

Research Space

Conference paper

From 'protection' to 'resilience' – the Covid-19 pandemic and the rhetoric of children's wellbeing

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Introduction:

From children *at risk* to children *as risk*

- Rhetorical shift in UK policy discourse around children's wellbeing:
 - **Safeguarding agenda (1997-2010):** potential dangers posed to children by 'unregulated' adults
 - **Pandemic management strategies (2020-22):** potential dangers posed to adults by 'socialised' children
- Accompanied by reconceptualization of the child:
 - Fragile, vulnerable, at risk *from* adults
 - Resilient, dangerous, presenting a risk *to* adults



Critics claim a perverse logic

- Mary Katharine Ham, [*The Atlantic*](#), January 2022:
 - “Kids are resilient” has been a refrain of the pandemic, used to justify the removal of regular school, birthday parties, and talking with friends at lunch. But it’s not a kid’s job to be resilient. It’s a parent’s job to be resilient for them, to spare them from our fears and worries. The longer we abdicate, the more damage we will do.
 - Children are the least at-risk population, but continue to face draconian mitigation policies—either in their name (*low chance* of serious COVID complications doesn’t mean *no chance*) or in the name of protecting their elders.
 - In our focus on one threat, we’ve let a thousand others flourish: learning loss, destabilization of the public-school system due to under-enrollment, self-harm, behavioral problems.
 - The media have too often fanned the flames of parents’ fears instead of quelling them... A characteristic column from December called attending day care “playing Russian roulette with our children’s lives,” but no outlet would run similar sentiments from a mother who refused to put her kids in a car or near a pool—both scenarios much more statistically risky to children.

But has our approach to children completely changed?

- Similar presumptions frame both the safeguarding agenda and the pandemic management agenda:
 - Generalised culture of fear
 - Warrant for hyper-regulation
 - Deference to 'experts' and 'professionals'
 - Individualised conception of responsibility for children

The problem of resilience: sociology versus psychology

Sociological focus

- Community
- Culture
- Institutions (eg education)
- Relationships

Psychological focus

- Individual
- Relationships
- Professionals (eg mental health)
- Techniques and strategies

The example of helicopter parents:

- *Culture of intensive parenting leading to over-protection by parents, requiring a community appreciation of children's need for independence*
- *Emotionally dependent and overbearing parents stifling children's development, requiring strategies to moderate parental behaviour*

The promotion of resilience pre-pandemic

- Safeguarding agenda emphasised all children's vulnerability to myriad dangers, including those potentially posed by adults-in-general
- Growing awareness of problem of undermining children's resilience and increasing their dependence on adults:
 - Critiques of helicopter parents
 - Promotion of children's play; 'Let Grow' movement (USA)
 - Institutional promotion of coping strategies, eg 'Growth Mindset' in schools
 - Strategies for dealing with social media
- Desire to build resilience congruent with concern about children's vulnerability
 - Focused largely on peer relationships as bulwark against excessive adult intervention
 - Underwritten by a concern about children's future development

The problem of resilience during the pandemic

- Children cut off from peer networks and wider community
 - Social media as sole portal to 'their world'
- 'Helicopter parenting' the baseline expectation (eg, 'home schooling')
 - Adult responsibility entirely individualised
- Vulnerability framed narrowly, in relation to effects of Covid-19
 - And posed relatively, to other care-givers, teachers, community members
- Resilience framed as coping with the present; little future orientation
 - Social institutions and networks suspended, fragmented
 - Individualised coping strategies only tool in the box

Narrative around children's wellbeing

□ Some claims by parents' campaigners and others:

- 'Children first' approach was discarded in favour of 'children last'
- Interests of the old were prioritised over the needs of the young
- Children's vulnerability has been downplayed in an emphasis on children's 'resilience'
- Short-term focus on protection from the virus eschewed considerations of longer-term harms from lockdowns and school closures

□ But was it so straightforward?

- 'Risks to children' from the virus were continually present in claims
- Parents' fears and concerns often supported school closures and lockdowns, especially in the early stages
- Restrictions related to children were often justified with regard to limiting population-wide mixing (eg school gates)
- Lockdowns and associated restrictions were intended to be temporary, and need for 'resilience' limited

Logical continuities: Hyper-regulation in a ‘risk society’

- ‘Safeguarding’ agenda developed in UK in the context of a heightened sensibility of risks to children’s welfare posed by adults
- Concerns about impact on children’s resilience emerged in response to the problem of ‘over-protection’
- Overarching sense of fear around Covid led to hyper-regulation of *all* social interaction
 - Impact on children framed as regrettable collateral damage, the ‘least worst’ option
- Resilience narrative emerges in two ways:
 - Reaction against catastrophising about individual outcomes for the ‘Covid generation’
 - Reluctance to face collective consequences of lockdown harms

The logic of risk and hyper-regulation

- 'Parents "anxious" about the safety of their children tend to conceptualize their anxiety in terms of the "risks" their children are exposed to, such as bullying in school, sexual predators... It gives rise not only to a specific conduct (driving children to all their activities), but also leads to the launching of regulatory projects (imposing post detention restrictions on sex offenders).' (Hunt 2003, cited in Bristow 2014)
- *Societies anxious about Covid focus on inter-personal distancing, hygiene, mixing, travelling, communicating...*
- *Giving rise to specific conduct (masks, testing regimes, one-way systems) and regulatory projects (lockdowns and Covid restrictions)*

Safeguarding example 1:

Every Child Matters initiative, 2003

- The focus on 'protecting children' that underpinned the safeguarding agenda was driven by a reconfiguration of the relationship between the citizen and the state.
- Every Child Matters followed the Laming Inquiry (2003) into death of 8-year-old Victoria Climbié in 2000:
 - 'the worst case of child abuse and neglect that I have ever seen' (Dr Lesley Alsford)
 - 128 separate injuries to her body
 - 12 occasions where authorities could and should have intervened
- 'Brought attention, not just to the education of children, but to their broader health, economic and social "well-being"' (Ward and Eden 2009, p7).



Main features of Every Child Matters

□ Aims and assumptions:

- Greater engagement by education policy with social and economic factors and the needs of the wider community.
- The state should set up systems and structures which intervene in parenting and the family on behalf of the child.
- Breaking down the insularity of professional groups and requiring multi-agency working around the needs of the child.
- The legislation [2004 Children Act] and guidelines place the engagement of the local community and parents at the heart of the change.
- At the same time, there is a high level of state control, with expectations for schools and other professionals.
- Schools' delivery of the five outcomes of ECM is inspected by Ofsted, forming a layer of surveillance and accountability. (Ward and Eden 2009, p157)

5 principles:

- Being healthy
 - enjoying good physical and mental health and living a healthy lifestyle
- Staying safe
 - being protected from harm and neglect
- Enjoying and achieving
 - getting the most out of life and developing the skills for adulthood
- Make a positive contribution
 - being involved with the community and society and not engaging in anti-social or offending behaviour
- Economic wellbeing
 - not being prevented by economic disadvantage from achieving their full potential in life.

Consolidated a pre-existing policy agenda around 'early intervention'

- '[*Every Child Matters*] aimed to take forward many ideas about intervening at a much earlier stage in order to prevent a range of problems later in life, namely those related to educational attainment, unemployment and crime, particularly for children seen as "in need" or "at risk". In this respect it aimed to build on much of the research and thinking [developed after 1997] and the policies introduced by New Labour in relation to childhood, where child development was seen as key and children were conceptualised primarily as future citizens.' (Parton 2006, p139)

Safeguarding example 2: Vetting and Barring Scheme (2006)

- Introduced following the Soham murders of 2002, of 10-year-olds Jessica Chapman and Holly Wells, by school caretaker Ian Huntley
- Bichard Inquiry 2004, leading to the creation of a national Vetting and Barring Scheme (VBS) (2006 Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Act)
- VBS reviewed by government in 2011, becoming the Disclosure and Barring Service



Expansive scope of the scheme

- Initially, anyone whose work or voluntary activities might bring them into contact with children found themselves subject to vetting, including:
 - Football coaches, cricket umpires, Guiders and Scoutmasters, volunteers in churches, charities and community centres, parents who volunteer for school trips or after-school clubs, and members of parent-teacher associations—as well as a host of people whose work is not to do with children but might involve them having some potential contact with them, such as bus drivers, or plumbers who fix school radiators.
- In autumn 2006, campaigners noted a rise of almost 100 per cent in the annual number of criminal checks issued by the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) since 2002, leading to 10 million disclosures.
- In a letter to *The Times*, critics observed that:
 - ‘The Bill will mean that **up to a third of the adult working population**—those who come into contact with children through their work or volunteering—will be subject to continuous criminal-records vetting.’
 - (Furedi and Bristow 2010)

Costs, confusion, and unintended consequences

‘Fantasy precautions’ in social work

- Eileen Munro, reader in social policy at the London School of Economics and an expert in child protection systems:
 - ‘The Bichard report in no way shows how [vetting] could have prevented the deaths of those two girls.’
 - The VBS represents the dangerous combination of ‘a risk-averse society plus the fantasy that we can avoid risk completely’. (Furedi and Bristow 2010, p8)

Fostering suspicion within communities

Review by Sir Roger Singleton, chair of the Independent Safeguarding Authority, in 2009:

- ‘We need to calm down and consider carefully and rationally what this scheme is and is not about. It is not about interfering with the sensible arrangements which parents make with each other to take their children to schools and clubs. It is not about subjecting a quarter of the population to intensive scrutiny of their personal lives. And it is not about creating mistrust between adults and children or discouraging volunteering.’ (cited in Furedi and Bristow 2010, pxi)

Hyper-complexity and ‘regulated activities’

□ Disclosure and Barring Service (2018)

- If the role meets the definition of regulated activity with children because it involves teaching, training or instructing children, or is providing any form of care for or supervision of children in a specified establishment and the period condition is met, then the organisation must consider the Department for Education (DfE) statutory supervision guidance.
- If the role is undertaking one of the specified activities in a specified establishment, is voluntary and the organisation decides that the role is sufficiently supervised, then the volunteer is not in regulated activity with children and is eligible for an Enhanced DBS check only.
- If that role working within the specified establishment is paid, then the individual will always be in regulated activity with children and eligible for an Enhanced DBS with a children’s barred list check. This is regardless of the level of supervision they are under.

Specified activities with children and what you need to consider			
Activity	Period condition	Supervision	Age of child
Teaching, training or instruction, care or supervision of children	More than 3 days in a 30 day period OR overnight between 2am & 6am with the opportunity for face to face contact with children	Must be considered	Under 18 – but not if the activity is in relation to the child’s paid or unpaid employment AND they are 16/17.
Moderating a web service wholly or mainly for children	More than 3 days in a 30 day period ONLY	Not required	Under 18
Advice or guidance wholly or mainly to children	More than 3 days in a 30 day period OR overnight between 2am & 6am with the opportunity for face to face contact with children	Not required	Under 18 – but not if the activity is in relation to the child’s paid or unpaid employment AND they are 16/17.
Driving a vehicle for children	More than 3 days in a 30 day period ONLY	Not required	Under 18
Health care or personal care	Once is enough	Not required	Under 18
Registering to be a foster carer or private foster carer	None	Not required	Under 18
Registering to be a childminder or child care provider, including voluntary registration	None	Not required	In line with regulations

Policy consequence: State over-extension and 'unsafe policies'

- Contemporary legislative and policy developments are set against a backdrop of broader concerns in the area of crime and justice, namely risk regulation, preventative governance and 'precautionary logic'. Proponents of these approaches have largely ignored concerns over their feasibility.
- This article specifically addresses this fissure within the specific field of vetting. It is argued that 'hyper innovation' and state overextension in this area are particularly problematic and have resulted in exceptionally uncertain and unsafe policies.
- These difficulties relate principally to unrealistic public expectations about the state's ability to control crime; unintended and ambiguous policy effects; and ultimately the failure of the state to deliver on its self-imposed regulatory mandate to effectively manage risk. (McAlinden 2010)

Potential risks and ‘unknown unknowns’

- McAlinden (2010) discusses the category of ‘unknown unknowns’ (Zedner, 2009: 47) - ‘those sex offenders “we don’t know we don’t know about”’:
 - To compensate for a lack of knowledge about the potential risks posed by this group, the state dispenses with measures selectively and individually tailored to assess risk for particular individuals for undifferentiated strategies which ‘treat all as potential suspects’ (Zedner, 2009: 47).
 - This blanket approach to risk, instilled in the recent expansive measures on vetting, merely perpetuates public fears and anxieties concerning the pervasiveness of sexual offending against children in particular.
 - The resulting feelings of insecurity, suspicion and mistrust which attach to all who come into contact with our children undermines our ability to make discerning judgements about the likelihood of harm.
 - This may ultimately help to further mask ‘unknown risks’ until they manifest themselves in the form of actual harm to children or the vulnerable. (McAlinden 2010, p42)

Individualised conception of adult responsibility

- In March 2006, a two-year-old girl who disappeared from her nursery and drowned in a garden pond. A bricklayer had driven past her as she wandered through the village. ‘She wasn’t walking in a straight line. She was tottering. I kept thinking, “Should I go back?”’ he told the inquest into the child’s death. ‘One reason I did not go back is because I thought someone would see me and think I was trying to abduct her.’
 - Many people remembered this story yet could not remember the details
 - It was used as the backdrop to discussions about whether you might help a child climb down from a climbing frame, whether you would intervene in a nasty fight between children, whether you would help a child find her way home, whether you would pick up and cuddle a toddler who had fallen over, whether you would administer basic First Aid on a child you did not know in a public playground if you did not hold a certificate... (Furedi and Bristow 2010, pp. 49-50)

Consolidated a pre-existing policy agenda around child surveillance

- The ministerial foreword to the 2007 DCSF/Home Office/DH consultation document on the Independent Safeguarding Authority began:
 - ‘The tragic murders of Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman in Soham in 2002 highlighted clearly and painfully the areas for improvement needed in the safeguarding systems at the time.’
- Yet in 2002, the report *Safeguarding Children: A Joint Chief Inspectors’ Report on Arrangements to Safeguard Children* (DH, 2002) discussed:
 - Information sharing, joint agency working, ‘*concerns about children and young people’s welfare as well as risks of harm to children’s welfare*’. (Parton 2006, p142, emphasis in original; Bristow 2016)

Impact of safeguarding regulations

- Implicit assumptions about community adult responsibility compromised by expectation that individual responsible adults would be vetted and 'licensed'
 - Relationship between citizen and state reconfigured through discourse of child protection
- Community involvement and care displaced by focus on professionalised activity
 - Replacement of 'common sense' judgement by expert guidance and regulation
- Children's safety from potential harms prioritised over other aspects of their wellbeing
- Shift in moral norms: 'doing the right thing' became 'obeying the rules'

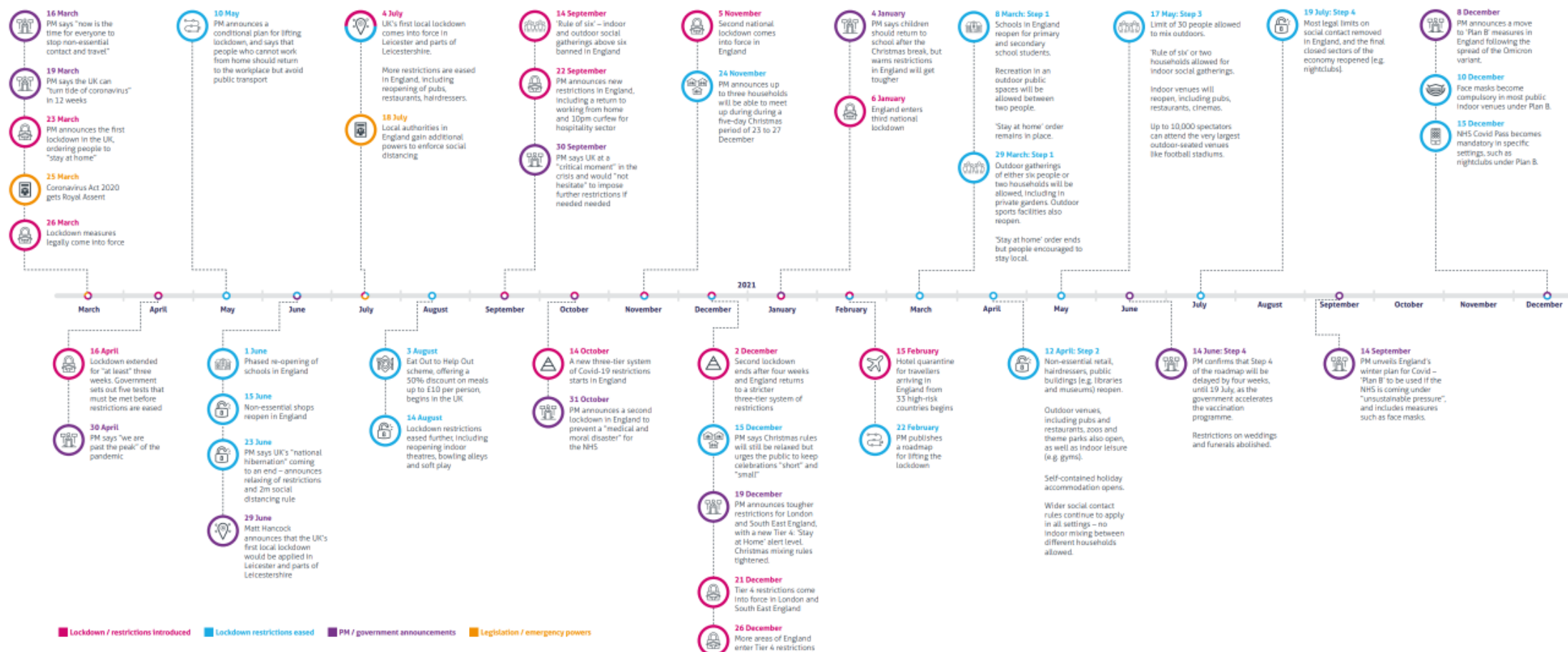
Fast-forward 10 years to the pandemic...

- ❑ Major new public health threat requiring response by the state
- ❑ Novel virus in the context of a pre-existing culture of fear
- ❑ Unprecedented international response of population-wide lockdowns, including closure of schools, universities, and childcare facilities
- ❑ Bewildering labyrinth of new rules governing interpersonal interactions, not dissimilar to the Vetting and Barring Scheme...



Timeline of UK government coronavirus lockdowns and measures, March 2020 to December 2021

IfG

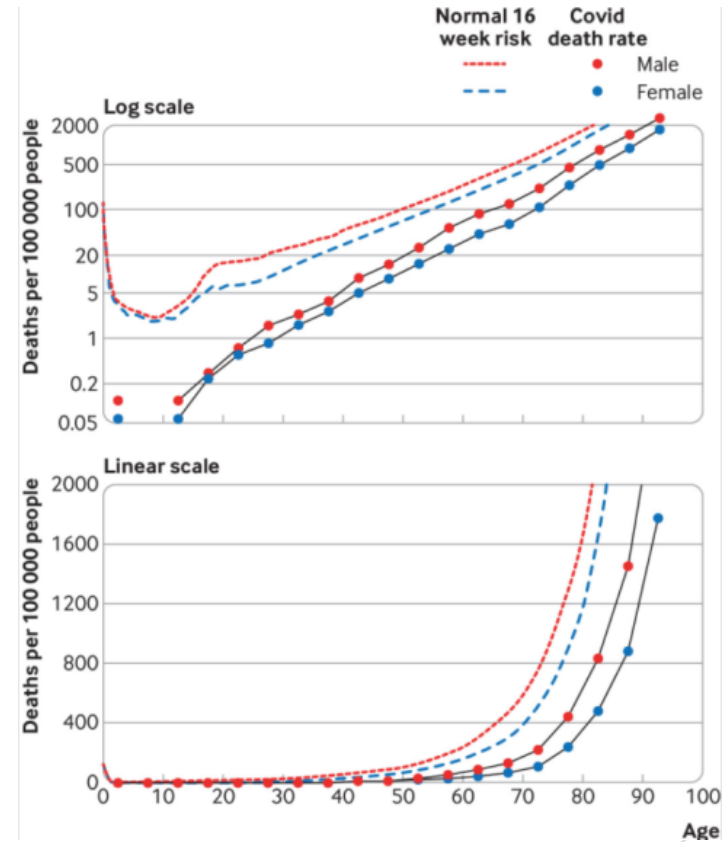


Source: Institute for Government analysis.

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Age-discriminating virus but universalised risk messaging

□ David Spiegelhalter, *British Medical*



‘Unsafe’ policies and regulatory state failures

- Diminished collective adult responsibility by community and state
 - High profile child abuse cases: Arthur Labinjo-Hughes, Star Hobson
 - 200,000 ‘lost’ children (Children’s Commissioner)
 - Impact on education, mental and physical health; prior expectation and rites of passage - individual and/or generational?
- Scale of disruption, followed by resumption of ‘normal life’, indicates present-day resilience: children have ‘their world’ back
 - But narrative of future success / wellbeing conspicuously absent
 - ‘Concerns about children and young people’s welfare’ and ‘risks of harm to children’s welfare’ have apparently dropped from policy agenda
 - Communities and institutions remain insecure about their relationship to children

‘The thing that’s made a huge difference in our community has been no masks, and the return of normal extracurricular activities. We recently had a school production - staff watched in tears because it was so normal...

‘[Children’s] world is their support system, and the things that are important to them are intact. I think they have grown in their appreciation of things they previously took for granted. The experience has emphasised the importance of the school community to people, having that value of social interaction with peers your own age.

‘Most kids have got through it, and I am less worried about pandemic issues than I was a year ago. The kids are back out there, going to school - they are less afraid than adults. The minute you say “you can take off the masks”, they take them off.

- Sarah Standish, high school counsellor, UK

Conclusion: What will 'safeguarding' mean in this context?

- State over-extension weakened adult authority and responsibility
- Society's commitment to the socialisation of children was revealed as fragile
- Child protection from known harms should be re-cast as a moral project, as opposed to a regulatory system focused on potential risks

- Regulatory state failures exposed importance of informal, intimate relations
- Children's ability to recover 'normal life' indicates higher degree of resilience than previously assumed

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