

## Majority of parents concerned about early years development after 10 months of social isolation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic

7 Jan 2021: New research from parenting campaign group, UsforThem, has revealed the impact the pandemic response is having on children under five:

- **60% of parents are now more concerned about their child's development than they were at the start of the pandemic**
- **76% of parents would like their child to spend more time with children of a similar age**
- **75 % of parents report that their regular playgroup or parent and child activity has not reopened since the end of the second lockdown - despite exemption from the Government**

The survey also showed that half of children not attending formal childcare settings spent less than 30minutes socialising with other children in the past week. This number is now likely to increase as further restrictions are introduced. This is particularly concerning considering that it is children from lower socio-economic groups who are less likely to access childcare. Socially isolated children, who do not get crucial early social development experiences, are more likely to grow into adults who experience higher psychological distress and reduced academic attainment<sup>1</sup>.

The UsforThem Child and Clinical Psychology Group explain the impact these restrictions are having on development:

*“Current delays in the provision of opportunities for children to touch, play and socialise may be causing harm that is irreversible. Healthy child development relies on critical periods, during which key skills and brain structures are best able to develop. Presenting a child with the same opportunities at a later date will not enable the same developmental outcomes.”*

Victoria McAlpine, UsforThem Early Years Lead said:

*As the Government and its scientists tell us the national situation has once again changed, we need to remember that our children's developmental needs and the vital importance of the early years sector remain unchanged.*

*Our research was conducted more than 6 months after early years settings were permitted to reopen. It is clear from our findings that under 5s continue to be disproportionately affected by the response to the pandemic long after the most restrictive legal barriers have been removed.*

*It is also important to remember that the 36% of under-5s without access to formal childcare are not returning to national lockdown because the lockdown of their social and emotional development never ended in the first place. Most community playgroups have never reopened and playdates at friends' houses have been illegal for most of the last 10 months.*

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<sup>1</sup> <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/25197797/>

*If the government really wanted to protect our children from harm, they would not only offer early years settings more support in staying open, but also: retract the inaccurate messaging that children are 'killing Granny', restart home visits by health visitors and actively encourage the reopening of community playgroups.*

Social development relies on children observing (and eventually modelling) behaviour they see in the world around them. Measures such as distancing, increased hand washing, the use of temperature guns, signs and symbols are all contributing to a child's sense of a world in which other people and themselves are unsafe. Vital opportunities to facilitate free-play in indoor group settings remain almost non-existent outside of Ofsted-registered early years settings. Even within formal childcare settings, Ofsted have reported a reduction in child-led activities<sup>2</sup>. Parents report that all these changes are negatively impacting their child's sense of security and confidence:

*"The covid restrictions have been absolutely terrible for my boy. He has become scared of people, including children and stopped speaking completely, including to say even yes or no".*

*"His first words should be Mama, cat, dog, car etc not mask".*

*"My daughter's confidence evaporated, she became terrified of other people, crying at night because social distancing taught her that other people are scary".*

*"My child has been afraid of adults and children since the first lockdown having previously been confident".*

*"It has been horrendous. It continues to be...I fear greatly for my child's emotional future".*

The Royal Foundation's Early Years report rightly referenced *"the scientific consensus that the conception to age 5 period is crucial in providing the foundation of health and happiness."*<sup>3</sup> The true consequences of ongoing restrictions will not be recognised for many years, potentially creating a mental health crisis that will be felt for generations to come.

## **About 'UsforThem'**

UsforThem is a network of parents, teachers and professionals lobbying for children's rights to be put first in decisions which impact them. UsforThem launched in 2020 when the founders recognised the disproportionate impact the response to Covid-19 had on children. They now have tens of thousands members across all four nations (England, Wales, Scotland & Northern Ireland) of the UK. Their research shows compelling evidence that children's welfare depends in large part on early years facilities re-opening and offering a service that is as responsive as possible to the needs of children. The parents we represent along with thousands of others, rely on early years providers and communities to aid in the healthy development of their children.

For further information/comment, case studies, and expert quotes please contact:

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<sup>2</sup> Ofsted, October 2020. Covid 19 Series Briefing on Schools October 2020

<sup>3</sup> P.12,

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