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Citation: Allen-Baker, Georgia and Velijab, Philippa (2023) Parents perceptions of online physical activity and leisure with early years children during Covid-19 and beyond. *Leisure Studies*, 42 (1). pp. 23-37. ISSN 0261-4367

Published by: Taylor & Francis

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2022.2115111>  
<<https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2022.2115111>>

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To cite this article: Georgia Allen & Philippa Velija (2023) Parents perceptions of online physical activity and leisure with early years children during Covid-19 and beyond, *Leisure Studies*, 42:1, 23-37, DOI: [10.1080/02614367.2022.2115111](https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2022.2115111)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2022.2115111>



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Published online: 30 Aug 2022.



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# Parents perceptions of online physical activity and leisure with early years children during Covid-19 and beyond

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## ABSTRACT

Prior to Covid-19, businesses offering enrichment activities for pre-school aged children were saturating the early years (0–5 years) market. However, the pandemic caused sudden changes to family routines with regular leisure activities cancelled. Using Lareau's theory of concerted cultivation as a framework, we explored how physical activity (PA) was managed by parents of pre-school children and how routines changed during the pandemic. A UK national online survey was completed by 925 parents. Sixteen tailored, follow-up semi-structured interviews were undertaken with parents. Due to the nature of the pandemic and the age range of the young children, it was the parents who ultimately made decisions about PA, and it was parents who had to adapt, often to a challenging set of circumstances. Our data suggests many parents sought to utilise informal play and online PA during the lockdown periods with mixed levels of success. For those that attended baby, toddler, and pre-school sport sessions provided by commercial businesses prior to lockdown, the vast majority were eager to resume their in-person classes as opposed to continuing online. Parents perceived a wider range of benefits and cultivation for their child if they attended such classes in person (e.g. expert delivery, socialisation, and routine).

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 7 February 2022  
Accepted 15 August 2022

## KEYWORDS

Digital technology; pre-school; commercialised sport; pandemic; parenting

## Introduction

In this article we discuss parents experience of online physical activities targeted at early years children during various forms of 'lockdown', where normal family leisure opportunities and external structured physical activities were disrupted. In doing so, we provide an understanding of how parents utilised online activities for their pre-school children and why. This is significant as prior to Covid-19, commercial businesses offering enrichment activities for early years children (0–5 years) were saturating the pre-school market. However, during the pandemic there were unprecedented restrictions placed on all aspects of life – family routines suddenly changed and regular leisure activities were cancelled. With this in mind, we draw on the theoretical concepts of concerted cultivation to discuss the changes families experienced during various UK lockdowns as well as locating these in debates about screen use and technology for under 5's. We also explored the decisions made in relation to baby, toddler, and pre-school enrichment routines. Covid-19 was an unparalleled 'lockdown', both in terms of its magnitude and scale but also in the social isolation many governments enforced on their citizens to stop the spread of Coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2). During this time, many people moved to online technology to maintain certain aspects of their life

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(e.g. social interactions and leisure) that had been restricted, but little is known about this usage in early childhood during the pandemic.

### ***'Good' parenting and concerted cultivation***

Parents, particularly middle-class parents, are increasingly motivated to help their children to develop the skills needed for a successful childhood, so they can get ahead in education and other social situations, providing a competitive advantage (Lareau, 2003; Stirrup et al., 2014; Wheeler & Green, 2014). Lareau (2003) uses the term *concerted cultivation* to describe a parenting practice which prepares children for adulthood by fostering talents, skills and abilities and intervening to ensure their children get the best opportunities in a competitive environment. Doing the 'right' thing as a parent and providing numerous opportunities across a range of activities has become an expected contemporary child rearing practice (Gabriel, 2017). In the UK, Vincent and Ball (2007) highlight how class divisions impact on child rearing and how middle-class parents invest in their children by enrolling them on to various enrichment activities. For parents that can afford to, providing numerous opportunities in a range of activities has become an expected contemporary component of parenting practice (Gabriel, 2017).

Facilitating opportunities for children to get ahead in education and other social situations is a growing trend (Lareau, 2003; Stirrup et al., 2014; Wheeler & Green, 2014) as Ball (2003) highlights how parents are concerned about their children attending the 'right' school. The number and variety of activities that young children are involved in is increasingly seen as a way of expressing 'good' parenting and to alleviate (mainly) middle-class anxieties about providing children with rounded and structured activities (Allen et al., 2021; Wheeler, 2018) although there appears to be considerable intra-class diversity in how much parents concertedly cultivate (Wheeler, 2018). Commercialised sporting activities are marketed (Smyth, 2016) at parents in ways that play into contemporary concerns about good parenting and cultivation. For parents who can afford it, they can select activities that are marketed as important for their child's development (Stirrup et al., 2014). We utilise the concept of concerted cultivation as a sensitising concept to understanding parents' approach and the pressures on parents to provide meaningful and cultivating activities for their children pre, during, and post Covid-19.

### ***Growth of early years commercialised sport and leisure spaces***

The growth of franchises and commercial businesses offering enrichment activities for the pre-school market (under 5 years old), has been substantial in the last two decades and in line with broader social processes around 'good parenting' (Allen et al., 2021). Parents who can afford to are able to take advantage of a relatively new privatised education system that provides their child(ren) with skills that distinctively set them apart from their peers (Evans & Davies, 2015). Broader social changes such as the rise in dual-income families and shifts in work-life balance have potentially changed attitudes in relation to children's PA and experiences available for early years children.

Furthermore, the reduction in public leisure services such as leisure centres and play parks mainly due to austerity over the last decade (Stenning, 2019) has created a need for safe sport and leisure spaces for young children. Before Covid-19 changed familiar routines, businesses offering sport classes were attractive to a significant number of families (e.g. based on franchise website information, UK membership numbers for popular franchises such as those offering ballet, rugby and swimming ranged from 11,000–42,000 children per week). In the UK, Wheeler and Green (2014, 2019) found that economic status influenced leisure opportunities and the ways in which parents cultivated their children's physical and social capital, especially highlighting the role of external clubs in middle- and upper-class families who value these activities

In addition to the increase in privatised and commercialised provision in baby, toddler, and pre-school we have seen in sport and leisure domains, youth sport provision has become subject to global privatisation. This includes formal provision in educational settings as well as out-of-school activities including coaching in sport, leisure and play opportunities (Evans & Davies, 2015, p. 2; Stirrup et al., 2014). Stirrup et al. (2014) argue that under an agenda of private and/or commercial interests (Evans & Davies, 2015; Powell, 2015), parents are consumers buying the best learning opportunities for their children from a very young age and some instances, even before the child is born. For example, one popular, nationwide swimming provider argues on their website that the antenatal classes they provide allows the baby to become familiar with the swimming environment whilst in the womb. With this in mind, Evans and Davies explore what the implications of neoliberalism will be (Evans & Davies, 2014) and what the future impact on the educational market might be when 'social justice is *not* a primary concern' (2015:3). The enrichment activities that parents discuss in this study are an example of this as they are provided by commercial businesses who are not masking as social responsibility. They sell an enrichment opportunity that is perceived by parents to be beneficial during early childhood (but only if parents have the economic capital to access such classes).

### **Parenting, digital technology and screen time**

Once the global pandemic hit, enrichment sessions that had become a regular feature in many pre-school children's lives were cancelled. Unsurprisingly, sporting activities declined more than other forms of exercise across all groups (Sport England, 2021). However, our knowledge of the pre-school age range and the impact of parental influence on formal and informal PA remains less understood (Harlow et al., 2020). Our initial focus was to examine the impact of Covid-19 on pre-school activity and family life, and we sought to understand how parents adapted their routines during the various UK lockdowns. While research on the impact of lockdowns is still emerging, the pandemic did change and restrict people's PA, and as a result, many people turned to online resources.

In line with the growing demand for mobile technology generally, children's access to digital devices has rapidly increased over recent years (Laidlaw et al., 2021). Pre-school children are now engaging with technology at increasingly younger ages and can move seamlessly across online and offline spaces (Laidlaw et al., 2021; Marsh et al., 2016), demonstrating digital fluency from a very young age. Byrne et al. (2021) note that both the amount of time young children spend on screen-based devices is increasingly and the age of first exposure is decreasing. Whilst screen-based devices can offer interaction, cognitive engagement and educational opportunities that may have some benefits, the potential negative consequences of excessive screen time (e.g. poor sleep, cognitive delays, lack of PA and obesity) are often a source of concern for parents (Byrne et al., 2021).

Online technology has transformed the way people access and share information, with digital media now a central part of modern family life (Sandberg et al., 2021). However, parenting in the digital age is challenging (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020; Mollborn et al., 2022). On the one hand, parents have a responsibility to keep their child(ren) safe online (Barnes & Potter, 2021) and are concerned about potential risks (Sandberg et al., 2021). On the other hand, parents are also responsible for creating digitally literate citizens (Sandberg et al., 2021) that will thrive in a digital marketplace. Parents are now having to navigate the complex intersection between societal attitudes and expectations (e.g. appropriate online content and amount of screen time) and the reality of everyday life when it comes to digital technology.

Technology devices are now used for a range of purposes which can cause further complexities and challenges for parents and early care and education providers (ECE) such as nurseries and pre-schools. Joseph et al. (2019) found that both parents and ECE providers were unaware of specific policies and guidance in relation to screen time. Whilst watching TV remains the most frequent way children use technology (Mollborn et al., 2022; Sandberg et al., 2021), technology is also used for

educational purposes, learning, communication, and recreation. This multi-use aspect can cause complications for parents who are negotiating perceptions of good versus bad technology use (Ito, 2019; Mollborn et al., 2022). Activities such as reading, learning/educational tasks, information gathering and developing digital literacy are often perceived to be *good* use of technology, whereas watching TV, gaming, or engaging with non-educational content are often perceived to have 'no human capital advantages' (Mollborn et al., 2022). Ito (2019) argue that parents seek to manage their children's online and technology behaviour in the *right* way even when parents are not sure what that is. Parental concerns reflect the pressure parents are under to cultivate in particular ways that will benefit and not harm their children.

The increased use of online technology during the early phases of the pandemic for purposes such as education, work, and PA saw the usage of some internet services rising 100% compared to pre-lockdown levels (De' et al., 2020). This increased usage also highlighted many inequalities with digital devices and access to online technology, with an estimated 5 million people in the UK not connected to the internet (Allmann, 2020) with low-income families (Beaunoyer et al., 2020), the elderly and disabled (Allmann, 2020) most at risk of digital and/or online exclusion. Many of the companies that provide sport and leisure activities aimed at the pre-school market moved to an online platform when restrictions were put in place, allowing them to stay engaged and connected with their customers (who had online access). Some businesses found the transition easier than others. Those needing specialist equipment, such as swimming pools, found the online transition almost impossible. However, those providing online PA sessions prior to lockdown were able to expand their reach and customer-base further. In this article, we consider how technology and online PA was utilised in an age group often forgotten when discussing leisure and pre-school sport (Harlow et al., 2020). We focus on the decisions parents made in relation to online PA, how they found their pre-schoolers responded to the online environment and whether online PA would endure beyond lockdown.

## Materials and methods

### *The UK Covid-19 context*

In March 2020, Coronavirus caused the UK Government (along with many others across the world) to enforce an unprecedented 'lockdown'. Unless you were a key worker, the acute 'stay at home' period resulted in restrictions on daily movement and freedoms that were unparalleled in peace time. Exercising outside – once a day, for one hour, either '*on your own or with members of your household*' - was cited by the Conservative Government as a valid but exceptional reason for leaving home. The only other valid reasons were to buy essential items (food or medication), care for others, and attend work (although employers were encouraged to facilitate home working where possible) (Malcolm & Velija, 2020).

No indoor sports or leisure facilities were open, and playgrounds were closed. Some schools and nurseries remained open for children whose parents were identified as key or essential workers. In some instances, the furlough scheme (also known as the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme provided financial support for adults who could not undertake their employment duties) provided many families with a slower pace of life and more time to spend together. Whilst those who continued to work (i.e. essential and/or key workers) often found the pressures of balancing work, family life and childcare extremely challenging and found this had an impact on family wellbeing (Chung et al., 2020).

Then England moved to a 'stay alert' phase. From May 2020, you could meet one other person from outside your household and outdoor activities expanded. In June 2020, schools began a phased reopening in England. Groups of six were allowed to meet outdoors. In July, playgrounds reopened, and organised sport restarted, followed by gyms and pools reopening. Soft-play centres were allowed to reopen in August. September saw the restriction to indoor team sport reintroduced,

but schools reopened for all pupils. Tiered (1–3) restrictions were implemented at a regional/level throughout England on the 14<sup>th</sup> October. England then went into its second national lockdown on the 5<sup>th</sup> November until 2<sup>nd</sup> December. Rules were relaxed for five days over the Christmas period but England entered its third national lockdown on the 6<sup>th</sup> January 2021, with restrictions applied to all organised and outdoor activity and closure of indoor leisure spaces such as gyms and pools. Our research captured the initial UK lockdown and then further lockdowns over the winter period.

During this time, ECE providers (e.g. nurseries and pre-schools) and schools were navigating a complexity of local and national restrictions to remain open for pupils. During the initial lockdown ECE providers and schools were closed on Wednesday 18<sup>th</sup> March 2020, and national examinations due to take place that year were cancelled. Covid-19 caused the biggest disruption to children's education since the start of the Second World War (Timmons, 2021). Home schooling began and lessons moved online for most UK children. Schools did their best to provide devices such as tablets or laptops to families who needed them the most although this scheme was not without its issues and delays. Schools were then allowed to open to key/critical worker children. Yet, despite their best efforts, some ECE providers found staying open for smaller numbers of children unworkable and many private nurseries and pre-schools were forced to shut (with some still charging parents full fees whilst closed). Key/critical worker children who stayed in ECE settings had a more familiar routine, and overall, a different lockdown experience.

### **Procedures**

An online survey was developed through Jisc's Online Survey platform and institutional ethical approval was granted from the second author's institution (approval number: 19177). The survey was devised by the authors, reviewed, and piloted with parents who had pre-school aged children prior to dissemination. The pilot allowed us to determine how long it would likely take for people to complete the survey and to make some very minor changes for clarity and conciseness. The survey opened in October 2020 and closed at the end of January 2021 to capture data across various lockdowns. The survey included a combination of open and closed questions as well Likert scale-based questions and sought to gather information on family demographics and PA pre-and-during the various stages of lockdown in the UK. We also sought to identify any potential enduring trends developed because of the pandemic.

The survey link was shared by organisations who work with or have an interest in early years children and their families such as group providers and nurseries and social media sites (i.e. Facebook™ and Twitter™). Finally, we asked participants to leave contact information (e.g. an email address) if they were happy to be contacted about participating in a follow up interview at the end of the survey. Procedures were clearly communicated to participants before consent was given and participants were made aware that survey responses were only stored once they pressed the submit button at the end of the survey.

Eighty participants who had left contact details were randomly selected and invited to participate in a follow-up semi-structured interview. Sixteen individuals agreed to take part and were interviewed over Microsoft Teams due to the national focus and restrictions in place at the time of interviewing. All interviews were recorded in Teams but interviewees were not required to switch on their camera. All ethical procedures (e.g. cooling off period, information sheets, informed consent, and debrief) were followed. Interviews ranged from 32 minutes to 60 minutes and were transcribed verbatim.

The survey was comprised of 5 sections: i) demographics (including household income, gender, number and age of children, access to indoor and/or outdoor space, and internet access) ii) physical activity routines prior to Covid-19, iii) physical activity during the stay-at-home phase, iv) physical activity during the stay alert phase, and v) physical activity during ongoing restrictions and lockdowns. The follow-up interviews were designed around the same format and were tailored to each participant based on their survey responses. Questions asked in the interviews were designed

to understand survey responses in more depth. For example, we asked parents if they had used online PA resources during lockdown and to provide a list of the apps/resources they had used. If parents had indicated that they had used online PA resources, we explored how the apps/resources were used, how often they were used, how families had found the apps, why online PA was used and for what purposes during the follow-up interviews.

### **Data analysis**

The interview transcripts were analysed using a thematic analysis approach. The survey and the follow-up interviews resulted in a large data set. Therefore, for the purposes of this paper, the analysis focused on aspects of the interview data that related to PA routines prior, during and after various lockdowns including the use of online activities. Familiarisation with the data was an important and necessary first phase. Transcripts were read several times and the appropriate sections of data were then coded (phase 2). Phases three, four and five included generating themes, developing and reviewing themes and then the reordering, reorganising, and renaming those initial themes. This process was undertaken with multiple highlighters and printed out transcripts before moving the relevant quotes back into word documents. The sixth phase involved 'writing matters for analysis' (i.e. writing up the analysis for dissemination) (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

To ensure participant confidentiality and anonymity, pseudonyms were used during the transcription and analysis phases (e.g. P1, P2 and so on). The authors acted as critical friends regularly discussing the analysis of data. This critical dialogue allowed us to challenge the interpretations each had made throughout the analysis process to enhance the rigour of our findings (Smith & McGannon, 2018). As middle-class mothers, we were mindful of our positioning and potential biases when designing the study, we are both women who have children under the age of 11 and whose pandemic experiences were also shaped by working full time at home with small children at home, balancing work, home-schooling and changes to family routines and family life. Having experienced these issues ourselves, we were acutely aware of the parental pressures from media, schools, social groups to ensure children were not falling behind.

### **Results and discussion**

To provide some context to the data, 96% of our survey sample identified as White, 86% had a household income of over £30,000 and 87% perceived PA to be an important or very important part of their under 5's daily routine. The survey results indicate that 348 families (38% of our sample) tried online PA classes/sessions during the pandemic with mixed success. Demographics for the 16 participants who engaged with the follow-up interviews can be seen in [Table 1](#).

#### **Early years and technology use**

##### **Parenting, digital technology and screen time**

Online technologies have transformed the way people access and share information and parents now also have a responsibility to keep their child(ren) safe online (Barnes & Potter, 2021). Parents are regularly provided with a narrative to protect and monitor their children's screen time and online use which Barnes and Potter (2021) argue is framed within a control paradigm. When we discussed online PA, screen time was a common theme and it seems many of the parents in our survey and subsequent interviews were keen to reduce their child(ren)'s exposure to screens during the pandemic. One parent told us:

My daughter had quite a bit of screen time, as we used FaceTime so much. I felt like she gets more screen time already with just the video calls and I didn't really want to add too much more screen time. I'm hoping to start taking my daughters to some outside activities where she can be a bit more active (P12)



Table 1. Participant demographic data (for tailored, follow-up interviews).

I.D	Gender	Ethnicity	Household income	Work status during Covid – 19	Main care giver during Covid-19	Private outdoor space	Perceived importance of PA	PA activities before Covid-19	PA cost - £ per month
P1	F	White British	More than £100,000	Mother on maternity leave	Both parents	Back garden	Essential	Swimming, football, gymnastics	£120
P2	F	White British	£56,000 - £99,000	Employed part time	Both parents	Front and back garden	Essential	Dancing, swimming, gymnastics	£25
P3	F	White British	£31,000- £55,000	Employed part time	Both parents	Yard (no grass)	Essential	Swimming, football, dance, gymnastics	£80
P4	F	White British	£31,000- £55,000	Employed part time	Both parents	Front and back garden	Essential	Football, gymnastics	£90
P5	F	White British	Less than £15,000	Lost job during lockdown/student	Grandparents	Front and back garden	Essential	Dance	£20
P6	F	White British	£31,000- £55,000	Employed full time	Grandparents	Front and back garden	Important	Football, swimming	£60
P7	M	White British	£56,000 - £99,000	Employed part time	Both parents	Front and back garden	Important	Swimming, dance, football	£250
P8	F	White British	£56,000 - £99,000	Employed full time	Nursery/Pre-school (+15 hours per week)	Back garden	Somewhat important	Gymnastics	£50
P9	F	Multiple races	£56,000 - £99,000	Employed full time	Both parents	Front and back garden other	Somewhat important	Swimming	£45+
P10	M	White British	£31,000- £55,000	Employed full time	Mother	None	Somewhat important	Swimming	£60
P11	F	White British	£16,000 - £30,000	Employed full time	Nursery/Pre-school (+15 hours per week)	Yard (no grass)	Somewhat important	Swimming, ballet, acrobatics, gymnastics	£174
P12	F	White British	£56,000 - £99,000	Employed full time	Nursery/Pre-school (+15 hours per week)	Yard (no grass)	Somewhat important	Trips to the park with our dog	£0
P13	F	White British	More than £100,000	Employed full time	Mother	Back garden, balcony	Somewhat important	Informal PA	£0
P14	F	White British	£31,000- £55,000	Employed full time	Both parents	Front and back garden	Important	Soft play	£14
P15	F	White British	£31,000- £55,000	Employed full time	Mother	Yard (no grass)	Important	Informal PA	£0
P16	F	White British	£16,000 - £30,000	Employed part time	Both parents	None	Important	No information	£0

Another parent explained why their daughter's screen time was minimised:

I tried to continue with the baby classes that had moved online. But they were they were not very physical activity based. Ava was just obsessed with the screen . . . I didn't feel right doing these things with the screen. We really wanted to limit her screen activities. I was brought up with the TV on constantly, so I wanted something a little bit different for Ava. It's the pull of the screen, it's like hypnotising . . . I felt a little bit of guilt every time I put on a screen. I just wanted to take the time to go outside instead (P16)

The pressure on parents and contemporary parenting styles have meant that parents internalise concerns about screen time and feel that their children should be involved in activities which benefit them. During the pandemic parents were also adjusting to a new way of living, working, and parenting. The guilt associated with not overusing technology was something else for parents to worry about. Such worries reflect current trends in concerted cultivation where parents are under pressure to ensure that children are involved in meaningful activities which will enhance their skills (Lareau, 2003).

Covid-19 lockdowns provided many challenges for families but for those who were required to work from home and juggle childcare, digital technologies provided the opportunity to keep children entertained whilst parents worked:

He'd [participants husband] would have an important meeting or I'd have a meeting and you just stick them on an iPad, or you stick them in front of the TV and that was the reality. I know that was the reality for a lot of children and a lot of parents, and you don't feel good about it, but you have meetings at a certain time and as much as your job might be flexible around your working hours, you have to do some of it (P2)

The pressures of reducing screen time for young children were felt by many parents, and as the parent above mentions, many did not like using screen time as an entertainment tool but thought that they had no other option when looking after children so young and needing to work. Nursery had closed for this child, leaving the parents to juggle work and childcare which proved to be exhausting. Concerns about screen time and poor parenting can be seen in the work of Vincent and Maxwell (2016) who found that giving children computer games was positioned in the Paired Peers project as passive parenting that lacked imagination and effort. The social interaction between everyday life and societal expectations is complex (Sandberg et al., 2021), and while parents and families may respond differently, all parents are aware of *how* you parent is judged by others, particularly in relation to perceived good versus bad technology use.

### *Suitability of online physical activity for early years children*

The survey asked parents if their young children had used online physical activities during lockdown (yes/no) and asked parents to tell us which apps/online activities they had used in an open text box. Joe Wicks (marketed as an online PE lesson replacement/high intensity interval training) and Cosmic Kids (a yoga programme which uses storytelling to deliver yoga and mindfulness sessions) were the most popular online activities that our sample engaged with. We then asked parents more about their use of online PA during the follow-up interviews to explore their experiences in more depth.

Despite the debates regarding the relevance of Joe Wicks for younger children and the obvious criticism that he is not a PE teacher, Joe Wick's PE sessions were the most popular choice for our families. As mentioned above, Cosmic Kids along with other types of kids' yoga, dancing videos and general fitness sessions were also very popular, however the suitability of these sessions was raised by many parents. The age of the child(ren) was also a common discussion point. It seems that many of the pre-school children were *'too young'* to engage with online activities, even though children are becoming technology literate at an increasingly younger age (Byrne et al., 2021):

We did give Joe Wicks a go, but I think I enjoyed it more than she [daughter] did. I think she might have been a bit too young for it. I think it was more to do with her doing exercise and having fun. I think at this age it's important that they're . . . having fun. I think it was hard for Faye in the first lockdown because she was two, she was too young to understand any of the stuff that was going on the TV or YouTube. We played hide and seek a lot. We played tag a lot, all the little simple games which she seemed to enjoy (P5)

Pressures on parents, alongside the media focus on the importance of activities, such as Joe Wicks, were too much for some parents and families. However, parents were still trying to plan and facilitate activities that were deemed to be meaningful and cultivating in order to be ‘good’ parents.

### **Online activities versus live classes**

#### **Children’s engagement and interest with online activities**

Parents pointed out the differences in engagement between live classes (delivered before Covid-19 lockdowns) and classes delivered via online platforms during lockdown.

It’s very different seeing how she engages in the swimming classes or if we’re outside. When it comes to screens, I think it’s a different reaction. I’m not sure if that’s to do with the technology or to do with the screen. I don’t think she’s old enough to stay engaged. Whereas if she’s in the pool and she’s with my wife then that’s kind of like a controlled environment . . . She doesn’t have the distraction of her toys or wanting to run off and do something else (P10)

Parents often made the comparison between the behaviour and concentrations levels of their child during online classes versus the in-person classes. When talking to the parents there seemed to complexities between the different PA approaches and were often pitted against each other as an either-or dichotomy, with screens depicted as problematic for early years children. For example, other parents told us that online activities did not engage their children despite efforts to get them to do the activities:

They couldn’t maintain their concentration and all three of us got really frustrated, because I’m trying to keep them interested in the classes and they’re really not. I was getting frustrated with them for just messing around. They were getting frustrated with me for being so pushy about these classes. They’re not going to continue it later in life, even when they’re a little bit older. I don’t think online classes is something that we’ll be able to do properly (P11)

Parents acknowledged the importance of physical activity and often viewed it as a meaningful part of their daily routine. Many parents felt the need to pursue such activities despite a lack of interest which often led to frustration.

Some of the franchises/businesses providing baby, toddler and pre-school enrichment activities found the transition from live classes to online delivery easier than some, but for those who could deliver sessions online, it provided an opportunity to stay engaged with customers during the lockdown periods. One parent whose child was able to maintain their gymnastics activities found the move online helpful as it maintained a familiar routine:

We did the little gym which is like a gymnastics class. They were really good actually. He liked doing the activities, but he did just like looking at the people and saying hello to them. I think more than anything for me it was the routine, for him it was more just seeing the people’s faces. Obviously, it’s not as good as being there in person but it’s something to do (P1)

As the parent above highlights, engagement with online PA was a way for parents to maintain familiar routines by engaging with the enrichment activities undertaken prior to Covid-19 that have become a key feature of (largely but not exclusively) middle-class parenting. Many parents sought activities that they could do with their young child(ren) whilst allowing them to interact with people outside of their household.

For families that did use online activities and found them useful, many of the parents would go on to say that whilst their young child enjoyed the activities, they were not as good as going to live classes. One parent told us: *‘Initially it went quite well, but she got bored much quicker than she would have done in person’* (P2).

Some of our participants mentioned the value of routine and structure these activities gave, whilst others acknowledged that they may have found the activities more beneficial than their

children. Parents often found online classes beneficial initially, but their toddlers and/or pre-schoolers lost interest and/or did not find them as valuable or useful as face-to-face activity. The extent to which online activities can engage early years children sustainably warrants further consideration. It appears for this age group and the reasons why parents value these activities, in-person classes prevail. In-person classes are valued because they are considered to enrich children in ways that online PA cannot and therefore these opportunities cannot provide the same experiences to early years children and their parents.

### *Importance of specialist and social spaces for early years children*

When asked why they thought that their young child(ren) engaged better in face-to-face sessions than online, many of the parents acknowledged the space in which the activities were undertaken in was an important aspect for early years children. One parent told us:

They've gone [before lockdown] to dance and there is a specific environment, the dance floor with all the mirrors, the mats, and the equipment that they seem to recognise as dancing. I think whatever they learned to associate with the dancing, or with the dance teachers, it's not the same at home, generally. They miss the friends, the mission, the social aspect of it as well. I think they missed the routine of going to certain classes (P11)

Not only were specialist spaces acknowledged as important but so was the social element such classes provided before lockdown. The impact the pandemic would have on the development of social/emotional skills in early years children was regularly raised and discussed throughout the various lockdowns. Fox and colleagues state that socioemotional development was of the greatest concern to families and practitioners with much of the harm 'attributed to the lack of social interaction' (2021: 3). One parent explained why she was looking forward to activities resuming:

I think what I'm looking forward to the most once things open is her socialising with other children. I think she's been so cooped up with adults. I mean there's been some benefits to that. I've noticed her speech and language come on really well because she's just been locked in with us adults. So, there's been a bit of development with her communication skills but I'd be happier seeing her spend more time with other children (P5)

She then went on to emphasise the importance of peer learning and engagement to her child:

When she's in a group with other children she first observes, until she feels comfortable and then she joins in. I think she's very much peer led even though she has her own little ways of doing stuff . . . I think if it's me doing it she gets bored and messes around. But if she's in a group with children of a similar age she'll join in more because she wants to be doing what the other kids are doing (P5).

For parents, they articulate the ways they consider these activities to have wider benefits for early years children to engage with others and follow their peers. Another parent stressed how socialising with other children was the main priority and a key reason for attending classes:

I think before lockdown it was getting ready, going out, seeing other children, that was the main sort of priority. And online doesn't really do that for children. Probably better for adults I would think (P8)

Parents recognised the importance of, and associations young children make when in, specialised physical spaces, but parents also told us that their children were more likely to engage and listen to another adult (i.e. the teacher or coach as opposed to the parent). This has been a common finding across our research (Allen et al., 2021). For example, one parent highlighted:

You can't really do gymnastics online. You haven't got the same equipment; you haven't got the same social side that you're playing in a team or playing with a partner. Yeah, it's very different . . . the Joe Wick becomes samey, like you're in your house, you're doing something online and it kind of feels very samey. Whereas when you go to a class it might be a different activity and it just feels different, and you've got more reason to engage with the person and the activities. As we all know, your own children do not listen to you as much as they listen to someone else. I think that's one of the big differences is having that teacher/coach physical person there because they absolutely listen to those more than they would listen to you trying to do a class at home (P4)

Parents often told us the important of the *expert* (e.g. the class teacher or sports coach) in getting their children to listen and follow instructions but also the reassurance that the expert has specific knowledge to develop their child in a way that parents feel they cannot. However, parents felt the expert did not work as well online and children needed to be in the same physical space to get the most out of the expert. One parent noted:

It was completely different online. When there's a teacher in the room, she will sit, she will listen, she will follow instructions, she'll still be a bit of a loony tune, but she will engage with the teacher. With a teacher online she wasn't engaged (P3)

We have previously acknowledged that the commercial early years sport and leisure market is popular for multiple reasons but one important consideration for parents is that a professional qualified person (e.g. the teacher or coach) is perceived to be listened to more by their young child(ren), and in these settings is able to negotiate and encourage their children more effectively (Allen et al., 2021). Moreover, the baby, toddler, and pre-school market, with specialist coaches has created a space where parents are willing to pay for an activity to have a specialist lead on delivering specific PA skills.

## Access and use of technology

### Challenges with digital technology and devices

De' et al. (2020) argue that Covid-19 brought a necessary need for internet access and those who did not have access faced total social isolation. During lockdown digital inequality became far more apparent with those in low-income households most likely to be affected both in terms of the number and type of devices but also the amount of data available (Beaunoyer et al., 2020). One parent told us:

With regards to the online classes, they just couldn't do them. We didn't have the technology for it . . . I think maybe if I'd had better technology at home, they might have been more interested. But because it was only on my phone, they couldn't see the teacher properly . . . Maybe if there was potentially a bigger screen or something like that, they would have been more engaged. If I'd had the money, I would have bought a smart TV or used Facebook rooms or do the classes with YouTube on my TV (P11)

As with access to digital technology, not all families had access to appropriate indoor and/or outdoor space. Access the families had to outdoor spaces is highlighted in [Table 1](#) but many of families felt that online PA was in fact an indoor pursuit:

To me it felt like we needed to be doing it outside but then the [football] videos needed to be inside . . . it could have been on a tablet or phone, but we didn't actually use them even though they were provided (P4)

The fact that families conducted online activities indoors appeared to cause some issues – replicating sport classes in an indoor home setting appeared to be challenging as one Father pointed out:

We set up little activities for Oscar like training drills that he does in football to replicate them indoors with some training discs and some cones and that kind of stuff and just got him to go around the living room, that was quite fun, interactive, but we don't live in a mansion, so it's not possible to replicate what they have in the sports hall (P7)

It was also apparent that for some families, PA was enjoyed more in outdoor spaces. This was a common finding in our survey data, where parents told us that during the first lockdown their early years children were active in outdoor spaces (in line the restrictions and exercise guidelines), largely in part to the nice weather the UK was experiencing at the time (Allen & Velija, [in press](#)):

[We preferred] doing the stuff properly outside rather than being inside watching somebody else exercise inside. It's just depressing. If you're gonna do something, do it outside (P14)

### ***Sustainability of online physical activity beyond the pandemic***

The pandemic caused many families to adapt and change their usual routines with 38% of the families in our study trying online PA. As we have discussed throughout the paper, there were mixed responses to this new way of being active and we sought to understand how sustainable online PA would be once pandemic restrictions were lifted. When parents were asked if they would use online PA classes beyond the pandemic one parent said:

I'm gonna carry on with the yoga and meditation because we've been quite enjoying that, and I'm trying to teach her about mindfulness. We'll definitely carry on with some of the things we've discovered on YouTube that she seems to enjoy. But I am really excited for things opening for her. You know, being out there and playing with other kids (P4)

Whilst some of the families we spoke to enjoyed online PA classes, in-person classes prevailed for many parents. For this parent, the dichotomy was not online versus in-person but rather that online PA filled a gap during the pandemic and the online classes that were enjoyed and valued would be included in future routines. However, the overwhelming response was that online activity was unlikely to be part of family routines once restrictions were lifted and pre-lockdown routines could be restarted. One parent said:

I hope not. I know that there's some baby classes that we did that are still running. Although they are back in person this week, they are still running them online because they've noticed that there's a market for people that can't get out or might be feeling anxious or just having a bad day or whatever that they're still running their sessions online. But I think a lot of it for me is getting out the house. I think she's much more focused if we're actually in the place and she gets a lot more out of it if she's actually in person with the actual prop, seeing other children do the same things that she's doing (P2)

Another parent acknowledged that online PA would remain part of her own routine but was unlikely that her children would continue to engage with online classes, suggesting that online PA provide meaningful experiences for adults but are not perceived to be as valuable for young children:

I use them for myself. But in terms of my children – probably not. Now we can get out when we can, we can ride our bikes and we can go outside and things like that. I might consider it over winter . . . but I probably wouldn't (P15).

Finally, when asked the same question another parent told us:

If something happened and then they offered an online one because of how things went, we might try it again, but it's not something I would openly pay for. On the flip side, I do see if you are someone with limited transport, if you or someone with limited funds, it may be more beneficial and something that they would be interested in, but just for us it wouldn't be something I would be willing to pay for if it was just online. We are lucky we have cars; we can travel. We have the financial ability to pay for these sessions that are £7, £8, £9 a session for each of them. But if you're in a flat with no car then maybe online would be good. No garden, then something online may be very positive. We're lucky, I guess it's a bit selfish (P4)

It is middle-class parents who are most able to invest in numerous enrichment activities for their young children, and in the case of P4, are aware of this. This parent highlights that online activities might have their place for those without the access to space and travel but those with available funds are able to secure more opportunities for their child(ren).

### **Conclusion and future considerations**

This article highlights the dominance and popularity of commercialised franchises and businesses providing sport-based classes for early years children, as well as presenting what parents did to adapt when these in-person, commercial classes were suddenly removed from family routine. Our data emphasises the reasons why parents value structured and external PA and the perceived benefits they bring. We argue that there are aspects of concerted cultivation in the

decisions they make. Concerns that parents have about increased screen time is not only focused on developmental issues but also concerns about what constitutes good parenting. Sourcing opportunities for children to experience a range of enrichment activities is now part of contemporary (middle-class) parenting. This reflects wider trends in parenting identified by Lareau (2003) whereby parents with the capital to do so choose activities that they perceive can enrich their children's skills in ways that may benefit them in school and other settings. While Lareau (2003) and others (e.g., Vincent and Maxwell, 2016; Wheeler and Green, 2018; 2019) have identified patterns relating to concerted cultivation in older children, our research alongside Vincent, Smyth and Harlow et al. suggests a downtrend in which parents of pre-school children are also encouraged to seek opportunities from increasingly earlier ages.

Our data shows that the pandemic resulted in a reduction in PA for many toddlers and pre-school aged children – a trend that appears to be consistent across age groups and countries that experienced similar restrictions to the UK. Digital platforms provided an alternative way for people to maintain their activity in their home environment and were used by over a third of our survey sample. While some found online exercise and PA videos useful, most found them to be a different experience. Online PA classes aimed at toddlers and pre-schoolers did not provide the types of cultivation that parents valued such as expert led engagement with the child, socialisation through group interaction, and routine out of the house that middle-class parents seemed to value and were willing to pay for. Whilst this is not the case for all parents, we certainly identified patterns of behaviour around a desire and pressure experienced by parents for cultivation within our study.

The innovation of digital technology appears to be relentless. Parents and ECE providers have a responsibility to teach young children how to navigate the digital world. Therefore, further research on the suitability of online PA is warranted to understand the use of online PA across the home and ECE settings. Whilst online PA was not appealing for the majority of parents we spoke to, it is possible that online PA has real potential moving forward. As privatisation is here stay (Evans & Davies, 2015), online PA may be of use to families who do not have the economical capital to access the enrichment activities offered by commercialised businesses. Online PA could provide an alternative provision but it could equally be another space that some families are excluded from such as those living in poverty who cannot afford the technology devices and internet access to engage online. There is also a need to understand the use of online PA in ECE and school settings (Joseph et al., 2019). Therefore, we recommend further research is conducted to understand the suitability and sustainability for children and their families to understand who online PA works for and in what situations.

While this paper focused on parents, and their decision making and views, the nature of the pandemic and the age range of the early years children, it was (and continues to be) the parents who ultimately made decisions about the physical activities undertaken by their child(ren). Our article therefore has provided a unique insight into their views of online PA with early years children during UK lockdowns and moving beyond pandemic restrictions. However, further work is warranted as we learn to live with Covid-19 and move beyond the pandemic.

## Disclosure statement

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

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