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The Impact of COVID-19 on Playwork: Five Years On

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The Impact of COVID-19 on Playwork: Five Years On

Cover Page Footnote

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Introduction

In 2020, the world experienced a global pandemic with the virus SARS-CoV-2, more commonly known as COVID-19. SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) was officially named an infectious disease by the International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses (ICTV) (Liu et al., 2020; Platto et al., 2021). It is believed the virus originated in Wuhan, China (Freedman, 2020; Liu et al., 2020; Platto et al., 2021) and subsequently spread as a pandemic globally. A pandemic “is an epidemic that expands to more than one continent” (Sampath et al., 2021) and by March the 2nd 2020, it had reached the United Kingdom (UK) where 39 cases had been recorded (Freedman, 2020). As the virus began to spread, the United Kingdom went into lockdown on the evening of the 23rd of March 2020 in an attempt to reduce infection of COVID-19 (Freedman, 2020).

The lockdown in the UK included the “banning large gatherings, closing schools, and then prohibiting all but essential work and social contact” (Freedman, 2020, p. 26), which included all types of child-related provisions, including playwork provision. Playwork is defined as:

A highly skilled profession that enriches and enhances provision for children’s play. It takes place where adults support children’s play, but it is not driven by prescribed education or care outcomes (SkillsActive, 2010, p. 3).

The playwork settings affected included after-school clubs, holiday playschemes, adventure playgrounds, and mobile play projects (King, 2023).

At the onset of lockdown, the first of a longitudinal study on the impact of COVID-19 on playwork was undertaken (King, 2023). The first study involved 23 participants working in a playwork context where the initial impact was the cessation of all practice, or where playwork was able to continue, this was either non-face-to-face or where playworkers were supporting the school Hubs (King, 2021a). Two positive impacts demonstrated the

adaptability and versatility of playwork, for example where adventure playgrounds remained open as a food bank and the importance of developing relationships with all members of the community (King, 2020). The lockdown lasted three months, until June 2020 (Dickerson et al., 2022), and by July 2020 playwork settings, under strict conditions and restrictions, began to re-open. In September 2020, two studies were undertaken on how adventure playgrounds (King, 2021b) and after-school clubs (King, 2021c) adapted to re-opening.

When the adventure playgrounds re-opened, the policies and procedures had to be revised to take into account the continued restrictions (i.e., COVID-19 testing, social distancing) as well as an increase in the cleaning of surfaces and equipment was implemented. The changes which were put in place meant that compared to how adventure playgrounds ran pre-COVID-19, in July 2020 there was a move from being an open-access provision (where children can choose to come and go as they please) to a closed-access, bookable provision of 15-20 designated time slots. This saw a reduction in the number of children attending the adventure playgrounds.

When after-school clubs re-opened, children had to stay in bubbles of 15 maximum, often with children in the same bubbles during the school day. There was also the requirement to revise the policies and procedures and implement the same strict hygiene measures. There was an increase in the number of staff to support the 'bubbles' children; however, there was a decrease in the number of children attending. Both the adventure playground and the after-school clubs had to reduce the resources and activities on offer, and whilst play outside increased, the movement within the place space decreased. By July 2021, one year on from the end of lockdown, both the adventure playgrounds and the after-school clubs were back to running the same number of days and hours as before the pre-March lockdown. Whilst the adventure playgrounds were operating as they were in pre-March 2020

lockdown (for example, a return to open access provision), the after-school clubs were still running under restrictions as in July 2020, such as children still in ‘bubbles’.

Casey and McKendrick (2023) considered three narratives which had an impact on children’s right to play during Covid-19 (Koller et al, 2022). The three narratives were 1) play in crisis, 2) the threat to play in times of crisis, and 3) play as a remedy to crisis. Examples relating to these three narratives include less playful social interaction (Koevoets et al., 2025) and playing outdoors (de Lannoy et al, 2020), resulting in a threat on children’s moods and well-being (Kourti et al., 2021). Play as a remedy to these problems was highlighted by Conroy & Ramchandani’s (2024) literature review on play therapists’ experiences while working during the Covid-19 period. The examples discussed above reflect the results from a longitudinal playwork study where the crisis led to less socialisation (for example, the closure of adventure playground) a change in children’s play behaviour when they returned after the first lockdown (King, 2021b), and an increased awareness of the therapeutic need for both play and playwork during this period (King, 2021a).

At the time of writing (2024), it is 5 years since the first recorded case of COVID-19 in 2019. Whilst there is still uncertainty about the short-, medium-, and long-term effects of COVID-19 on children, families, and the community, these areas are currently being researched. When concerning playwork, and playwork practice, the short-term impact (King, 2020), and the medium-term impact (King, 2021b, 2021c) have been researched, however, is there a long-term impact? This question forms the basis of this study: What is the impact of COVID-19 on playwork 5 years on?

Methods

This study provided a continuation from the first and subsequent studies undertaken on the impact of Covid-19 on playwork (King, 2023). The time period between the last study

in 2021 and this study was important to revisit in order to examine how playwork practitioners understood and experienced adjustments to playwork after Covid-19.

Data Collection

The research design used semi-structured interviews. Ethical approval was granted from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Swansea University. The value of semi-structured interviews is that they provide an interview guide but enable a broader scope to follow up on any of the set questions. The interview questions were:

- Tell me how you are involved in Playwork?
- From your memory, how did playwork adapt to COVID-19?
- What policies and procedures in the day-to-day running as a result of COVID-19 are still in place?
- Has the way children played changed comparing 2019 (before COVID-19) and 2024 (five years later)?
- Has playwork professional practice changed comparing 2019 (before COVID-19) and 2024 (five years later)?
- The original study asked the question ‘Can Playwork have a Key Working Role?’, how does Key Working relate to playwork in 2024?
- During Covid-19 funding was made available, how is the funding situation now to support playwork?
- If you were to sum up the impact of COVID-19 on playwork in 2024, what would you say?
- Do you have any questions?

Location

All interviews were undertaken remotely using the Zoom® or the Teams® platform.

This enabled face-to-face interviews to be undertaken and recorded for transcription and

analysis. At the start of the interview, participants were reminded of the purpose of the study, asked to confirm that informed consent was granted, and made aware of their right to withdraw from the interview at any time. When the interview finished, participants were reminded of the confidential and anonymous nature of the interview and informed they could withdraw their data up to one week after the interview finished. No participants asked for their data to be removed.

Participants

Participants were invited to take part in the study through online social media using X[®] (formally known as Twitter[®]), playwork-specific Facebook[®] pages, and national play organisations in England, Scotland, and Wales. In addition, participants who took part in the first study were also invited to take part. The request for participants was open between March 2024 to September 2024. Interested participants were sent the Participation Information Sheet (PIS) and consent form, which they signed and returned. In total 8 participants were interviewed, 5 of whom took part in the first study in March 2020.

Data Analysis

All recorded interviews were transcribed and uploaded into the NVivo 12[®] software for analysis. Data analysis was undertaken using the thematic analysis framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis is a six-step process that involves the reading and re-reading of each transcribed interview to further immerse the researcher into the data (Green et al., 2007). This approach to analysis identifies initial codes which are then grouped into themes, a process in qualitative research called collapsing the data (Elliot, 2018). The thematic analysis was started after interview 1 and initial coding continued throughout the final interview (Interview 8). Due to the small sample size, it was not possible to consider the saturation point (Saunders et al., 2017); however, the collapsing of the initial codes to the final constructed themes enabled a concise reflection of the interview responses. The draft

themes and sub-themes were sent to all the participants to comment on. This is considered important for the trustworthiness of the analysis and is termed a 'member check' (Shenton, 2004). The participants who responded stated they were a true reflection.

Results

Step 1 of the Braun and Clarke (2006) Thematic Analysis framework had 205 initial codes. These codes were collapsed into 4 main themes and 12 sub-themes. The themes and sub-themes can be found in Table 1.

Table 1

Themes and Sub-themes

Theme	Sub-Theme
Community Engagement	Access Community Funding
	Supporting the Community
	Increased Community Relationships
Emotional Regulation	Age-Related Play
	Social Skills
	Coping
Outdoors	Time
	Ethos
	Area
Health and Safety	Handwashing
	Infectious Disease
	Cleaning

Theme 1: Community Engagement

The theme of Community Engagement as a result of COVID-19 relates to accessing funding to support existing and increasing relationships that playwork has with the community. The focus on 'community' has resulted in a new direction for potential funding:

“When I realized how much community work that we do, I started focusing on that with the funding applications” (Interview 4).

During the initial lockdown, it was found playwork provisions, such as adventure playgrounds, became foodbanks. One participant explained how being a food bank has continued to support the community. For another participant, COVID-19 meant a chance to practice from a static provision to a mobile one. This has enabled the development of new and diverse community relationships:

“We've kind of connected with communities that would never have ventured as far as where the play center was” (Interview 6).

“We've made friends with some very unexpected community members. All the families usually had quite a bit of a downer on the PCSO, but now they quite often drop in on play sessions and help kids put hammocks in trees and things and that's really nice so they're getting to recognize their faces” (Interview 5).

Playwork has historically been associated with community engagement, and was summed up from the following comment:

“I think I get the principles of community development just through a lens of playwork and children rather than through the lens of adults and activities” (Interview 7).

The impact of COVID-19 to the present day suggests an increase in the need, and the desire to maintain this positive connection to the community.

Theme 2: Emotional Regulation

Whilst there was a positive outlook on the impact of COVID-19 to the present day, there was a more negative theme around Emotional Regulation. When observing how children play, the participants explained how children were more anxious and wanted their own way more than pre-Covid-19. This is summed up in the comment below:

“Before COVID staff would observe the children putting things in place for them to support them but now most of the support is about emotional regulation” (Interview 3)

The participants noted how during children’s play, they observed a change in the children’s social skills and how they respond to situations:

“We're still thinking that children are just not. You know that. They've had it rough, they've had it really rough and some of the social skills have just not been kind of there, the fighting and falling out stages that they missed when they were locked in” (Interview 2)

This change in social skills also reflected a shift in the types of play children were engaging in. It was noted that ‘older’ children would engage more in ‘younger’ type children’s play than before COVID-19:

“It is very evident that the gap in play and being around their peers and being around children their age. They were younger in their years for the way they behave in” (Interview 8)

There was a perception that children’s coping strategies were different when having to respond to situations:

“I used to see kids arguing and sort of working it out, and it wasn't such a big deal. Now I'm noticing there's a bit of an argument quite quickly, and it's like, I never want to speak to you again” (Interview 7).

“Whereas they were quite independent before. They now need a lot more reassurance because they're not so confident we're trying new things” (Interview 5).

How children play and how they cope during their play appears to have differed, particularly where social skills need to be involved.

Theme 3: Outdoors

The return of children to their respective type of play provision after the first lockdown involved a lot more time spent outdoors. One aspect of being more outdoors is that it not only supported the existing ‘ethos’ of the provision, but helped strengthen it, particularly for professional practice:

“We've already got an outdoor ethos so we are outdoors as much as we can. I suppose it had changed the staff's prospect of because sometimes its half the battle to get the staff to go outdoors” (Interview 1).

This outdoor ‘ethos’ has resulted with more time being spent outdoors, particularly for one participant who experienced a move from an indoor static provision to a mobile outdoor provision:

“I think there are a lot of factors that impacted on our playwork practice since then. I think it's primarily being outside now and sort of stepping away from what the local authority already had running, and we've been able to kind of evolve, evolve the organization the way that we think it should have looked in the first place” (Interview 6).

“Obviously being outside was a result of COVID, but I think since then is developed into more of responding to what we think kids actually needed that came to the sessions” (Interview 7).

Thus, whereas for some types of play provision, such as adventure playgrounds, outdoor play is predominant, the move to mobile play for other types of playwork provision as a result of COVID-19 has enabled an increase in outdoor playwork.

Theme 4: Health and Safety

When the playwork provision re-opened after the first lockdown in July 2020, there was an increase in cleaning and updating of policies. Whilst health and safety policies are still

in place, the focus of COVID-19 is now incorporated as an infectious disease, rather than a specific COVID-19 policy:

“We constructed a whole new registration form about if your child or somebody in your family is unwell to let the playground know. And if your child becomes unwell after being at the playground to let the playground know” (Interview 1).

“We kind of still use the COVID one based on the fact that it's infectious diseases” (Interview 4).

The cleaning of the equipment, surfaces, and fixed equipment has now decreased to pre-COVID-19 regimes. It is only the handwashing that is still being more rigorously enforced:

“I don't think very much is still in place, to be honest. We gladly ripped down all the signs. I don't think anything is. I think it all kind of now is back to normal really” (Interview 1).

“I wouldn't say we're keeping up any stringent hygiene. I would say it's still just the basic thing of wash your hands” (Interview 7).

Hence, many of the participants referred to playwork practice as being back to ‘normal’, where normality was based pre-COVID-19 in 2019.

Discussion

When the SARS-CoV-2 virus, or COVID-19, started to spread globally the impact on playwork and playwork practice was immediate with the closure of provision, reduced provision, playwork practice changing, and/or staff being furloughed (King, 2020, 2021a). Playwork and playwork practice did continue during the first March 2020 lockdown in some form, from providing play resources to face-to-face work with the childcare keyworking provision that was organised (King, 2020). Upon re-opening in July 2020, playwork practice operated within tight regulations of children in ‘bubbles’, extensive cleaning of hands,

equipment, and surfaces, and the need for COVID-19-related policies (King, 2021a, 2021b). By September 2021, playwork practice within adventure playgrounds had returned to pre-COVID operation, whilst after-school clubs were still operating in a mixture of pre-COVID or still having to operate within some COVID-19 restrictions (King, 2021c). This study aimed to provide a concluding follow-up to the first study undertaken in March 2020 during the first lockdown to explore if playwork is still being impacted by COVID-19 with the research question: What is the impact of COVID-19 on playwork 5 years on?

When considering play as a child's right under Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), 1989), Casey and McKendrick (2023) put forward the three narratives of play in times of crisis: 1) play in crisis, 2) the threat to play in times of crisis, and 3) as play as a remedy to crisis. The research evidence of the impact of COVID-19 in the UK found a threat of disruption for children transitioning from early years provision to schools (Bakipoulou, 2024) and deterioration in the emotional and mental health of preadolescent children (Waite et al., 2021). The impact of COVID-19, particularly the experience of lockdown for children and young people, increased boredom, loneliness, and frustration (Morgül et al., 2020). These latter findings, however, are not empirically confirmed in the UK even though anxiety and depression have been recorded to have increased globally (Chawla et al., 2021). Whilst this study focused on playwork practice, rather than the potential impact on children and young people, the theme of Emotional Regulation does suggest how children and young people's play has been affected by the crisis of COVID-19, particularly during the period of lockdown.

Playwork has been considered to be a type of Community of Practice (King & Newstead, 2020; King, 2020) where shared thinking, knowledge, and playwork practice have developed the profession out of the adventure playground movement (Play England, 2007).

During the first lockdown and upon playwork settings re-opening many playwork settings, particularly the adventure playgrounds, had little guidance to meet the COVID-19 restrictions that were in place. It was down to the different playwork organisations to organise and have online meetings, reflected in the comment from one participant “we've become a little bit more united”. This reflects the CoP aspect, where often solutions are found through discussion and consultation to provide support, as reflected in the comment below:

“I kept getting emails during COVID where the smaller adventure playgrounds didn't know how to reopen. So, I handed out my policies procedures, and set up plans. I just gave them to the playground so they could just replicate it, and I mean that kind of bonded a few of us as well” (Interview 4).

In addition to supporting playwork colleagues, COVID-19 has also enabled positive changes where more engagement with the community has occurred through moving from inside to outside provision and accessing more ‘community-focused’ funding. This again demonstrates the adaptable and flexible nature of playwork (King, 2020) and how it continues to respond to changes that are often enforced upon the profession and how play can be a remedy in many different contexts.

Many of the settings’ policies and procedures have retained the COVID-19 regulations that were put in place, although this has been incorporated with existing policies around infectious diseases. Whilst hand washing is still prevalent, the extensive cleaning and rotation of equipment are not undertaken now nor is the continued wiping down of fixed equipment and surfaces. The health and safety theme clearly indicates that settings within this aspect are back to pre-COVID-19 levels.

Outdoor play has always been predominant for adventure playgrounds and mobile playwork provisions that rotate around local parks and open spaces (King & Sills-Jones,

2018). For one participant, COVID-19 provided the opportunity to move from inside play to total outdoor play by developing a mobile playwork provision, as well as a remedy to the threat of the decrease in outdoor play (de Lannoy et al, 2020) during Covid-19. This resulted in an increase in community engagement. During the first lockdown, the increase in indoor play due to COVID-19 restrictions resulted in less physical play and outdoor play, particularly the lack of access to parks and playgrounds (Kourti et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2022). Mobile playwork provision supports children's use of their outdoor parks and open spaces and it has been demonstrated to have an increased use by children and young people when playworkers, often termed playrangers (2005) are present (Wavehill, 2013).

For one participant in this study, the change from a static indoor to a mobile outdoor provision provides support for children and young people to not only use their local areas but also address the lack of physical play that was identified as a result of the lockdown (Kourti et al., 2021). In addition to physical health, the benefit of children's participation in outdoor activities contributes to an increase in adolescent health and well-being (Jackson et al., 2021). This study indicated children's health and well-being have seen a change in how they cope with conflict within their play. In addition to an increase in physical play, the access and change to outdoor play can support children's emotional regulation.

Access to funding has been a constant issue within playwork (King, 2015, 2021a; King & Waibel, 2016). During the period after lockdown, funding was made available to support children's play (King, 2021b); however, for many participants there is now a lack of funding available today. However, this was not the case for all the participants, as it was felt that focusing on community engagement has opened up a new funding stream, particularly for adventure playgrounds. The community engagement has built on the use of adventure playground being, or becoming, food banks during COVID-19, and continuing in this capacity today.

This study provides useful insight into how playwork continues to function in light of COVID-19. Whilst social distancing and intense cleaning of resources are a ‘thing of the past’, playwork continues to be versatile and adaptable (King, 2020) and still provides a ‘key working’ role in supporting children therapeutically through their play (Sturrock & Else, 1998). Whilst COVID-19 had a huge impact on everybody’s lives during the period of lockdown and subsequent lifting of restrictions, different opportunities have arisen around an increase in outdoor play and community engagement. This further supports the ‘keyworking’ role identified in the first study in March 2020 (King, 2020). Playwork continues to have an important role in both children's and young people’s lives, as well as the people who live within the community.

Limitations

There are limitations to the study concerning the sample size. Although the themes and sub-themes were checked with the participants, the results may not have reached ‘saturation point’. Whilst the number of participants were relatively low in this study, more than half of the participants were also included in the first study, which enables continuity between the studies.

Conclusion

Closure is an important concept, and this study has provided the opportunity to ‘close’ a longitudinal study that began during the first lockdown in March 2020. Playwork was considered to have a ‘key working’ role from the original study, and this continues to be the case five years on from COVID-19. The importance of community engagement continues and the need for children to be able to play continues to have a therapeutic need as children are potentially still adjusting emotionally during their social play. The increase in outdoor play not only supports children’s play in the community, it also further develops community engagement for the playwork profession.

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