

PLAY IN A COVID FRAME

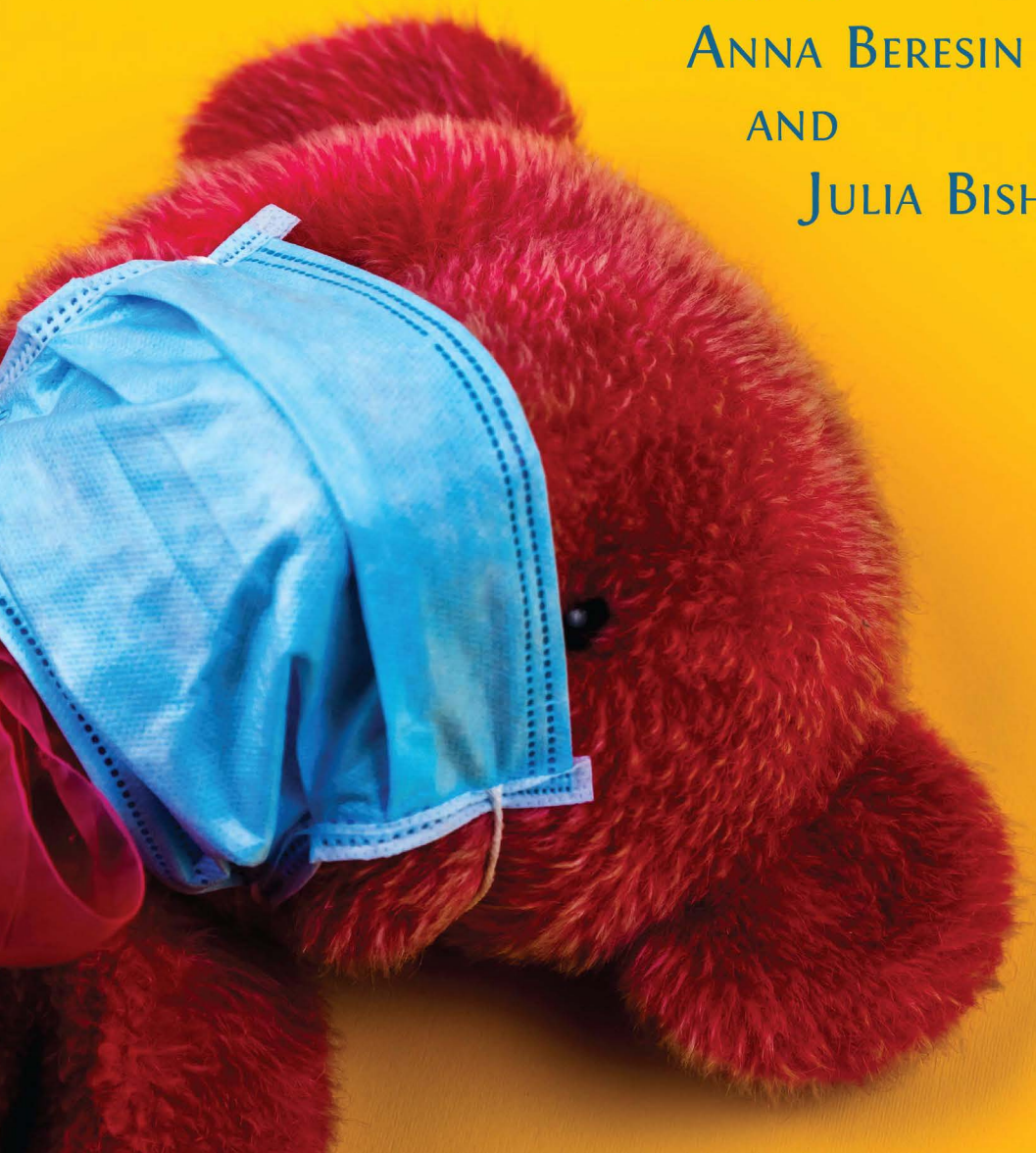
EVERYDAY PANDEMIC CREATIVITY
IN A TIME OF ISOLATION

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9. Parents' Perspectives on Their Children's Play and Friendships during the Covid-19 Pandemic in England

Caron Carter

Introduction

Historically, research on children's friendships in educational contexts has been overlooked, with academic progress and attainment taking precedence. In recent years, there is growing recognition of the importance of children's friendships, particularly in relation to children's social and emotional well-being and their learning and development (Daniels et al. 2010; Hedges and Cooper 2017; Peters 2003). While the existing research is valuable, it does not address how children coped without face-to-face interactions with friends during Covid-19 lockdowns and subsequent restrictions. This topic of inquiry is crucial as schools are now tasked with supporting children with their friendships and well-being as children return post-lockdown (Education Endowment Foundation 2022; O'Toole and Simovska 2021). Relatively little is known about how children managed without their usual friendship interactions. Questions remain about how children creatively maintained play with friends and how the answers might be used to support children's friendships in the future. This chapter poses the question: What are parents' perceptions of children's play and friendships during the Covid-19 pandemic?

While a recent study has used online questionnaires to gather data from children (aged five to fourteen years old) about their friendships during this time (Larivière-Bastien et al. 2022: 9), to my knowledge there is no research using in-depth, semi-structured interviews with parents of young children (six- to seven-year-olds) in England.

The Affordances of Friendship

Friendship matters to children (UNICEF 2011) and affords several benefits socially, emotionally and academically (Hedges and Cooper 2017; Kragh-Muller and Isbell 2011). Quality friendships can provide children with opportunities to understand and regulate their emotions and interactions with others (Coelho et al. 2017: 813; Dunn and Cutting 1999); friendship can thus enhance children's social and emotional competences' (Engdahl 2012: 86).

A range of studies have highlighted the association between children's friendships and play. Engdahl (2012: 86) notes succinctly that 'children play with their friends, and they develop friendships while playing'. Positive play interactions with friends are therefore an important ingredient for making and maintaining children's friendships. Having friends that participate in enjoyable play has also been connected to enhanced well-being and positive school experience (Fattore, Mason and Watson 2016; Hollingsworth and Buysse 2009; Murray and Harrison 2005; Streelasky 2017). Likewise, higher levels of self-confidence and self-worth in children have been linked to the presence of stable, quality friendships (Berndt and Keefe 1995; Engle, McElwain and Lasky 2011). Research also indicates the benefits friendship can have on learning and development including improved school attainment (Ladd 1990).

However, friendship cannot be taken for granted and is not guaranteed for all children (Engdahl 2012). Not being able to make friends can have a negative impact on children. This experience can cause a child stress, damage self-esteem, affect engagement and learning, and influence their future relationships with peers (Daniels et al. 2010; Ladd 1990; Murray and Harrison, 2005). Simply having a friend or friends is not necessarily a protective factor. It is the quality of the friendships that makes the difference and can lead to higher self-worth and better

school experiences (Gifford-Smith and Brownell 2003). Furthermore, friendships can be fragile and unstable, especially in younger children (Rubin et al. 2005). Therefore, children need time and space to nurture and maintain quality friendships (both in and out of school) for positive well-being and holistic development and learning (Carter 2021; Carter 2022a; Carter and Nutbrown 2016; Chan and Poulin 2007). During the Covid-19 lockdown and restrictions, this time and space for friendships was removed or radically reduced and altered.

Context: Covid-19 Pandemic

On 20 March 2020 England went into a national lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Schools were closed to most pupils with only some key workers and vulnerable children continuing to attend. During this lockdown period, households were only permitted to go out once per day for exercise or for provisions. Even when lockdown came to an end and some schools reopened in June to children in Year 1 (five- to six-year-olds) and Year 6 (ten- to eleven-year-olds), restrictions remained regarding social distancing (Department for Education 2020). For children, the lockdown and restrictions led to a lack of in-person social contact with their friends.

During lockdown and home-based learning, there was no guidance given to children and families about how to manage and maintain children's friendships. When schools fully re-opened to all children in September 2020, some official guidance for schools was issued stating that children may need pastoral care to help them reconnect socially (Department for Education 2020). Children were kept in 'bubbles' to reduce their number of contacts in school. Bubbles were groups, classes or year groups of pupils that had to be kept together; children could not play with others outside of their bubble. Consequently, many parents remained fearful or reticent about allowing their children to have social contact with friends out of school. Some children were unable to participate in their usual after-school provision/activities which were still on hiatus due to concerns about potential rises in infection rates. In summary, for many children, disruption to friendship interactions continued for several months or longer beyond the lockdown.

The adverse effects of Covid-19 social restrictions on children and families are already evident and for some the effects will be long-lasting (Goldschmidt 2020; Loades et al. 2020; Rider et al. 2021; United Nations 2020). Many families experienced stress, anxiety and depression as a result of the restrictive measures (Pascal et al. 2020). There are recent studies suggesting that the psychological impacts on children include loneliness, anxiety and struggling to cope in the absence of friends and school (Egan et al. 2021). Children have reported concerns about losing friends during the lockdown (Lundie and Law 2020). As pupils returned to school, pastoral support for children was and continues to be a high priority. Schools have also reported the need for 'long term planning for social and wellbeing interventions' (Achtaridou et al. 2022: 31), which is indicative of the legacy of the pandemic restrictions for children socially and emotionally.

The Voice of Parents

The data for this chapter are drawn from a larger pilot study on children's friendships. Fieldwork for that study took place largely before the pandemic and involved teachers, teaching assistants, lunchtime welfare supervisors and children. The initial research design did not include parents but it became apparent to me after talking to adults in school that the perspectives of parents were missing and were needed in this study. The following vignettes from participants in the larger study prompted a period of reflection for me. There were instances where school staff felt that parents did not always understand the complexity and challenge involved in handling friendship play scenarios in the school settings. In schools, staff must manage these friendship dynamics in a class of thirty or more, whereas parents have just their own child or children in mind. For example, the following commentary by a lunchtime welfare supervisor describes the challenges of working to meet the needs of both the parents and the children.

Researcher: Do you feel that adults/teachers can support children's friendships?

Lunchtime Welfare Supervisor: Yes. They see as well how they are in the classroom and also they have a lot of input from parents, who they want to play with, who they can play with. Some have got issues and they can't play together, they're in the same class and they can play together at break and stuff but at lunch we have to keep them separate. Some we just have to do because that's what the parents say but I know that sometimes it's discussed, why can't we teach them to play nicely, rather than keeping them apart? That's not up to us. If you've got two children that have to be kept apart and you've got one child that likes to play with both of them and that child then has to choose who they play with, which is a lot for that child.

Similarly, the following extract gives a teacher's perspective:

Researcher: Do you feel parents are on side [with friendship issues]?

Teacher: It tends to be, at the end of the day if there has been an issue, I'll then keep that child behind and say to the parent, this has happened in the playground today. Can you talk about it at home with them? Most parents are quite on board with it, but some parents are, kind of, 'Well they don't want to play that game'. Sometimes they're not always going to have their first choice of game. Sometimes they have to be able to negotiate or they have to be able to take the back seat sometimes. Some parents find that hard to get across to their child that actually their child is one of thirty within the class and it won't always be their child who gets to pick the game every time. Some parents and some children expect that to be the case. So some parents are less on board with that than others.

Being a parent myself, I thought it was important to explore this further. Parents often hear about happenings at school second-hand and they do not always know the full truth of a situation. Trying to support children from home with friendship scenarios, without understanding the bigger picture, is often a challenge for parents and carers. This is evident in the headteacher's comments here:

Headteacher: I can think of a friendship situation we're managing from one class, and two children are playing in separate playgrounds and have done for a number of months. That is as much to support the parents with this process as well, so they're reassured that they're not playing together, as it is for the children themselves.

Researcher: You said you know sometimes parents can have concerns and it's quite hard if you're the parent because you're not there at school?

Headteacher: It is hard, partly because when children go home, they tell the story from their perception and that isn't always the true reality. Some parents have an understanding of children and will understand that their child isn't lying, but will be telling things completely from their perspective, and therefore when they come and see us, as a school, they come from the perspective of understanding to try and find more information and to find out what the actual reality is. A few parents we have to help because they can only see it from their child's perspective and their child doesn't always have a true understanding of what has actually happened.

Following reflection on this data collection it was clear to me that the need for parent voice warranted a new strand of data. Consequently, I obtained ethical approval for some additional interviews investigating parents' perspectives on supporting children's friendships. Just when I planned to interview parents face-to-face, we went into the first Covid-19 lockdown period. This forced the interviews to go online but fortuitously

the timing allowed for exploration of parents' perspectives on how this unprecedented lockdown was affecting children's friendships. Thus, the additional data collection involved parent voice exclusively—hearing parents' opinions and perceptions of their children's experiences of play and friendships during this timeframe. Therefore, I acknowledge that the data cannot be considered to be truly representative of the children's own voices and perspectives. For details on child voice, see Carter, Barley and Omar (2023).

Research Methods

As stated, the data for this chapter forms part of a larger study for which most of the fieldwork took place before Covid-19. Only the data from parents were collected during the pandemic, in June 2020 after the first lockdown. These parent interviews enabled me to investigate how children had managed play and friendship during the lockdown. The setting was an infant and preschool in the north of England providing education for children aged between three and seven years old, with approximately three hundred children on roll. To research the phenomenon of children's friendships in one setting, the methodology adopted was a single case study. The intention was not to generalize from the findings, but to allow for an in-depth investigation (Yin 2018) to discover what could be learnt from this single specific context.

Online interviews were the primary method of collecting data from the parents, with supplementary methods being fieldnotes and a reflective research diary. Individuals experience life in different ways and interpret and make meaning of life events through different lenses or perspectives (Salmons 2014). Therefore, interviews were the most appropriate method for learning about the varied perspectives of parents on their children's play and friendships during this unique period post-lockdown. The online modality had the advantage of being Covid-secure, given that we were still subject to restrictions including working from home. All of the parents interviewed stated their preference for online interviews over face-to-face meetings. Their reasons were twofold: Covid-19 safety considerations, but also the time saving and flexibility of fitting interviews around work schedules and not needing to come into schools. The parents may also have felt more

comfortable in their own environment than school settings, therefore lessening any potential effects of power dynamics.

The participants were recruited through the school. Information and consent forms were emailed to parents of all three Year 2 classes (the phase focus for this research). Four female parents and one male parent agreed to participate. Greater detail on the participants is not provided here as their anonymity could be compromised. This group of five is a smaller sample of parents than anticipated prior to the pandemic. The original aim was to recruit twelve parents for this pilot. However, recruiting participants for research was more challenging during the pandemic because families and schools were under increased pressures. In these circumstances, it would have been unethical to persist in chasing potential recruits for responses in the hope of achieving a larger sample. However, it was still feasible to proceed with in-depth interviews but with a smaller number of participants. The study was approved by Sheffield Hallam University's Ethics Review Board. Informed consent was obtained in writing from all participants and they were given pseudonyms to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. All quotations by parents used in this chapter have assigned pseudonyms.

The data analysis was guided by Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis (TA) (2019). Reflexive TA is a method of 'developing, analysing and interpreting patterns across a qualitative dataset' in order to develop themes (Braun and Clarke 2022: 4). The first phase of this analytic process requires the researcher to familiarize themselves with the dataset. This required listening to the recordings, re-reading interview transcripts and fieldnotes. The second stage involved coding the data with concise labels that helped to organize the data and map it to the research question. In the third phase, initial themes were generated. Finally, the fourth stage called for revisiting, developing and reviewing the themes (Braun and Clarke 2006). The aim was to conduct a 'rich, nuanced analysis' that responded to the research question and revolved around a central concept (Braun and Clarke 2022: 97).

Findings and Analysis

The aim of this study was to investigate parents' views and perceptions of their children's play and friendships during the Covid-19 lockdown

and restrictions. The main findings fall within two key themes: (1) that children adopted alternative strategies to interact with their friends creatively and playfully, and (2) parents became more grateful for their children's friendships, as did some of the children themselves.

Theme 1—Creative Strategies to Interact with Friends

The absence of face-to-face opportunities for play during the lockdown and continued restrictions led to children and families having to resort to alternative means if they wanted to maintain contact with their friends. Parents found themselves standing in place of school in their children's lives, including taking on the full-time role of teacher, but for many parents the greater challenge was providing for the holistic needs of their child. For example, Connie explained that although she felt able to support and nurture her child academically, it was more difficult to plug the gap socially.

I think it's extremely important. I think it's one of the reasons why with the pandemic it's so important for children to be at school because I just think there's a risk—I think it's just detrimental for them not to be in school, even more so for the friendships in some ways, you know, because we're fortunate ourselves to have, you know, for me and my husband to have a good education and therefore academically in some ways we can plug those gaps when they're not at school but you can't replace the sort of friendships and the time that they spend together when they're not. Obviously, the academic educational side is really important but just thinking about the last six months, you know, we could plug some of those academic gaps by doing reading, writing, some maths with them, but there's just no replacement for the interactions with other children and what they learn in the playground and the feedback that they get from their friends, I don't think.

To meet the challenges, all parents reported strategies they had used as a family to help their children to interact with friends in creative and playful ways. Parents spoke mostly about three strategies: the use of the Zoom online meeting platform, video messages/calls and doorstep visits.

Strategy 1—Zoom

Connie recalled how her daughter had made use of Zoom during the lockdown to stay in touch with her friends, particularly her closest friend who is an only child. Connie was impressed by her daughter's creative use of Zoom:

We did try. So we used Zoom for her to interact with some of her friends and I think she actually managed with Zoom pretty well all things considered [...] I think she was particularly good at using Zoom so they used to play games and all sorts by Zoom. They'd do little imagination games, they'd read to each other over Zoom, play Hide and Seek and I Spy and they were really quite creative in how they used Zoom.

For many children, Zoom provided a forum for play activities with friends, enabling treasure hunts, quizzes, bingo and sharing/showing LEGO and toys. These opportunities for continued imaginative play with friends, albeit through virtual contact, were vital. Time and space to nurture and maintain quality friendships were important during the lockdown and restrictions in order to support children's development, learning and well-being (Carter 2021; Carter 2022b; Carter and Nutbrown 2016). Likewise, having fun play experiences with friends promotes enhanced well-being and positive school experiences (Fattore, Mason and Watson 2016; Hollingsworth and Buysse 2009; Streelasky 2017). Maintaining friendships was also essential for the return to school; Zoom interaction could facilitate this maintenance. However, Zoom was not the best strategy for everyone. For example, Connie was aware that Zoom did not work for all of her child's friends.

I think some of her friends really struggled with it [Zoom] and so it was harder to keep in touch with them in that way [...] but certainly that wasn't across the board [a positive Zoom experience], and I think some of her friends they did find it really difficult to use Zoom.

Another parent whose child had additional needs and found friendship more challenging, especially initiating friendships, did not feel that Zoom worked for them either.

So he wasn't too keen on Zoom meetings with other friends because, I don't know, I think a lot of them just find them a bit dull but they did exchange, were using my phone or using their parents' phone, messages and video messages. (Andrea)

This perspective gives a sense that for many children some modes of online play with friends did not suit them. Four out of the five parents talked about how they had started with Zoom or other platforms but the novelty soon wore off. Some children, such as Andrea's son, felt uncomfortable in this arena. Parents also knew of many children who were without the technology to connect virtually with friends and this anecdotal evidence aligns with official data (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development 2020). The upshot is that the pandemic restrictions removed or greatly reduced children's time and space for friendship interaction, removing with it the benefits provided by quality, stable friendships including higher self-confidence and self-worth (Daniels et al. 2010; Gifford-Smith and Brownell 2003; Ladd 1990; Murray and Harrison 2005). Research shows that this absence of social interaction had negative impacts on children's well-being (Lundie and Law 2020). These challenges resonate with reports by schools that they are prioritizing pastoral support for children and putting in place social, emotional and well-being initiatives (Achtaridou et al. 2022: 31).

Strategy 2—Video Messaging/Calls in the Absence of Birthday Parties

A couple of the parents said that the absence of face-to-face birthday parties during lockdown and restrictions had been significant for children. Birthday parties figure strongly in the peer culture of infant, school-age children (between four and seven years old) (Bath 2009). Andrea spoke about the absence of a birthday party having a considerable impact on her son. Instead, they had used video messages creatively to celebrate the occasion and try to fill the birthday party gap:

Yeah. I mean it was hard because during that time from March to May I think we couldn't even meet anybody even outdoors so that was hard and he had his birthday during that time as well but what we did was some friends [...] well, they would make videos of themselves and they would send video messages to each other

so we did that and actually for his birthday I'd asked some of his close friends to record a video message for him and then collected it all together and he watched it on his birthday so he really liked that.

Nevertheless, as was the case with Zoom, video messages and calls did not work for all of the families. Melanie talked about the short-lived effectiveness of video calls for her child.

The funny thing was though, over lockdown I tried to do video calls and stuff with her friends, so she got to see them and we did that for a while but then she kind of got a bit bored of it.

Strategy 3—Doorstep Visits

Three out of the five parents spoke about doorstep visits. These were often conducted with one family standing at the bottom of the drive while members of the other family were at their doorstep or an open window. These were often friends who were located geographically nearby to one another. Sometimes gifts were also left by the front door. Lucy stated: 'We did some doorstep visits to a couple of her friends'. Doorstep visits provided opportunities for children to see each other but not for fun and enjoyable play experiences (Fattore, Mason and Watson 2016; Hollingsworth and Buysse 2009; Murray and Harrison 2005; Streelasky 2017). This finding chimes with the research of Larivière-Bastien et al. (2022: 9) which noted that 'physical closeness' between friends, an important dimension of children's friendships, was absent during Covid-19 restrictions.

To conclude this theme, it seems that all children and families in the study tried some means of virtual contact with friends. For some this worked well but for many these measures had only short-term utility. Parents felt that nothing compared to the face-to-face modality of interaction with friends, where children could experience play that was fun, enjoyable and physically close. Most parents talked about arranging outdoor play dates as soon as they were permitted to do so, as stated by Connie:

As the restrictions eased and we could see people outside and things we then did try to really make as many play dates as was allowable within the restrictions at the time.

Theme 2—The 'Newfound Joy' of Friendship

Valuing Friendship: 'You only appreciate it when it's gone'

All the parents spoke positively about the value of children's friendships and especially having experienced lockdown and social restrictions. The following quotations by parents illustrate that they found play and friendships important in different ways. Although they may have known the value of children's friendships pre-pandemic, it is interesting that all the parents elaborated on the positive affordances of play and friendship for their child during this period.

I think she gets [...] positive reinforcement of herself. I think friendships are important for their self-confidence and self-worth. I think enjoyment, fun, you know, people who will play games and have ideas that sort of match hers and on her level [...] I think she probably gets different things from different friends I would say. (Connie)

I definitely think there are a lot of positives to the friendships [...] I think it makes the experience of school much more enjoyable for him and he looks forward to school more now that he's got an established set of friendships there. I think overall also he feels more as a part of the class that, oh, you know, I sit with this person and I had lunch with this person and I'm going to see this person so I think there's that greater sense of belonging and also feeling more enthusiastic about going to school. Oh, I think it's really important. (Andrea)

Yes. I think it's very hard to be able to learn and develop yourself without a peer support network and I think friendship is very much linked to your happiness and well-being isn't it and if you're not happy and feeling well and buoyant it's hard to learn, isn't it? So, yeah, I think it's very important. That being said, I'm coming at it from me being a very sociable creature and my children being very sociable creatures and I don't know whether it would be the same for a child that perhaps doesn't really want to. (Lucy)

Firstly, we have Connie valuing friendships for children's self-worth and self-confidence. This aligns with the literature on the association between

these outcomes and quality, stable friendships (Daniels et al. 2010; Gifford-Smith and Brownell 2003; Murray and Harrison 2005). Connie valued the fun and enjoyment her daughter experienced when playing with others and coming up with ideas for games together. Similarly, Andrea noted that her son's experience of school had improved once he had an established group of friends. Both of these perspectives reflect research cited earlier in this chapter on the benefits of friendship and play for children's well-being and school experiences (Fattore, Mason and Watson 2016; Hollingsworth and Buysse 2009; Streelasky 2017). Finally, Lucy discussed how friendships are integral to happiness and well-being which has a knock-on effect on learning. Again, this idea is supported by research which suggests that positive friendships are associated with improved attainment (Ladd 1990).

All of the parents post-lockdown said that their children seemed to have renewed gratitude for friendships and their affordances. For instance, Connie talked about her child's response to being reunited with friends.

Do you know what? I think they emerged out the other side of lockdown a little bit more grateful for each other which was nice [...] so I don't think she realized that she missed her friends as much as what she did when she saw them again. So it was almost like a newfound joy, I think, seeing her friends again which was nice. Has it changed? Yeah, I think because they've all sort of adapted really well and slotted straight back in, just as friends do, you know, you don't see each other for a few years or whatever, in their case probably is the equivalent of years isn't it and they've just slotted, they seem to have slotted straight back in to where they left off.

A Welcome Break from Enforced Socialization

According to some parents, lockdown was a welcome break from obligatory social interaction for their children, including those who find friendship more challenging to navigate. Andrea reported on how the break benefitted her son who has additional needs. She felt this break allowed him to have a smooth transition back into play and friendship when schools reopened.

But the good thing I've seen is that once he went back to school it's kind of happened really naturally and it almost went back instantly which was really good to see, because I was like, oh, this has been a six-month gap and what's it going to be like but it's been really good actually. I think lockdown was good for him, gave him a bit of a break and now he's gone back and he's doing much better, touch wood.

Early research does indicate that being at home during lockdown reduced stress and pressure on some children and therefore enhanced their well-being. This was particularly pertinent to children who before the pandemic had negative experiences at school such as bullying (Ziauddeen et al. 2020).

Likewise, being at home may have suited some children's personalities or inclinations. For example, Melanie talked about how her daughter simply enjoyed the break and doing things at home with her family.

I asked her was she missing her friends and was she missing school and stuff and she never was, she was very happy just being at home with her family. So she's happy with them but she does need them I think [...] Yeah, she said she didn't want to go back to school, she was happy just being at home and playing and doing the stuff we did at home. I expected when she went back to school it to be more difficult. I thought it would be more of a shock and she'd be more upset but she's adapted really well to it [...] She has a really nice little group of friends but, yeah, she did, she was quite self-contained and happy during lockdown.

Some families were able to spend more time together, resulting in positive interactions between children and adults (Goldschmidt 2020). Other parents also talked about the social gap being filled by a sibling(s). Some siblings were close in age or enjoyed one another's company and were able to play together imaginatively as they would with their friends.

I think having a sibling at home eased things. My two get on very, very well so by and large they'll just go off and play whatever imaginative game they're into at the time. (Lucy)

It seems that although children expressed contentment with family and siblings, these relationships could not replace their friendships, something which became evident when they returned to school. Connie's words movingly illustrate this: when her daughter was reunited with friends, it was like a 'newfound joy'.

Discussion

This chapter addresses the following research question: What are parents' perceptions of children's play and friendships during the Covid-19 pandemic? Two main insights were highlighted. First, children and families were using a range of strategies to interact virtually with friends, although none was as effective as in-person play with friends. Second, appreciation for the value of children's friendships was reignited either during lockdown or when children returned to school.

Face-to-face Play with Friends Was Irreplaceable

The findings provide new evidence about the irreplaceable nature of 'real world', face-to-face play with friends and the value of friendship and its affordances. All the parents discussed how their child had used virtual means of making contact and interacting with friends. One parent, Connie, felt that online platforms enabled her child to continue her imaginative play with peers (referred to in 'Strategy 1: Zoom' above). They continued to enjoy games like Hide and Seek and I Spy. Other parents reported that the novelty of virtual contact soon wore off because children either grew bored or realized the social limitations of the platform. Andrea and Connie recalled that some children became bored or just found it difficult to interact online.

Virtual technology was appreciated but found to be greatly inferior to the face-to-face mode of play and interaction with friends. Parents reported that children did not possess phones of their own so connecting with their friends in this way would have been new to most of them. The data indicate that use of platforms like Zoom may have supported some friendships to thrive by enabling children to show toys, play games and share tours of their homes and gardens. However, in other cases, parents reported that children seemed to find it awkward to work out what to say and how to be with friends in these new virtual spaces. These

findings are consistent with emerging research by Larivière-Bastien and others (2022) which focused on children in the five-to-fourteen age range. In their study, children often found it challenging to read social cues or facial expressions through virtual interaction and some virtual conversations had awkward silences. Of course, one might speculate that lack of privacy from adults and/or siblings, compared to children's experiences in the playground for example, could contribute to the awkwardness.

Doorstep visits were another strategy used by three of the families in the present study. These visits enabled friends to see one another from afar but the interaction was deemed unsatisfactory in comparison to the usual play with friends which included fun, enjoyment and physical closeness (Fattore, Mason and Watson 2016; Hollingsworth and Buysse 2009; Larivière-Bastien et al. 2022; Murray and Harrison 2005; Streelasky 2017). These findings indicate that parents feel that their children have been socially isolated from their friends and denied the means to adequately play and interact. Essentially, this predicament stemmed from official restrictions by government and was contrary to Article 15 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states that children should have the right to play with other children, form friendships and join organizations (United Nations 2013). Interaction with friends is essential for children's well-being and mental health. Indeed, in the wake of the pandemic, children now need opportunities to reconnect with friends and experience extended periods of play (Pascal et al. 2020) to counteract this social deficit. Time and space to reconnect could be allocated during the school day or in cost-free activities after school (Carter 2022b).

The Renewed Value of Friendship

A novel finding was that parents had a renewed sense of value for their children's friendships. The parents were able to articulate the specific affordances of friendship for children including self-confidence, self-worth, fun and enjoyment, a more positive experience of school and a disposition that is ready and receptive to learning. All these affordances are supported by the research literature (Fattore, Mason and Watson 2016; Hollingsworth and Buysse 2009; Larivière-Bastien et al. 2022; Murray and Harrison 2005; Streelasky 2017).

A couple of the parents felt that their children had not really missed their friendships while they were confined to their homes as they had a sibling to play with and/or felt quite contained within their family. As quoted above, Melanie recalled that her daughter was content at home and did not miss her friends. However, upon return to school the children recognized that they had missed their friends and that these special relationships were different to those with siblings and parents (Dunn 2004). Connie acknowledged that her daughter realized she had missed her friends upon being reunited with them.

There were interesting observations by some parents that their children welcomed respite from the pressure to interact socially with friends in school. Andrea, as quoted above, commented on her son benefitting from a break in social interaction with peers. Her child had additional needs and often found instigating play with friends a challenge. The pause in social activity may have been doubly beneficial for this child—it was a comfortable break in itself but the absence of friends also served eventually to reawaken his appreciation for friendships and supported his reintegration back into school.

Children's friendships may have been taken for granted by parents prior to the pandemic. When Covid-19 restrictions effectively removed opportunities for children to play and interact with friends, the unprecedented changes perhaps invited the cliché that something is not appreciated until it is gone. Lockdown put children's friendships and their positive affordances under the spotlight. A silver lining of this challenging period is that the links between children's friendships, well-being and mental health have been brought to the fore (Carter 2022b). Perhaps these illuminated links are why the parents in this study valued friendship so highly in terms of its contribution to children's happiness and development. This is in line with Carter and Nutbrown's 'pedagogy of friendship' (2016). Their approach calls for adults to value and respect children's friendships, to be knowledgeable about how young children's friendships are enacted, and to provide opportunities—time and space—for children to have agency to nurture and maintain their friendships (Carter 2022a). Where parents and educational settings value and understand the importance of friendships, they are likely to be made a genuine priority.

Implications for Future Research and Practice

There are obvious limitations to using a small sample. From a single case study involving a specific group of five parents, the findings cannot be generalized. However, the data do provide important insights into how parents perceived their children's play and friendships during the pandemic lockdown and restrictions. These valuable insights may chime with other parents' perceptions. In future research, it would be intriguing to explore parents' perspectives using a larger and heterogenous sample of in-depth qualitative interviews to add to these pilot study findings. It would be fruitful also to hear from more children directly about their experiences of play and friendship during the Covid-19 pandemic (Carter, Barley and Omar 2023). This is an important task given that children in some contexts were 'marginalised and their voices silenced' during the pandemic (Lomax and others 2021: 1). To conclude, the findings add to the existing small body of knowledge on how children and families coped in the absence of in-person interaction with friends during lockdown and restrictions. This chapter amplifies the case for parents and educational settings to provide opportunities for children's friendships to be made, re-established, nurtured and maintained during the period of Covid recovery.

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