

# The new normal for children's physical activity and screen viewing: a multi-perspective qualitative analysis of behaviours a year after the COVID-19 lockdowns in the UK

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## Publication

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## Abstract

### Background

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted children's physical activity. Recent evidence indicated children's accelerometer-measured physical activity levels have, on average, returned to near pre-pandemic levels in 2022, though sedentary behaviour remains higher. However, insufficient physical activity levels among children continues to be a critical public health issue in the UK, with only 41% meeting physical activity guidelines. This study aimed to provide in-depth analysis of how the pandemic has shaped children's physical activity patterns beyond the short-term periods following lockdowns and identify the new challenges to engaging children in physical activity.

### Methods

One-to-one interviews with parents (n = 22), school staff (n = 9), and six focus groups with children aged 10–11 years (n = 45) were conducted between February and July 2022. Topics explored changes to children's physical activity and sedentary behaviour patterns, including screen-viewing, and factors influencing any changes. The framework method was used for analysis.

### Results

Five themes were generated. Theme 1 described residual lockdown habits, including increased screen-viewing within the home, while activities outside the home continued to feel less spontaneous. Theme 2 highlighted an interrupted development of social, emotional, and physical skills among children compared to what would be expected pre-pandemic. This coincided with Theme 3 which reflected increased mental health challenges among families, creating complex barriers to children's physical activity. A new normal for child physical activity was evoked and explored in Theme 4, with greater dependence on structured and organised activities. However, Theme 5 highlighted that girls and children with lower socio-economic position may be especially at risk of decreased physical activity.

### Conclusions

There is a new normal for children's physical activity that is characterised by increased dependence on structured and organised physical activities, such as active clubs, and less on unstructured and spontaneous physical activities, such as physical play. While this may suit many children, girls and children from lower socio-economic households face barriers to participating in the new normal. It is important that affordable and equitable opportunities are provided to all children to prevent physical activity and health inequalities.

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