



# Impact of COVID-19 restrictions on pre-school children’s eating, activity and sleep behaviours: a qualitative study

Clarke JL<sup>1</sup>, Kipping R<sup>2</sup>, Chambers S<sup>3</sup>, Willis K<sup>2</sup>, Taylor H<sup>2</sup>, Brophy R<sup>2</sup>, Hannam K<sup>2</sup>, Simpson SA<sup>4</sup> Langford R<sup>2</sup>

1 Institute of Applied Health Research, University of Birmingham, 2 Centre for Public Health, Population Health Sciences, Bristol Medical School, University of Bristol  
3 School of Social and Political Sciences and MRC/CSO Social and Public Health Sciences Unit, Institute of Health and Wellbeing, University of Glasgow, 4 MRC/CSO Social and Public Health Sciences Unit, Institute of Health and Wellbeing, University of Glasgow

## About the research

In Spring 2020, the first COVID-19 lockdown placed unprecedented restrictions on the UK population. Despite being least affected by the virus, young children experienced enormous disruption to their lives. Opportunities for physical activity were restricted, family shopping habits changed and routines were interrupted, putting children’s health behaviours at risk. At the same time, pre-schools were closed to most children, separating them from an important source of support for their health and development.

Behaviours established in the early years can impact bodyweight through childhood and beyond. Nearly one in four UK children starting primary school are overweight or obese, with rates increasing with deprivation. The disruption caused by COVID-19 could have implications for the future beyond immediate restrictions.

We wanted to find out how the lives of pre-school children changed during lockdown, particularly in terms of their physical activity, sedentary behaviour, eating and sleep. We interviewed 20 parents of pre-school children and asked them about their children’s lives during lockdown.

***“While we were in the main period of lockdown, we couldn’t leave and there was nothing really that you could do. And living in such a block of flats, you can’t be too noisy because you’ve got neighbours everywhere.”***

## Implications

- Families need practical guidance and support to help them to maintain healthy behaviours during restrictions.
- This could include information on: cheap healthy snacks; active games for indoors and outdoor; links to child-appropriate programmes and games which promote physical activity (e.g. dance classes, kids’ yoga); and advice on maintaining healthy bedtime routines.
- Rates of overweight and obesity in children starting school are high, so the longer-term impacts of the pandemic restrictions on younger children should be monitored.
- Action to mitigate negative impacts of COVID-19 restrictions on child health and wellbeing will require multisectoral working between health, social care and education.

## About the School

The NIHR School for Public Health Research is a partnership between the Universities of Sheffield, Bristol, Cambridge, Imperial, and University College London, The London School for Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM), LiLaC – a collaboration between the Universities of Liverpool and Lancaster; and Fuse - The Centre for Translational Research in Public Health a collaboration between Newcastle, Durham, Northumbria, Sunderland and Teesside Universities.

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## Key findings

- **Physical activity**

Most parents reported their children were less active during lockdown. Barriers included loss of childcare and group activities, playgrounds being closed, and reduced contact with friends and relatives.

- **Eating**

Parents reported disruptions to normal eating habits and routines, with most acknowledging increased snacking, citing reasons such as boredom and as compensation for what their children were missing out on. Positive impacts included families being able to cook and eat together due to parents/carers being at home.

- **Food costs**

Several parents reported increased spending on food. For some this was due to the whole family being at home and increased snacking. Others felt food prices had increased. One parent (who was shielding) now used a more expensive supermarket as their normal, cheaper shop did not deliver. One parent mentioned lack of access to free meals at pre-school.

- **Sedentary behaviour**

Parents reported substantial increases in their children's screen time, with many feeling it filled the void left by not being able to go out or socialise. For many parents, screen time was also necessary to keep their child occupied and safe while they worked from home or caught up with household tasks.

- **Sleep**

Almost half of parents reported negative changes to their child's sleep, including difficulties going to sleep or staying up late.

- **Longer term impacts**

Most parents thought any changes in their child's behaviour would be temporary. However some worried it may be hard to re-establish rules around, for example, screen time.

"I put it down to routine and being less active... At nursery, you're on the go from the time you get there to the time you go home"

"We were feeling bad they'd missed out on so much, we were buying treats and things for them to make them feel happy."

"When we couldn't go to McDonalds we made homemade chicken nuggets... that's been positive, they've enjoyed cooking"

"We'd normally just go to Aldi or Lidl and be able to buy it, whereas now we've been trying to do the online stuff, it's just added to our bill"

"If I've got a two-hour Zoom meeting and I don't want him bursting in every five seconds I'd give him his iPad and he'll watch a film for two hours... it's been the only way to make sure he's safe"

## Further information

The paper is available [here](#) and has been accepted for publication in BMJ Open.

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## Contact the researchers

For more information about this study, please contact Beki Langford at:

Email: [beki.langford@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:beki.langford@bristol.ac.uk)

NIHR School for Public Health Research

Website: [sphr.nihr.ac.uk](http://sphr.nihr.ac.uk)

Twitter: @NIHRSPHR

Email: [sphr@ncl.ac.uk](mailto:sphr@ncl.ac.uk)

Telephone: +44 (0)191 208 3829