



PRESS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Campaigners call on Prime Minister to allow children to play outside together as they return to school

Leading children's rights experts and play campaigners including the Children's Rights Alliance for England (part of Just for Kids Law) and Playing Out have written to the Prime Minister calling for England's lockdown guidelines to allow and encourage children to play outdoors together, as they return to school today.

The group argues that the rules have unfairly - and possibly unlawfully* - discriminated against children, as evidence mounts of the devastating mental and physical toll that lockdown has taken on them, through social isolation and inactivity. Under the "one-to-one" rule, adults and older children have been able to meet one friend for exercise outdoors, but children aged 5 and above (only under-5s are exempt from the rules) who are too young to go out alone have effectively been prevented from doing so.

For children with no siblings, this has meant that many have not met with another child between December and March. Additionally, whilst adults have been explicitly allowed to get outdoors for exercise "such as going for a run" throughout lockdown, there has been no equivalent clarity or encouragement for children to play outdoors.

Meanwhile, in Scotland, where all primary aged children are exempt from the regulations and encouraged to play outdoors with their friends, there has been no resulting surge in cases.

Whilst children in England will now be seeing friends during the school day, they will still not be allowed to do so outside school until lockdown rules change (potentially on 29th March), severely hampering their ability to play, socialise and be active, all of which are essential for their mental and emotional wellbeing, as well as for their physical health, say the group. This is especially crucial for children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, who have been hit the hardest by lockdown.

Dr Helen Dodd, Professor of Child Psychology at the University of Reading, said: *"Over the past year, we have seen unprecedented increases in children's mental health problems and loneliness, alongside decreased physical activity. The longer that children are restricted from playing with their friends, the more likely it is that their typical development will be affected."*

Louise King, Director of the Children's Rights Alliance for England, said: *"The current guidance in England has failed to take into account the impact on children, including their right to play. It again demonstrates the need to embed children's rights in government decision*



making through a statutory child rights impact assessment. Given the evidence about the safety of meeting outdoors, we see no reason to justify continuing to prevent children from meeting each other, just as adults can.”

Alice Ferguson, Co-Director of Playing Out, said: *“We are deeply concerned that it is children who have suffered the most over the past year and that their need to get outside and play with other children has not been fully considered in decision-making. We urge the Government to act now to allow children to see their friends and to protect their right to play, both in Covid-recovery and any future lockdowns”*

In the letter, the campaigners call for the Prime Minister to ensure the rules going forward do not unfairly impact children and to:

1. Exempt under-12s from current and future regulations around meeting outdoors with immediate effect.
2. Amend the guidance to make it clear that play is a valid form of exercise, and that families with children are encouraged to leave their houses to play lawfully.
3. Ensure children’s right to play and socialise will be considered in any future lockdowns or restrictions.

- ENDS -

***Appendix**

Excerpts from the joint letter

“We urge you to consider exempting children under 12 from the regulations concerning meeting outdoors, which would mirror those in Scotland, where the restrictions around meeting outdoors do not apply to children under 12, based on good scientific evidence.

We fully understand and support the need for lockdown measures to control the virus but are extremely concerned about the undue and unjust impact on children’s ability to get outdoors and have equivalent freedom and social contact to that afforded adults.”

[..]

“We consider the current regulations discriminate against children and may be challengeable under either the Equality Act 2010 or Article 14 of the European Convention of Human Rights (in conjunction with Article 8).

Further, the current regulations are clearly not consistent with the government’s own policies around the importance of outdoor play and socialisation for children, nor the Right to Play under Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Further, these regulations disproportionately impact single parents with children aged 5-11, who are more likely to be women, as they cannot take advantage of the 1:1 rule by meeting with another adult as they cannot bring their children with them. This would be resolved by excluding under 12s from the regulations.”



[...]

"We are in touch with many families, support workers, and parents and are aware that many families are spending large periods of time indoors due to this guidance, to the severe detriment of them and their children. In order to mitigate the adverse health consequences of this lockdown – both physical and mental – it is vital that families are encouraged and not discouraged to leave the house in order to allow their children fresh air and exercise.

We believe that the guidance should be changed, with immediate effect, to ensure that children can and do get outdoors to play, for their physical and mental wellbeing."

Case Studies

Daisy, a single mother in Devon, who is concerned for her daughter, shared her concerns with us:

"My five year old daughter is an only child and she has been badly affected by lack of socialising with other children since lockdown. Her behaviour has become challenging, which was not so before lockdown. She's much more easily frustrated and struggles with sharing and listening, which used not to be problems for her. She is far less cheerful and motivated than she was before this isolation. She especially looks for videos or games with other children to watch or pretend, which she used not to do. Her sleep has also become disturbed. Not being allowed to play with other children even outdoors is damaging to her."

Shani, a project worker in an area of high deprivation in Bristol told us about their concerns seeing the children there:

"Over the last two weeks we have been at the school and met parents one by one, handing over art packs we bought for children at home. Unlike the more affluent area where we live (which is busy with children and parents outside, and many people looking healthy and active) we saw no children at all outside or in the green spaces. Parents said that collecting the art pack was one valid reason they could take their children out, as if they did not feel this was the case otherwise. The serious impact of isolation and time indoors was very evident on many children who were either subdued (even though we had not seen them for so long) or who looked very different. Parents too spoke about how hard it was for them. Examples included children as young as 5 having to be on screens all day for learning; a family of 7 inside together all the time (aged nursery to Y11); and one child (Y7) with autism who had become so fearful he had not left his bedroom or computer for months. To the parent's horror, he has developed pressure sores (bed sores in effect) from being hunched over the device in his room. This devastating snapshot of children's lack of activity, time outdoors and any social contact with others and the damaging impact of it all is just the tip of the iceberg - the bit that can be seen in a playground, delivering art packs. We know there is so much more to come in terms of children's physical and mental health when we see them. And it is all the more appalling because it didn't have to be this way."

Frances, another mother, sent us this heart-breaking email about her son:

"My son (aged 8) has really suffered in this lockdown. He has not seen his friends since the last day of term before Christmas (18th December). He is currently in one of the age groups

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that has no rights to meet friends as he must be accompanied by an adult which immediately takes the group above the rule of two. Nursery aged children do not count towards the rule of two and a teenager would be able to meet one friend but as we have complied with the law, he has been very isolated. In Scotland, there have been rules which allowed children play outside together which seemed so much more sensible, kind and compassionate. He has become irritable and sad often crying with frustration and having tantrums (which he has not done since he was a pre-schooler). He has missed his friendly greatly and his sleep has become affected with bed-wetting and wakings. As a parent, there is only so much you can do, as young children need their friends and play in the fresh air."

Zoe, a mum from Bristol, shared the below with us:

"Our 10 year old is an only child. The last few months of lockdown have been incredibly hard from a mental health perspective. Normally sporty and very outgoing, we've seen our child become anxious, withdrawn and depressed. The lack of social interaction has not only impacted confidence, but also resilience, emotions run high. All. The. Time. We are all exhausted by the inability to connect with friends outside."

Other comments from parents we have heard are as follows:

- *"Our son has not met friends to play since pre-Christmas free-for-all, so would benefit from dispensation for minors to play outdoors once they mix in classrooms next month. 5 weeks is a long time when you're in Primary School Mr Johnson."*
- *"So depressing. My 5yo daughter has not been able to play with another child since 18 December. I am increasingly concerned about her mental health."*
- *"I've seen that the rule of six will be brought back in - this will mean that although six adults can meet up two families with two parents and two children still won't be allowed to meet. Yet again adults before children."*
- *"My 5 year old hasn't seen another child since December. It's hard to measure the impact exactly but I think she has become far less resilient and I put that down to only being around adults & not peers."*
- *"My happy sociable 7 year old has developed chronic anxiety since the start of this - and all he wants is to see his friends, to race around the playground non stop and for life to feel more normal ."*

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- *“My 7 year old hasn't seen anyone since December 16. He has started to withdraw and become moody and aggressive. He's angry with me and his mam because he's an only child and has no one to play with! I am soooo worried about him its unreal!”*
- *“I have an 8 year old who like yours hasn't seen any other children since mid December. He sits having literal conversations with him self about football (not just talking out loud but having a discussion) in lieu of being able to chat to his friends.”*
- *“My 8 year old coped remarkably well until Christmas, but this term has become very withdrawn and it's heartbreaking.”*
- *“Being trapped indoors for so many months of the year will have had a devastating impact on so many children in BS13, where many families are in flats with no gardens, there are huge challenges relating to poverty including health, and where school and social contact is a vital support system.”*

Notes to editors

The below letter-signatories, experts and parents are available for interview or further information:

- Jennifer Twite, Head of Strategic Litigation, Just for Kids Law
- Louise King, Director, Children's Rights Alliance for England
- Alice Ferguson and Ingrid Skeels, Co-Directors, Playing Out
- Anita Grant, Chair, Play England & CEO, Islington Play
- Dr Helen Dodd, Professor of Child Psychology at the University of Reading
- Dr Sunil Bhopal, Clinical Lecturer in Paediatrics, Newcastle University & Great North Children's Hospital
- Several of the parents quoted in the above case studies

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About Just for Kids Law

Just for Kids Law is a UK charity that works with and for children and young people to hold those with power to account and fight for wider reform by providing legal representation and advice, direct advocacy and support, and campaigning to ensure children and young people in the UK have their legal rights and entitlements respected and promoted and their voices heard and valued.

About the Children's Rights Alliance for England (CRAE)

CRAE seeks the full implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in England. Our vision is of a society where the human rights of all children are recognised and realised. CRAE merged into the charity Just for Kids Law in 2015.

About Playing Out

Playing Out is a UK-wide parent and resident led movement aimed at restoring children's freedom to play out in the streets and spaces where they live, for their health, happiness and sense of belonging. Playing Out originated the resident-led play street model that has now spread across the UK and beyond.