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**REFLECTIONS ON COVID-19**

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**CARE IN THE  
TIME OF COVID-19:  
NURTURING OUR CHILDREN**

**BY CAITLIN TAYLOR**

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# Care in the time of Covid-19: Nurturing our children

**Caitlin Taylor**

## **Abstract**

In recent years there has been increasing emphasis placed upon the value of nurturing practice within children's services in Scotland. The outbreak of COVID-19 is having an invisible, yet devastating, impact on our most vulnerable children. For most there is no school, no sports or social activity. Many children are witnessing their parents losing employment or falling ill. The longer the outbreak lasts the deeper the consequences will be on children's life chances; their social and emotional development, their behaviour and learning.

## **Keywords**

COVID-19, nurture, children and families, education, Scotland

## **Corresponding author:**

Caitlin Taylor, Glasgow City Council, gw14taylorcaitlin3@glow.sch.uk

## **Introduction**

This article focuses on the response of a primary school in one of Scotland's cities. Throughout lockdown schools pulled their resources together to provide childcare in 'hubs' for children whose parents were key-workers or were identified as being vulnerable (Scottish Government, 2020). The article summarises work that is being initiated by child care professionals to ensure positive and caring relationships are sustained with children and families throughout the pandemic. It will highlight where technology is being used to good effect and will provide evidence which demonstrates that, in spite of the crisis we are all living through, many valuable little victories are being achieved.

Our school is essentially a community of practice, located in an inner city area which falls in the top 10% of the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (Wenger-Trayner, 2015). Approximately one third of children speak English as an additional language and many hold status as refugees or asylum seekers. The school has a long-standing tradition of working in partnership with parents and carers: we deliver adult literacy and numeracy classes and regularly invite families to participate in cooking events, play initiatives and therapeutic interventions. A group of volunteers run an informal charity shop and provide essential goods to those in need. For many families, particularly those who have recently arrived in Scotland, their support network is confined to a small number of child care professionals and dedicated unpaid workers who facilitate services within the local community (Scottish Government, 2018b).

## **Maintaining connection**

Lockdown has had a devastating impact upon the financial security of many families in our community.

In the first week of school closures many families were in crisis due to the absence of free school meals and family cooking clubs. In one instance, a father of four, a refugee, disclosed to me that he had run out of money. To support these families emergency donations of food were gathered and delivered as they awaited free school meal vouchers which could be used at a budget

supermarket. This supermarket however, although affordable and accessible by public transport, did not offer culturally appropriate food for many families; furthermore, the voucher scheme was only intended to replace one meal a day for each child and it became necessary to look for alternative, solutions to ensure families could cope. We reached out to charities, foodbanks and other local initiatives which had been established in the wake of the crisis.

As the weeks progressed more and more help became available and there was less urgency for food parcels. Nevertheless, it was evident that the families obtained much more than nourishment from our donations. It was clear that both children and adults felt reassured by the presence of a trusted professional on their doorstep and this challenged us to think creatively as to how we could provide connection and support while adhering to social distancing guidelines.

## **Technology**

Technology has played an immense role in enabling people to maintain contact throughout Lockdown. Pedagogues have been challenged to shift their practice and deliver online learning. Within such an environment the relationship students have with their teacher is of paramount importance and they depend on 'live' interactions with a practitioner who is (albeit virtually) present (Bowness, Morrison, Stuart & Green, 2020, p. 3). This theory echoes attachment-based practice where practitioners create and sustain a close relationship with pupils 'modelled on that of parent-child' (Boxall and Lucas, 2010, p. 25). With this in mind our staff ensured that relationships remained at the heart of their pedagogy when delivering online learning. Children who had access to educational apps were able to socialise virtually with their peers and sustain daily emotional check-ins with their teachers by exchanging videos, drawings and voice messages online. One non-verbal child who has Autism laughed and smiled whenever they saw photos and videos of their teacher and classmates.

We were challenged by that fact that not all pupils had 'equitable access to online learning environments' (Bowness et al., 2020, p. 3). A third sector organisation facilitated access to technology for some families within the

community by distributing tablets which came equipped with data allowance. In this instance some families prioritised the use of their data to maintain contact with family overseas as opposed to accessing materials from school. In other households multiple children participated in online learning while operating exclusively from one parent's mobile phone. Some families who did have access to technology did not necessarily have the capacity to utilise their devices to their full potential. It was essential that we were sensitive to the many intersectionalities of disadvantage experienced by our children and families who had to contend with a range of challenges throughout this crisis (Crenshaw, 1989). We gave great consideration to factors such as poverty, parents' understanding of English and the family's housing situation in order that we could ensure our interventions were welcome and appropriate.

## **Nurturing from a distance**

We ensured that children who were participating in online learning could still enjoy aspects of the hidden curriculum which are essential in promoting self-esteem, building a sense of collective identity and most importantly – having fun! Teachers ran virtual talent contests and 'show and tell' sessions. Twitter became a focus for the community where parents and carers could access advice and resources. One member of staff made weekly videos of key adults sharing positive messages and also organised events to boost morale such as a virtual sports day. Throughout the summer holiday staff shared video tours of the school as well as introductions from new teachers. This was essential in addressing the anxiety of both parents and children to ensure a positive transition at the beginning of the academic year.

There is an argument that blended learning leads to 'increased access and convenience, improved learning and decreased costs' (Stein & Graham, 2014, p. 14). We were surprised that some of the children we had expected to struggle throughout lockdown coped remarkably well. Some children with Autism Spectrum Disorders who often exhibited challenging behaviour benefited from the fact that there were fewer transitions in their lives. They enjoyed the flexibility of online learning and their families were able to thrive throughout this time. For other children, however, the sudden disruption in routine was

confusing and their distress was manifested by destructive behaviour, disturbed sleep schedules and loss of appetite. In the first week of school closures one parent told me that their child, who had a sensory impairment and was non-verbal, had written the names of their classmates and teacher over the walls of the family home. This child evidently craved connection with their peer group and although we could only replicate this in a virtual setting, the ability to interact with their friends using a range of media was essential for their wellbeing.

Children and families who were particularly vulnerable, as well as those who were without internet, maintained contact with key professionals by phone or text message. Almost all families engaged very positively with this and we were able to build a detailed portrait about how they were coping in order that we could offer more personalised forms of support. This support took many forms: for a small minority of families we were able to offer childcare within the hub which provided a semblance of routine school education for children and much needed respite for parents. For others we provided parenting advice via phone calls while offering support and company; we also created work packs for the children and for some of our more vulnerable families added in small 'caring' parcels. We issued comics, baking and gardening kits as well as craft materials – all personalised to the children's special interests. From listening to our children and young people we found that weekends could be particularly long and isolating, particularly for those who did not have internet access. We worked in partnership with a health promoting charity to offer 'Fakeaway Kits' where families could replicate a traditional take-away meal at home such as pizza or curry. This proved useful in building a sense of anticipation for the weekend, breaking up the monotony of the week and helping families provide wider experiences for their children while remaining at home. These parcels and kits were not only useful in establishing a common interest amongst siblings and enabling families to build connection together, they also served arguably as a transitional object where the both the parent and child had concrete proof that a key professional was holding them in mind (Boxall & Lucas, 2010).

## **Empowering parents and building community**

Many families in the area live in large tower blocks and were terrified to go outdoors throughout lockdown. Time outdoors and connection with nature is fundamental to children and young people's wellbeing (Scottish Government, 2018a). In some instances, however, parents were so fearful for their family's safety that their children had not been outside for over two months. Many families who were refugees and asylum seekers reported that they missed having access to a weekly resource where children received a hot meal and participated in organised games and free play outdoors. Through this resource many of these (mostly) women had formed friendships and support networks of their own and regularly referred to 'Family Club' as the highlight of their week. In this instance it was obvious that the loss of community caused by COVID-19 had a huge impact on the wellbeing of these women. Having left their own communities under duress it was little wonder that they felt the impact of isolation more strongly than others (Scottish Government, 2018b). As practitioners we learned to be more sensitive to the families dealing with multiple priorities throughout this crisis and whose overlapping needs put them at risk of 'double-discrimination' (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 12). The mental health of some parents and carers was being impacted whilst others struggled to maintain a routine for their children.

In response we adopted a simple yet effective intervention to address these concerns and began inviting one family at a time into the school playground where families could meet informally with a member of staff. The aim of these sessions was simply to give adults the confidence to be outside with their children - a practitioner would model some simple outdoor games and activities while offering company and support for the parents. This initiative gave families an incentive to get up and dressed while equipping them with the resources and capacity to take their children outdoors and engage in vigorous, energetic play. As the weeks progressed families were increasingly visible within the community and one parent reported that the sessions helped them to 'feel safe outside and to feel better.' The success of this intervention is now being used to inform our community's 'Family Fun' summer programme where in lieu of large group

outings and team games our staff work on a one-to-one basis with families before providing them an activity pack to take home and enjoy as a family.

## **Conclusion**

This article set out to chronicle work undertaken by one school community to support the children and families it serves. It has highlighted the role of the school in sustaining nurturing relationships with children and their families during the pandemic.

Whilst lockdown undoubtedly heightened the isolation experienced by many of the families we support, most especially those from refugee and asylum communities, it has also served to reinforce the trust that parents and children have in the school and the range of committed professionals and volunteers who work within it. We have been able to work in partnerships to address the fear that COVID-19 has given rise to as well as the added challenges of inequitable access to technology and social isolation.

As schools across the globe prepare to welcome students back it is imperative that child care professionals, volunteers and parents work together to ensure that that children feel safe and secure as they re-enter into new school routines. As we begin to co-create a new normal our community will discover a newfound sense of resilience and deeper appreciation of the power of relationships in our everyday practice.

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## **About the author**

Caitlin is a Nurture teacher in Glasgow. She has an interest in nurturing pedagogy and inclusive practice.