

Edu-Parenting during Covid-19

Reflections of a primary-school parent

Deirdre McGillicuddy

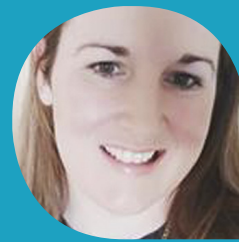
The pandemic of 2020 has caused a monumental pivot in Irish education, with physical school closures resulting in a shift of responsibility for educating our children from teachers to parents. This article reflects on the challenges and opportunities presented to parents, children, and schools during distance learning and considers how this has redefined our understanding of education and schooling in Irish society.

As schools and crèches closed their doors on 13 March 2020, little did I know that my preschooler, first-class, and third-class children would finish out their school year at my kitchen table. Like many parents, I saw the initial phases of physical school closures dominated by a narrative of 'making the best of this time together' while engaging in 'slow' activities such as baking, arts and crafts, connecting with nature, and learning to cycle again. We prepared for a very different St Patrick's Day, with virtual parades replacing the boisterous celebrations associated with this patriotic festival.

Our patriotic duty now was to #stayhome and #staysafe. As children counted down the days for school and crèche to reopen, it began to dawn on us as a nation that this year we would all be embarking on an educational journey never previously experienced. The institution that is education in Ireland was to make one of the most extraordinary pivots since its establishment, one unlike anything we had witnessed before. It has redefined our understanding of education and raised many questions about the role of schooling in our society, and in our family lives.

Families' experience of distance learning varied across the country. My own children's schools and crèche went above and beyond to try to connect with our children using virtual platforms and modes of communication. There were weekly plans of work, a virtual active schools week, online lessons, and video messages from early years educators and teachers. Each interaction was filled with empathy, deep care, and reassurance that everything would be okay.

Parent Voices



Deirdre McGillicuddy

Mother of Three, Primary School Teacher, and Assistant Professor at UCD School of Education

Sarah Cran née Carroll

Mother of three primary-school children

Jennifer Scully

Mother of two primary-school children

The important rites of passage in our children's lives were brutally interrupted, with my preschooler graduating via Zoom in our back garden and taking her first steps into the unknown world of the junior infant classroom without us there to hold her hand. *Home School Hub* and *Cúla4 ar Scoil* quickly became staples in our daily routines, allowing time for us as parents to catch up with work while our children were edu-tained in front of the TV screen. Truth be told, we could never catch up on work, and all we could do was try to survive the chaos of our family life.

Some families, such as front-line and essential workers, struggled to secure childcare, while others were impacted by the economic fallout from the pandemic, with job loss and financial worries reshaping their family lives. The deep inequalities in our education system quickly rose to the surface, with families and children finding themselves in a position where they did not have the resources they needed to be able to engage with education during the physical closure of schools. Such accounts have raised serious questions about the inequities evident in our education system.

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The use of technology emerged as paradoxical, enabling while also disengaging. Zoom calls, which started with squeals of delight and murmurs of anticipation, soon descended into frustration at not being able to interact individually with friends as you would in the real-world classroom. The children expressed quiet discomfort at 'performing' in front of the virtual camera, with my youngest often refusing to do so. The assumption around expecting children to engage through virtual platforms raises key issues about their individual rights and their ability to consent and assent.

Fatigue with Aladdin, Seesaw, Kahoot, and Zoom quickly set in, with parents struggling to keep track while children started to dread the 'ping' of a new notification. But the legacy of using such apps and modes of communication will be profound, as they continue to be a critical mode of interaction between school and home. It remains to be seen whether such approaches strengthen that relationship, a direct line which, up to now, has been challenging to establish and maintain. It is also important to question the assumption that families have equal access to the technology and resources necessary to be able to communicate through these complex modes, if we are to ensure an equitable approach to the home-school relationship.

The deeply embedded relational aspect of schooling was particularly notable in its absence during the physical school closures this year. Curricular tasks assigned to children were detached from the vital relational aspect of learning, the compass against which children understand their identity as learners in the classroom. Indeed, when principals, teachers, and special needs assistants (SNAs) did have the opportunity to engage with the children, they did so in a deeply relational way, giving them emotional support and encouragement which, in my children's experience, boosted their mood and enhanced their engagement.

The work of teachers and SNAs is embedded in a pedagogy of empathy and compassion. As we were thrown into disarray and fear of the unknown, principals, teachers, and SNAs provided an anchor to normality for children during this unsettling time. The vital physical reopening of schools in

September has reinforced the importance of the relational in nurturing our children to begin to flourish again under the expert guidance of our school communities.

A striking aspect of education during Covid-19 was how the private became public. Schools were suddenly reaching into the private spaces of our homes and families. This dictated our daily practices in our private lives, not only in the work that children were assigned but also in our family routines and sacred spaces. This, for some, was of great benefit, assigning tasks and fun activities to keep children engaged in learning at home. For others, it was accompanied by great stress in trying to juggle work with what I term 'educating'.

Not only did the children pick up on this stress, but it also affected their desire to engage. After all, as I was told on many an occasion, 'That's not how teacher does it!' Equally, the private space of school and the classroom was projected into the public domain. Teaching became a public activity, open to scrutiny and criticism based on assumptions rather than on deep pedagogical understanding. Such negative narratives on the complexity of pedagogy in classrooms is extremely damaging, resulting in a polarisation between teaching as a profession – traditionally held in high esteem in Irish society – and a more neoliberal, reductive approach to understanding education and schooling.

The pandemic has led us to question the societal value of education and schooling. School is at the heart of our communities, the fulcrum which draws us all together daily. It is fundamental in shaping the temporal, spatial, and social practices in our lives. From drop-offs and collections, to homework, holidays, and building relationships in our communities, school shapes the everyday occurrences in how we live and experience our lives. The absence of schooling resulted in an absence of community. And who are we without community? How can we understand ourselves and others in the world if we do not meet on a daily basis? School plays a vital role in shaping our national identity and defines our role as global citizens in an increasingly complex and challenging world.

As we look to the future, living with Covid-19, it is imperative that we place children and young people at the heart of any decisions we make in education. While school staff are going above and beyond to meet very challenging expectations to keep our communities safe, we need to consider the impact this is having on everyone's well-being, particularly children's. The rigorous routines implemented in schools to protect everyone are characterised by face masks, social distancing, sanitising of hands, hyper-vigilance, restricted social interaction with peers, and pods and bubbles.

Children's lives have changed drastically. They no longer have the right or freedoms to engage with the world on their own terms. Their school lives are now heavily determined by routines and restrictions that control their every movement, preventing their free engagement with peers. Although we hope this change is temporary, the impact of these oppressive regimes required to tackle Covid-19 should not be underestimated, with my children consistently hoping for 'the time when this is all over'. It is incumbent upon

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us as a society to acknowledge the critical agency and citizenship of our children and young people in adapting to this very alien way of living their lives.

Homeschooling during Lockdown

No substitute for social learning among peers

Sarah Cran née Carroll

Sarah is a working mother who homeschooled her three primary-school boys in spring while working during the lockdown. Here she gives a frank account of the experience: how her family dealt with the challenges of having to educate children at home while juggling jobs, learning new technology, and managing other responsibilities.

I work three days a week in a children's hospital, while my husband works full-time from home. We have three boys, aged ten, seven, and four at the time of the first lockdown. My husband works in commercial property management and was incredibly busy, particularly in the initial weeks. He did an amazing job looking after the boys, keeping everyone safe and fed, while managing a team and coordinating Covid-19-related operational changes for ten hours a day while I was at work in the hospital. He simply wasn't in a position to consider their educational needs on a day-to-day basis as well. So I took responsibility for preparing their work for the next day, choosing tasks they were less likely to need help with, writing instructions, printing off whatever they needed, and negotiating a suitable bribe to get their work done without disturbing their Dad too much!

My older boys were in first and fourth class at the time of the lockdown. Initially, their teachers sent emails with work to be completed over the coming weeks. All of their books remained in the school. When it was apparent that the lockdown was going to be extended, we were all encouraged to download the Seesaw app, to which their teachers uploaded work each week.

“ I found Seesaw really stressful at first... we didn't have enough devices for everyone... we ran out of ink, we ran out of paper, the printer jammed.

I'm not technologically proficient at the best of times, and I found Seesaw really stressful at first. We didn't have enough devices for everyone. It was a case of opening the app on my phone, downloading the files, sending them to the desktop and printing from there, before taking photos of all of their completed work to upload. We ran out of ink; we ran out of paper; the printer jammed.

My four-year-old's Montessori teacher organised a few Zoom calls for the class. While I appreciated the idea, it felt abstract and confusing for them. Young children play together. They don't 'chat' without the scaffold of a social environment. The school was also great with providing links to worksheets and lists of fun learning activities to do at home. It was lovely to see my four-year-old learning the three Rs through writing shopping lists, identifying colours and sounds out on our walks, and measuring out baking ingredients.

In reality, however, when both parents are working, there is very little time for hands-on experiential learning. Even the best-behaved four-year-old (and he was) needs adult attention and supervision, so it was difficult for my husband when I wasn't there. Most days, my four-year-old coloured. We went through half a forest's worth of paper!

We managed to resuscitate an old tablet computer and gradually got the hang of Seesaw. I think that the boys' primary school struck a really nice balance between academic work and more experiential learning. My husband would have struggled to do any of the more hands-on exercises while I was at work, so we would try to schedule those for my days off. We depended on screens where we could: PE with Joe, story time with David Walliams, Drawing with Alan (a great YouTube series by Irish author and illustrator Alan Nolan), and of course Home School Hub.

At one stage, I was running a staff support helpline for a few hours a week, which I was able to do from home. Given the confidential nature of the work, I needed a quiet and uninterrupted space. So I set up 'clinic' from my car in the driveway. Every so often, one of the boys would come out and try to grab my attention. In fairness to my husband, whatever task he was doing, he always managed to notice just in time and hook them back inside the house by their hoodies. Needless to say, there were some days when very little schooling was achieved!

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I'm under no illusions that what we provided was 'teaching'. We provided structure to the children's day, some meaningful activity, and hopefully enough revision to stop them falling behind. They watched far more TV than usual, and probably would have watched more if the weather hadn't been so good. There were parts that we all enjoyed: the scavenger hunts, exercising together as a family, and revising our Gaeilge (with some of us needing more refreshing than others!).

But I did not inspire my children to learn. Even my eldest, who has always been an enthusiastic student, seemed determined to do as little as he could get away with. Simply getting them to do the tasks set for them was much harder than I thought it would be. I was no substitute for a qualified teacher and for social learning among peers. This has been strikingly apparent since their return in September, hearing their chat about which table has the most stars, preparing what to tell the class at 'news' time, and continuing discussions from class debates. I feel more engaged with their educational journey than I was before. Having said that, I still shudder when I see the Seesaw app on my phone.

Homeschooling: From Textbooks to the School of Life

Jennifer Scully

Jennifer writes about the experience of homeschooling her two children, aged seven and five, during the lockdown of 2020. After initial enthusiasm, the workload became overwhelming, though the experience proved ultimately enjoyable. But the right balance had to be found via trial and error.

The announcement of a national lockdown and school closures in mid-March came as something of a relief to me. As a medical professional, I was all too aware of how deadly this virus could be and how easily it could spread, particularly in crowded places like schools. I was in a fortunate position in that I didn't have to worry about the logistics of childcare or working from home, as I was on a career break from St James's Hospital. Homeschooling the kids couldn't be that difficult, right?! What transpired over the following few weeks was that homeschooling my two darling children (then aged seven and five) would be the most challenging job I've ever had.

Like most parents, I approached the first days of homeschooling with enthusiasm. We had our timetables, and the kids were excited that I would be their new teacher. Daddy was working from home, meaning he would have break-times, mealtimes, and impromptu kickabouts in the garden. All our friends and family were safe and well, and we were so thankful for that. Our school set homework for the kids on the Seesaw app, which was a useful way for the school to send work home and to keep an eye on both the progress and participation of the children.

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As the weeks rolled on, however, receiving this daily workload for each of the children became overwhelming. After all, I wasn't just the school teacher: I was also running the household and doing the housework in a considerably busier house, given that everybody was at home. It became difficult to juggle everything: the schoolwork, the housework, the cooking, the 'fun' activities with the kids, keeping in touch with friends and cocooning relatives and neighbours, exercising, maintaining social outlets for the kids, and keeping them entertained without resorting to (too much!) screentime.

Most of the children's extracurricular activities had moved to Zoom, which was yet another schedule to try to keep. It brought the added pressure of ensuring that one child was engaged with what was happening on the screen while entertaining the other child. GAA coaches were sending practice drills for the kids. It all became overwhelming and caused stress in our family. I felt under huge pressure not to let anything slide. I was also determined to cook nutritious food to assist our immune systems during the pandemic. Paranoia about the virus was extreme in the beginning, which led to many additional tasks such as washing down the groceries.

Two weeks into lockdown, our lovely, elderly next-door neighbour contracted Covid-19 while in hospital and sadly died. I realised that what the kids would learn during this period was far beyond what could be taught in textbooks. We gradually moved away from the focus on textbooks to the school-of-life approach instead. I made the meals while teaching the children how to cook. I exercised and encouraged them to join in. I set them tasks like writing comics or letters to their pals while I spent time on housework. We began to spend less time sitting at the table doing schoolwork and more time learning day-to-day skills like tying shoelaces, knitting, and tie-dyeing.

A balance was finally struck after the Easter holidays that everyone was happy with. On reflection, the children were very happy during lockdown. Given their ages, it was a huge novelty for them to have the whole family at home together for so long. Teenagers would present very different challenges, I am sure! The kids would camp out in the living room, make trucks out of cardboard boxes, and make marble runs out of toilet rolls. They baked, painted, pressed flowers, learned magic tricks, and discovered online drawing and yoga tutorials.

They kept a Covid-19 diary in which they listed all the things they missed most about 'normal' life, such as seeing their friends and going to the playground. The list of things they enjoyed about being home was much longer! They loved building forts, baking, drawing, playing rugby in the garden with Dad, and bouncing on the trampoline (oh, thank God for that trampoline!).

I definitely enjoyed the slower pace of lockdown life that resulted from not driving to various daily activities, the absence of play dates, and of course my now socially distant social life. I realised that our pre-Covid-19 schedule had been exhausting for everyone. I held a belief before that I was doing the best for the kids by keeping them involved in lots of different afterschool activities. But actually they were exhausted most of the time, and I was depriving them of time for creative play.

I think the kids learned most in their downtime. When the schoolbooks were cleared away and they were given the time and encouragement to be creative, they seemed to excel. So I can't say that I didn't enjoy homeschooling, although I did find it challenging. The irony is that I was the person who learnt most from the experience. The return to school has produced a beautiful sense of normality that I never appreciated before.

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