

# Listen and Act

## **Attending to the needs and rights of families**

In the National Performance Framework, we can see a number of National Outcomes articulated.

In the text we find this vision statement:

*We do all we can to ensure our children grow up in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding<sup>1</sup>.*



But how is this achieved? It must be the case that if it is to be experienced anywhere it must be in the context of family life. The UNCRC – with a Bill in the Scottish Parliament to bring about incorporation in to Scots Law - views the family as: “The fundamental group in society and the natural environment for the growth and well-being of all its members...particularly children” and recognises that (with text that is the source of our own national vision) “the child, for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding”.

**Family life matters, and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on families must be understood if we are to ensure best efforts for recovery and make rights real for children.**

The 15 stories we have reported evidence that all families are different, and their experiences of lockdown and recovery will be varied. In our engagement with parents and children some strong and clear insights have really struck home. We present these here, in eight key areas, with the intention of informing and influencing the way we understand the needs of families and how we develop policy and practice responses that support parents and carers to do the best for their children.

- 1. Keeping early learning centres and schools open**
- 2. An improved model for learning at home**
- 3. Value and facilitate play**
- 4. Ensure families have a network of support**
- 5. Educational establishments and other services must acknowledge and address the financial consequences of the pandemic for families**
- 6. Families and services must work together to reflect on the impact of lockdown and social isolation on children’s behaviour and development**
- 7. Support lone/single parents**
- 8. Support children and parents who live apart**

Our stories are stories of resilience and practical resolve. One of the most striking comments from one parent has been: *It’s about being on top of everything*. While one of our children said of his drawing: *It says my mummy keeps everyone safe, because that’s what she does*. (Lewis, age 4) **So, let’s acknowledge the determination of parents to do their best, but also recognise that this resolve, under great pressures, is finite.**

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<sup>1</sup> National Performance Framework/National Outcomes <https://nationalperformance.gov.scot/national-outcomes/children-and-young-people>

## 1. Keeping early learning centres and schools open

The number one ask of parents and carers in our continuing response to the pandemic is that early learning centres and schools remain open. The greatest fear that many parents have is entering a new lockdown period where, with nursery or school closures, they will once again be isolated, and children set adrift from friends, other caring adults and learning.

The reopening of early learning centres and schools is identified by all our families as the most positive thing to happen since the start of the pandemic. Parents and children are largely happy with the procedures in place to mitigate Covid transmission risks. However, our families have had mixed experiences about engagement with centres and schools about re-opening and the start of the new term. Some have experienced good levels of contact in advance or since, others less so. Moving on, all parents should expect and experience regular and respectful communication.

- *“When she went back to school, it was like her mind just lit up and her imagination was sparking”. (See Marion’s story)*
- *I’m happy that we are back at school because I can play with my friends and I see my teacher every day. I’m worried about the Coronavirus and that they might close schools again. (Yasmine, age 5)*
- *The fact that they are back at school. That’s good for them and me... You know it all took its toll. (see Sarah’s story)*
- *I could keep him wrapped in cotton wool. I thought, I will let him go and I will deal with whatever happens. There have been a couple of cases in the school. It is a tricky one. Families are asking me... ‘Do you think I should keep her home or send them in?’ I think each family just needs to decide that for themselves. (see Dawn’s story)*
- *But certainly for early years, they were really on the ball, everyone has their own bubbles and she was happy enough. It was sad she couldn’t see all the different teachers. It was hard when she started at the new nursery because there were so many staff and nobody introduced themselves to me. I knew one person already, but that was it. I think they should have had a little virtual tour, introducing themselves and the place. That would have been good to see. (see Chloe’s story)*
- *The nursery only phoned me once, and if it wasn’t for me going on the website I wouldn’t have figured out what was happening with him starting school. I know other schools and nurseries had a little gathering for families, but we didn’t have that... we didn’t get to meet the teacher. We didn’t get a tour of the school. It was like, ‘In you go and that’s it.’ That was hard. (see Dawn’s story)*
- *They do good work with our children and I’m so happy we have such a good school with people we can trust with our weans. For me, in lockdown and after lockdown, I did say that we weren’t going to take them back until we saw what was going on*

*because our children aren't guinea pigs... But we thought about it and knew that he needed to go to school. (see Lynsey and Karim's story)*

## 2. An improved model for learning at home

When parents reflect on the lockdown experience of learning at home, they often describe best intentions and then a struggle with expectations and practical delivery. During lockdown, materials from early learning centres or school varied in terms of quality. Some parents reported positive experiences with accessible resources, help with digital access, a feeling of being in an online community – but others heard little or felt judged when they did not feel able to sustain a connection with the work being sent.

While the priority for parents is to keep early learning and schools open, should any future model of home or blended learning be required there needs to be greater consideration of what can be expected, what support is on offer and recognition that what parents can do - bake, cycle, play, create, talk, reassure, hugs - has value.

- *Learning was probably quite heavily based around screens so a lot of the work the school would send us needed to be printed off and I don't have a printer so that was a real issue... Closing the school was huge though. It had a huge impact on us. (see Fiona's story)*
- *They were so lovely at the nursery as well. They made us activity packs, like for baking, with instructions which was good. (see Chloe's story)*
- *One thing they did throughout lockdown was a school assembly on Teams each week. It was difficult because there was so many trying to get on but that was quite good. There were songs, readings...they did talk a little bit about coronavirus but it was mainly just all positive stuff. (see Fiona's story)*
- *When the children were learning from home, I found this really difficult. We missed a lot of classes because we didn't have enough devices. That was a real problem for us. I asked the school for help with this but they didn't reply. Using the same device for my children, me and their father wasn't enough. (see Layla's story)*
- *The school were quite good. They set everything up on Glow and they said if you couldn't get on Glow then they would send out writing packs... One thing I wasn't too keen on, the school phoned me one day and said 'Oh we're just phoning to make sure you have your password to the Glow account because the boys haven't done any work and you should log on and do it'. And like, I understand that their education is important but I'm teaching them other things... I wasn't always going to sit down or try to get the kids to sit down for an hour a day and work on Glow. I just felt a wee bit out of place that they were phoning me to ask me to do the work, it made me feel like I'm doing this wrong here. (see Sarah's story)*

**Parents of children who are in Gaelic medium education**, but who do not speak Gaelic themselves, have identified particular needs about home learning, and concerns that if any

model of home or blended learning is to happen once again, while support has been good, they will need specific support in order to support their child's learning and language development.

- *During lockdown, well with home-schooling, he wasn't keen. He's in Gaelic medium education. That was hard work. I don't speak Gaelic, I know a little bit. Whereas Alexander is fluent and has been since he was about three or four. The fact I couldn't speak Gaelic meant that I had to stop and translate what he had to do and he'd get really annoyed that I couldn't do it. I couldn't explain it in Gaelic so I'd have to do it in English and he'd get really annoyed that I wasn't a good enough teacher... I had to stop and Google everything. But I would say our school bent over backwards. If you had an issue, you'd call up and they'd tried to sort it that day. (see Leona's story)*

### 3. Value and facilitate play

The closure of parks and play areas in the early months of lockdown, along with closing down organised play and sporting activities, had a profound impact on children.

In the context of discussing the importance of play, parents also saw value in the increasing use of outdoor activities and play in early learning centres and schools, acknowledging this as one of the recovery/mitigation measures being adopted. But there were concerns that if this is only driven by Covid mitigation, rather than a meaningful commitment to play, good practice may not be sustained.

In our continuing response to the pandemic children's play must be acknowledged as both a right and a basis for the promotion of wellbeing. Local or national lockdown decisions need to take account of the child's right to play. Further, we should see the use of outdoor learning by establishments not previously committed to it as an opportunity to grasp.

- *But we don't have a garden, and the parks were shut for the first while, but we could play in a field. The police were patrolling anyone who stopped to play, and there was a lot of anxiety about the police talking to people. Friends of mine got stopped by them for playing football with their five-year-old, and for sitting on a picnic blanket. Also going out in a public space was quite stressful. Especially where we live, it's so densely populated. People were getting quite angry with children in public. (see Marion's story)*
- *Because of Coronavirus we stayed home a lot. I didn't like it, because it was boring. I liked playing in the garden and on the trampoline... I'm happy to be back at school, because I get to see my friends. I play games with my friends, like hide and seek in the playground. I like riding my bike to school. (Samir, age 7)*
- *Our school is moving more towards outdoor play but that's not because of a higher consciousness but because they're forced to be outside. We can use it as a positive thing - we can get them all outside and then start educating people that actually, it's for their betterment as a whole. They need to be doing more outdoor learning. (see Natalie and Jon's story)*

#### 4. **Ensure families have a network of support**

In fast-moving or emergency situations decisions are reactive, but we know that support for families is most helpful when it is focused on early intervention and prevention. **When services closed in the early days of lockdown it was if the rug had been pulled from under some families.** The response to the pandemic may have by necessity been rapid, but the consequences for families were not adequately considered and some services did not adapt and respond with enough haste. Our families have talked about how hard it is to ask for help. In the context of services that should be concerned with prevention and early intervention this should not be something they worry about.

- *There were food parcels available too, but you know I struggle asking for help. I admit that. People here say 'you don't ask for help when you need it' even the school were like 'do you need anything?' It was good people were offering so I could say yes. (see Margaret's story)*

When families need support, it is often community-based services, many third sector, that they turn too. Families report that it is these services that have adapted quickly and responded with essential practical and emotional support. To protect the anonymity of our families we have not named (and so not been able to celebrate) some crucially important services, but we know from families and services that they are under pressure and resources are harder to find. **Recovery – and any ongoing measures akin to lockdown - must mean prioritising, supporting and resourcing community-based services for families.**

- *Well everything closed but what (third sector pre-school and family service) did was phone you every week and I looked forward to that every week because that gave me that wee bit of 'well there's someone out there who wants to know how I'm getting on' – so not just there for him but for me as well. It was a case of them checking in and I could say things like 'Well I'm really struggling this week, his behaviour and stuff' and they were like 'well leave it with us and we'll see what we can do'. (see Margaret's story)*

**Across our interviews a further aspect of support was evident - the importance of that one key worker who cares.** For parents their relationship with a professional person who they know to be authentic in their care and respect for them has made a significant difference; relationships matter.

- *I think having somebody there that won't judge you. Like having someone like (local support agency worker) who knew I wasn't doing online work with the boys and she never once turned round and said 'but you should be!' Or I would tell her, 'we've been in the house and we have done nothing, I've not done anything exciting with them, I've not tried to do anything fun with them', she would be like 'just chill, you are fine, you will have these days'. They are so supportive no matter what I chose to do and that really helped a lot because there were a lot of people that felt like they weren't being good parents during lockdown and that was me included, and so having someone there that was just encouraging you and reminding you that you were a*

*good parent, well it would have been a lot worse if I didn't have that person reminding me every couple of weeks. (see Sarah's story)*

- *The kinship worker phoned every week to make sure we were alright. When it started to ease a wee bit they would deliver packs of things, like books and toys but I had a lot of support from the kinship team... the kinship guy was really good, he gave me his number and said if there was any problems just to phone. (see Emma's story)*

Our parents also talked about volunteering themselves, and the closure of support services had an additional impact where this is the case.

- *So, for myself, I found it really tough, because I was helping with the parent/toddler group at the local community centre and going to the drop-ins and being part of the local women's group. All those things. For that all just to stop it was like: 'Where's my purpose?' (See Chloe's story)*

#### **5. Educational establishments and other services must acknowledge and address the financial consequences of the pandemic for families**

The cost of food, the effects of unemployment, lost income and the cost of return to school have all been identified by our parents. We have heard about the response of some early learning centres, schools and community-based organisations that provide practical supports. But we have heard that the return to school has been a further financial pinch point and education services have not necessarily responded adequately. Much great work has been done around the *Cost of the School day*<sup>2</sup>, and as our response to Covid continues these matters must remain on the agenda.

- *The hardest thing was that my husband stopped working, and financially this was very hard for us. So recently, when they started school, I didn't manage to buy stuff like uniforms, school bags. I found it really difficult. Children copy each other, like to wear what others wear, and to be like each other. That was hard. I like my kids to be happy. I wish someone had helped me when they were going back to school with pencils, pencil cases and things like that. (see Layla's story)*
- *Pretty soon though work stopped, being self-employed I wasn't eligible for furlough and everything just stopped for the first three or four months... I went from earning all of my own money to Universal Credit and I've been able to top that up with a few bits of work but, I couldn't live on what I'm earning right now... Everyone was piping in, 'oh you should just go out and get a job.' I didn't have any childcare. I haven't got a problem in going to work in Tesco if I could, but I have no childcare. I'm also a single parent and I need to stay well. (see Marion's story)*

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<sup>2</sup> Costs of the School Day: Understanding and addressing financial barriers at school  
<https://education.gov.scot/improvement/practice-exemplars/cost-of-the-school-day/>

## 6. Families and services must work together to reflect on the impact of lockdown and social isolation on children's behaviour and development

Our parents have expressed concerns about how the experience of lockdown, new Covid mitigation measures and the possibility of further lockdown measures are impacting on children. With the understanding that all behaviour is communication, they are reflecting on what presenting behaviours are telling us about our children. Concerns can include worries for a child at the point of transition from early learning to school, this in the context of a broader societal debate about the age at which children start primary school education. In the months ahead education providers - and other professionals with an interest in learning, behaviour and child development - need to engage with parents to understand their perspectives on the impact of recent months on children, to be able to reflect on behaviours alongside parents, without making them feel they or their child are being judged.

- *But during lockdown the toughest thing was losing routine. He was just not getting to jump about, burn energy off, he was bouncing off the walls, going to bed later, getting up earlier, started not wanting to eat himself and wanting me to feed him, being in my bed, everything was just kind of starting to deteriorate with it. I think it was just because he was with me 24/7 and clingy. Touch wood, he has got much better, but I can't get him out of my bed.... This is an important year for his development. Michael could go to school next year. I feel like him having time off nursery could slow his development down or make him less ready for school. So, that's a slight worry. I don't want to keep him back for another year just because this has happened, but if that's the circumstances then I would have to look into keeping him back. (see Mairi's story)*
- *I think he has struggled. He is used to structure and routine so when everything went into lockdown he really struggled with his behaviour and how to express himself, I found it really did affect him in that way. (see Margaret's story)*
- *I was talking to a teacher discussing behavioural issues and they were saying 'nothing is normal for her'. We don't know what these children...if their behaviour is because of this, the pandemic, or if it's normal. (see Natalie and Jon's story)*

## 7. Support lone/single parents

Lone/single parents have experienced a significant degree of isolation, oftentimes not having another adult to talk with other than on the phone or online. The social isolation of lone/single parents is something that must be considered when decisions are made about responses to the pandemic and the provision of services.

- *Probably although I've had the bairns to talk to, I haven't had adult conversation. And because we had just moved away from family and my pal group I was kind of isolated myself, so it was like talking to bairns all day. That was it, unless you phone somebody, but then they might be busy, with their own bairns to look after. (see Emma's story)*

- *For me, at least for the first couple of months I didn't see any of my friends. I think it's difficult for me as I don't have family anywhere near. They're all so far away and even now, I still haven't seen any of them. (see Fiona's story)*

## **8. Support children and parents who live apart**

There was some confusion in the initial months of lockdown reported by families about what to do when children live in two homes. Co-parenting in lockdown also brought some further stresses to relationships. The circumstances of such families need to be considered whatever levels of lockdown measures are imposed.

- *Logan and his sister are co-parented by myself and their Dad but there were questions about that initially as well, we were two houses, so there was a lot of...it was difficult in the start. (see Fiona's story)*
- *They couldn't understand why we weren't allowed to go out, or go to school, or see their friends. Or why they weren't getting to visit their Dad at the beginning, because obviously you weren't allowed to meet anybody, and the rules weren't clear about that. (see Sarah's story)*
- *I felt sad because I couldn't see Dad. I missed school and my friends. I'd be sad if we had to go back into lockdown. (Harvey, age 7)*

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