

Written evidence submitted by Cornerhouse (Yorkshire), Explore,
Family Links, Fastn, Marriage Care, One Plus One, Parentkind, Relate,
Relationships Foundation

Education Select Committee – Covid 19 Inquiry, Submission

July 21 2020

Dear Select Committee

Who we are

We are an informal coalition of organisations, each with significant experience of working with schools and parents to encourage children and young people to develop positive relationships ambitions and form healthy dependable relationships to help them thrive throughout adult life.

Why we are submitting evidence

COVID has profoundly affected children's relationships with their peers with significant consequences for their wellbeing and mental health. Many family relationships have also been placed under significant additional strain. Schools will need both to support the rebuilding of relationships within school as well as developing the relationships between home and school and the relational capability of pupils to increase resilience to any future lockdowns or emergencies. This can and should be seen as part of the implementation of the new relationships education curriculum. As well as supporting all of the adults around children and young people, this building of relational capital in schools as learning communities can support the ongoing work of implementing the guidance. Building trusting relationships with parents and carers is a necessary precursor to being able to work well together.

Our evidence

School closures and lockdown measures limited the social interaction of children. A poll of 250,000 parents carried out by Parentkind during the intense period of the lockdown found that 48 per cent of parents were concerned about the impact of 'My child not seeing their friends or socialising.'¹ A further survey carried out on behalf of Fastn and Parentkind indicated that the importance attached by parents to their children's relationships with family, friends and school staff had all increased substantially in the wake of COVID-19:²

¹ <https://www.parentkind.org.uk/News/Major-new-Parentkind-research---over-a-quarter-of-a-million-parents-have-a-say-on-school-closures-and-coronavirus-fears>

² <https://cdn.survation.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/19172439/FASTN-and-Parentkind-Summary->

- 59 per cent cited 'relationships with family' as having increased in importance
- 36 per cent cited 'relationships with friends' as having increased in importance
- 30 per cent cited 'relationships with school staff' as having increased in importance

As Relate found in its most recent survey released this week, lockdown has made many people experience first-hand the benefits of quality family time. More than half of respondents (55%) said lockdown has inspired them to make more effort with loved ones in the future, including spending more quality time with family (29%)³.

These concerns are supported by evaluations of the impact of COVID 19 which have warned of the impact on children of loneliness and isolation, and that loneliness is some 50% above normal levels.⁴ This research led by the University of Sussex highlights the mental health consequences of loneliness and the increased risks for children from disadvantaged and marginalised groups. Indications of these consequences are already evident in the survey by Young Minds of adolescents with mental health needs which found that around one third were reporting being 'much worse' and another half were reporting being 'a bit worse' since COVID-19.⁵ In Parentkind's latest survey⁶, parents were asked to prioritise three things schools should focus on when they reopen to more pupils, with the top option being mental wellbeing, selected by 70%. 30% ranked "impact on my child's mental health" as their number one concern over school closures, just behind "impact on my child's education" at 35%.

There is also evidence of the impact on family relationships. The University of Cambridge, Mothers and Fathers Study is an ongoing longitudinal study which has data from lockdown period.⁷ Preliminary findings based on 367 UK families, split to compare results for more vs less affluent households suggest that **lockdown increased:**

- the gender disparity in childcare responsibilities for women (regardless of family background)
- partner conflict, but only for less affluent families
- children's screen use – especially the use of learning apps – but also computer games, particularly for less affluent families.

[Document.pdf](#)

³ Research was conducted online from 26 June- 2 July 2020 by Censuswide, with a sample of 2,058 adults weighted to be nationally representative (aged 16+).

⁴ <https://www.sussex.ac.uk/about/documents/play-first--supporting-childrens-social-and-emotional-wellbeing-during-and-after-lockdown.pdf>

⁵ <https://youngminds.org.uk/about-us/reports/coronavirus-impact-on-young-people-with-mental-health-needs/>

⁶ <https://www.parentkind.org.uk/News/Parentkind-survey-finds-parents-want-more-say-in-how-their-child-returns-to-school>

⁷ Dr Sarah Foley, Centre for Family Research, University of Cambridge is currently working with OnePlusOne as ESRC post-doctoral fellow and has provided this brief summary.

- children's internalising and externalising problems – especially for less affluent families. In turn, these child externalising and internalising problems were related to child difficulties in adjusting to pandemic measures (e.g., washing hands, keeping 2m from non-household members).
- the strength of associations between child adjustment problems and household chaos. While this link is probably bi-directional, helping parents maintain family routines would probably be useful in mitigating children's anxieties and acting-out behaviours.

ONS report that couples with dependent children report higher levels of stress and anxiety and suggest that the challenges of combining work and home schooling may be a factor.⁸ NSPCC and other children's charities report that children are at risk of seeing higher levels of domestic violence within families as well as of being victims of abuse themselves.⁹ UK Youth's report *The impact of COVID-19 on young people & the youth sector* recognises that the impact of Covid-19 will be 'intense and long-lasting'. It collated responses from over 200 organisations representing over 608,000 young people and highlighted eight major concerns including 'challenging family relationships and 'lack of trusted relationships or someone to turn to'.¹⁰ In order to support pupils whose social connections have been limited the rapid review also recommended that: "Reducing the impact of enforced physical distancing by maintaining the structure, quality, and quantity of social networks, and helping children and adolescents to experience social rewards, feel part of a group, and know that there are others they can look to for support is likely to be important. Finding ways to give children and adolescents a sense of belonging within the family and to feel that they are part of a wider community should be a priority."¹¹

The Sussex research also argues that "children cannot learn effectively when they are struggling emotionally". Support in rebuilding peer relationships and emotional wellbeing will be needed if children are to sustain the kinds of relationships in school that enable learning and support academic attainment.

Edge, the independent education charity dedicated to shaping the future of education in the UK, asked 1,000 parents and 500 teachers from across the UK through a YouGov survey how they wanted to see education change post-Covid-19.¹² Nearly all teachers surveyed (96%) said that they want to help pupils

⁸<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/articles/coronavirusandanxietygreatbritain/3april2020to10may2020>

⁹ Eg <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/media/2246/isolated-and-struggling-social-isolation-risk-child-maltreatment-lockdown-and-beyond.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://www.ukyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/UK-Youth-Covid-19-Impact-Report-External-Final-08.04.20.pdf>

¹¹ Rapid Systematic Review: The impact of social isolation and loneliness on the mental health of children and adolescents in the context of COVID-19 <https://osf.io/qh5fp/>

¹² <https://www.edge.co.uk/news/edge-news/challenging-times-inspire-education-change-government-s-old-fashioned-approach-to>

develop relational values like kindness, empathy and community cohesion. More than eight out of ten parents (86%) agreed that they wanted their children's education to do this. This echoes Fastn's survey of parents which found that:

- 85 per cent said that it was important that Relationships Education should 'improve relationships and acceptance of others in society'
- 83 per cent said that it was important that Relationships Education should be adapted to the 'realities of each child and their community'

It is in this context that effective relationships education is important in supporting rebuilding classroom relationships, equipping pupils to manage social distancing, and increasing resilience to future emergencies that may compromise relationships. The development of the relationships between home and school that underpin effective implementation of relationships education also supports the partnership in education between home and school that has been essential in sustaining children's education during school closures. **Schools' work to address the impact of COVID should therefore be seen as an integral part of implementing the new Relationships Education curriculum. Schools implementing the curriculum are likely to be more resilient in the face of future emergencies.**

A key focus of the principles for relationships education developed by many of the signatories to this submission is that this not simply seen as additional curriculum content that schools might need to delay, but something that is embedded in a whole school approach.

Many of the signatories to this submission worked together to pool their research and experience to develop the 12 Principles of Excellence in Relationships.¹³ In rebuilding relationships as schools reopen these include:

- Pupils having opportunities to understand healthy and reliable relationships through experiencing them.
- Parents consulted and staff role modelling positive relationships and honest communication.
- An active relationships education policy at the core of the school's culture and ethos.
- A relationships education policy and curriculum that aims to improve relationships across the school community.
- Schools supporting pupils to recognise unhealthy relationships and develop their own relationship ambitions
- Progress is measured towards a better understanding of emotions and relationships for all.

¹³ <https://www.fastn.org/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=c6bc6810-ed4c-4e4a-951a-1bb3ce2551ae>

The principles support and contextualise the statutory guidance from the Department for Education. They emphasise the role of Relationships Education in supporting the whole school to achieve the best education for all children, the vital role of school leaders in modelling relationships, why an age-appropriate curriculum must reflect the community it serves and reflect diverse family needs, circumstances and structures.

Relationships are being formed every day, and for those without access to the positive examples, experiences and role models, making up for lost time can actually take a lifetime.

Relationships matter and it matters that our children who learn from what they see and experience around them all the time get the space and opportunity to develop positive relationships ambitions for themselves. The experience of Covid-19 has brought this in to sharp focus for parents, children and schools,

Parents recognise the importance of relationships with family and friends and want to work with schools to offer children and young people opportunities to experience and witness healthy, dependable, nurturing relationships that will support the development of their own positive relationships ambitions to help them thrive through the whole of their lives.

As we plan for economic recovery and debate the impacts of Covid-19, we should factor in the value of relationships. Our forced isolation has brought deprivation, but it has also heightened awareness of just how much we rely on others. Relationships are not just nice to have, they are the stuff of life.

Co-signatories

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