

- Mental health

Giving kids a break is the best way for them to 'catch up' after a year of disruption

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Across the UK schools are again preparing for a phased or full return of pupils to the classroom. Most weary parents, passionate teachers and lonely kids will be delighted to see this day come, but concerns remain about the effect that protracted school closures have had on our children and young people.



Much of the debate has focused on how to help pupils “catch up” on their “lost learning”. This narrative is profoundly unhelpful and potentially damaging, due to the psychological pressure it places on children and young people. It’s our national obsession with summative assessment that makes children feel that they have “fallen behind” if they haven’t learned certain things at certain times. But in every year group, pupils are at various stages of cognitive, physical and emotional development. There is no such thing as “behind”, there is only where children are at. Besides, if we truly believe that everyone can be a lifelong learner, then a few months of parents struggling to teach phonics is a brief bump on their educational journey.

When I read recently of measures being planned to help children make up for lost school time through extended school days, tutoring and summer schools, my first instinct was that we should do the exact opposite. Pre-Covid research from the US has been referenced in support of extending school days, but studies have not provided evidence of positive impact on attainment. Research by the Education Endowment Foundation has highlighted limited evidence of small group tutoring benefiting learners who are “falling behind” and some small benefits of summer schools.

Whether the small gains seen in these studies could be replicated on a larger scale post-pandemic is as yet untested, and open to debate. Given limited time and resources, rather than hoping for a slight boost in standardised attainment scores, educators and government should focus in-

stead on addressing the immediate impact of the crisis, with an eye to what interventions will help children most in the long term.

Emotional wellbeing is fundamental and foundational for academic attainment. A stressed, anxious child will have difficulty learning anything. On the flip side, promoting wellbeing can boost academic outcomes. A meta-analysis of 213 school-based, social and emotional learning programmes demonstrated an 11% boost in results in standardised achievement tests. The impact of lockdown on child and adolescent mental health and wellbeing is clear from research on previous school closures, within the health service, and in our own experiences as parents. Social isolation has exacerbated disadvantage and pre-existing vulnerability. It's vital that long-term planning includes improving the availability and accessibility of therapeutic support for those who need it. Right now, we need to emotionally regulate before we educate.

However, while there is clearly cause for concern, a fatalistic discourse can be counter-productive, and prevent schools and the government from fully committing to supporting young people. Our children are so much more than the pandemic they have lived through. They shouldn't be pathologised for displaying normal reactions to abnormal events. It's important to remain hopeful for our young people and to help them to hope. Put simply, if our kids keep being told that they are the "Covid generation", helpless victims in a "tsunami" of mental illness, at some point they are going to believe it. Alternatively, if we reassure them that "it's really hard, but it will pass, it's going to be OK", maybe they will believe that instead.

The majority of pupils won't need counselling post-lockdown. They will benefit from getting back to the structure, stability, predictable routine and clear expectations of school. And then they will need space to play. At every age and stage, play is essential. My daughter needs pretend play with other three-year-olds, and the teenagers need their sports clubs, societies and parties. There is growing evidence of long-term negative impacts of play deprivation. That's because the experience of play enhances children's social, emotional, physical, and creative skills, while also supporting the development of early literacy and numeracy ability in an integrated manner. If we really want to boost long-term academic attainment, then we need to let the kids reconnect and play together again. A summer of play should be part of that process.

The psychiatrist Bruce Perry writes that, because humans are inescapably social beings, the worst catastrophes that we can experience are those that involve relational loss. Therefore, recovery must involve re-establishing human connections. Perry suggests that the most important healing experiences often occur outside therapy and inside homes, communities and schools. A "recovery curriculum" may help in this regard by supporting a relationships-based approach to teaching and learning post-lockdown.

Ultimately we need to trust and respect school leaders and staff to support our children as they return to class, as well as provide adequate resources. Many teachers are close to burnout and need support for their own wellbeing. They are best placed to identify and close any gaps

in knowledge. But before “catching up” on learning let’s allow pupils to catch up with each other and with staff. Resilience resides in these relationships.

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