

A multi-perspective qualitative exploration of the reasons for changes in the physical activity among 10–11-year-old children following the easing of the COVID-19 lockdown in the UK in 2021

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Publication

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Abstract

Background

Active-6 is exploring how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted physical activity behaviour among Year 6 children (aged 10–11 years) and their parents in Southwest England. Initial findings from the Active-6 project have shown a 7–8 min decrease in moderate-to-vigorous physical activity and an increase in sedentary behaviour among children following the easing of restrictions in the UK in latter half of 2021. This finding suggests that the pandemic has had a persistent impact on child physical activity behaviour. This paper explored the possible mechanisms behind these changes.

Methods

Interviews with parents (n = 21), members of school staff (n = 9) and focus groups with children aged 10–11 years (n = 47) were conducted between August and December 2021 to discuss the impact of the pandemic on child physical activity behaviour. The framework method was used for analysis.

Results

Five themes spanning two key stages of the pandemic were described. Three themes related to the period of lockdowns and fluctuating restrictions (March 2020 – April 2021). These included: Theme 1) Lockdown: A short-lived adventure; Theme 2) Access to facilities during restrictions; and Theme 3) The importance of the parent. A further two themes were identified related to the period following the gradual easing of restrictions in April 2021. These included: Theme 4) An overwhelming return to normal; and Theme 5) Reopening fatigue.

Conclusions

The analysis suggested that feelings of novelty experienced during the initial stages of lockdown waned as restrictions were prolonged, creating an increasingly challenging period for parents and their children. However, during periods of restrictions, the importance of parental encouragement and access to appropriate facilities in the local and home environment helped facilitate physical activity. Following the easing of COVID-19 restrictions, emotional overwhelm and physical fatigue among children, stemming from a sedentary and socially isolated life in lockdown and other restrictions, were key contributors to the decreased moderate to vigorous physical activity and increased sedentary behaviour that was observed in a related quantitative study.

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