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Citation:

CARTER, Caron, BARLEY, Ruth and OMAR, Arwa (2023). ‘I wish that COVID would disappear, and we'd all be together’: Maintaining Children's friendships during the Covid-19 pandemic. *Children & Society*. [Article]

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‘I wish that COVID would disappear, and we’d all be together’: Maintaining Children’s friendships during the Covid-19 pandemic

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Abstract

Friendship is a central focus in children’s lives and is important for healthy development. During the Covid-19 pandemic, children experienced restrictions on their interactions with friends. This research heard the voices of 10 children (7–11 years) in England regarding their friendships, drawing on data collected through creative participatory methods including drawings, photography and collages, and accompanying unstructured interviews. Findings provide new insights into how children endeavoured to maintain their friendships through virtual interactions, street/doorstep visits, and artwork, and how friendship disruption affected their well-being. This paper argues for educators to heed the implications for the period of ‘Covid recovery’.

KEYWORDS

children’s friendships, children’s well-being, Covid-19 pandemic, creative participatory methods

INTRODUCTION

Research into friendships has increasingly focused on the benefits for children’s academic, social and emotional development (Brogaard-Clausen & Robson, 2019; Coelho et al., 2017; Hedges & Cooper, 2017; Theobald et al., 2017; United Nations, 2011; Wentzel et al., 2020). Also, research has illuminated how children select, make and sustain friendships, and the subsequent positive

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impacts (Carter, 2021; Carter & Nutbrown, 2016; Ladd, 1990). The darker sides of friendship and the negative effects of the absence of friendship have also been explored (Parker & Seal, 1996). However, the literature does not address how children maintain their friendships during a global pandemic. The Covid-19 scenario is unprecedented; little is known about the impact on children's friendships as we have no comparative data. To date, there has been limited attention to the impact of lockdowns on children's friendships (see Barron & Emmett, 2020; Cameron & Tenenbaum, 2021; Couper-Kenney & Riddell, 2021; Paulauskaite et al., 2021) and no studies have used online creative participatory methods to gather data on children's friendships in the 7–11 age bracket in England. Therefore, the present study asks: How did children maintain their friendships during the pandemic?

The Covid context

In England, the first Covid-19 lockdown started in March 2020. Schools were closed, except for key workers' children and some vulnerable children, for almost 5 months. Consequently, most children in England were unable to socialise with friends as they normally would at playtimes and lunchtimes. Citizens were permitted to leave their homes only once per day for exercise or essential supplies. Thus, children were without their usual social interactions with friends outside of or within the school (Cameron & Tenenbaum, 2021). The lockdown eased over the summer of 2020, but as schools were on holiday during this period some children were separated from their school friends for 6 months. As restrictions eased, members of the public including children could meet outdoors and subsequently indoors in groups of no more than six.

Although most children returned to school in September 2020, social distancing rules remained. Children were often 'bubbled' in small groups, limiting their interactions in the playground to specific children and spaces, and hindering the making and maintaining of friendships, particularly across year groups (Cameron & Tenenbaum, 2021). Some children continued to shield because of a health condition or to protect a family member. For these children, who had to engage with online learning instead of attending school, the effects on friendships were greater (Couper-Kenney & Riddell, 2021; Paulauskaite et al., 2021).

The easing of restrictions involved a system of 'tiers', with different regions in England subject to different protective measures. Many areas were put into Tier 3 which prohibited meeting non-household members indoors. When the second national lockdown was announced, schools moved to online provision for almost all children in January 2021. Online teaching continued for most children until March 2021.

The impact of school closures on families has been reported in terms of higher incidence of family conflict and family-based violence affecting both adults and children (Cappa & Jijon, 2021; Cluver et al., 2020), higher rates of parental depression and poorer mental health (Russell et al., 2021), and challenges of juggling work and home demands (Fontanesi et al., 2020). Specifically, in relation to home-schooling during the lockdowns, the pandemic has problematised gender inequalities in facilitating children's learning while parents worked from home (Fontanesi et al., 2020; Petts et al., 2021) and increased inequalities between families from different socio-economic backgrounds (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2021; Colao et al., 2020).

The pandemic's impact on children's well-being and mental health has also been widely reported around the world (Carter, 2022; de Miranda et al., 2020; Imran et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2020; Loades et al., 2020; Nearchou et al., 2020; Phelps & Sperry, 2020; Rajmil et al., 2021; Saito et al., 2021). However, as previously stated, there has been limited attention to the impact of

lockdowns on children's friendships. Addressing this gap is vital, given the benefits of friendships for children's development and well-being. These are developed below.

Friendship and discrimination

Friendships in schools can help to challenge discrimination as children mix with other children from families with characteristics and values which differ from their own (Barley, 2014; Iqbal et al., 2017). Positive interracial interactions at a young age are important given that children's attitudes are less entrenched than adults' views and more open to change through contact experiences (Raabe & Beelmann, 2011). Research suggests that the Covid-19 lockdowns and school closures have had a disproportionately negative impact on cross-group social interactions among children (Cameron & Tenenbaum, 2021).

Play and friendship

Play is integral to children's friendships. Free play with other children is an important part of children's development and physical and mental well-being (Barron & Emmett, 2020; Gomes et al., 2018; Whitebread, 2017). This principle is enshrined under Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Free play in informal settings independent of adult interference provides youngsters with opportunities to develop the social skills necessary for making and maintaining friendships including how to successfully manage peer disputes and rejection and how to communicate independently without adult support (Baines & Blatchford, 2019). During the Covid-19 pandemic, opportunities for children to socialise in informal gatherings unsupervised were severely curtailed by lockdown restrictions including the closure of public playparks, in addition to school closures (Cameron & Tenenbaum, 2021). Barron and Emmett's (2020) survey of parents in Ireland found that children were less likely to play outdoors during the pandemic or be involved in vigorous physical activity compared to pre-pandemic times. They also found that children were more likely to use technology including social media to maintain peer friendships.

Friendship maintenance during transitions, such as moving to secondary school, has been shown to relate both to better mental health outcomes and higher academic achievement (Ng-Knight et al., 2019). Schools in England cancelled transition events or did them online, making it hard for children to interact and develop friendships. For pupils with established, quality friendships (Dunn, 2004), these transitions would have been easier whereas others endeavouring to forge new friendships via online platforms may have found it more challenging. Thus, the impact of lockdown disruption on friendship groups may be more profound for children who are moving on to secondary school (children aged 10 and 11 years). For this reason, this study focuses on pupils aged 7–11 years. This age phase is referred to as Key Stage 2 in England.

METHODS

Creative participatory methods

Creative participatory research methods were employed. These vary in creative modality and approach and the level to which children are involved (Lomax et al., 2022). This project drew

upon our previous research experience of creative participatory methods with children (Barley, 2014; Barley & Russell, 2019; Carter, 2021; Carter & Nutbrown, 2016), built on a foundation of children's rights: Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that children have the right to be heard and taken seriously in relation to issues that affect them (United Nations, 1989). Children are active social agents, and the diverse, complex and multiple experiences of childhood must be recognised (James & James, 2004). Children are competent to provide 'expert testimony' on their experiences. This principle informed our research design (Thomson, 2008).

A pilot study design had to be framed in the context of the pandemic, given that face-to-face research was not permitted. To ensure that the research was inclusive and accessible, we used a flexible and multi-method approach to encourage children to participate in ways they felt comfortable and that aligned with individual preferences (Clark, 2017; Kyritsi, 2019). Nevertheless, some pragmatic decisions were made. We knew that the methods could not be optimally participatory due to the continued pandemic restrictions.

Recruitment and sample

This paper reports the qualitative pilot study involving 10 children aged 7–11, (7 boys and 3 girls) who participated in creative participatory methods and open-ended unstructured interviews. All children were living in England. Data were gathered after the second lockdown when schools were reopening (March–July 2021). We decided not to recruit via our usual means of school networks because schools were already overwhelmed by pandemic-related government directives and policies. Schools were overstretched with reduced staffing and the pressures of addressing children's needs during a period of recovery. These challenges were evident anecdotally but also formally recognised in a school governance update in March 2021 entitled 'Wellbeing for Education Return' (Department for Education, 2021). Therefore, we recruited children via Twitter using their parents as gatekeepers. A Twitter account was created to avoid potential conflicts of interest connected with personal accounts. Existing networks were used to raise awareness of the recruitment post on Twitter and these proved to be the most successful routes. Ten participants were recruited which we deemed viable for a pilot study. Table 1 sets out the participating children's names and ages. Pseudonyms have been used.

TABLE 1 Participants and ages.

Name	Age
Arthur	9
Mia	7
Stanley	11
Arun	8
Zara	11
Sam	8
Noel	7
Poppy	9
Louis	8
Bobby	7

Data collection

Children were asked to create an artefact to express their ideas or feelings about friendship during the pandemic: a drawing (Carter & Nutbrown, 2016), friendship map (Barley, 2014), poem, photography, or another creative method of their choice. This was followed up with an online, open-ended, unstructured interview so the children could share their artefacts and provide commentary (Barley & Russell, 2019). The researchers used prompts to facilitate the interaction while allowing the children to take the conversation in the direction they wished (Kyritsi, 2019). Offering a range of creative methods recognised that all children are unique and may prefer different modes of participation (Carter & Nutbrown, 2016; Tisdall, 2016). Children created their artefacts prior to the interview. The artefacts were then used as prompts to discuss children's experiences. Harnessing creative methods in this way helps to avoid misinterpretation of the child's perspectives or defaulting to adult-viewpoint interpretation (Barley & Russell, 2019). We focused on what the children had to say about their artefact rather than the artefact per se (Russell, 2007).

Drawings

Drawings were suggested to allow the children to express their views and perceptions without relying on words (Carter & Nutbrown, 2016; Holliday et al., 2009). While many children enjoy drawing, this is not the case for all children (Einarsdottir, 2014), so other options were provided.

Poems

Poems were offered as a means of expression because poetry-writing figures largely in the English curriculum for this age range (Department for Education, 2014), so children are familiar with the modality. Many children enjoy reading poems aloud and writing poems can 'explicitly give reign to children's imagination' (Greene & Hill, 2005, p.14).

Mapping

Participatory mapping was selected as a well-used research method for making sense of everyday experiences. Mapping records tours of children's environments in 2-D form, individually or collaboratively with an adult. These can be hand drawn or photographs (Clark, 2017; Barley, 2014).

Photography

Photo-elicitation involved the children taking photograph(s) and generating a narrative around them during the interview (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015). We were mindful of accessibility issues and felt that photography would be feasible given that most families have a mobile phone. Photography has been recognised as a useful way to reveal children's perspectives including elements that would otherwise be overlooked by adults (Tisdall, 2016).

Collage

We also offered the children a free choice of method. As previously stated, this strategy sought to maximise inclusivity, align with individual preferences, and set children at ease (Clark, 2017; Kyritsi, 2019). Two children opted for free choice and completed collages. Ultimately, seven out of the 10 children had created artefacts to share when interviewed. 5 children did drawings, 3 children photographs and two collages. No maps or poems were created. Three children presented more than one artefact. Children without artefacts were also interviewed. For more details on the opportunities and challenges of this methodology see Barley et al. (manuscript in preparation).

Interviews

Interviews with children took place online via Zoom in their homes and in the presence of a parent/carer for safeguarding reasons. Before recording started, there was time for informal conversation for familiarisation and reassurance. This lead-in period was important because we could not visit children and develop a rapport with them in person, due to Covid restrictions. The children were talking to strangers and as researchers, we were sensitive to this and the need for time to 'warm-up' (Barley et al., manuscript in preparation). Interviews were audio-recorded with consent. We did not video-record on Zoom so as not to intrude on family life and cause children discomfort in future years.

These interviews gave the 10 children the opportunity to talk and elaborate on their creative artefacts and so was an important part of the methodology (Clark, 2017; Barley & Russell, 2019). Interview durations (about 30 mins) were appropriate for the children's age. A largely unstructured format was followed; children led the conversation and followed directions of their choice. However, we had a set of prompts to use if needed. We were aware that children might wish to take a break or stop the interview for a variety of reasons, including feeling upset about the pandemic and its impact on their friendships. We noted some resources to direct children and families to if this occurred.

Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations were ongoing (Carter, 2018). Ethical approval was granted through university procedures, and informed consent was gained from gatekeepers/guardians (Harcourt & Conroy, 2011). At least 1 week before the interview, the children were provided with written information using language they understood and which could also be shared verbally, prior to obtaining consent. At the start of the interview, children were asked verbally if they still wanted to participate (Roberts-Holmes, 2018). This approach ensured there was no coercion and children could forgo participation without repercussions (Nutbrown, 2011).

Framework for analysis

We took a 'Big Q' approach to reflexive thematic analysis (i.e., qualitative in values not just methods). This framework unapologetically recognises the active and subjective role of the researcher(s) in the research process (Braun & Clarke, 2019). While we aimed to interpret

children's experiences accurately, we were mindful of the subjective nature of our research and how to some extent the data are shaped and situated by the researchers: our goals in the analysis process were to tell a story of the children's experiences and develop an argument in relation to the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Phase 1 included intensive reading and re-reading of the interview transcripts and scrutiny of the artefacts to become fully immersed in the data to identify commonalities and dominant experiences for the children. Phase 2 involved coding the data. In Phase 3, initial themes were generated and then revisited, reviewed and defined (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this way, we were able to home in on particular themes. All the research teams were involved in this process of reviewing and defining specific themes.

FINDINGS

This article asked the question: How did children maintain their friendships during the Covid-19 pandemic? Interviews were dominated by children's descriptions of innovative ways of keeping in touch with friends. However, they also talked about how friendships were disrupted and lost through lockdown and restrictions, with impacts on their well-being. Accordingly, we present the key findings under two themes emerging across the accounts. Theme 1, 'Maintaining a connection with friends', encompasses how children found ways to maintain their friendships. In Theme 2, 'Friendship disturbance', we show how children's friendships and well-being were affected by lack of social interaction.

Theme 1—Maintaining a connection with friends

This theme has two sub-themes: virtual interactions and street/doorstep interactions.

Subtheme 1—Virtual interactions

Video gaming and video calls

Many children's accounts described the use of technology to keep in touch with friends, such as gaming (PlayStation 4 and Xbox). Minecraft and Rocket League came up frequently.

Arthur spoke of his experience of virtual interaction:

Normally I'll play PS4 and I'll just talk to them... Because one of them normally stays on PS4 and he doesn't play any games, he just wants to talk.

Arthur spoke about how talk was an important feature of the interaction, sometimes more important than playing the video game. Talk was accomplished through headphones while simultaneously playing the game, or via a video call. Poppy also emphasised talk. She expressed how the dependence on virtual communication had affected play with her friends, with the effects continuing on her return to school:

Well because on Zoom we couldn't really do anything except talk, and because of Zoom, now we can play together again, we don't really play anymore, because we're used to chatting because that is all we could do on Zoom, so now we just chat and we don't really play that many games anymore.

These examples suggest that in the absence of physical interaction, children relied on verbal communication. This may be because the children could not see their friends in person and/or because body language and social cues were more difficult to navigate online. For some children, like Poppy, online conversation was challenging:

Well sometimes when you're online you wouldn't say stuff that you may say in real life, like you could have said something different but since you're online it kind of just makes you say something different or you don't know what to say.

For Louis, being able to move around during gaming was vital:

Oh yeah yeah, yeah... video game and we'd be walking around together.

This movement made it possible to show things to his friend(s) via video call and wireless console. Stanley's artefact also talks about modes of online interaction and the use of headphones:

Similarly, many children spoke about using video calls to see and talk to friends. Arun shared his video-calling experience:

I talked with my friends. It was a video call so I could see their face. Yes, I showed them my garden outside and the living room. And the big TV, the big TV that we have.

For Arun, seeing a friend's face was significant and provided an opportunity for a virtual tour. Other platforms included Skype, Houseparty, Instagram and Webtalk. One of Arun's artefacts below shows his drawing of a laptop and phone that he used to maintain contact with friends (Figure 1).

Virtual comic-making and art lessons

Several children spoke about virtual art as a way of staying connected to friends. This spanned across the age range. Often the younger children (7–9 years) described drawing with friends or drawing comics. They did this in pairs or small groups, talking simultaneously via video calls or platforms like Zoom. Some children had a previous interest in drawing in the school context, for example making comics with their peers during breaktimes, and this continued virtually during a lockdown. For others, the artwork was a new venture. Bobby discussed how he enjoyed this newfound interest:

Yes, I also do a club where we make comics, and it's on Zoom. Well I got it [the idea] from a book that I read... Well there was something that I did like about lockdown, is that we could do – could make more comics because I also make comics... Yeah, it certainly got me interested.

Likewise, Arun used drawing to share his newfound passion for nature. He referred to the animals that visited his garden as 'guests' and 'friends' (Figure 2).

Several older children (9–11 years) also discussed online art lessons. Zara completed activities in the online company of her friend.

...then the teacher would show you how to do the art. So basically... a well-known painting and show you how to do it and they basically... online art classes. They were quite good. Quite relaxing.

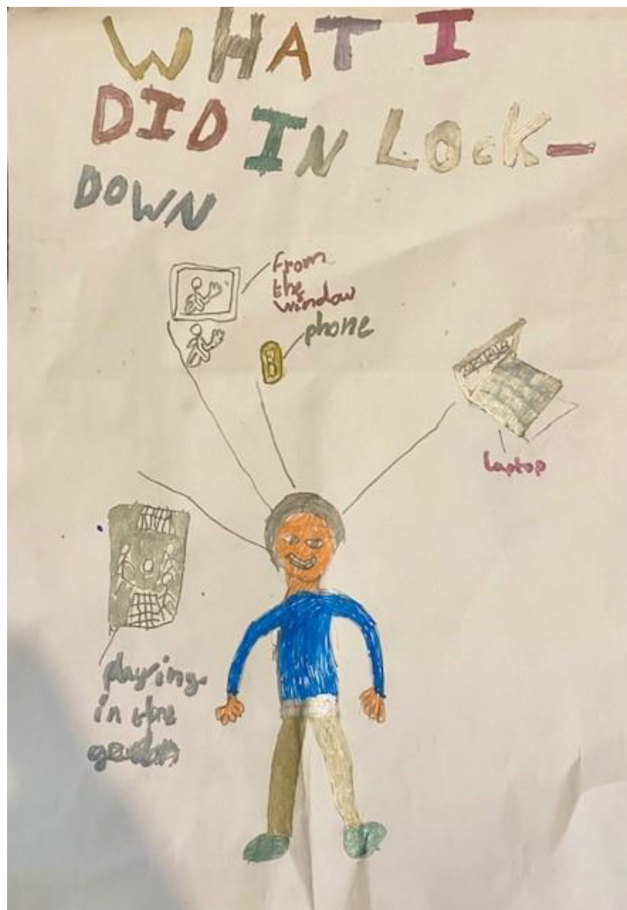


FIGURE 1 Arun's artefact—'What I did in lockdown'.

Across the age range, children seemed to find escapism and tranquillity in connecting with friends through virtual art. For example, Zara commented:

...sometimes me and my friends would do work together on a call.
Yes, because if you are stuck on a question then they might know. And it is also less boring because you can have someone to talk with.

Subtheme 2—Street/doorstep interactions/visits

Another form of contact was via street or doorstep visits. These involved conversations in the street, across the road, over doorsteps or through windows. Arun spoke fondly of bringing gifts for a friend on a visit.

I also have sometimes from the window they come and we talk to them through the window. And they also brought some things for us and we also gave them stuff. Yes it was about eating treats, yes, I gave them chips, I gave them... also chocolate.

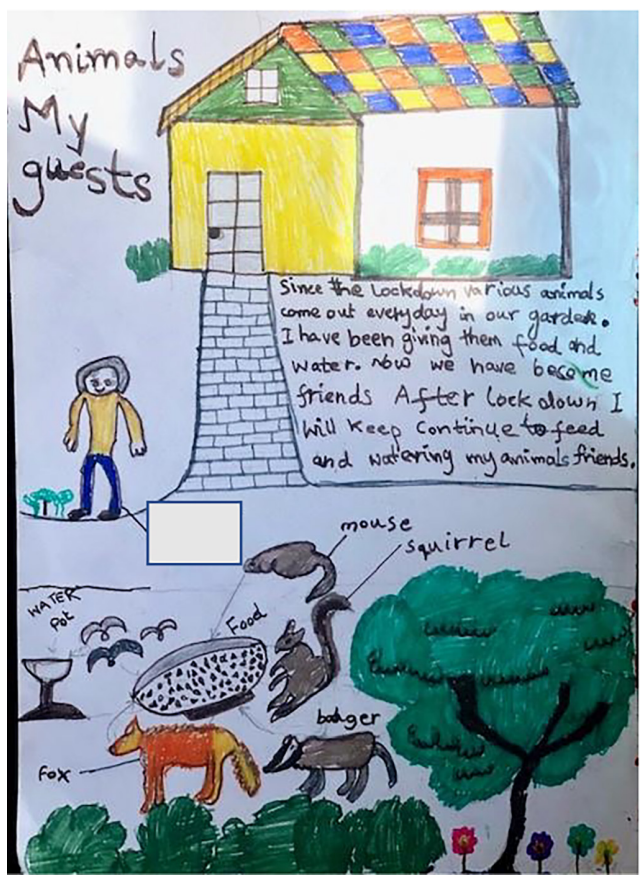


FIGURE 2 Arun's artefact—'Animals my guests'.



FIGURE 3 Bobby's artefact—'Looking through the window'.

Similarly, Bobby shared his artefact and commentary of his doorstep visit (Figure 3):

...this is a picture of me and Joe looking through our friend's window so that we can have a chat with them. It was my friend's house, but also we watched them playing video games.

The children gained satisfaction from these visits but missed the physical closeness and interaction with friends in the knowledge that this was not permitted.

Theme 2—Friendship disruption and well-being

This theme has two sub-themes: absence of playful interaction with friends, and friendship loss and separation.

Subtheme 1—Absence of playful interaction with friends

The lockdowns and restrictions entailed the prohibition of interactions that ordinarily enable friendships to be made and maintained. Most children talked about how school restrictions to reduce virus transmission had affected play and friendship. Poppy explained that the bubble system only permitted play with certain children:

I think at first it was a bit strict and there were all these bubbles and I couldn't play with the people in my class again.

The choice of play partners was removed for many children. Some could not play with certain children in their class or their year group, depending on how the bubble system was implemented. Poppy described this situation:

Well I am only really playing with one person... but we aren't in a class now. So we weren't allowed to play with her... No. There is a girl that I used to be friends with before lockdown, but I am not sure if it was because of lockdown, it might have been, but we aren't friends anymore.

The children experienced a substantial amount of change. All extra-curricular activities were removed, play equipment restricted and playtime shortened. Three children commented on these changes:

Stanley: Well at lunchtime it always used to be tennis but we stopped because of corona. And we always used to go to after-school club, but they stopped that because of corona.

Louis: '... We weren't allowed to use the equipment as a year group. It means that if William or someone in 2F [class] was using something we weren't allowed to use it and they weren't allowed to use what we were using. It was like that, yeah.

Zara: We normally get like since we mostly play in the playground, probably we just like play and then we get – now since Coronavirus we have 25 minutes for our first break and for our lunchbreak we get half an hour. We used to get a lot more.

All these changes restricted children's opportunities to play and interact with friends.

Subtheme 2—Friendship loss and separation

Some children were philosophical about how lockdown and restrictions had altered their friendships. Poppy noted how her friendships had evolved during lockdown due to the bubble system and she was okay with that. This may not have been the case at the time but retrospectively she felt comfortable with the scenario:

I am still friends with most of them though. There are one or two I am less close with. I think that I am okay with it and a lot of my friends have friends that aren't part of the group that I'm friends with. I only really have one big group of friends but a few of them ... I am just left with one or two friends that are playing with other people because they made different friends in lockdown.

Poppy had insight and acceptance that friendships can change and evolve:

Well I feel like she's changed, well, we've both changed a bit because we were quite young when we played together and I feel okay, and I've made a lot of new friends in the class...

Likewise, some children like Bobby accepted that they could not play with their usual friends and used this as an opportunity to make new friends. That does not mean they were unaffected by the absence but perhaps found acceptance of the situation a pragmatic strategy. For example, Bobby reported:

Well I also made some new friends as well. Yes, during lockdown. Well my friends that weren't new, they weren't in the same class as me, so I couldn't really play with them and so I decided to play with some new friends.

Other children felt the separation and/or loss of their friends quite profoundly. Arun and Arthur stressed that not seeing friends had impacted on their well-being:

Arun: That made me feel kind of sad and lonely.

Arthur: Not that easy because some of us were in different classes and you have to stay in the same bubble. I felt sad. Yeah, it affected me a bit. Not seeing people that we like. Yeah. I wish that COVID would disappear and we'd all be together.

Several children reminisced about pre-Covid-19 times and said they missed the interaction with friends. Louis felt that Covid-19 restrictions had led to losing close friends:

Yeah. I don't usually play with 2C [children in another class] anymore... now we can't do it... I would prefer if I was still in Year 1. Again we could just carry on what we were doing and we wouldn't have to worry at the fact that we were in the middle



FIGURE 4 Louis' artefact—'The volcano'.

of a lockdown. Also I might still be really good friends with a lot of the 2Cs... we'd still be best friends... I would say a lot better friends with them if it hadn't been for the pandemic.

Stanley spoke about how the longevity of Covid-19 restrictions led to further friendship disruption:

We had just managed to see each other again and then our bubbles burst. I was sad, because they were my best friends... We were best friends but we didn't get to see each other anymore

Here, the phrase 'bubbles burst' refers to someone in the bubble testing positive for Covid-19. It is also reminiscent of the saying 'to burst your bubble', meaning to end someone's sense of well-being. The 'bubble burst' literally and metaphorically for Stanley.

The friendship disruption elicited a range of emotions felt by the children, including sadness and loneliness. Louis expressed his anger at restrictions. When asked why he had drawn a volcano, his response was:

Because volcanos are usually a thing someone would use to say... angry, I drew a volcano. Usually a volcano is a symbol, like a big explosion, really angry so I thought I would draw that. The fact I was sat in the house, the fact I couldn't really talk to that many people, the fact that, yeah, there were so many rules. Two metres. Wash your hands three times a day. Whatever. Whatever. Whatever!...Yes. And another thing is people kept also saying, no, it's one meter, no, it's two meters. So you never actually know what you're supposed to be doing. Another thing is you don't have any rulers. How are you supposed to know if you're two meters apart?

Louis' anger is expressed through both his drawing and commentary (Figure 4).

DISCUSSION

This study sheds light on how children maintained their friendships during Covid-19 in three areas: (1) the emphasis on virtual 'talk' with friends; (2) art as a medium for friendship; (3) the pandemic's impact on friendship and well-being.

Virtual talk and friendship

All the children maintained contact with friends. A variety of strategies were used, including platforms like Zoom, PlayStation consoles and video calls. For several children, these media put emphasis on verbal communication. Typical 'real world' play with friends includes physical and non-verbal interactions that are vital for development and well-being (Barron & Emmett, 2020; Theobald et al., 2017). However, many of these elements are absent from or difficult in virtual interaction, privileging talk. Some children, such as Poppy, felt out of their comfort zone, describing awkwardness and not knowing what to say. However, some children like Arthur were more comfortable with online talk. This may be because they were confident communicators and/or had quality friendships pre-pandemic (Dunn, 2004). Another factor in the ease of virtual interaction could be the shift in emphasis from talk for its own sake to talk as part of an activity, as illustrated by Arthur's narratives about gaming. Likewise, the children who described moving while talking seemed to find the interactions more enjoyable. This is reminiscent of the merit in allowing the children to choose their preferred creative participatory method so that they felt comfortable expressing themselves (Carter, 2021; Clark, 2017).

Art and friendships

Online art emerged as a popular and valuable way for children to maintain contact with friends. Shared activities included drawing, making comics, and doing online art lessons. The findings echo research suggesting that visual arts allow children to make connections, communicate and collaborate with peers (Brooks, 2017; Probine, 2021). In the present study, visual arts appeared to make virtual interaction with friends more comfortable. Generally, for the younger children, the pleasure came simply from a shared interest in art activities online with their friends. Older children commented on virtual art lessons where their friends provided support, camaraderie and help with questions.

Pandemic's impact on friendship and well-being

Some children found ways of maintaining contact with their friends that were satisfactory, but not as effective as interaction in person (Carter, 2023; Larivière-Bastien et al., 2022). Some children were able to navigate online friendships, make new friends within a bubble system, and reconnect with others when restrictions were removed. Such experiences might suggest that these children find making friends straightforward and/or they have well-established quality friendships that can sustain disruption and reconnection (Dunn, 2004). However, it should not be assumed that these children were largely unaffected. Children can block things out to protect themselves, but the emotions could surface in the future.

For other children, friendship during this period was less satisfactory. Lockdown and restrictions removed many of the conditions needed by children to sustain friendships. The data produced examples of where friendship disruption was challenging and uncomfortable. For instance, several children mentioned doorstep/street visits to keep in touch. These encounters enabled children to see their friends in person, but the physical closeness and interactive play were prohibited. Many children struggled in the absence of these vital elements of friendship. Social peer play is integral to children's friendships, and many suffered without this (Beazidou &

Botsoglou, 2016). This chimes with recent research findings that ‘physical closeness’ and displays of affection like hugging are integral to friendship (Larivière-Bastien et al., 2022, p.9; Theobald et al., 2017). Moreover, when schools reopened, the infection reduction protocols compromised friendships. These policies led to some children being unable to play with their friends, and/or time and space for friendship being reduced.

For some children the separation from friends was felt acutely and was detrimental to their well-being, prompting sadness and anger. Research suggests the severing of friendships through moving schools ‘affects children’s well-being in a non-trivial way’, and young children have shown signs of agitation and anxiety when friends leave (Dunn, 2004, p.79). These deep feelings of separation and loss indicate the emotional investment integral to friendship (Corsaro, 2003; Theobald et al., 2017). Pandemic restrictions were imposed on children by the adult world and for some children, the disruption will have enduring effects (Pascal et al., 2020). This must inform decisions on provisions for Covid-19 recovery.

Implications for practice and future research

This study shared insights into children’s friendship experiences during Covid-19. The findings underscore the importance of listening to children and acknowledging their experiences. However, this is not sufficient: children’s accounts of friendship disruptions should be heard *and* acted on—informing changes to school provisions in the event of future lockdown or isolation scenarios. Second, during Covid-19 recovery in schools, action is needed to create conditions conducive to children nurturing their friendships.

Lessons for the future: Supporting friendships in lockdown scenarios

Despite the upheaval from lack of social interaction with friends, various strategies can support children with their friendships and enhance their well-being (Brogaard-Clausen & Robson, 2019; Carter, 2022; Carter, 2023). We reiterate the importance of hearing and acknowledging children’s pandemic experiences, which is especially important in contexts where children were ‘marginalised’ and their voices ‘silenced’ (Lomax et al., 2022, p.1). For example, adults should heed the messages from those children who were ill at ease with virtual interaction with friends. The online talk was not always effective for some children and we need to consider ways to alleviate children’s discomfort if this mode of interaction is prescribed by circumstances in the future. Further research with children could explore methods including art activities, movement, and PlayStation functionalities which appeared to help some children get more benefits from friendship interaction online.

Covid-19 recovery: Creating conditions for friendship

Time and space must be devoted to supporting children’s reconnection with friends (Carter, 2022; Carter, 2023) during Covid-19 recovery and beyond. Many children in this research reported feeling sad and lonely during the lockdown, echoing recent findings by Loades et al. (2020). Time for reconnection should be scheduled during the school day, with activities centred on interaction and collaboration, and also in after-school/out-of-school activities. Contact with friends in a

range of contexts can help children strengthen and maintain friendships (Chan & Poulin, 2007). Indeed, a renewed focus on friendship could also bring opportunities for social interaction and well-being to permeate through the curriculum (Carter, 2022).

Teachers and parents are well-placed to support children's friendships (Theobald et al., 2017). Adults can do this in a variety of ways including being good listeners, helping children to share feelings, sharing interests and common ground, initiating play, and modelling language for social connection (Carter, 2021; Theobald et al., 2017). All these strategies require friendship and quality social interaction to be prioritised (Carter, 2021; Carter & Nutbrown, 2016).

CONCLUSION

This article has explored children's experience of friendships during the Covid-19 pandemic and gleaned important insights into the strategies used to maintain friendships. The contact strategies brought to light issues and complexities which may chime with other children, including the removal of the usual conditions for friendship, the emphasis on talk in virtual interaction, and the impact of loss/separation from friends. However, the sample size is small and with more boys than girls. In addition, recruiting via Twitter gave a specific demographic. Further research with children from different cohorts and investigating the gendered effects would be beneficial. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalised to all children.

Nonetheless, we argue that the present study contributes another 'piece of the puzzle' in our understanding of the pandemic's impact on children's well-being and the implications for educational practice. There is still much critical research to be done concerning how we listen and respond to children and support their reconnection with friends. This article prompts dialogue and reflection on how to support children's friendships in the future.

Further research which creatively engages with children is recommended to explore the efficacy of different strategies used to stay connected with friends, including virtual art activities and incorporating physical movement into online interactions. Research with younger children (three to eight) is necessary, given the anecdotal reports that many are exhibiting signs of ill effects from lack of social interaction during Covid-19. Reducing the impact of the pandemic on children's well-being and mental health is an urgent recovery priority. Within this agenda, attention to the vital role of children's friendships is pressing. Policy makers and school leaders could seize this opportunity to explore how to promote children's friendships and well-being across the curriculum rather than treat it as an add-on. We hope this research will prompt a re-evaluation of established practice, not just for Covid-19 recovery but for longer-term benefits to children.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We wish to acknowledge the feedback provided by Lisa Clarkson and Dr Lisa McGrath on this article.

FUNDING INFORMATION

There was no external funding for this project.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There is no known conflict of interest related to this research.

ETHICS APPROVAL

This research has been ethically approved by Sheffield Hallam University.

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How to cite this article: Carter, C., Barley, R., & Omar, A. (2023). ‘I wish that COVID would disappear, and we’d all be together’: Maintaining Children’s friendships during the Covid-19 pandemic. *Children & Society*, 00, 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12693>