, Khan Academy launched a series of free videos on its YouTube channel called "Circle Time," where instructors engage young children in stories and activities.¹⁷

While art lessons, stories, and yoga lessons are available online, some parents object to additional screen time for their computer-exhausted virtual learners. Thus, socially distant in-person activities provide an attractive alternative. For instance, some parks imposed capacity limits, instituted a reservation system, required masks, and increased cleaning. Museums that decided to reopen instituted one-way traffic paths and social distancing, closed areas that were prone to congregating groups, and required masks. While not risk-free, these sources for play balanced children's needs for recreation with the public health goal of protecting the community from disease.

In a lower contact alternative, libraries offered curbside pickup of books, and in some cases, activity kits. Some libraries offer toys, games, and educational kits for checkout, allowing children the opportunity to explore subjects like music, science, and history before returning the kit to the library. School districts catering to rural students with school lunch delivery and hotspot access could also offer recreational supplies and art kits for delivery, functioning like ice cream trucks for play.

In many places, youth sports were cancelled during the pandemic. Vocal parents and athletes have pushed back against the ban many communities enacted on contact sports, holding "Let them play!" rallies to urge the reopening of fall sports. Writing in *Psychology Today*, ethics professor Michael Austin's analysis favors outside sports participation above the riskier return to in-person school.¹⁸ He points to a study out of Aarhus University and the University of Southern Denmark that determined youth and adolescent soccer players are within a distance of 1.5 meters of each other for only 60 seconds per hour during games, far below the threshold for a close contact as defined by the CDC.¹⁹ Supporting this view, the American Academy of Pediatrics pointed out that re-engaging in sports activity with friends has both physical and psychological health benefits for children and adolescents.²⁰

Conclusion

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ The Kennedy Center, *Lunch Doodles with Mo Willems!*, The Kennedy Center (last accessed October 29, 2020), available at <https://www.kennedy-center.org/education/mo-willems/lunch-doodles/>.

¹⁷ Khan Academy Kids, *Circle Time*, YouTube (last accessed October 29, 2020), available at https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLsO1jePSb_q1hbBk81aZdg9TeED_LLcd.

¹⁸ Michael Austin, *Let Them Play: Emerging Resource on COVID-19 and the Safety of Soccer*, *Psychology Today* (August 13, 2020), available at <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/ethics-everyone/202008/let-them-play>.

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ *Id.*

With the approach of flu season in the Northern hemisphere and the continued spread of COVID through many countries, quarantines and social distancing may be in place for the foreseeable future. However, lifestyle restrictions must not eliminate children's right to play. Through creative, carefully thought out play solutions, governments, schools, and communities can support the physical and mental health of children. Targeted efforts have potential to help children most at risk from loss of play, including children of color and children living in poverty. While play cannot eliminate the risks of a global pandemic, it can mitigate psychological effects and allow children and families the potential to emerge from COVID-19 restrictions with creativity, curiosity, and mental health thriving.