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So then you had to get back all that friendship: children's lived experiences of the COVID-19 lockdowns and on returning to school

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an immense impact on the global population. Lockdown restrictions and school closures resulted in disruption to children's learning and prolonged periods of social isolation from peers, throughout a crucial time in their development. By examining children's lived experiences of lockdown and their transition back to school, this study aimed to understand how children have dealt with the challenges presented by the pandemic. In doing so, this may provide guidance for families and educators in their support of children in the future. In the aftermath of lockdown, face-to-face interviews with six children, aged 10–11 years, were conducted across three schools in the United Kingdom between October–November 2022. Semi-structured interviews provided a detailed account of participants' experiences and were analysed thematically. Thematic analysis of the data identified five themes: (1) *COVID comprehension*, (2) *friendships through lockdown*, (3) *remote learning challenges*, (4) *family friction*, (5) *benefits of lockdown*. This study provides an insight into the unique experiences of children throughout an unprecedented time, and their transition back to school. In listening to the voices of children, we understand the importance of external social connections and the school as a means of nurturing friendships and in providing teacher support and feedback. These findings offer important guidance for educators in the event of future restrictions, or where pupils are unable to attend school for a prolonged period, to ensure interventions are in place to facilitate friendships and maintain connections with children.

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The COVID-19 pandemic impacted the lives of the global population on an unprecedented scale (World Health Organization, 2021). Though children were less likely to suffer the serious effects of the virus (Mehta et al., 2020), it has been suggested that they experienced secondary stressors (Whitt-Woosley et al., 2022), such as disruption to learning, social isolation, and the fear surrounding the virus,

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all believed to have had a negative impact on children's psychological well-being (Asemota et al., 2022).

Due to lockdown restrictions, children's home lives were significantly altered, with families spending extended periods of time together whilst many parents continued to work remotely. The strain experienced has been addressed within the literature, raising concerns over the challenges faced by parents in maintaining their role as primary caregiver whilst supporting children's home learning (Chanchlani et al., 2020). The impact of these stresses on parent-child interactions was noted by parents during the first wave of the pandemic (Gadermann et al., 2021) and highlight how employment and financial insecurity intensified conflict.

Learning

One of the largest impacts on children was the closure of schools, meaning that millions undertook their education remotely, resulting in significant learning losses (Renaissance Learning, Education Policy Institute, 2021). Parental reports suggest a decrease in primary children's academic motivation throughout the pandemic (Zaccoletti et al., 2020), possibly due to limited teacher feedback. Research carried out throughout the first lockdown (Larcher et al., 2020) highlights the difficulties young people faced in learning from home, many finding it to be overwhelming without the support of teachers and peers. Focusing upon secondary pupils aged 11–18 years, their study provides young people with the opportunity to share their experiences, many of whom felt their views were not heard in relation to the pandemic, emphasising the importance of continued child-centred research to aid policy and offer guidance for professionals working with younger age groups.

Peer separation

The effect of lockdown not only impacted children's learning, but also meant they were cut off from peer groups. In a study by Gilbert et al. (2021), parents of children aged 5–11 years reported children's feelings of loneliness throughout the lockdown, believing that the lack of social interactions resulted in regressive behaviour and negatively impacted well-being. Interviews with mothers of children aged 9–11 years, indicate that limited communication throughout this time had an adverse effect on children's interpersonal skills and motivation, many suggesting that their child became withdrawn in socialising with family members (Tiwari et al., 2021).

Longitudinal studies examining the effects of childhood social isolation on individuals from the age of seven through adulthood (Lacey et al., 2014) have highlighted its potential contribution to poor health outcomes in later life. These findings underscore the necessity for additional research focusing on

children's experiences of peer isolation throughout this developmental period. On returning to school, interviews with primary school teachers (Fray et al., 2022) suggest that many children struggled to reintegrate into friendship groups, reports indicating that children had lost the ability to engage with peers. This highlights how the stresses felt by children may not have been reduced upon returning to school, illustrating the importance of further exploration of the ongoing effects of the pandemic from the perspective of children.

Family questionnaires completed during the pandemic suggest that children, aged between 3–10 years, experienced heightened stress levels due to the lack of contact with peers (Christner et al., 2021). In a study conducted throughout the lockdown, Larivière-Bastien et al. (2022) explored the social impact, highlighting how separation from peer groups may have been damaging to young people's emotional well-being. Interviews captured children's excitement at the prospect of returning to school, specifically for the social opportunities. Conducted across an age range of 5–14 year-olds, this study demonstrates the significance of peers throughout childhood, in providing a unique relationship which cannot be replaced by family. In the aftermath of the pandemic, research which explores how children have reintegrated into these social groups may provide an understanding of the long-term implications of lockdown.

Anxiety and fear

Following the outbreak of COVID-19, news sources became dominated by updates relating to the pandemic (Dalton et al., 2020). Parental accounts of children's fear and anxiety experienced throughout this time were believed to have been intensified by exposure to public health reports and social media (Cantor & Harrison, 2022), and may have ongoing consequences for their well-being (Garfin et al., 2020). Using drawings gathered from children aged 7–12 years throughout the early stages of lockdown, research by Bray, Blake, et al. (2021) illustrate children's awareness of transmission and the importance of protecting vulnerable groups by staying at home. Further exploration of children's perspective may offer an important insight into how their social context and exposure to media narratives shaped their understanding of the pandemic.

Benefits

Though the literature largely examines the negative outcomes of the pandemic, studies have explored the positive aspects of lockdown. Questionnaires completed by parents indicate improvements in children's family satisfaction during this time, these authors suggest this may be because of additional time spent together (Christner et al., 2021). Research with adolescences aged 16–24 years (Branquinho et al., 2020) note that this time allowed families to build

relationships, engage in hobbies and reassess the importance of friendships. Moreover, interviews with children aged 7–11 years conducted throughout the first wave suggest that children enjoyed additional time with family and embraced new forms of communication with friends through virtual platforms (Thompson et al., 2021). These accounts illustrate children's ability to find positive outcomes throughout this turbulent time.

When examining the voices of young people in this area, studies have often focused on the views of adolescents. In a study by Branquinho et al. (2020), questionnaires were used to gain an understanding of the implications of COVID-19 on Portuguese adolescents. This research indicated that loneliness, depression and anxiety were amongst the mental health issues faced by young people following lockdown. The average age of participants in this study was 19.1 years, and it is important to provide younger participants the opportunity to share their views (Greig et al., 2013) of lockdown, experienced throughout a time within the developmental stage, where social surrounding plays a crucial role in responding to the pressures already experienced throughout this time (Eccles, 1999).

The present study

Although it has been nearly two years since the lifting of measures, continual research with children is believed to be essential, due to the adverse mental and physical health outcomes which may result over time following periods of acute stress (Garfin et al., 2020). Parent and teacher reports shed light on the stresses experienced by children and the family unit during the pandemic (Goldberg et al., 2022; Kerr et al., 2021; Tiwari et al., 2021) and the anxiety upon returning to school (Fray et al., 2022). However, is important to gain insights from multiple sources due to the discrepancies which exist in relying upon parental reports alone (De Los Reyes & Kazdin, 2005). The inclusion of children in the research process is crucial (Sammons et al., 2016) as providing a voice for them allows changes to be made within their social contexts (James, 2007).

The aim of the current study was to explore children's lived experiences throughout the COVID-19 lockdown and upon returning to the school setting. The present study aims to build upon parental and teacher reports, employing children's voices in the wake of a global upheaval.

The research questions which guided this study were:

- (i) What was life like for children during the COVID-19 lockdown?
- (ii) How did children adjust to the transition from home to school and adapt to the 'new normal'?

To address these, semi-structured interviews with children aged 10–11 years were employed. In doing so, this research hopes to offer guidance for

professionals working with children, so that they can be supported following the lifting of measures, or if future lockdown measures were put in place.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited from a convenience sample of schools known to the lead researcher. Children were recruited via three Derbyshire schools in the UK. Two schools were small, rural Primary Schools, while the other was a larger urban Junior School. Based on information obtained from the schools Ofsted reports, the proportion of disadvantaged children within the Junior School was above the national average while the two rural schools were below. Six children, aged between 10 and 11 years, were interviewed between October-November 2022 (five girls and one boy). Two children interviewed attended the urban Junior School, while the remaining four participants attended the rural primary schools. Participant details are provided in [Table 1](#).

Materials

The interview schedule allowed a rapport to be established through more general questions, building trust between interviewer and child (Egberts et al., 2020). Ice-breaker questions such as, 'did you have a nice summer?', 'what is your favourite subject?' and 'what are your hobbies?' enabled children to feel comfortable and at ease with the researcher, so that questions relating to the lockdown could be asked. To further engage the children, the researcher explained that they would be able to create their own special identity (pseudonym).

Semi-structured interview questions aimed to create a relaxed, conversational atmosphere (Prior, 2016) and follow-up questions enabled participants time to further reflect on their experience of lockdown. This also allowed the researcher to rephrase questions which participants may not have understood. Interviews began with general questions about the pandemic, moving on to children's own experience of lockdown. To explore children's experiences of returning to school, questions such as, '*what has it been like going back to school after lockdown?*' and '*how has life changed since lockdown ended?*' were asked.

Table 1. Participant details.

Pseudonym	Gender	School setting
RB	M	Rural
Mary Godwin	F	Urban
Rugby Girl	F	Rural
Mathilda	F	Rural
Lily-Anna	F	Urban
Rosie	F	Urban

Questions were designed so as not to be leading or reflect the researchers' views, having worked in the education sector.

Procedure

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the ethics committee of the researchers' institution (PSY_MSc_Jul22_Jan_003). Headteachers advertised the study to families of Year 6 pupils. Participants' parents or carers were required to opt-in and provide written, informed consent and then interview sessions were arranged with each child during their school day. During the session, children provided their first name to indicate their assent. Interviews took place on school premises within a quiet area.

Interviews lasted an average of 17.5 minutes. Once the interview was completed, the researcher debriefed the child and a written debrief form was provided for children to take home to their parent or carer.

Analysis

Thematic analysis was used due to its ability to capture children's experiences, thoughts and feelings whilst being adaptable to a range of epistemologies (Braun & Clarke, 2006), taking an inductive approach to allow the data to drive the area of focus (Thomas, 2006). A social constructionist perspective was employed, looking at the context of these lived experiences (Prosek & Gibson, 2021) and adopting the view that children make meaning through interactions and social surroundings (Burr, 1995).

Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim by the lead researcher. This was then coded into groups and was inclusive of the entire data corpus (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Codes were then organised into themes. The researcher was mindful of their position as a teacher throughout analysis, and continuously reflected on this throughout the study (Palaganas et al., 2017).

Results

Thematic analysis of the data identified five key themes which illustrate children's experiences of the COVID-19 lockdown and their transition back to school. These were: (1) *COVID comprehension*, (2) *friendships through lockdown*, (3) *remote learning challenges*, (4) *family friction*, (5) *benefits of lockdown*.

COVID comprehension

Throughout interviews, children's knowledge of COVID-19 and the restrictions in place was evident. The severity of the pandemic and children's understanding of precautions to prevent transmission encompasses this important theme, and

how this contributed to feelings of anxiety. Discussions also reflect how children were not so much impacted by the virus as they were the restrictions which went with it.

Interviews portrayed the diverse levels of comprehension amongst children about the COVID-19 virus. Participant RB showed awareness of the varying degrees of severity, 'Like say Omicron which has already come out but it's not that bad, not that much people have had it.' This participant was aware of COVID variants and talked in detail about vaccines, which may illustrate the media exposure throughout this time. This is further portrayed in RB's discussion of life during the height of lockdown:

In the middle of COVID when it was the worst basically everything was shut down... you couldn't even go outside without wearing a face mask 'cause of how bad it was... And all over the news and newspapers, COVID. - RB

This highlights how children's perceptions of the pandemic are constructed through their surroundings and exposure to news sources, possibly evoking fear through headlines. Garfin et al. (2020) warn of the psychological distress resulting from repeated media exposure throughout times of crisis. However, not all participants interviewed demonstrated the same understanding of the virus:

All I know is that it was, like, made from like [pause] I dunno who made it, like it was made in like a certain country...And, all I know is that it's very annoying to have.
- Lily-Anna

Similarly, RB notes; 'I'm guessing it started in China or India, that's what I'm guessing'. These accounts perhaps reflect Western media narratives speculation on the origin of the virus (Pietrzak-Franger et al., 2022), and the impact of these on children's constructions and understanding of the pandemic.

The accounts reflect children's varying degrees of knowledge of COVID and its severity, perhaps illustrating the information they were exposed to during the pandemic. Bray, Carter, et al. (2021) note that children's main sources of information throughout lockdown were parents and caregivers. Their study found that most parents attempted to limit or even shield their child from the news. However, research indicates that where information is withheld, children may piece together fragments of overheard conversations which could result in misunderstanding and heighten feelings of anxiety (Christ & Christ, 2006). Dalton et al. (2020) emphasise the importance of honest communication in protecting children's psychological well-being in the long-term to alleviate anxiety.

Concern for the welfare of loved ones was also apparent throughout the data. RB draws attention to the uncertainty of what may happen to his peers:

Probably just a bit sad, like knowing what's going to happen to my friends, will they get COVID, what will happen to them...It was just making me worried about what's happening to my friends right now. - RB

Children's fear for the safety of family and friends was also noted by Asemota et al. (2022) and highlights how this may have contributed to the stress experienced by young people.

Though children's knowledge of the virus varied, understanding of COVID restrictions was consistently detailed, and all children discussed the measures taken to prevent transmission, capturing a sense of collective responsibility.

My mum always made me wear a mask and my little sister would struggle so much 'cause she didn't like wearing the mask. But she knew it was for her safety. - Lily-Anna

The wearing of masks, hand sanitising and social distancing were key precautions which children discussed, and perhaps indicative of how children were most affected by COVID restrictions. Some children discussed the need to isolate to ensure family members did not become infected:

My dad was because he thought he had COVID but apparently um he didn't...and my grandpa had it and then—so had to isolate just to make sure... 'cause he saw him in the past like week. - Mary-Godwin

This account portrays children's comprehension of the importance of preventing transmission, and the vulnerabilities of older relatives. This was also noted by Larcher et al. (2020), capturing children's sense of social consciousness as they observed the impact of COVID-19 on a broader level. Young people's understanding of transmission was also highlighted by Bray, Blake, et al. (2021) where children's drawing depicted the importance of preventing the spread amongst vulnerable members of the community. This demonstration of prosocial behaviour develops between infancy and middle childhood (Christner et al., 2020) as children's 'moral self' emerges, providing an understanding of their responsibility within the social world (Hay & Cook, 2007).

Friendships through lockdown

A significant theme within the data corpus was the nature of children's friendships throughout lockdown and on returning to school. This theme captures children missing friends and how technology enabled connections to be maintained. Of significance within this theme was children's anxieties around returning to school, and the uncertainty felt in reconnecting with friends after a period of separation.

Throughout the interviews, all participants highlighted the difficulty in not seeing their friends during the lockdown period. RB notes, 'The main thing was at like in the – in the middle, I missed my friends so much. Everyday I cried about it because of how much I missed them.' This corresponds with parental reports

which note the impact of peer separation on children's well-being (Larivière-Bastien et al., 2022).

An important aspect of this theme is the alternative ways children communicated with friends through online platforms. Mary Godwin discusses how this helped her, "The online world... 'Cause um you can then like text your friends, call your friends instead of having to like go out and meet them." Maintaining friendships was evidently important to participants. This was also illustrated by RB:

Well it just helped me so, 'cause COVID at— basically you basically only got to see your family. So say you wanted to see your friends you could just go on teams or zoom and just talk to them. - RB

This emphasises the importance of external relationships and the online community. Communication through virtual platforms was also noted by Larivière-Bastien et al. (2022), where children found ways to adapt to lockdown restrictions and explored new ways of remaining connected with peers. In the present study, RB mentions the use of the game *Fortnite* as a means of communication. Participation in virtual play may have enabled children to build and maintain relationships throughout this time. Rubin et al. (2009) highlight the importance of games between friends as a reciprocal means of social interaction throughout middle childhood, and these interviews indicate that children were able to foster friendships remotely throughout the pandemic.

Whilst children missed their peers, data portrays the anxieties felt upon returning to school, with some participants expressing their uncertainty over reconnecting with friends.

I was very nervous... I weren't used to being around a lot of people, like, I wanted it, but then I didn't want to be around people then because I was very like, nervous they changed their minds about me, like all my friends 'cause I'm not sure what they did, if it's different than mine. - Lily-Anna

The mixed emotions experienced upon returning to school suggest that, through a period of isolation from peers, feelings of stress or anxiety may have intensified. This may indicate that, in the absence of peer support and interaction, children's confidence in the stability of friendships may have deteriorated. This is important for educators to consider when working with children and supporting them within social contexts, as Bukowski et al. (1994) highlight the importance of security in children's relationships with friends in moderating anxiety throughout the preadolescence stage.

Many participants enjoyed returning to school and report that they were able to reintegrate back into friendship groups. However, this was not the case for all children, and RB explains time apart impacted his friendships:

After the lockdown well... It's basically like we started all over... even though... you were like best friends with them, you just, like, didn't get to see them that much. And

basically you were just like normal people to each other now, so then you had to get back all that friendship. - RB

He goes on to say:

Some of my friendships have gone down a bit, some have gone up...some of my friendships we've gone down. We're still friends but not that good friends. - RB

This perhaps indicates the fragility of friendships amongst children, and the impact of lockdown measures upon social connections. It may also suggest that online interactions are not a sufficient replacement for face-to-face social exchanges, also indicated by children interviewed by Larivière-Bastien et al. (2022) who place emphasis on physical closeness in friendships. The present data may suggest that, without access to institutions where friendships could be nurtured, children's social groups may have suffered. Children's accounts of their friendships throughout lockdown demonstrate the importance of schools in providing interventions where children have been separated from peers. Negative peer acceptance can result in poor well-being and feelings of loneliness amongst children (Parker & Asher, 1993) and research indicates the influence peer acceptance may have on children's self-esteem and psychosocial adjustment within the school context (Antonopoulou et al., 2019). Therefore, it is important that professionals provide the skills necessary in promoting positive friendships.

Remote learning challenges

A significant theme across the data corpus was the difficulties in home learning. The absence of teacher support encompasses an aspect of this theme, where participants understood the impact of the pandemic on their learning. Moreover, participants' awareness of the pressures faced by parents in supporting them in their learning was apparent.

Throughout lockdown many parents took on the role of educator, and participants discussed the difficulty this presented, drawing comparisons between parent and teacher abilities in supporting their learning. Lily-Anna notes, 'It's really hard because you've – like, parents aren't teachers so they don't know how to explain it.' Children identified the strain placed upon parents, often resulting in frustration and friction. However, this was not the case for all participants and RB draws attention to the differences children experienced in home learning:

Well, since my mum was training to be teacher I— the lessons were like actually quite easy, not like hard for someone say my dad to explain...she knew about the lessons and what to do. - RB

This highlights children's diverse experiences of remote education, where some families were better equipped in supporting home learning than

others (Lucas et al., 2020). Associations between parental support and access to digital devices in pupils' engagement with learning throughout lockdown were illustrated by Chzhen et al. (2022), noting that children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds were negatively affected by remote learning due to lack of resources. The disparity between participants experience of home learning was evident throughout interviews, where children discussed limited access to digital devices and technical issues due to old, second-hand computers and slow internet access.

Difficulties in home learning may be attributed to the absence of face-to-face teacher interactions. Mathilda highlights the limited contact children had with teachers during lockdown:

Well it would be good if we did like more zoom calls. We did do zoom calls sometimes but it would be good if we could like, um learn the same but on zoom calls... Because then the teacher can still talk to you. - Mathilda

This demonstrates the importance of maintaining social connections with teachers and supports literature which notes the salience of teacher-student relationships (Juvonen, 2007). Zaccoletti et al. (2020) highlight how teacher feedback can build children's motivation and promote positive self-beliefs, employing the self-determination theory to argue that, without individualised feedback received within the school setting, children's self-esteem and motivation may have suffered. Teacher interviews indicate that children who did not engage in online learning exhibited engagement difficulties on returning to school (Fray et al., 2022). Therefore, results from the present study may indicate that these needs were not met through remote learning and that measures should be in place, in the event of future restrictions, to maintain communication between pupils and teachers to ensure children feel supported in their learning.

A difficulty in home schooling was the change in function of the home, where children needed to adapt to new routines and boundaries. Lily-Anna reflects on these challenges, 'Normally when I'm at home, I always get to do whatever I want but then I had to start doing, like, home schooling and all that. So it was quite hard'. She discusses the difficulty in adapting to parents' new role of teacher.

There's some days where I didn't want to do work, but I don't—I had to. 'Cause at school you don't have a choice, otherwise you'll get told off. But at home, like, you'll get told off but, like, you wouldn't really care 'cause you get told off by your parents at, like, a lot. - Lily-Anna

This portrays children's understanding of teachers' role as educators, and possibly more authoritative figures. Studies have noted that the context of home learning throughout a global pandemic may have contributed to a decline in

parental authority (O'Sullivan et al., 2022), due to the added strain of this uncertain time.

The quality and quantity of the work assigned throughout lockdown appears to have heightened remote learning difficulties. Children often felt work was repetitive or difficult to understand without teacher support. On discussing her return to school, Rosie notes, 'I get to learn new stuff and when I was at lockdown I couldn't learn new stuff. It was basically the same but a different questions over again.' Rugby Girl reflects, 'It was a lot harder. I felt the work was harder than it was at school.' Theories of learning have noted the importance of establishing an optimal level of challenge to promote intrinsic motivation amongst students (Malone & Lepper, 2021) and illustrates the importance of developing alternative methods of assessment which may be conducted remotely to ensure that assignments do not discourage children in their learning.

The data sheds light on children's experiences of home learning, and their understanding of appropriate learning resources, demonstrating self-regulation in their education. Accounts align with findings by O'Sullivan et al. (2021) which note children's feelings of anxiety at the quantity of projects they were expected to complete independently. Theories of teaching and learning highlight the importance of a student-centred adaptive approach (Bernard et al., 2019), where teachers respond to the individual needs of pupils. It could be argued that, without formative assessment opportunities, work assigned remotely may not have allowed children to progress in their learning.

Family friction

Another theme identified was family tension experienced throughout the lockdown. This captures the stress and annoyance which resulted from siblings, and sometimes parents, working in close proximity. Participant RB explains his annoyance towards his sibling became more pronounced the longer restrictions were in place:

The more you got annoyed and annoyed of like seeing your brother for example, or— starting to get a bit annoyed with your family 'cause like you see them every single day and you don't get to see someone else.. Yeah I found that challenging. - RB

This participant seems to acknowledge how the absence of interactions outside the family unit potentially caused issues, which may have impacted lasting relationships, as he reflects on his relationship with his brother after lockdown, "It's different with me and my brother 'cause we a – hate each other."

The frustration and tension experienced during this time may have been exacerbated by the changing nature of the family home, where its function became that of the school. Lily-Anna explains the difficulty in working alongside her siblings:

Since I have three other siblings. . .we argue a lot because [pause] we weren't used to being, like, around each other so much. Since we were all just sitting there doing all work, it was like, silent but the silent was really annoying. - Lily-Anna

Lily-Anna notes that the irregular circumstances of lockdown caused annoyance and arguments amongst siblings, portraying the difficulty experienced by larger families working in small spaces. Tension with parents was also evident throughout the data. Rosie illustrates this:

'Cause I had to do um, had to do online homework. . .it wasn't fun 'cause me and my dad got into a real argument. . .Because I was getting stuck on a question and I was getting fed up, and I chucked my pen and my paper on the floor. - Rosie

Parents' new role of teacher may have added to the pressures felt during lockdown. This strain upon parents was observed by LA when discussing her daily routine, 'And then we'd go back to work for about an hour. Until my mum got fed up of doing it.'

The strain of being with family for an extended period corresponds with research in this area, where parental reports suggest children became more demanding throughout this time (Evans et al., 2020). Studies note that, during times of stress and difficulty, systems of authority within the household can become fragile (Prime et al., 2020). These authors use the family stress model to build an understanding of the strain placed upon parent-child relationships. It may be that the uncertainty surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, where many faced unemployment or financial stress, combined with the additional demands of home schooling, contributed to the difficulties faced by families. Several participants interviewed discussed their parents' roles as key workers throughout the lockdown, which may have placed additional pressures upon the family unit. Studies illustrate the bidirectional nature of parental stress and child behavioural problems (Neece et al., 2012), highlighting the importance of stress management strategies (Kandula & Wake, 2022) and interventions which support vulnerable families.

Benefits of lockdown

The benefits of the pandemic were a significant theme within the data corpus. It was apparent that the lockdown period provided the opportunity for children to learn new skills, engage in hobbies and spend time with family, without the pressures of everyday life. This was captured where children discussed their transition back to school, with busier schedules resulting in less time to spend on activities enjoyed throughout school closures.

Across the data, it was evident that the lockdown allowed more time to engage in hobbies. Rugby Girl discusses how she spent her time, 'I did loads of drawings in lockdown. And cooking'. Similarly, Lily-Anna notes, 'Well, in lockdown, because my mum loves crafts. . .I got to do a lot more art. . .Yeah a lot of

cooking ‘cause my uh – stepdad, he loves cooking.” The positive aspects of lockdown were also noted by Thompson et al. (2021), where children’s accounts highlight opportunities to spend time with family and engage in hobbies.

Many children viewed the opportunity to bond with family as a positive aspect of the lockdown and something which they were not able to do prior and upon returning to school. Rugby Girl reflects on this contrast, “Cause normally my sister goes to secondary school. . .so she comes back around five, so it was nice to catch up with her”. This indicates that a slower pace of life allowed children to spend more time with family. On asked whether she would mind another lockdown, Rosie conveys her uncertainty, ‘No because I don’t want, to do homework. And yes, because I get to. . .spend time with my family and ha – rest.’ This may suggest that lockdown offered more time for family interactions compared with life after. Studies indicate that increased time spent with family resulted in better mental health amongst young people (Ellis et al., 2020), and though lockdown restrictions have lifted, highlight the importance of carving out ‘family time’ (Tubbs et al., 2005).

Changes after lockdown shed light on these positive aspects, where children expressed the enjoyment of being able to ‘relax’, suggesting that their typical routines were more structured. Rugby Girl notes, “Got lots done. That’s probably what I liked. . . ‘Cause like, now everyone’s got clubs like, I feel like I miss managing to do stuff.” Other participants also discussed the different pace of life since returning to school, when reflecting on what they enjoyed about the lockdown. Rosie highlights this contrast:

Err. Probably resting and that lot. ‘Cau—resting from school because I—every time when I wake up now, to go school, it’s about quarter past 6 to get up and I have to be at school for 8:15. . . ‘Cause I have morning club now. - Rosie

Participants noted that they had more time throughout lockdown, compared with the present. Interviews provided an insight into children’s extracurricular activities, illustrating that these may add to the pressures of day-to-day life. The accounts in the present study perhaps reflect the pressures children experience because of parents placing greater importance on what they may believe to be an investment in their child’s future (Wheeler & Green, 2019). Through busy schedules, Ginsburg and Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health (2007) warn that quality interactions between parent and child may be missed, and that ‘downtime’ can allow children time to collaborate with parents through hobbies. The current data aligns with this, indicating that children value the opportunity to engage with parents.

New responsibilities and roles within the home were also discussed, and Mathilda illustrates how lockdown was beneficial in her own personal growth:

Probably encouraged me to help out a bit more at home ‘cause. . .now I can like. . .make dinner for me and my sister, and I can Hoover up sometimes. - Mathilda

The opportunity to learn new skills throughout lockdown was also evident amongst adolescents in a study by Branquinho et al. (2020) who highlight the importance of focusing on positive outcomes to alleviate negative ones. Research indicates that stressful or traumatic experiences can provide opportunities for emotional growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996) and children's perception of their own growth is believed to increase feelings of optimism (Park et al., 1996) and sense of self-reliance. Children's ability to respond positively to traumatic experiences may also reflect their social context, particularly parental responses (Cadamuro et al., 2021). This highlights the importance of promoting positive interactions and support for children in the aftermath of stressful events, to build resilience and mitigate psychological distress.

Discussion

These findings shed light on children's lived experiences of lockdown amid the COVID-19 pandemic. In listening to the voices of young people at a crucial time in their development, we gain an understanding of their unique perspectives on how lockdown restrictions impacted their lives. By adopting a social constructivist approach, the significance of social surroundings in shaping children's experiences is apparent. This helps us to understand how parents and educators can provide support for young people in the aftermath of this turbulent time, and in the event of future restrictions.

Findings demonstrate children's diverse understanding of the virus, perhaps mirroring the extent of media coverage and public health messages that young people were exposed to which may have contributed to the fear and uncertainty felt throughout this time. These accounts indicate the importance of parents and schools in providing meaningful information through a 'multi-source approach' (Bray, Carter, et al., 2021) rather than shielding children.

By listening to children's experiences, we perceive the importance of schools for young people in fostering friendships as well as providing academic structure and support. Importantly, the data captures the nature of children's friendships during lockdown and upon returning to school. These accounts highlight the anxieties young people experienced after a period of separation from peers and the importance of implementing interventions which nurture friendships within the school context. Discourse portrays the social challenges faced by young people due to school closures, where learning took place remotely and access to external connections was restricted. The mixed emotions felt throughout this time were also illustrated, often exacerbated by prolonged periods of time with family and isolation from peers.

The accounts demonstrate children's self-regulation in their own learning, noting the importance of teachers in providing feedback and support in their education, which parents could not fulfill. Due to the sudden implementation of lockdown measures, educators were required to navigate new methods of

teaching and supporting students (O'Toole & Simovska, 2022), which may have resulted in assigned work being too challenging and resulted in children becoming demotivated and disengaged. The voices of children in the present study combined with previous research employing parent (Zaccoletti et al., 2020) and teacher reports (Fray et al., 2022), highlight the importance of providing educators and other professionals with the resources and training to ensure that children receive appropriate feedback in the event of further lockdown restrictions or circumstances which prevent children from attending school. Despite the difficulties faced throughout this uncertain time, findings also illustrate their ability to adapt to new circumstances. The data captures the resourcefulness of young people in maintaining connections, and how technology not only provides a learning tool, but means of communication. Children's reflections also indicate that this time afforded the opportunity to enjoy a slower pace of life and additional time with family.

Limitations and future directions

While the research questions did not set out to examine gender differences, we acknowledge that boys were under-represented within the participant sample and studies have indicated that children's responses and coping mechanisms in the aftermath of trauma or natural disasters may differ depending on gender (Kronenberg et al., 2010). Furthermore, a key theme identified within the present study was friendships through lockdown. It may be argued that these relationships offer different functions for boys and girls throughout middle childhood (Parker & Asher, 1993), and research which explores these individual perspectives may provide important insights into the differing experiences across genders.

Although not specifically addressed by the research questions, this study captures the voices of children from various demographics, highlighting the inequalities experienced throughout the pandemic due to limited access to technology and confined, shared workspaces. Further studies which examine the experiences of young people from socially disadvantaged and minority groups are important, due to the disproportionate effect of school closures on marginalised communities (Armitage & Nellums, 2020). This would provide important information for schools which work closely with these communities in supporting families in the long term.

Due to the limited responses from parents, the number of participants interviewed was towards the smaller end of the proposed sample size. This potentially presents limitations in the conclusions which may be drawn, and we acknowledge the importance of further research which captures children's voices across an equal distribution of demographics. Our data analysis highlighted a significant theme which was children's understanding of the virus. However, the limited sample highlights the importance of continued research in this area to gain a more representative understanding of children's sources of information.

Despite the constraints, the qualitative data obtained from the participants in this study offers nuanced perspectives of these young people's lived experiences throughout this turbulent time and will be important to build upon through continued research.

Conclusion

This study aimed to explore children's perspectives of life during and after a global pandemic. The data provided a rich account of their individual experiences throughout this unprecedented time, building upon research employing parental and teacher accounts. This study emphasises the importance of including children's voice in research, as we gain a unique perspective of children's experience of returning to the education setting and reconnecting with friends in the aftermath of COVID-19 restrictions, which parent and teacher accounts cannot replace. The research presented provides an important understanding of children's social world during a time of uncertainty and as society returns to normal, and it will be essential to monitor the far-reaching repercussions of the pandemic in future studies.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Ethics approval statement

Ethical approval for this study was granted by Birmingham City University ethics committee (PSY_MSc_Jul22_Jan_003).

Participant consent statement

Informed consent was obtained from participants prior to data collection.

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