University of Strathclyde Glasgow

Inspiring
Children's Futures

Learning Report Series

Protecting Children's Wellbeing in Response to COVID-19: Learning from Past Epidemics

Learning Report One – May 2020

key messages

This *Learning Report* explores learning on children's wellbeing from past epidemics in order to inform responses to COVID-19. It draws on the *Justice for Children, Justice for All [1]* vision to *"respond to children's distinct needs, and realise their full range of rights and opportunities, to achieve peaceful, just and inclusive societies for all"*. It has been produced by the *Institute for Inspiring Children's Futures* at the University of Strathclyde, Scotland, UK, for national and local leaders in government, non-governmental and civil society organisations around the world who are responding to this pandemic.

Ensuring children's wellbeing at forefront of COVID-19 responses

The rapid spread of COVID-19 has brought complex challenges throughout the world with children experiencing protracted periods of lockdown and isolation from other children, and sometimes from parents, siblings and other family members. In addition, children are experiencing sudden and increased poverty, loss of education, poor physical and mental health, pressures on their families, new and existing vulnerabilities and social restrictions.

Learning from past epidemics highlights that children and families' needs and wellbeing have to be taken into account in the development of economic, social and health protective strategies across sectors and in collaboration with communities. Not taking assertive action results in children experiencing damaging impacts which restricts their capacity to fulfil their potential, and compromises both children's and communities' post-epidemic recovery. To mitigate these negative effects, children must be at the heart of responses to COVID-19: their wellbeing needs to be to the fore in strategic thinking at all levels of government and with their human rights protected throughout the stages of the epidemic.

Learning from past epidemics

Evidence shows that existing concerns about children's wellbeing are exacerbated in epidemics with new ones emerging. This results from the health impacts of the epidemic as well as from prevention and control measures. If children's wellbeing is not prioritised and given specific attention, children, families and the communities around them experience negative and debilitating consequences. These, in turn, significantly weaken countries' and communities' economic, social and political recovery, and resilience to future shocks.

Leadership, policies and provision of public services for children and families

Effective responses actively facilitate trust, relationships and connections: Experience highlights that effective responses in health emergencies are integrally dependent on, and actively facilitate, trust, relationships and connections by working across sectors, with communities, and with children and families themselves. There is a free two-way flow of information along with ongoing engagement.

Effective responses are strategic, planned and informed: Good policy and delivery of services in an epidemic requires responsive political and professional leadership. Having a flexible 'can do' approach that is highly responsive and adaptable is more helpful than a rigid adherence to pre-epidemic ways of working that may be wrongly directed and inappropriately prioritised for the crisis period, thereby depriving children and families of the support they need.

Effective responses respect the importance of children's relationships: Effective responses enable professionals, such as teachers and social workers, to continue to have contact with children, and ensure children's relationships with their friends, peers, and family members, are supported.

Effective responses recognise the complexity of situations: They ensure public services work in a coherent, connected and interdependent way to meet the needs and wellbeing of children across services. These services will ensure the following:

Education:
The diversity of children's learning experiences is supported regardless of whether schools are open, closed or have restricted access. Inequality is addressed across all phases of COVID-19 responses.

Health:
Children continue to have access to health services and information about them, including mental health and antenatal provision, with plans in place to deal with accumulating need.

Child protection and social care:
Prevention measures retain their importance as an essential service with consideration given to the emerging or exacerbated vulnerabilities of children. Particular attention is paid to identifying newly vulnerable children, who have become *at risk* with the imposition of sudden and new constraints on their, and their families lives. This is complemented by ongoing support for children in alternative care, or other complex situations.

Justice:
Emergency measures are for the shortest time possible and restored swiftly. Children's right to complain and their access to legal representation and support are available for all children including those who experience injustice.

Play, leisure and culture:
Opportunities for play and leisure continue to be seen as essential for children's development and wellbeing with restrictions lifted as and when appropriate.[1] Cultural norms for children and their communities are respected and supported.

1 Introduction

This *Learning Report* considers the following:

How can we ensure that children's wellbeing is at the forefront of responses?

Impact of COVID-19 on children
Economic impact
Phases of the pandemic

What can we learn about the impact on children's lives from previous epidemics?

Evidence from previous epidemics:

Negative consequences from not prioritising children's wellbeing

What can we learn about the leadership, policies and provision of public services for children and families from previous epidemics?

Government leaders and policymakers
Public services & provision for children

Our commitment at the *Institute for Inspiring Children's Futures* is to the rights and wellbeing of children: to ensure that children are able to survive, develop and thrive wherever they live and whatever their circumstances in line with international commitments to children's rights[4]. We are concerned how children's wellbeing can be secured in this profoundly difficult time, recognising the challenges for every country. These challenges are not only about protecting everyone's health and especially the health of the most vulnerable in society. They are also about the economic, social and political consequences that we are already confronting as a result of the pandemic and which will affect us for years to come[5]. To ensure national and global recovery and future resilience, children's needs will have to be at the forefront of policymakers' considerations.

This *Learning Report* draws on a rapid focused scan undertaken in April 2020 of grey and academic literature on learning from recent epidemics (particularly from Ebola and also referencing SARS, MERS and cholera). It considers recently published guidance and reports about the impact of COVID-19 including a rapidly developing body of technical guidance and resources[6]. The paper has been informed by emerging concerns profiled by organisations and in the media[7] [8], with the themes subsequently tested with international child and humanitarian experts, and government policy advisors who provided additional input. Quotes are from online discussions with child and humanitarian experts.

This *Learning Report* has been developed in response to the devastating global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. It has been produced for national and local leaders in government, NGOs and civil society dealing with the complexity of responding to the pandemic. It provides a summary of what has been learned in recent epidemics in protecting children's wellbeing and includes prompts that decision makers should consider in early responses to the pandemic. It complements the work of organisations globally, nationally and locally, who are currently examining how to respond to the challenges of COVID-19, through periods of containment and beyond.

This *Learning Report* has been produced by the *Institute for Inspiring Children's Futures* at the *University of Strathclyde*, Scotland, UK.[2] *Inspiring Children's Futures* has a strong track record of multi-level, multi-sector global engagement, policy development and practice improvement. This includes, most recently, its leadership of the *Justice for Children, Justice for All Global Initiative*[3] which, in collaboration with the UN-sponsored *Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies*, embeds children's human rights into the delivery of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. *Inspiring Children's Futures* builds on the longstanding and successful programme of the University of Strathclyde's unique *Centre for Excellence for Children's Care and Protection (CELCIS)*.

This *Learning Report* forms the first of the three-part programme entitled *Inspiring Children's Futures in light of COVID-19*. This programme will gather evidence on protecting children's wellbeing in past epidemics; inform better policies and practices throughout the COVID-19 pandemic; and influence change *in the long shadow that COVID-19 will cast over the recovery phases* ahead. With our partners, we are strengthening global, national and local approaches to ensure that we are collectively delivering on the *Justice for Children, Justice for All Call to Action* to "*respond to children's distinct needs, and realise their full range of rights and opportunities, to achieve peaceful, just and inclusive societies for all*".

2 Ensuring children's wellbeing is at the forefront of responses

"**When we finally turned to children and the vulnerability created {by the Ebola epidemic}, we found we were really far behind.**"

Humanitarian expert

Impact of COVID-19 on children

Children are profoundly affected by COVID-19. Children may not suffer the worst direct health impacts of the disease, but they are experiencing significant damaging and negative effects as a result of sudden and increased poverty, loss of education, poor physical and mental health, pressures on families, increased and existing vulnerabilities and social restrictions. [9][10][11]

Nine out of ten children across the world have experienced reductions in their access to education with schools closed or partially open, and with over 70% not at school in mid-May 2020. [12] Many are experiencing food insecurity alongside poverty and low income. Children and their families' access to essential support – health provision including mental health, child protection and alternative care services, and play and youth opportunities – is not available or restricted. Children's everyday contact with friends, family members and other adults in the community has been curtailed. For children whose lives are already complex and difficult, COVID-19 has rapidly exacerbated daily challenges. These factors make it even more important to ensure that children's needs and human rights are realised and supported in responses to the pandemic so that children are not left behind.[13]

Humanitarian and other experts on children have highlighted the danger of a 'lost generation' of children missing out on important learning and experiences which will affect countries and communities now and in the future.[14] With children making up 30% of the world's population, rising to 50% in some countries, it is essential that children are at the heart of emergency and follow-up COVID-19 measures. This will ensure that children do not become 'invisible' in national and local responses to the pandemic.

Economic impact

The economic situation arising from the pandemic is already impacting negatively on children and their families. Children and their families are being severely affected by increased levels of poverty, primarily resulting from the loss of family income through reduced hours of working and unemployment. They are experiencing hunger, inadequate or lack of accommodation and limited access to services that usually provide support.

National budgets are under pressure, especially in countries already experiencing financial challenges.[15][16] The early responses of governments have accentuated the differences within nations and by global region. Low income countries are under additional strain while high income countries have put in place far reaching financial support measures which are likely to have long-lasting effects on budgets.

Learning from past epidemics emphasises that children and their families have to be taken into account in the development of economic strategies and policy decisions across all levels of government and in the full range of government policy making. Not taking assertive action results in children experiencing the negative impacts of poverty and the inability to fulfil their potential and contribute to national and global economies in the future.[17] Under-investment in policies which impact directly and indirectly on the wellbeing of children and their families is a significant and seriously retrograde step. This under-investment in children, children's services and inadequate financial support to children and families would lead to major losses in the medium- and long-term benefits to national economies and their societies, and longer term costs for countries and communities. Prioritising the needs and wellbeing of children is therefore integral to the overall vision of every nation.

Phases of the pandemic

The early responses to COVID-19, and the experiences of past epidemics, shows that there are different phases in responding to an epidemic, recognising that these might not be distinct, may vary in length, and might include intermittent tightening and relaxation of emergency measures. This makes it difficult to predict the national responses that are required a few weeks or months ahead and the impact on children and their families in these different phases. Assessing needs and planning for the long-term as well as the short-term helps to mitigate the negative factors which affect children and their families in this rapidly changing environment.

3

What can we learn about impact on children's lives from previous epidemics?

"An epidemic is a health check on the whole system."

Humanitarian expert

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Evidence from previous epidemics

Evidence from previous epidemics indicates that child wellbeing concerns are exacerbated in epidemics. Existing concerns may become more acute while new ones emerge as a result of the health impacts of the epidemic as well as from the prevention and control measures.[18] [19] In addition, inequalities are affected by the social and financial consequences of epidemics.[20] Concerns include:

- The sudden rise in, or ongoing impact of, poverty, low income and financial insecurity which affects access to basic services, water and sanitation, sufficient and nutritious food, adequate housing, basic income, and risks children's survival and development. A lack of equity in how support and services are delivered can result in hardship and/or a lack of access to services.

- The impact of school closures and restrictions around returning to school results in interrupted learning as well as children missing out on other benefits from school attendance, such as, provision of meals, supported transitions, opportunities for play and physical activity, and participation in a community of peers. [21] [22] [23] [24] There are increased risks to children of abuse and neglect due to restrictions, with teachers not having their usual awareness of children's wellbeing.

- Restrictions on movement impact on everyday childhood experiences including: children's friendships, their access to play and leisure, contact with birth families for those in alternative care, as well as overall restrictions on children's autonomy. Children in street situations are significantly affected as are children who work and those internally displaced and/or in refugee camps[25].

- New vulnerabilities are created with an increase in the number of children in vulnerable situations, especially those who were not seen to be at risk in the pre-epidemic period. [26] Areas of vulnerabilities which are exacerbated by the impact of COVID-19 include, online exploitation, sexual exploitation, domestic abuse: violence, neglect, and challenges to children's physical and mental health.[27] [28] [29] [30] [31]

- Children's vulnerabilities are compounded by the impact on their home environment, where they may be spending more time due to restrictions. Parents and other caregivers can be under greater pressure due to poverty and low income, mental health issues, housing and lack of childcare. These challenges can particularly affect single parents, child headed households, children who are caregivers to family members, displaced, migrant and refugee families, and those experiencing domestic violence.

- More children are likely to be placed in alternative care or are at risk of separation from their families as a result of the pandemic. Children in alternative care may experience a sudden closure of their residential care and those in independent living arrangements may experience isolation and lack of access to everyday resources.[32] The challenges that children living with their birth families experience will be compounded for those living away from their families. [33]

"There is no 'one-size-fits-all' response. Know your groups with the greatest vulnerabilities, consider geographies, disabilities, people, and tailor your responses."

Humanitarian expert

- COVID-19 measures typically do not sufficiently take into account of the diversity of childhood experience, including: children's age, gender, race, disability, asylum, refugee and migrant status, sexual orientation, where children live including, for example, geographical location, alternative care and refugee camps. A single approach cannot meet all children's needs. Instead, distinctive responses are required.

- Children in street situations can experience harsh police responses in upholding lockdown restrictions.

- There are other ways in which children can be physically and socially invisible in responses to epidemics. For example, older children up to the age of 18 are often overlooked in country and local programming and can be seen as troublesome if they do not comply with restrictions. Ensuring young people are included and their agency recognised helps them support emergency measures. At the same time, very young children's development can be detrimentally affected because of lack of access to support for families and early years services.[34]

Negative consequences from not prioritising children's wellbeing

Where children's wellbeing is not prioritised and given specific attention in COVID 19 responses, children, families and communities will experience negative and debilitating consequences:

- **Children's survival and short- and long-term development is put at risk**
  Children's formal and informal learning and their development will be negatively impacted by interrupted schooling, and their physical and mental health affected with disrupted transitions between different stages of childhood and into adulthood. As a result, children will not be able to fulfil their potential as citizens now and in the future.

- **Children experience unsafe and damaging effects due to vulnerable situations**
  Children who experience online or sexual exploitation and emotional or physical violence will have challenges to their mental health and physical safety and will experience other unforeseen consequences, such as teenage pregnancy. As a result of these experiences children will require additional support and resources.

- **Children experience the multiple negative impacts of poverty**
  A rise in families affected by poverty, low income or financial insecurity will result in children living in inadequate housing, or without a home or shelter, experiencing hunger and material need as well as physical and mental distress.[35] This will have long term consequences for the wellbeing of children, their families and communities.

- **Children's needs are not prioritised, and they do not get access to services they need**
  A lack of equity in how support and services are delivered to children and families will exacerbate difficult and challenging situations, such as children with disabilities not accessing social care, mental health services not being available for acute needs or children being unprotected. This can also occur where services are not free at the point of delivery, or access to and the quality of, service provision is geographically variable.

- **Children's mental wellbeing is negatively affected**
  Children's mental health will be affected by stress arising from pressures on the family, not being able to see other family members and their friends and not being able to play and move around freely outdoors.[36] This will be particularly challenging for children in unpredictable and unsafe situations, and those living in alternative care settings or refugee camps.

- **Children experience the detrimental effects of stigma and discrimination**
  Children will feel excluded and distressed where they experience stigma and discrimination because of existing negative attitudes or because a family member or community has COVID-19. [37] [38] Adults may express negative attitudes to and about children, especially targeted at older children and young people. Girls find that they are expected to take on more household tasks.[39]

4 What can we learn from previous epidemics about the leadership, policies and provision of public services for children and families?

"We started with a lack of leadership, with all different agencies weighing in on what we should do. It was like 'freestyle wrestling'... but we were able to readjust from these individual strategies to ...ones with a common purpose. That adjustment was essential to [success of] the response"

Humanitarian expert

Observations from previous epidemics provide helpful insights for COVID-19 actions focusing on children's wellbeing. Experience from health emergencies highlights that transparency, flexibility and responsiveness are key in policy and service responses. Working with community structures and leaders helps build trust and channels for information sharing and delivery of essential services.[40]

GOVERNMENT LEADERS AND POLICYMAKERS

Good policy and delivery of services in an epidemic requires the responsiveness of political and professional leadership. There needs to be a balance between following standard procedures and policies, making difficult judgements about the priorities for the immediate term and those for the longer term, and having a flexible 'can do' approach that is responsive and adaptable. Inflexible adherence to pre-epidemic ways of working means that children lose out on the support they need.

Effective responses actively facilitate trust, relationships and connections:

- Information is transparent and flows between communities and policymakers underpinned by a common sense of purpose. [41]

> **"The lack of transparency from government then [during the epidemic] about what was happening, and what they knew and didn't know, still affects their interventions even now, even though we managed to contain Ebola. And as a result it's making it harder for us now to contain COVID-19."**
>
> **Humanitarian expert**

- Priority is given to engaging with communities and civil society in timely, meaningful and sustained ways to inform planning and provision. Relationships with community leaders and NGOs are seen as essential in order to access community knowledge, make better decisions, build trust and lessen discrimination. Politicised responses undermine trust.

- The power of communities is recognised in developing localised responses.[42] Community responses are supported through funding and maintaining community infrastructure so that local organisations and groups can deliver and inform local and national government decisions.

- There is a commitment to engage with children and their families in order to ensure their views and experiences shape effective policy and service responses. Meaningful ways to hear from children are put in place with community and NGO support.

- Support to poorer families and communities, and the most vulnerable within them, is at the heart of responses. Funding to organisations and services, and cash transfers to families, are delivered in timely, transparent and effective ways so financial support arrives when it is needed.

- Communications and information are shared across sectors and with communities and families in accessible formats. This includes the provision of information to children of all ages.

eleven

twelve

Effective responses are strategic, planned and informed:

- Budgets for children and the services that support them are appropriate to the identified needs, and are sustained and, where necessary, increased in order to ensure the wellbeing of children and their families.

- The phases of the epidemic response are anticipated, recognising that these might not be distinct, and that relaxation of measures might be followed by intermittent tightening. The long-term, as well as the short-term, impact of measures are taken into account in planning, resourcing and implementation, and plans are put in place to mitigate any negative factors.[43]

> **"No more cases does not mean the end of the epidemic. Prepare now for the long term, including recovery and development."**
>
> Humanitarian expert

- Surges in demand are anticipated across all services after lifting or easing of emergency measures.

- The case for broad-based and sustained political and resource commitment is built over the medium and long term to advance the wellbeing of children, given the centrality of children to the future strength of every society and their long-term contribution. This needs to take into account the setbacks that may have occurred in each phase of the epidemic.

- The policy and practice advances that have been gained in supporting children's wellbeing are protected. Emergency measures are proportionate with an assessment of the impact on children's human rights in all phases of the epidemic. [44]

- There is robust collection of data which goes beyond the collection of health information and gathers information on children and families who are most vulnerable. These data feed into risk analysis and long-term recovery planning. What has been learnt is tracked and documented, with learning integrated into ongoing systems.

> **"Document your learning now—including especially your failures—for the next pandemic response. We didn't do that, and we didn't 'institutionalise' what was successful, so now with COVID-19, despite all we did successfully to stop Ebola, we're starting from scratch again."**
>
> Humanitarian expert

Public Services & Provision For Children

Learning from past epidemics has identified that inter-agency, inter-sectoral working should be promoted and supported, with health care forming only one part of the wider service response to epidemics.[45] Economic, education, social and health sectors' responses are coordinated, recognising that these are complex and interdependent, to ensure that children's diverse needs can be met.

> **"Don't create new structures. We ignored existing structures, and created new ones, which just added unnecessary pressures...What's needed is shared leadership [across national, local and community levels]."**
>
> Humanitarian expert

Effective responses respect the importance of children's relationships:

- Responses and approaches are chosen that maintain professionals' relationships with children, taking account of, and mitigating the impact of, professionals' absences, working from home, and loss of posts and redeployment.

- The role of, and children's access to, helplines and other similar services are especially important to access independent and confidential support.

- Children's relationships with their peers are supported, especially in different phases of the pandemic. This includes facilitating access to play and leisure.

Effective responses recognise the complexity of the situation and ensure public services work in a coherent, connected and interdependent way to meet the needs of children:

These services will ensure the following:

- **Education:** The diversity of children's learning experiences is supported regardless of whether schools are open, closed or have restricted access.[46] Inequality is addressed across all phases of COVID-19 responses. School staff ensure that they maintain regular contact with children and work with other public services where there are concerns.

- **Health:** Children continue to have access to health services and information about them, including mental health and antenatal provision. Flexible provision enables the assessment of need, and appropriate responses where urgent. There is a plan to deal with accumulating need, paying special attention to support for children where they have been bereaved or have an ill family member. Birth registration services are maintained to avoid introducing new and serious vulnerability factors for children.

- **Child protection and social care:** Children's care and protection services are more effective where approaches to children and families' acute and ongoing needs are systematic and responsive. Prevention measures retain their importance as an essential service with consideration given to the emerging or exacerbated vulnerabilities of children. [47] Particular attention is paid to identifying the newly vulnerable children, who have no history of previous vulnerability, but who have become at risk with the imposition of sudden and new constraints on their, and their families', lives.

  There is ongoing support for children in alternative care. Disabled children and children with complex needs continue to be supported so that their needs are met in planned and resourced ways.

- **Justice:** Emergency measures are for the shortest time possible and restored swiftly.[48] Children's rights including their right to complain and their access to legal representation and support are available for all children who need it including those who experience profound and sustained injustice.[49] Young people are released from detention facilities where safety for young people and others is possible, and entry to detention facilities is paused.[50]

- **Play, leisure and culture:** Opportunities for play and leisure continue to be seen as essential for children's development and wellbeing with children able to access outdoor play areas and youth provision as soon as emergency measures allow.[51] Cultural norms are respected and supported.

5 Conclusion

The coming months and years are crucial for our global wellbeing. Protecting children's wellbeing involves providing services that enable their growth and development, and preventing harm; as well as enabling children's participation in the determination and direction of their lives. These are functions that will be central to our recovery. Decision makers therefore need to ensure that children's needs are prioritised during all the different phases of the pandemic. By taking children's needs and rights into account, governments at national and local level will be supporting the recovery and resilience of their citizens and communities.

Our *Inspiring Children's Futures* efforts at the University of Strathclyde in Scotland is working in partnership to strengthen global, national and local approaches, in the long-term post-COVID recovery, to ensure that we are collectively delivering on the *Justice for Children, Justice for All Call to Action* to "respond to children's distinct needs, and realize their full range of rights and opportunities, to achieve peaceful, just and inclusive societies for all".[52]

6 End notes

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Inspiring
Children's Futures
IN THE LIGHT OF COVID-19

Learning Report One

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