**Impact of COVID-19 in the EARLY YEARS** By Kayleigh O’Brien

Coronavirus hit the UK in early 2020, it was a pandemic that became widespread very quickly and touched almost everyone in one way or another. Everyone fought their own personal battles with COVID-19, some through direct effect of the illness, some dealing with loved ones who were infected, some mourning ang grieving the loss of important people in their lives while they could not even attend burials or visit them in the hospitals, others through unending isolation and for many, the unknown. The pandemic shut down the UK with key workers being at the front line risking their lives each day; as time progressed, we were met with safety measures, PPE and eventually a vaccine. Although COVID is becoming safer to live with, the devastating impacts will remain, and some effects will last a lifetime. Children within the early years had taken on a new way of life with social clubs and parks being non-existent, having no experience of socialising with others and having their caregivers as their only learning resource.

I have seen many children come back to nursery after the lock down falling behind in areas like PSED, communication and language, and many full of anxiety. Many parents are also anxious and finds it difficult to separate from their child at the nursery. We have had to give room for longer settling in period to support separation anxieties of both children and parents which has helped.

Apart from the fact that children have not been away from their parent all through the lockdown, one of the major factors I see is the living conditions or environment of most of the families in our setting. Majority live in flats where there are no opportunities for children to run and exert their energy.

Another important factor to consider was how parents as a result of the isolation and closure of social clubs, baby group, nurseries, schools etc became the primary and only educator for their children at home. We found most children were able to count from 1-20 and recognise these numbers while some could recite all the letters of the alphabet by the time they joined the nursery at the age of 2. Although this is not to discredit the parents in any way but to highlight how fundamental social needs have not been met for many children. In the early years and child development, the focus in the early stage of development is the PRIME area which consists of social and emotional development, communication and language and physical development. These are fundamental in a child’s learning process and when a child is exposed to new experiences and activities, they grow strong enough exploratory desire to then begin learning maths, literacy and gain an understanding of the world and how to express themselves. These situations have further exacerbated the effect COVID-19 has on children.

**What Practitioners can do to bridge the gap**

To support children and parents with separation anxiety, practitioners can send weekly updates of each child's adventures, invite parents to stay for settling in sessions and additional sessions if necessary and ensure they gather as much information as possible about the child and the home from the parents in order to prepare them for nursery.

Practitioners may introduce a transition book for children that are having difficulties settling in; this can include pictures and names of staff members, images of different areas, a short visual timetable and images of what they can pack in their bags to prepare for nursery. This can be brought home and shared between parent and child.

Practitioners can support parents to understand the importance of the prime area of development as the starting point for children. This will give parent a clearer picture of what their child should be doing at every stage. Having this understanding will help parents to scale back their focus on specific area of learning and engage more in the prime area.

With many news articles highlighting communication and language being the biggest impact of COVID for children within early years, there is a pressure to ensure children are expanding on their social and play skills to improve their overall communication and language. Practitioners should ensure a high focused communication and language-based activities are provided throughout the setting. This could include group interactions and one on one talk times where children have the opportunity for an open-ended conversation, sustained shared thinking to express their thoughts and feelings. This could happen throughout their time at nursery both indoor and outdoor. A good example is supporting children to do show and tell at circle or other group time at nursery. This does not only help the children’s communication and language development but also help in building their confidence and social skills.

Practitioners should have sufficient training in the area of speech and language in order to be able to provide the needed support in children’s communication and language skills. Practitioners can do this in various ways including the use of Makaton, visual aids, timeline etc to get the most out of each child’s communication and language experiences. Practitioners can support children with English as second Language (EAL) to expand their knowledge by learning some key words in their home language and using it to communicate while at nursery.

We can not overemphasize the importance of working with parents especially at this time. Practitioners must ensure a close work relationship with parents of all their key children with regular contacts, feedbacks, exchanging of ideas and so on for maximum result.

In our setting, we make books available for children to take home so that children and parents can share them together. We also have workbooks that allow for at home learning which sometimes include suggestions as to what the parents could do at home with their children to continue their learning and development. The feedback has been positive, and we are looking at including two at home activities per half term for children to practise at home, such as learning a new song, mark making, messy play etc. We have had strong success with parents coming in to talk about what they do with the children. We hope to continue this collaboration and probably include play with parents days or using celebrations such as a Father’s day tea/coffee morning etc for parents to have the chance to come into nursery and interact with their children in a different environment.

The impacts of Covid pandemic will probably remain for a long time to come. No one can understand the depth and breadth of such impacts on their development. Hopefully, with all hands-on deck and many efforts being put in place by Practitioners, parents and in collaboration with the government at various levels, we can minimize such impacts and hopefully close the gaps we have seen in children’s learning and development.