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Opinion: Protecting children's rights during Covid-19

On 11 March 2020 the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared Covid-19 to be a global pandemic. Since then the pandemic has become a global phenomenon with hugely significant effects on family life. Millions of lives around the world that have been affected in some way by Covid-19 and, very sadly, the virus appears to be rearing itself again as autumn and winter approach faster each passing day.

For those of you who remember M's speech in the James Bond movie, Skyfall (or, I suppose, for the literary purists, for those who read [Tennyson](#)) I think you'll see why M could quite easily have been describing the pandemic we now find ourselves in when they say: "Though much is taken, much abides; and though we are not now that strength which in old days moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are; one equal temper of heroic hearts, made weak by time and fate, but strong in will; to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield."

Covid-19 cases are rising again in the UK and that does, of course, bring significant challenges as 2020 draws to a close, not least because of the likely increase in other viruses (such as influenza) over the winter period. Those challenges will undoubtedly affect all of us, all of our communities, and all of our society.

Although the clinical course of Covid-19 appears to have been much milder in children compared with adults in the first wave, the other consequences of the pandemic are arguably equally, if not more, damaging to children. Family members have tragically died; children have missed out on weeks of in-school education during the spring and summer; social contact between children living in different homes has been decimated; and concerns have arisen about higher levels of abuse.

Throughout the pandemic my colleagues and I, at [SickKids](#) charity and the [School of Health and Society](#) at the University of [Salford](#), have been working hard, in collaboration with colleagues around the country, to do everything possible to ensure that children's rights have been [promoted](#). Children (all those aged under 18 years of age) have a right to be heard. Involving children in decision-making and development promotes their rights, which can make a positive difference locally and globally on issues that matter to [them](#).

The pandemic has disproportionately affected our Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities, as well as caused an increase in mental health problems, especially amongst [children](#). Children are susceptible to depression, fear, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder during lockdown - and social isolation, separation from peers and the loss of school support may have intensified these issues. Repeated media coverage of Covid-19 deaths and infection risk can only heighten children's fear. It is difficult to see how some of the decisions that have been taken during the pandemic have been consistent with children's

rights, for example their [Article 8 rights](#) – their [right](#) to respect for their private and family life, home and correspondence/communications, thus protecting their dignity and autonomy.

My Churchill Fellowship report made recommendations to better safeguard children and young people in the UK and beyond. Part of that involves ensuring that children's voices are heard on matters that affect them. As I believe the late Robin Williams said, "No matter what people tell you, words and ideas can change the world."

As organisations and individuals look for initiatives they can deploy throughout the remainder of the pandemic, a single good idea can make all the difference. It is the collective amalgamation of a myriad of good ideas that will make our world a better place in which to live.

One of the best things that organisations and communities can do as Covid-19 continues to infiltrate our communities, whether or not those organisations care for children, is to recognise that in some way whatever they do will affect a family or community members who care for children, even if not affecting children directly.

The challenge that must be set is therefore to ask: "What will you do, what will your community do and what will your organisation do to ensure that all of your actions are taken with the best interests of children at their core and so that across our global society we can collectively build child safe communities with happy, healthy and safe children and young people at their hearts?"

That is a challenge that I know, if we put our collective minds together and focus on protecting and promoting children's rights, we will be able to answer. As a result, our world will become a fairer, and in all senses better, place for children to grow and prosper.

If not because it is their right to be heard; if not because it is the right thing to do; then because the future of society depends on engaged, experienced and enthusiastic children becoming engaged, experienced and enthusiastic adults. It is time for children's voices to be heard, throughout the remainder of this pandemic and beyond. Not allowing children to participate, express their opinions and be heard on matters that affect them, is wrong and is a breach of their human rights.

Professor Andrew Rowland
30 September 2020