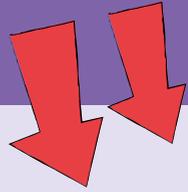


# COVID AND THE UNDER-FIVES: IMPACT AND RECOVERY

What happened to the under-fives during lockdown?  
How do we support them and their families?

PAS briefing: August 2021



## BACKGROUND

The first few years of life lay the foundations of future wellbeing and health but there's been little attention paid to the experiences of under-fives and their families during the pandemic. A recent Parenting across Scotland (PAS) webinar explored the issues, the research, and the experience of those supporting under-fives and their families. With participants from health, early years and childcare, family support, and public and voluntary sectors, the event was heavily over-subscribed. The points that emerged from presentations and discussions were significant and are captured below.



# RESEARCH EVIDENCE

Dr Debby Wason, Public Health Scotland (PHS), summarised findings from the **PHS 'Covid-19 Early Years Resilience and Impact Survey' (CEYRIS)** which investigated the experience and impact of Covid-19 and the associated restrictions on young children (two- to seven-year-olds) in Scotland. Main points relating to under-fives included:

- families which were struggling before the pandemic may have been pushed further into poverty and the scales may have tipped for those who were just managing
- children and parents' mental health and wellbeing suffered significantly
- some parents were unable to find the help they needed
- presentations of under-fives at hospitals plummeted during lockdown

**Young children during the pandemic: presentation from Dr Debby Wason.**

Dr Lucy Thompson, University of Aberdeen, discussed her search of the literature which indicated a dearth relevant to under-fives, and notably the under-twos who are not covered by CEYRIS. Although she commended CEYRIS, more research is needed to gain a clearer picture of how the pandemic has affected very young children and families on a low income.

Cheryl Brown, Midlothian Sure Start, discussed the experience of Midlothian family centres and how this linked to the CEYRIS research evidence. Main points relating to under-fives included:

- increased parental anxiety and isolation
- reluctance of many parents to use family centres in person because of fears of contracting coronavirus
- significant economic concerns for families

**Supporting families during Covid-19: presentation from Cheryl Brown.**



# DISCUSSION

Webinar participants discussed what they thought happened to the under-fives during lockdown.

Discussion questions were:

- from the presentations, what surprised you or was of particular significance?
- are there other issues from your own experience that weren't mentioned in the presentations?
- what support do parents and carers need now to help their children as we move on?

We've summarised main points and questions raised under the headings below. These points are from five breakout sessions. Some points may have been made by only one participant, and we need further research to see the wide range of circumstances which have affected families over this time.

## Experience of giving birth

- over the pandemic, women have been restricted in their choices about giving birth and this may have resulted in increased birthing trauma, including more unplanned home births and births on the way to hospital
- general concerns about women having to give birth alone, and partners not being allowed to be present at the birth. What is the impact of any anxiety caused by this on early years development and on relationships?
- what can be put in place to prevent anxiety about childbirth?

## Babies and very young children

- general concerns about lack of stimulation, attachment issues and infants' cues being missed by parents



## Health visiting

- variability of the health visitor service across health boards, and how different areas have managed the shift online differently – some areas moved successfully to providing home visits online; in other areas ‘contact’ was limited to a text message
- PHS data shows that health visitor contacts have largely been maintained, but we need to understand more about how these visits were experienced by parents and babies

## Family support

- support services had to convert to supporting families online during lockdowns. This worked reasonably well for most, though the vast majority of families preferred face-to-face support and wanted to revert to this once it became possible. Many parents withdrew from online support once children returned to childcare settings
- sometimes online support was more helpful, for example for families who might find it difficult to access services and in rural areas. While providing computers

and other digital hardware through schemes such as Connecting Scotland was necessary and helpful, data access and digital confidence continued to be an issue for many families

- working online with families which were already in contact with services before the pandemic was easier than using online methods to establish new relationships with families
- the City of Edinburgh Council provided Triple P online and found that this worked well
- the Peep antenatal programme also ran online and worked well
- more support with children’s speech and language is needed
- what is the impact of the pandemic on children’s physical development? Lockdowns meant that some toddlers and children have had fewer opportunities to practise walking
- services were forced to be creative and to develop innovative approaches to supporting families – some of these, such as supporting people in outside locations, are likely to continue, at least, in the short to medium term

## Experience of families

- working from home with under-fives was difficult and many parents would have liked to have been furloughed
- children's spontaneous play involved masks and bubbles, with children acting out their understanding of the pandemic

## Childcare

- how have changes to childcare for older children affected childcare for younger children?
- general concerns about parents' confidence and trust in childcare settings. Heightened fears have affected the relationship between families and settings. One participant said that supporting children and families through an induction process, for example by virtual tours prior to attending, had made a huge difference

## Mental health

- while the research highlighted parental mental health, webinar participants thought that it did not adequately

reflect the degree to which parents' mental health had been adversely affected

- a consultant paediatrician reported a significant rise in parental mental health issues
- heightened anxiety in parents and children, as well as increased requests for support for mental health and wellbeing, and with parenting
- increased PTSD and flashbacks in parents of young children

## Hidden harm

- general concerns about hidden harm such as child protection issues, child abuse and domestic abuse
- rise in social work referrals for child protection and safeguarding concerns
- generally, some child protection cases are picked up serendipitously from presentations at A&E – the massive reduction in presentations meant that this did not happen



## Child vaccines

- some parents not bringing their children for under-five immunisations because of worry about catching coronavirus
- some areas had provided alternative venues for the purpose of child vaccinations

## Presentations at A&E and other medical settings

- dynamics of fear changed during the different lockdowns – general concern about the impact of further fear if there were to be another lockdown
- messaging about not overwhelming the NHS and fear of catching coronavirus resulted in parents not going to GPs or hospitals
- parents were very frightened during the first lockdown and, while this made them more compliant with regulations and restrictions, it also had the knock-on effect of deterring them from seeking other help including medical assistance for themselves and their children

- there seemed to be a greater degree of fear in the first lockdown, likely resulting from the unprecedented nature of the pandemic. But messaging contributed to heightened fear and anxiety. Future messaging needs to be conscious of impact beyond ensuring compliance with restrictions

## Funding

- third sector organisations reacted quickly to support families
- there was emergency funding for third sector organisations to respond to the pandemic, but it is not clear whether this funding will be maintained. More clarity is needed about this, as well as evaluation of the third sector's role during the pandemic and the implications for national planning



# COVID + UNDER 5s: IMPACT + RECOVERY

29.6.21

PARENTING ACROSS  
SCOTLAND webinar

YOUNG CHILDREN DURING  
THE PANDEMIC - **MR DEBBY WASON**

**CEYRIS** = Covid-19 Early Years Resilience  
+ Impact Study

Parents + carers of 2-7yos.

PUBLIC HEALTH  
SCOTLAND

CP.H.S. Official

**1** IN **5** CHILDREN EXPERIENCED BEREAVEMENT  
OF FAMILY MEMBER / CLOSE FRIEND

**ISOLATION** = key theme

**USE OF ACUTE SERVICES**

**BIG DROP** in U5s (biggest drop of  
all age groups)

**40%** CHILDREN IN HOUSEHOLDS  
WITH REDUCED INCOME

**V. LOW  
PARENTAL  
WELLBEING**

**DISCUSSION:**

**RESILIENCE**  
of children + families

**IMPACT OF  
REDUCTION IN UNIVERSAL  
HEALTH VISITING??**

## RESPONSE TO CEYRIS

**DATA - DR. LUCY THOMPSON**

UNI. OF ABERDEEN

THANK YOU FOR DOING THE RESEARCH!  
↳ 'forgotten' age group (esp. in  
peer-reviewed literature)

**DISADVANTAGE**  
FAMILIES / EXPERIENCING  
CHALLENGES = PARTICULARLY  
DISADVANTAGED

**ARE WE MISSING  
SOMETHING?**

**BABIES!**  
CEYRIS = 2-7yo

**PEOPLE W/  
POOR MENTAL  
WELLBEING**  
not incl'd. in that measure

**NEED TO SPOTLIGHT...  
IMPACT  
ON LOWER  
INCOME  
FAMILIES**

**RISK OF A  
CLIFF EDGE...**  
...AS  
'EMERGENCY'  
SERVICE  
PROVISION  
+ FUNDING  
ENDS.

**UNDER-2s  
missing from  
the data**

SKETCHNOTE ©  
@EllieSandercock

## SUPPORTING FAMILIES

**DURING LOCKDOWN**

**CHERYL BROWN**

MIDLOTHIAN  
SURE START

**↑↑** No. OF CHILDREN PRESENTING  
WITH WELLBEING CONCERNS

online delivery  
Zoom fatigue

**IMPACT ON  
LITERACY**

**ISSUES WITH  
EMOTIONAL  
REGULATION**

**WINTER  
LOCK-DOWN**

**HOUSEHOLD  
INCOME**  
+ CONCERNS RE.  
REMOVAL OF UC  
UPLIFT

**NEED FOR  
LONG-TERM STRATEGY  
+ RESOURCING FOR  
PARENTAL  
MENTAL HEALTH**

**LINKS**

- parentingacrossscotland.org
- publichealthscotland.scot (CEYRIS)
- babiesinlockdown.info

## RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE BREAK OUT SESSIONS

The following recommendations resulted:

1. More research is needed on early years and the pandemic, particularly as it relates to under-twos, low-income families, and domestic abuse
2. Parents and families should be consulted about what support is needed to help them recover from the impact of the pandemic.
3. A national needs assessment of infant mental health should be conducted in order to ascertain what young children and families need.
4. A clear picture should be developed of health visiting across health board areas during the pandemic and the impact of changes. This should be incorporated into the evaluation of the health visitor pathway and be used to inform local and national direction.
5. Public health messaging in any future emergencies should achieve desired outcomes without creating so much fear that it deters parents from seeking help.
6. A strategy and resources are needed to allow third sector services to respond to the needs of babies, children and families.
7. A fully resourced and funded long-term strategy for parental mental health and wellbeing should be developed.

## NEXT STEPS

PAS, with partners, will consider the issues and recommendations which emerged in order to mitigate and respond to the effects of the pandemic on the under-fives and their families.



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