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My corona*: listening to children in corona times

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**ABSTRACT**

Created with twelve Members of Children’s Parliament aged 8–14 across Scotland, The Corona Times Journal was established in March 2020 as Scotland entered a national lockdown in response to the global COVID-19 pandemic. The children were supported to reflect on their experiences of the pandemic in response to themed journal prompts around life at home, health and wellbeing, education and learning, news and information, and the return to schooling. The children’s views captured in The Corona Times Journal significantly informed the Independent Child Rights Impact Assessment (CRIA) carried out by the Observatory for Children’s Human Rights on behalf of the Children and Young People’s Commissioner in Scotland on the impact of COVID-19 measures on children’s human rights. This article brings three of the Corona Times journalists together with academics involved in carrying out the Independent CRIA to reflect on the children’s experiences of contributing to The Corona Times Journal and, in turn, playing a key role in informing the development of the Independent CRIA and national decision-making processes. It explores the importance of children’s participation in decision-making during times of crisis when human rights are at most risk of being compromised.

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**KEYWORDS**

Children’s rights; children’s participation; COVID-19; pandemic

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**Introduction**

The importance of children and young people’s participation is now well recognised, with research highlighting examples of the increase of children’s participation in decision-making. What happens, however, to children’s participation when decisions are being made and actions taken in times of crisis?

In the first few months of the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK, an Independent Child Rights Impact Assessment (CRIA) was carried out by the Observatory of Children’s Human Rights\textsuperscript{1} for the Commissioner for Children and Young People Scotland. This brought children’s human rights academics together to analyse how emergency laws...
and policies around COVID-19 impacted the human rights of children and young people in Scotland.

The Independent CRIA showed that children and young people’s views were largely missing from the development of emergency COVID-19 measures introduced by the Scottish Government. While a few projects and organisations gathered the views of children and young people, these were often fairly general and not linked to specific policy areas. The absence of children and young people’s participation in the decisions being made raises the following questions:

a) whether children and young people’s best interests had been properly considered and their participatory rights met; and
b) what needs to happen in order to involve children in a meaningful way in times of crisis

In those critical first few months of the initial lockdown in Scotland and the rest of the UK, qualitative and quantitative evidence about the impact of the pandemic on children and their human rights was extremely limited. One initiative, which was essential for informing the Independent CRIA, was *The Corona Times Journal* – an online journal created in late March 2020 with twelve Members of Children’s Parliament aged 8–14 across Scotland. The twelve children were supported by the Children’s Parliament team to reflect on their experiences of the pandemic in response to a series of themed journal prompts around life at home, health and wellbeing, education and learning, news and information, recovery and emerging from lockdown, and the return to school.

In this article, we bring children – ‘the journalists’ – involved in *The Corona Times Journal* together with some of the academics involved in carrying out the Independent CRIA, to reflect on the children’s experiences of contributing to *The Corona Times Journal* and, in turn, how they played a key role in informing the development of the Independent CRIA and national decision-making processes. Together, we explore the importance of children’s participation in decision-making during times of crisis where human rights are at most risk of being compromised.

**Background**

All children involved in *The Corona Times Journal* were invited to participate in discussions with three academics who had been involved in the Independent CRIA, with three of the children choosing to take part. There were three specific aims of the discussions:

1) to have the opportunity to reflect on the children’s participation as journalists;
2) to think together about the impact of the pandemic on children’s rights; and
3) to create top tips for adults making decisions at times of crisis.

The invitation was made by Katie Reid, who knew the children from her work at the Children’s Parliament, as well as being one of the academics with a key role in developing the Independent CRIA with the Observatory of Children’s Human Rights Scotland. The group met three times, between February and April 2021. The group discussions were recorded, with all participants’ consent, and notes written up and shared with the
children at the following meeting to make sure that their views, ideas and reflections had been accurately captured and to allow for any changes or additions. The group discussions, held online, took place in the second national lockdown in Scotland, and also became a much-needed space for laughing together, being silly, and checking in with each other, in the middle of the ongoing crisis. This article has been reviewed and agreed to for publication by the children and adults involved.

1. Reflections on participating as journalists for The Corona Times Journal

Enjoyment of participation

A key theme in the discussion with the children involved in The Corona Times Journal was how much they enjoyed being journalists. The children reflected that this was, in part, because it was something to do and to look forward to at a time when there was not much going on.

Brodie: It was something to do when we were in lockdown because there wasn’t really much … it’s quite unique.

Beyond that, the children shared that they found thinking about the prompt questions both an enjoyable and interesting way to share their views, experiences and ideas.

The importance of recognition

The children explained that participating in The Corona Times Journal gave them a sense of purpose, especially once they realised how much their involvement was recognised and valued. The children felt it was particularly important that their perspectives were being listened to by a wider audience and could inform adults and potentially help other children. As Omima said:

I definitely think it’s important to be listening to children’s opinions because, like, some adults think that children don’t know much about this stuff because they don’t know what’s going on scientifically behind it. But children have some really great ideas and I think children can be a lot more open minded than adults so they can think about and share things that adults haven’t even considered.

Brodie, Paige and Omima each described feeling proud for having participated in The Corona Times Journal. The children shared that their family members were proud of them for taking part and having the opportunity to influence decision-making in Scotland.

Brodie: A lot of my family, like my granny and that, have been saying that they’re really proud that I managed to get in there and be part of The Corona Times.

Omima: If you are doing something, it feels good to be recognised … it feels good for children knowing that they have that recognition, not just adults. My granddad was really proud of me. He said he would love it for me to go into politics when I’m older.

Beyond the recognition from family members, the journalists appreciated hearing feedback from others about the impact of The Corona Times Journal. While they had known that the journal was on the internet, the visibility and reach of their words had not necessarily been fully grasped at the time. Written feedback from adults who had been following the journal was collated by the Children’s Parliament team and sent to each child at several points throughout the process. The children felt this helped them understand how much their contribution was valued.
Omima: When we got all our comments and everything back – we got a big sheet – that was really great because it had all the different people from parents to people with political positions. It was really amazing to realise how much impact we were having.

Brodie: [It gave me a] good boost of confidence.

2. Children’s thoughts on the impact of COVID-19 on children’s rights

The journalists described significant impacts of the pandemic and lockdown on children’s rights to education, play, health and wellbeing. While meaningful participation allows children to understand and exercise their rights, the journalists were able to explicitly talk about their experiences in the context of children’s rights. The children’s knowledge and understanding has grown from their involvement in the Children’s Parliament since September 2019, in which the children have been supported to understand children’s human rights and explore and discuss key issues for children in the context of their own lives, and the lives of other children.

The journalists noted that the first lockdown had a huge impact on children’s rights to education. They described difficulties including less help and support from teachers than would be available in school, and a lack of materials to use. There was also a sense that a lot of the schoolwork involved things they had done before and was therefore fairly easy. There were less opportunities to learn new things as not all students were online, which resulted in some feeling bored. Despite these difficulties, the children understood the reasons for not being at school.

Paige: My mum doesn’t really want us to go back [to school] because one, we’re not ready and two, we’re safer here [at home].

The journalists reflected on the impact of the pandemic and lockdown on children’s right to play, such as being unable to go out and see friends. They gave examples of playing with friends online, but they noted that not all children have access to technology or are allowed to play online or use apps such as WhatsApp.

The journalists also talked about the impact on children’s right to health and wellbeing, particularly thinking about exercise, spending time outside, and sleep. The journalists reflected on how in the first lockdown they could not go anywhere unless it was for essential purposes. They highlighted that not all children have access to exercise equipment and are limited in where they can go. Sleep was a key issue for some of the children – with the changes in routine resulting in staying up later and struggling to get to sleep.

*Difference between the first lockdown and later ones*

As the journalists reflected on the impact of the pandemic on children’s rights, they described the differences between the first lockdown, when *The Corona Times Journal* started, and more recent restrictions and lockdowns. They talked about weather-related limitations and the difference between being able to do outdoor activities during summer and winter lockdowns.

Brodie: The biggest difference was the weather. It’s a lot colder and there’s a lot more limitations because you could still like go swimming in the river or you could still like spend the day outside with your friends. But today, now, it’s just cold and icy.
The children also discussed their experiences of learning. The children shared the view that the later lockdown was generally better than the first as they had better access to technology, teachers were more available, and they could spend more time online. New technology available to the children made both learning and keeping in touch with friends easier in the later lockdown. Omima explained that her school provided every child with an iPad and families with a WIFI box:

Omima: We did get iPads so that’s been really good. We can speak to our teacher more. Most of the time, our teacher is online and available to help us and she’ll give us our assignments for the day which is easier than last time because last time we didn’t get given any specific assignments.

The journalists also talked about it being easier to stay in touch with friends, as they were allowed to use social media platforms, such as WhatsApp, more than they had previously been allowed to.

Omima: Over the lock down, more and more of my friends have been allowed to get social media platforms like WhatsApp and stuff like that so we’ve been able to stay more and more in touch and we’ve got used to everything on WhatsApp.

The increase in information available to children, about how to handle the pandemic and the vaccines, was noted as an important and positive difference. However, the children highlighted that it was important to make sure children of all ages can access information provided in child-friendly ways.

Omima: I feel more ‘in the know’ only because there is more information now because every day, they’re learning new things about coronavirus in different ways to handle it, and like better ways to handle it. So I think that’s really great and I can get clearer information on coronavirus and the vaccines and what’s going on, who’s getting vaccinated and everything.

3. Top tips for adults making decisions in times of crisis

The children provided some key messages for adults, drawing on their experiences as journalists, Members of Children’s Parliament and children living through the pandemic in Scotland.

Don’t forget about children!

Adults must not forget about children in times of crisis. They must make sure they are listening to children, looking from children’s perspectives, thinking about and asking children how they are doing or what their worries are, and not leaving children unattended when adults are working.

Paige: It feels good [when children are] being remembered.

- It is important to listen to children

Children’s views, experiences and ideas must be listened to, as well as adults, to make sure that everybody’s ideas are on the table at times of crisis. The journalists described how children can help adults by bringing creative, imaginative solutions to problems.

Paige: It is important [to involve children] because children might have a really great idea to help COVID-19 go away.
Omima: Children can think more open minded and out of the box than adults … because they are younger, there’s not really any limits.

- Try looking at things from children’s perspective

Adults should put themselves in the shoes of children, bearing in mind that different things are important for different children and young people. Children and young people are missing out on different things at different ages as a consequence of the pandemic. Some are missing out on school camps and residential, others are missing out on the social aspects of starting high school and meeting new people.

Brodie: They [adults] can put themselves in the child’s shoes and think how that would impact them and imagine it from their perspective.

Check in with how children are feeling

Adults must think about what children might be worried about and to be aware that children may be affected differently to adults. Checking in directly with children about how they are feeling, for example, before engaging in activities, is a good chance to see if anyone is worried about anything. It is important to not ignore the little things, ‘how we feel and what we are doing’.

Omima: Children and adults are worrying about different things – children are worried about when they are going to see their friends and adults might be worried about financial things.

Brodie: It’s good for children to let someone know how they are feeling rather than keep it all inside.

Paige: Parents are always checking the numbers [COVID-19 cases and death statistics]. Sometimes children can worry about the numbers, but children don’t always understand if it’s a lot or not.

Children should have a say in political matters

Children should have a say in political matters affecting them, including voting for leaders. One of the journalists explained that, as there are 1.9 billion children in the world, it should not just be adults (who number approximately 5.9 billion) who get to have a say in voting. If children got to have a say then there might be a different result. The children expressed strong opinions over the decisions made and actions taken by political leaders in the context of the pandemic, in particular, Donald Trump and Boris Johnson.

Brodie: Get Boris out! He doesn’t really think about how it would disadvantage some people. He only thinks about how it would advantage some people.

Omima: Children should have more say in political matters, because children and adults worry about different things and I think sometimes adults overrule things that would be important to children.

Make sure that children’s participation involves choices and having fun!

When children are having a say in decision-making, it works best if they have choices about activities to do because different children like to participate in different ways. The journalists noted that questions can be made into games so that children can share their views and have fun at the same time. Like adults, children do not want to spend time
doing things that they do not want to do, especially when other things going on in their life are difficult, confusing or stressful!

Brodie: Having fun is good for your mental health and it’s like anti-stress, having fun makes your attention span bigger and it’s better to keep people engaged.

Katie: When we had the weekly calls for Corona Times, it was really important to have fun with other people especially when times were really hard and everything was really uncertain.

Conclusion

When researching and writing the Independent CRIA, the academics involved noted that the analysis represents a snapshot of a particular moment in time – the early months of the pandemic. The Corona Times Journal project reminds us that the pandemic happens over time and our responses change and develop depending on what is happening around us. The journalists also remind us that although the emergency laws and policies were developed in a time of crisis when it seemed to adults that there was no time to gather children’s views and perspectives, children’s experience of that period is one of not having much to do and, often, boredom coupled with anxiety.

One journalist talked about how her participation in The Corona Times Journal had made her ‘visible’. The journalists’ top tips for adults point to the importance of ensuring that children remain visible, with opportunities for participation and their opinions valued, even in times when adults might think that this is not a priority.

Notes

1. The Observatory of Children’s Human Rights Scotland is a collaborative of Scottish organisations working to drive implementation of children’s human rights in Scotland, with local impact and global learning. See Observatory of Children’s Human Rights Scotland | The University of Edinburgh.

2. Found in 1996, Children’s Parliament is Scotland’s centre of excellence for children’s human rights, participation and engagement. All participating children become Members of Children’s Parliament (MCPs). Unlike other parliamentary bodies, Children’s Parliament is not an elected body. Rather it is a participatory one, engaging with children across a range of settings in order to include as many children as possible, many of whom face barriers to participation. See Children’s Parliament.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Paige (aged 11), Brodie (aged 12) and Omima (aged 12) are Members of the Children’s Parliament in Scotland. From April - September 2020, the children participated as journalists in The Corona Times Journal, an online publication which gathered children’s views and reflections on how the pandemic was impacting their lives.

Katie Reid is a children’s participation practitioner and researcher. She was part of the Observatory for Children’s Human Rights Scotland team that undertook the Independent Child Rights

**Dr Christina McMellon** is a Research Associate at the MRC/CSO Social and Public Health Science Unit, University of Glasgow and has responsibility for young people's participation in the Trans-disciplinary Research for the Improvement of yoUth Mental Public Health (TRIUMPH) network.

**Dr Mary Ann Powell** is an Independent Researcher. In her previous role as Senior Research Fellow at the University of Edinburgh, Mary Ann was part of the Observatory for Children’s Human Rights Scotland team that undertook the Independent Child Rights Impact Assessment on the COVID-19 measures in Scotland in 2020.