



# Children's informal learning at home during COVID-19 lockdown

## REPORT SUMMARY

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2021

The national COVID-19 lockdown in Term 1 and Term 2, 2020 provided a unique context to investigate children's experiences of informal, everyday learning in their household bubble. In Terms 3 and 4, 178 children in Years 4–8 from 10 primary schools agreed to participate in a group art-making activity and an individual interview about their experiences.

The research adopted a strengths-based approach on the basis that most children are capable actors in their social worlds. This is a summary of the full report, which documents children's accounts of the multiple ways in which they negotiated the novel experience of forced confinement over a period of several weeks with family and whānau.

The report<sup>1</sup> is rich with children's own accounts of their everyday living and learning during lockdown. To foreground children's descriptions and explanations of their lockdown experience in this way is an acknowledgement of their right to express their views on matters of interest to them in their lives, and to have those views listened to, and acted on, by adults. Similarly, the approach reflects a growing educational research interest in student voice: enabling children to articulate their experiences so that adults can use this knowledge to better respond to and support children's learning aspirations and needs.

1. Full report available at <https://www.nzcer.org.nz/research/publications/learning-during-lockdown>



This research report does not speak for all children or all children's experiences. Nevertheless, it does provide valuable insights about the phenomenon of children's informal and everyday learning during lockdown, gained from a group of children for whom it was a mostly positive experience, and through which they learned much about themselves as persons and as members of a family and whānau.

Several months after the event, children in this study were able and willing to recall their experiences of learning during lockdown. They could identify social, cultural, and historical dimensions of their learning at home. Some children were able to recount rich, detailed stories about their lockdown experience and the ways in which they organised their days and activities. For some others, their days were largely shaped for them by family and whānau members, but even so, the children were able to explain what they enjoyed, or did not, and why.

Variations in children's learning across the group highlighted the complexity of learning that each child experienced, and the importance of having social relations, environments, and contexts that encourage and support their learning. Children demonstrated an understanding and appreciation of the value of this learning.

Informal learning at home during lockdown is not to be confused with school learning. It is not formally "assessed" or "measured" in the ways children commonly experience at school. Nevertheless, informal self-assessment and family and whānau assessment of children's learning was evident throughout their personal accounts. Children themselves and their family and whānau regularly made judgements about the value of children's informal learning that occurred during lockdown. It was evident from children's accounts that they and their valued others had observed the acquisition of new or enhanced knowledge, skills, and dispositions, and had identified growth in the children's learning.

Seven themes emerged from qualitative analysis of the interviews with children:

1. Learning new structures and routines in the bubble
2. Learning from and with whānau
3. Learning about and through language, culture, and identity
4. Learning through life events
5. Emotional dimension of learning
6. Learning about and through digital technologies
7. Self-directed and self-regulated learning.

Children described developing and adapting to new daily structures and routines during lockdown. They spoke about their changing appreciations of time and the role it played in what they could choose to do, when, and how. Many were quick to realise that schoolwork tasks could be completed more efficiently than at school, through self-determined patterns. These provided them with more time to engage in play, pastimes, hobbies, and interests, and make contributions to the everyday life and work of the household using the resources available in the home and immediate environment.

Children learnt constantly from and with family and whānau. Many reflected enthusiastically about spending extended, intimate time together and could explain how lockdown time together differed from their normal shared family and whānau time. Dealing with intensified sibling, parental, or

other relationships, or having valued others who were unexpectedly either absent or present during lockdown, all helped children learn how to negotiate their lockdown living environment. Children talked about the enjoyment of learning more about their family and whānau, their involvement in a range of family- and whānau-related activities, and learning who in the family they needed to approach for help with particular forms of learning, such as cooking, construction, gaming, and arts and crafts.

For children from minoritised cultures, in particular, lockdown provided an extended opportunity in the home to be introduced to or to more fully immerse themselves in aspects of their heritage language and culture together with their valued others. It was clear from their accounts that children treasured these more intimate encounters with their parents' or grandparents' childhood and lives elsewhere. Moreover, the particular blends of language learning, cultural practices, domestic rituals, and retold intergenerational stories they experienced in lockdown were significant for their identity formation—both their sense of self and sense of belonging. Many children talked in ways that suggested lockdown had provided them with new or intensified experiences of learning about and through their heritage language and culture. Some children acted as teachers of older and younger family and whānau members and sometimes it was they who initiated family and whānau practising of language and culture through their own desire to learn more.

During lockdown, children were challenged in how they marked both cyclical events such as birthdays, Anzac Day, and Easter, and unanticipated life events such as the illness or death of a family member or pet. Lockdown forced them and their family and whānau to make adaptations to their customary ways of marking special occasions. It was evident from their accounts that many children gained a rich understanding of the principles, traditions, and cultures that underpin these events. Children were able to talk about how they individually reconceptualised and experienced the life events, but also about the emotional effects of life events on family and whānau, and the importance of family and whānau modelling and support for their own experience.

Emotional dimensions of learning were evident throughout children's accounts.

Children talked about how they learnt to understand, control, and work with their emotions. Lockdown itself was a time of heightened individual and collective sensibilities in the household bubble. Consequently, children became more acutely aware during this period of the full range of their emotions. They variously described feelings of empathy, anxiety, anger, boredom, frustration, contentment, happiness, joy, and “flow”. They were also able to articulate the strategies they developed to support themselves, and sometimes their siblings or parents, through both stressful and relaxed times.

In addition to the widespread use of digital technologies to access and participate in schoolwork and watch educational television during lockdown, many children described using them for leisure, in their personal non-formal and informal learning activities, and for communicating and staying in touch with schoolmates, friends, and family and whānau members outside the household bubble.



Browsing, watching instructional videos, gaming, using editing and social media applications to create and share digital content were frequently mentioned, as were broadcast and streamed content services. Some children described choosing to be online for extended periods of time, some others having their access monitored by adults. Most children described spending their free time during lockdown on a mixture of online and offline activities and passive and active pursuits. Children talked enthusiastically and knowledgeably about their learning through digital content, games, and communication technologies, and also about discovering new uses of technologies, alone, through observation of others' actions online, or with the assistance of more proficient siblings or adults in their household.

In their explanations of how they learnt through the course of lockdown to exert greater influence over and understanding of their schoolwork, leisure, and housework activities, children demonstrated self-directed and self-regulated learning. Lockdown produced situations that required and enabled children to use their own resources, ask their own questions, and to be motivated to action by these questions. Children identified and took opportunities to participate collaboratively or on their own in real-life, real-time opportunities for personally meaningful learning.

Many scholarly and mass media commentaries on children's experiences of lockdown have been characterised by what children were missing out on, what they would be unable to do, and the harm or delay to their learning that would occur as a consequence. Children's own largely positive accounts of their informal and everyday learning during lockdown act as a powerful and necessary rejoinder to what adults have assumed would be children's experience.

This report foregrounds children's own largely positive experiences, words, and reflective analyses of learning within their household bubbles during lockdown. Certainly, some children talked about the constraints or restrictions imposed by lockdown but many more children's accounts conveyed a sense of "freedom".

This included freedom to determine what and how to approach their learning, freedom to roam, freedom in one's use of time, and freedom to make choices and decisions. Collectively, one might reasonably describe these as an experience of *freedom to learn*.

Their accounts reveal children's ability to adapt readily and pragmatically to the circumstances in which they find themselves and to find and create solution-focused approaches to their learning—in all its many dimensions—within a cognitively, affectively, and socially challenging setting. In short, the children we spoke with revealed to us their natural ability to survive and thrive. They reinforced our view that children can and do learn capably and with agency in their childhood worlds. Alone and with the support of family and whānau, children can and do create the necessary conditions for learning in challenging times.

