



What the pandemic has really done to our children's minds

If children have chosen 'anxiety' as their word of the year, it is because Project Fear has taught them that this is the right way to feel

By Jennie Bristow
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Back in spring 2020, my teenage daughter and I wrote a book reflecting on the raw shock of lockdown and school closures, and the implications for those growing up in the Covid crisis.

Emma, then 15, noted “the harsh judgement flashing across people’s faces” as we ventured out for a walk in those early days. The sense of fear was palpable.

Even as we noted the absurdity of people jumping into oncoming traffic to avoid passing another pedestrian, flinched at chained-up children’s playgrounds, and raged at the cancellation of GCSEs and A-level exams for Emma and so many others, we recognised that many had genuine reason to be scared about this new virus.

Initially, children didn’t seem afraid for themselves, so much as worried about what the virus might do to elderly relatives. And then, the official narrative quickly shifted to a campaign of terror.

“Today I have a message for young people: You are not invincible, this virus could put you in hospital for weeks or even kill you,” scolded World Health Organisation boss Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus in March 2020. “The choices you make about where you go could be the difference between life and death for someone else.”



A coronavirus information sign on a London bus stop | CREDIT: AP

Which might go some way to explaining why [Oxford University Press has chosen 'anxiety' as the children's Word of the Year for 2021](#). Researchers for the Children’s Language Report surveyed 8,000 pupils from Year 3 (age seven) to Year 9 (age 14). Teachers asked them to discuss the words they would be most likely to use when talking about wellbeing and their experiences of the past two years. ‘Anxiety’ came out top, followed by ‘challenging’ and ‘isolate’.

Given that previous children’s Words of the Year include Brexit (2019) and Trump (2017), we might want to take this particular survey with a pinch of salt. It seems to be less about winking insights out of the mouths of babes than putting adult words into them. Children, in my experience, want everybody to stop going on about Covid and let them get on with the business of having fun and growing up.

But it’s worrying nonetheless, as an example of how Project Fear has framed the way children and young people have been encouraged to experience and talk about the pandemic over the past two grim years.

Take the [infamous March 2020 report](#) by SPI-B, the behavioural science sub-group of Sage, aka the Nudge Unit, which advised: “The perceived level of personal threat needs to be increased among those who are complacent, using hard-hitting emotional messaging.”

Simon Ruda, co-founder of the Nudge Unit, [recently criticised “the level of fear willingly conveyed on the public” as “the most egregious and far-reaching mistake made in responding to the pandemic”](#). Nowhere was this clearer than in the messages transmitted, relentlessly and remorselessly, to children.

During the 2020 Summer of Shaming, young people were released from isolation to a blizzard of warnings not to ‘kill Granny’ by having too much fun – let alone actually going to visit her. Little kids were kept at arm’s length from their extended family, as if they were little more than nappy-clad viral vectors. Exhausted parents and demoralised youngsters waited for the schools, colleges and universities to open, and for life to return to ‘normal’. How naïve we were.

Staggered start times. One-way systems. Bubbles painted on playground tarmac. Children sent home because a classmate had tested positive. Packed lunches eaten outside. Children told to face forward, or seated so they couldn’t face each other at all.

Windows and doors wide open. Coats worn in the classroom. Coats banned from the classroom. Hands red raw from washing. Hands slimy with sanitiser. Time lost at the end of lessons by wiping down furniture; bins overflowing with wipes – how ironic, for the kids who allegedly chose ‘plastic’ as their word of 2018.

Children wearing masks in corridors, in class, not at all, back on again (and now, hopefully, off forever). Children stigmatised by exemption badges. Kids barred from hanging out with children in other year groups: goodbye extracurricular activities. No team sports, concerts, plays, trips, singing, shouting. No leavers’ proms. Results days by email. Graduation ceremonies over Zoom.



Children using hoops for social distancing at an independent London school | CREDIT: Reuters

Kids told to stick things up their nose and down their throat twice a week. Those who tested positive made to isolate in their bedroom for days, meals left outside the door. New university students asked to come to campus and pay for their accommodation, then isolated while trying to gain a higher education from their beds and being blamed for ‘seeding the virus’ across the country.

These are some of the things we have put our children through in the name of keeping schools open. It is doubtful whether any of these measures, from the inhumane to the bonkers, have done anything to protect the elderly and vulnerable. But we don’t need to look very far to see their impact on young people.

Schools struggled to provide much education during the pandemic, but they proved adept at inculcating children in fear and anxiety. This stands as the most shameful lesson and one that, as adults, we must take deeply to heart.

The Government and its advisors created the framework, and educational institutions had no choice but to comply with the letter of the law. But what remains alarming is the extent to which some took the brief even further, with a zeal to “do the right thing” that lost sight of the needs of those they were supposed to be protecting.



Dame Rachel De Souza warns many children have 'fallen off the radar' | CREDIT: Anthony Upton

If children have chosen ‘anxiety’ as their word of the year, it is because they have been taught this is the right way to feel. It has been normalised and made out to be a non-negotiable facet of being responsible. As adults, our job now is to push back against this fear narrative, and reassure kids that it’s OK to be OK.

Of course, some are not OK. Studies show that Covid restrictions are likely to have had a severe impact on mental health. According to Dame Rachel De Souza, the Children’s Commissioner for England, [between 80,000 and 100,000 children have “fallen off the radar” and are not in school at all](#). Serious work needs to be done in catching those who have fallen through the cracks.

But for most young people, the impact of the pandemic seems to be less psychological than developmental. A primary teacher friend describes the challenge of trying to pull together a class of children who, because of the discombobulation of the past two years, have wildly disparate levels of knowledge and needs. Recreating that common educational experience that we used to take for granted will require effort. Similar tensions are evident in secondary schools and universities – we cannot just pick up where we left off two years ago, and pretend that everything is normal.

But we can be sensitive to the disruption young people have experienced, without pathologising them as broken by it. The end of Plan B restrictions gives us an opportunity to do what we have failed to do before: give kids their lives back. If we do, they will work out how to live again.

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