Understanding "Home" in COVID Times – Exploring Children's Experiences of Family Relationships in the Context of "Intensity of Togetherness" and the "Isolation of Being Apart"

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Abstract. *"Home" and "family" are inextricably linked, never more so than during the COVID pandemic, when government restrictions controlled who we could see, when we could see them and for how long. We live our daily lives at "home" often with family members, who can bring security, closeness, a sense of belonging and feelings of comfort, intimacy and positivity – although this is not the case for everyone, nor all of the time. Lockdown restrictions brought fundamental changes to our lives. In England they meant children learned online rather than attending school, while their parents worked from home and juggled home-schooling. The opportunity to go outside was restricted to essential journeys and at times, one period of daily exercise only. Children were unable to meet family members outside the "home", unless they had separated parents and were moving between their homes, or their family circumstances meant they were able to form a "support bubble" or "childcare bubble". Consequently, in 2020 many months were spent together inside the home, bringing about a previously inexperienced "intensity of togetherness" in family relationships alongside the "isolation of being apart" from other family and friends. Using insights from the "framework for understanding children's accommodation of parental separation" (Kay-Flowers, 2019b), this concept paper explores how children may have experienced the "intensity of togetherness" and the "isolation of being apart" during the pandemic. As such, it provides a basis for further investigation into the impact of their experiences of "home" and family relationships during this time.*

Keywords : children, family relationships, home, COVID-19, England

Introduction

This concept paper[1] aims to develop understandings of children's experiences of "home" and family relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using insights from previous

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research on young adults' childhood experiences of separation and divorce and how they accommodate changes in their family life, it explores their experiences during the time of government restrictions imposed to curb the transmission of COVID-19 (Kay-Flowers, 2019a).

Starting with a personal observation, the paper goes on to provide an overview of the government restrictions that curtailed individual's domestic freedoms during the COVID-19 pandemic in England. It then uses the "framework for understanding children's accommodation of parental separation' to identify factors known to support children as well as those known to present challenges in accommodating change in their family lives, enabling children's experiences to be conceptualised in the context of the "intensity of togetherness" and the "isolation of being apart" experienced during COVID-19 times (Kay-Flowers, 2019b).

It concludes with the observation that research into how children experienced "home" and family relationships during the COVID pandemic is needed to address the issues they face as the world emerges from this pandemic.

Setting the context

I started to think about these issues after an experience I had on World Book Day last year (4 March 2021), which I would like to recall here. I was taking my young grandson – who was dressed as a Gruffalo – for a walk in the woods ; when walking along, we were stopped by a lone woman. Commenting on his outfit, she asked his name, how old he was and said she had seen Julia Donaldson on the news that morning talking about the World Book Day – usual topics of conversation. She went on to say she was 76 years old, lived alone, and had had her first COVID-19 vaccination. She had not seen her youngest grandchild (aged 3), nor her teenage grandchildren for a year. While she was in a "support bubble" with her daughter, who lived in Stourbridge and whom she had seen at Christmas, she said it was not "a bubble" in practice, because it involved a distance of 110 miles and she did not drive. This exchange lasted far longer than it would have done in pre-COVID times, and the "passer-by" told me more far about her life than would have ordinarily been expected. As time went on, I became aware this might be the only conversation she would have that day and that her situation was not unusual given the government's lockdown restrictions at that time.

Government restrictions

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the UK government, like many governments, intervened in our personal lives in an unprecedented way. In England, restrictions and legislation were introduced to curtail individual freedoms and control movement of the population. The first restrictions, introduced in March 2020, were varied over time in response to the evolving situation, but it was not until February 2022 that all restrictions were removed (HM Government, 2022).

For some time, these restrictions determined who we could see, when we could see them, in what circumstances and for how long. Family gatherings, including weddings and baptisms were forbidden and the number of people able to attend funerals was severely restricted. (Similar restrictions were put in place across the Home Nations of the United Kingdom by the Scottish Parliament, Welsh Parliament and Northern Irish Assembly.) The most severe measures included a national "lockdown", which meant people were required to stay at home at all times unless going to buy essential supplies or undertake a permissible one hour's outdoor exercise per day. Schools were closed (other than for keyworker's children) and

workers were expected to work at home wherever possible. Non-essential shops were closed and mixing or socialising with people outside your own household was not permissible.

Exceptions were made for people living in particular situations, who were able to form "support bubbles" or "childcare bubbles". Those living in "a household with a child under the age of 1 or a household with a child under the age of 5 who has a disability, or a single parent with one or more children under the age of 18" were able to form a support bubble (DHSC, 2020a). This meant two households could have close contact as if they were members of the same household, in other words, they did not need to maintain social distancing. "Childcare bubbles" allowed one household to link with another household to provide childcare for children under 14 (DHSC, 2020b). A support and childcare bubble did not have to be with the same household as they performed different tasks. However, households forming a childcare bubble were restricted to providing childcare only and were not able to meet or interact socially. This was not the case for support bubbles. Individuals were asked not to see members of their childcare and support bubbles at the same time in order to limit the risk of spreading the virus.

Children of separated parents were able to move between their parent's homes. However, this needed to take account of : a) the child's present health, AND b) the risk of infection, AND c) the presence of any vulnerable individuals in one household or another.

Parents needed to communicate to reach a "practical solution" about arrangements for their children and it was recognised that "in certain situations parents may have to exercise their parental responsibility to vary arrangements to ones they consider to be safe" (Courts and Tribunals Judiciary, 2020). In those situations where a Child Arrangement Order (a court order identifying with whom a child lives, spends time with or has other contact and when this takes place) existed, and the child was unable to spend time with the other parent as set down in the order, the courts' expected alternative arrangements to be made for regular contact to take place remotely (Courts and Tribunals Judiciary, 2020). This might be by Face-Time, Skype, Zoom or other video connection or, if this was not possible, by telephone (Kay-Flowers, 2020).

During lockdowns, only the children of keyworkers (that is, those working in essential services, such as, the National Health Service [NHS] and transport industries) and vulnerable children (for example, those who were in the care of Local Authority) were able to attend school. This meant the vast majority of children in England remained at home where they learned online through materials created and delivered by their teachers (supplemented by the provision of learning resources on the BBC during the last lockdown in January to March 2021).

Consequently, children lacked the everyday routine of going to school with access to learning, extra-curricular activities, trained teachers, support staff, friends and safe spaces, which are particularly important for those living in difficult or precarious family situations. At the same time, they lacked face to face contact with grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins and wider family members (unless they formed part of their "support bubble" or "childcare bubble"), and access to social activities outside the home. Relying solely on virtual communication to maintain any contact with those outside the home during this time, meant many children experienced the "isolation of being apart" from others.

"Home"

"Home" is "a place of retreat ; a site of psychological and emotional well-being ; meaningful relationships ; routines and rituals ; and a physical dwelling" (Campo, Fehlberg, Natalier, Smyth, 2020, 299). It is where we live our day to day lives, with family members who can

bring a sense of security, closeness, belonging and elicit feelings of comfort, intimacy and positivity (Campo et al., 2020). Families can offer support (physical, emotional, financial and practical) in responding to, and navigating life events.

Our family lives and relationships and therefore, the experience of "home" tend to be predicated on "everyday routines". These include the "everyday routine" of children going out to school each day, where they are exposed to new knowledge in a learning environment and taught by trained teachers ; where they work alongside peers, socialise with friends and have free time in which they are able to play outside in child-friendly, accessible, supervised, safe spaces and where they might see grandparents, or other family members, who provide additional child care. They also include the "everyday routine" of parent(s) usually going outside the home to work and earn financial income. Such routines create a daily structure and bring continuity, predictability and a level of order to our lives.

However, restrictions during COVID times meant this was not the case. Instead, during lockdowns and school closures, families spent their time inside the home together, with children learning online and parents working, struggling to combine the roles of worker, parent and home educator (Sellgren, 2020). This led to a previously inexperienced "intensity of togetherness" in family relationships.

Children have different experiences of "home". For some children, "home" does not always provide a sense of security and comfort or evoke feelings of positivity. In some cases, it seldom does, instead, it can be a source of anxiety, discomfort and sometimes fear particularly when parental conflict is present (Kay-Flowers, 2019a). Some children experience "adverse childhood experiences" (ACEs) that include loss and separation (death, parental separation, divorce, hospitalisation, family conflict, being taken into care, adoption, parents in armed forces), life changes (birth of sibling, moving house or changing school, transition from primary to secondary school), and traumatic experiences (abuse, neglect, domestic violence, natural disaster) (DfE, 2018). As a consequence, they are more likely to experience mental health issues in childhood with the risk increasing with the more ACEs they experience and as they get older. The COVID-19 pandemic is a "natural disaster" that everyone across the globe experienced, albeit in different ways. It has led to loss and separation, life changes and traumatic experiences for some children. Those children growing up in poverty in England have been disproportionately affected due to their increased isolation, loneliness and lack of access to support with its impact seen on their mental health, access to learning and outdoor space as well as food insecurity and housing (The Childhood Trust, 2020).

The pandemic presented challenges for each individual. Some challenges were common experiences, such as, being unable to go outside the house, socialise, participate in regular activities and travel. Other challenges, such as, decisions relating to health and risk-taking were more individualised, leading to personal decisions, which were not always understood by others. In this way, the pandemic was a unique experience for each one of us, making it difficult to fully appreciate the personal situation of others. Children's experiences of home and family relationships during COVID times remain unexplored as yet, in particular, the "intensity of togetherness" they experienced at home and the "isolation of being apart" from others during lockdowns. The next section uses the "framework for understanding children's accommodation of parental separation" to identify those factors known to support children as well as those known to present challenges in accommodating change in their family lives, enabling children's experiences to be conceptualised in the context of the "intensity of togetherness" and the "isolation of being apart" experienced during COVID times (Kay-Flowers, 2019b).

Previous research

My research into childhood experiences of parental separation used young adults' reflective accounts to analyse how they felt about it at the time, and how they felt about it now as they looked back as young adults (Kay-Flowers, 2019a). Analysis of their accounts assessed the extent ("level") to which they were "satisfied" with the changes that took place and the extent ("level") to which they "accepted" them. Following categorisation according to whether accounts showed high, medium or low levels of "satisfaction" and "acceptance", these levels were combined, to reflect young adults' "level of accommodation" of the family changes that took place.

Young adults who came to view their parents' separation as a positive improvement in their lives over time and fully accepted the post separation changes, showed a high level of accommodation. Those that saw their parents' separation as neither a positive improvement nor a significant loss in their lives, but rather the situation "is as it is", showed a medium level of accommodation. Those that saw their parents' separation as a significant loss and struggled to accept the changes it brought, continuing to experience its impact on their lives today, showed a low level of accommodation.

More detailed analysis enabled factors that supported children's accommodation to be identified alongside those that created challenges. These were used to develop the "framework for understanding children's accommodation of parental separation" and post-separation changes which has value when exploring the impact the COVID-19 pandemic may have had on children's experiences of "home" and family relationships (Kay-Flowers, 2019b).

Supportive factors

Having contact with both parents, feeling supported and able to talk to them, and parents' ability to communicate to ensure that post-separation changes took account of their needs were important factors in supporting children in accommodating family changes.

Feeling supported and being able to talk to their parents about the changes taking place helped children's adjustment, adaptation and ability to "make sense" of the changes that occurred. Where support was available from wider family members, children found it easier to accommodate changes within their family. Grandparents' homes were often seen as providing a "safe haven" and young adults described how they felt supported and were often able to talk to their grandparents in a way they were not with their parents (Kay-Flowers, 2019a). Sometimes they moved there to "escape" from a difficult or precarious home situation, the move could be temporary or permanent.

Friends were also important to children in accommodating changes within their family. Shared activities engaged their interest and served as a distraction from issues at home. Friends who had similar experiences could be particularly useful in supporting the accommodation of changes in their lives.

Challenging factors

Children who lost contact with their non-resident parent, particularly when this was not what they wanted, experienced more difficulty in accommodating the changes parental separation brought. The "availability" of their parents was important when adjusting to change. Children experienced difficulties when their parents were preoccupied with their

own issues and failed to take their needs into account, this impacted negatively on their ability to accommodate change (Kay-Flowers, 2019a).

Parental conflict, present in over 40% of young adults' accounts, always had a negative impact on children's social and emotional wellbeing (Kay-Flowers, 2019a). They described the anxiety it created and those witnessing conflict directly talked of the fear it created. Sometimes they were drawn into their parents' arguments or used as messengers between them. Some referred to feeling responsible for their younger siblings while others referred to the health issues it created ; these included panic attacks, pulling their hair out and an eating disorder.

Discussion

As a result of restrictions on domestic freedoms, children were unable to move away from home by going to school or engaging in other regular activities during lockdowns, meaning they were unable to access the support they usually derived from such activities. This led to children experiencing a unique period of "intensity of togetherness" within the home at the same time as an "isolation of being apart" from those outside the home and other family members. This impacted on all children but is likely to have had more significant impact on those in vulnerable situations such as, those living with parents with mental health or addiction issues, and those who have experienced ACEs in their lives.

Some children will have experienced adverse events during the pandemic. There was an increase in the incidence of reports of domestic violence in England and Wales making it likely that many children will have been exposed to parental conflict and domestic violence as a result (ONS, 2020). The number of couples seeking divorce advice in the UK increased meaning many children will face new, unexpected changes in their family situations in which they have little control or influence (Race, 2020). In some cases, children will have experienced the death or hospitalisation of family members due to COVID-19. They may have faced more than one ACE during this time, thereby increasing their risk of developing mental health issues over time (DfE, 2018).

Children of separated parents, whose parents communicated effectively to reach a workable situation in relation to contact arrangements during the pandemic are likely to have fared better in accommodating the changes it brought. Others may have lost contact with their non-resident parent, particularly if contact was not a consistent part of their lives pre-COVID-19. Where this becomes a long term or permanent loss of contact, and this is not their choice, it is likely to have a long-term impact, leading to a sense of divided loyalties and emotional "distance" over time (Kay-Flowers, 2019a).

Children need to feel they "matter" and "being heard" makes them feel valued, but over the last 2 years, parents have had to respond and adapt to many unexpected situations and quick changing events brought about by the pandemic (Maes, De Mol, Buysse, 2011 ; Campbell, 2008). They have had to manage the impact of changing guidance on schools and work routines, grapple with reaching "workable" routines at home against the backdrop of concerns about their health, their children's health and that of their wider family. They may also have had worries about their employment, their financial situation and the impact of lockdown on their relationships, as such they may have struggled to maintain focus on their children's needs. It would be unsurprising if "parents tended to be preoccupied with their own issues" for a time (Kay-Flowers, 2019b). However, as we move forward adopting a child-centred focus will support and encourage children to adapt and accommodate the changes the pandemic has brought.

The pandemic highlighted the digital divide in children's access to technology and devices in homes in England. During lockdowns those who struggled to access technology due to lack of internet access, connectivity issues or access to devices found it difficult or impossible to access online teaching provided by schools and those living in households where devices were shared, faced difficulties when their parents' work or siblings' studies were prioritised (The Childhood Trust, 2020). It also affected their ability to communicate with family and friends, bringing about a particular "intensity of togetherness" in family relationships within the home as well as an "isolation of being apart" for those without access.

During lockdowns, children were able to move to different accommodation in emergency situations and for safeguarding reasons, but opportunities to move themselves to a different safe space temporarily, such as, their grandparents' home or school for short-term respite or "a breathing space" were limited. It was more difficult to access support from family and friends, from usual informal support networks, such as youth clubs and sports groups. At the same time, services for children and young people, such as, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) and Young Minds (children and young people's mental health charity), moved online, creating difficulties for those without access to technology or an individual device. This has led to concerns of "safeguarding issues [being] largely hidden from view during lockdown" (Health and Equity in Recovery Plans Working Party, 2020). Parental conflict at this time is likely to have been a particularly negative experience for children, placing them at greater risk of physical and emotional harm and there are early indications that some children were exposed to serious harm which sadly, resulted in their death (Samuel, 2021).

Conclusion

At the time of this paper being given in May 2021, government restrictions were easing in England with "hugging allowed" once more (BBC, 2021). All restrictions were removed in February 2022 as the country started to learn how to live with the pandemic (HM Government, 2022). However, at the time of writing (July 2022), there is evidence that infection rates are rising steeply once more, presenting on-going challenges, particularly for more vulnerable members of society.

There has been a significant increase in the incidence of mental health issues among children in England during this time (The Health Foundation, 2022). Pandemic experiences showed that life is unpredictable, change can happen quickly and that loved ones can be affected by unexpected health events, meaning many children will have experienced ACEs associated with loss and bereavement. The availability of support from family and friends as well as support staff and teachers in schools, increases children's ability to accommodate changes in their family lives (Kay-Flowers, 2019a). Where this was available during COVID times it was restricted and usually in online form. Consequently, children may require support in returning to the lives they led before the pandemic and resuming their everyday routines. Strategies that encourage and promote children's resilience and well-being may need to be devised to support their adjustment but first there is a need for "deep listening" to understand their experiences if "child-responsive ways" of being are to be developed (Campo et al., 2020, 317).

This paper has provided insights into what children may have experienced in their family relationships and at "home" during the pandemic and in lockdown measures. Further research is needed to investigate their experiences and its long term impact. As evidence starts to emerge, it is crucial we understand their experiences to inform the development of strategies that may be needed to support children in accommodating the changes the pandemic has brought.

Note

1. This paper was originally presented as an online seminar for the Centre for Educational Research (CERES) at Liverpool "John Moores" University in May 2021.

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