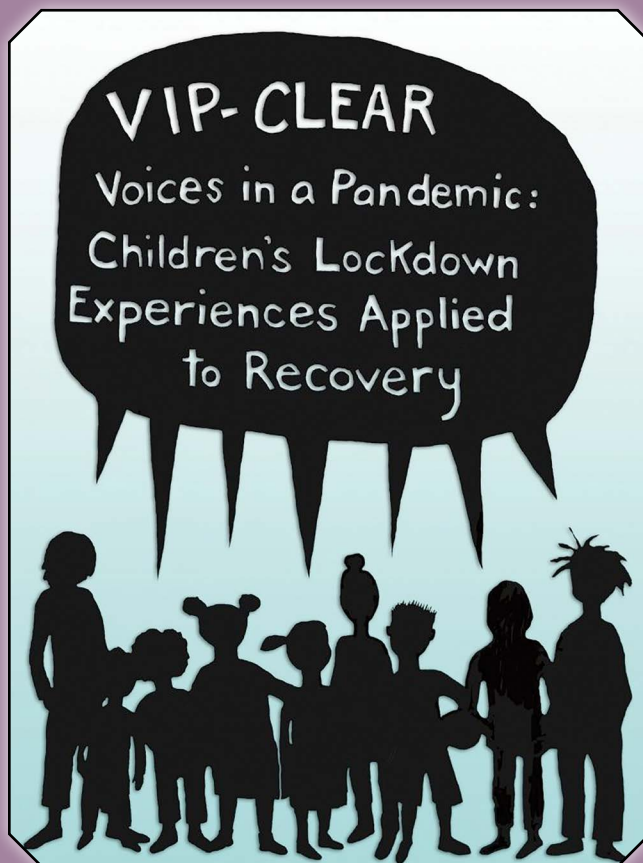


# Children's experiences of lockdown: talking about invisible threats



**Verity Jones and the VIP-CLEAR team researched the impact on children of the COVID-19 lockdown and the lessons we can learn**

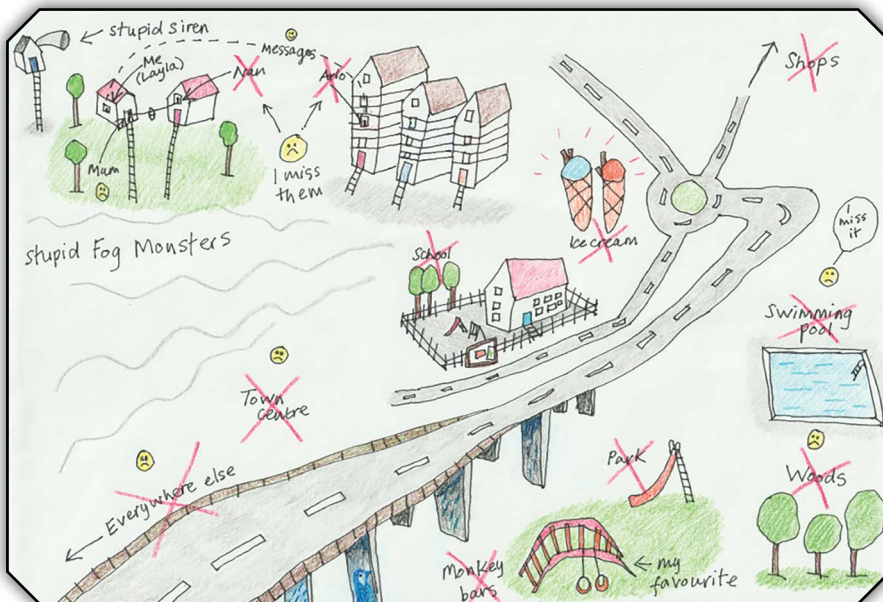
All of our lives were turned upside down during the COVID-19 pandemic, but children in particular saw huge changes to their childhoods. While the virus united the scientific community like never before – with the common goal to produce a vaccine and treatment – children were often overlooked.

Children were not necessarily deemed as vulnerable as others to the virus. However, their routines and support structures were instantly shattered. Contact with important family and friends were often severed. Access to familiar and important

spaces for learning and play, such as parks, was restricted. Education was disrupted with a move to unfamiliar online learning platforms. Important milestones were missed, such as the opportunity to learn to ride a bike or get the first 5 m swimming badge. Other milestones were experienced differently, such as birthday parties and religious celebrations. COVID-19 was an invisible threat. While children could not see the virus, they recognised the differences in their everyday lives and had to make sense of changes as policy and guidance switched, sometimes overnight.

The 'Voices in a Pandemic: Children's Lockdown Experiences Applied to Recovery' (VIP-CLEAR) team undertook research in schools during the COVID-19 pandemic to gain an insight into its impact on children. Between Spring 2021 and Summer 2022 the VIP-CLEAR project undertook interdisciplinary teamwork with 6- to 11-year-olds from four primary schools in socially disadvantaged areas of Bristol, UK. The team, made up of experts in education, health, psychology, geography and arts-based practice, created a series of four child-centred creative activities that gave children the time and space to explore their experiences of lockdown and the COVID-19 pandemic, looking both retrospectively and into the future. We also interviewed teachers and members of the senior leadership teams. Combined, this allowed us not only to gain insight into how children experienced COVID-19 but to learn lessons to help prepare for future

Key words: ■ COVID-19 impact ■ Invisible threats ■ Children's voice



**Figure 1** Layla's COVID map reflecting her experience at the time

similar threats. Here we reflect on the first two activities, which analysed 190 children's maps, and what lessons may be learned from them and the process.

### Finding out how children feel in a crisis

Children were asked to 'make a map of their world right now' on an A6-sized postcard using coloured pens (Figure 1). They were encouraged to add labels, emojis, annotations and text to the back of postcards. The emphasis was not on geographical or artistic skills, but on supporting ways in which children could communicate their experiences of the pandemic. This activity allowed the children to reflect on their emotional response to a time of crisis. Later in the school term, children returned to these maps. The original maps were each glued to a larger A4 sheet and children were asked to add to them, with prompts such as 'Has anything changed?', 'Can you tell me more about this?' and 'Is there anything you would like to add?'

Many of the first maps reflected the diversity of children's experiences at the time. There was a focus on home life, with many referencing time spent with immediate family. Others told of how these young people struggled at home, practically and psychologically, due to a lack of space, resources and support. Direct reference to the

pandemic was articulated through images of isolated houses, closed schools and parks and occasional images of 'the virus' and injections to represent vaccines. Animals were often included in maps in the form of pets (both owned and yearned for – perhaps for social and emotional support). Science and technology in the form of the internet, social media and gaming platforms were also frequently represented as a way of maintaining social contact with family and friends as well as being something to do when access to the outside world was limited.

The second mapping activity highlighted the opening up of local areas as lockdown restrictions were lifted. The necessary buildings of the first maps (with a focus on food shops) were now inclusive of non-essential destinations, such as hairdressers, toy shops and fairgrounds.

### The value of mapping in a crisis

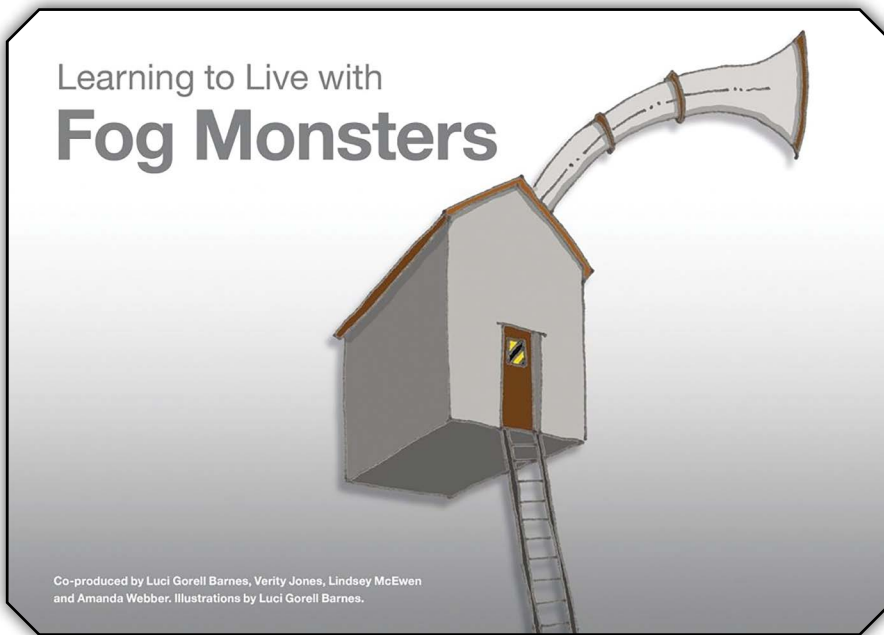
The two mapping activities undertaken highlighted the importance of public natural spaces and interactions with animals within urban settings. Digital space was considered important as a way of communicating with valued others (friends and family). However, the inequalities around home learning (having room, quiet space, availability of hardware and internet access, etc.)

were also amplified, as learning at home often became difficult, with work, school and family demands mixing in new ways. Our research showed the diversity in children's experience of the crisis and the conflicting emotions. The change in understanding and attachment that children have in relation to different places through a social crisis calls for careful reflection, not only by teachers, but also whole-school approaches, health professionals, employers, town planners, public health departments and policy makers. The team are communicating these recommendations through a series of policy briefings (see *Weblink*).

### What about next time?

Unfortunately, COVID-19 is not a singular, contained event. As we move into the winter of 2022 cases are rising. But this is not the only crisis children are dealing with. Throughout the latter phases of the VIP-CLEAR research, as COVID-19 restrictions began to be lifted, children spoke of other big issues that were worrying them: big and often invisible threats, such as climate change and news of war. In addition to this, the current period of response and recovery to the pandemic has been particularly difficult for children who may already be dealing with social and economic challenges. We know that teachers recognise these issues, but sometimes appropriate resources are difficult to find to support children in thinking and talking about their experiences.

Based on 18 months of research with the 6- to 11- year-olds, we have developed a free children's book entitled *Learning to live with fog monsters* (Figure 2), with accompanying teachers' notes (see *Weblink*). This resource aims to engage and enable children in key stage 2 (ages 7–11), while supporting teachers to deliver high-quality, research-informed lessons. The linked teachers' notes aim to make a difference to children's well-being, resilience and understanding of challenging times as we prepare our



**Figure 2** Cover of the free children's book designed to help them discuss their concerns

children to be active citizens. These resources can also be used to facilitate cross-curricular learning where the impact of science can be linked with PSHE (personal, social, health and economic), English, geography, art and music.

The book highlights the impacts threats such as COVID-19, other global disease, climate change and conflict may have. In addition, it attempts to identify how such crises may be mitigated through the eyes of two 10-year-olds. The importance of

sharing worries, working together, and planning for hopeful futures at home, in school and in the wider community is introduced as a springboard for discussion and further work.

Both the e-book and teacher's guide are free resources and available online for download from the VIP-CLEAR website.

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**Weblink**

VIP-CLEAR: [www.vip-clear.org](http://www.vip-clear.org)

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