

# The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the physical activity environment in English primary schools: a multi-perspective qualitative analysis

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## Plain language summary

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# Plain language summary

## Why did we do this study?

Schools are important spaces for children's physical activity. Children can be active in physical education lessons, break times, after-school clubs and travelling to school. School closures and other COVID-19 restrictions affected children's physical activity. We wanted to know how physical activity in primary schools might have changed since the pandemic.

## What did we do?

We spoke to school staff, pupils and parents two times after schools reopened. We asked about children's physical activity, and if or how this had changed over the course of the pandemic. We asked school staff about school policies around physical activity.

## What did we find?

When children went back to school, schools needed a 'recovery' approach. Children's academic, social and physical skills had been affected. For this time schools prioritised physical activity, but this was short-lived. Since then, schools have been highly pressured. They have had to 'catch up' on missed learning, staff are overloaded and some pupils are still affected by the lockdowns. Physical activity policies in schools have changed, but in many different ways. Some have kept social distancing policies; others feel their school culture has changed. Additionally, pupil ability and needs are more polarised. These factors have shaped, but are also shaped by, the high pressure in schools.

## What does this mean for children's physical activity?

- Supporting changing child needs in highly pressured schools is hard for state primary schools.
- Changes to school physical activity policies need to be understood and evaluated.
- Strategies to ease pressure in schools are needed to support physical activity.