

KAREN FOLEY: Welcome back to Student Hub Live. In this session, we are going to focus on the Children's Research Centre. I'm joined by Natalie Canning, who is a Co-director of the Children's Research Centre at the OU.

Natalie's research is on children's empowerment, play, and giving children a voice in exploring their understanding of rights. And she's also part of the Early Childhood team you may have recognised from previous Student Hub Live events where we've been talking about curriculum. And she works as an area lead for children and youth on the professional doctorate programme.

But we're going to talk about the Children's Research Centre. Welcome, Natalie. I wonder if you can fill us in on what it is and what sort of stuff you're doing there.

NATALIE CANNING: Hi, Karen. Nice to see you today. So yeah, the Children's Research Centre is a group of academics within The Open University but also outside of The Open University. And they're people who are interested in doing research with children and young people and also about children and young people as well. So there's sort of two strands to it.

And we support other professionals as well who are interested in doing research with young children and helping young children and young people to lead their own research. So for example, teachers in schools setting up after school groups where young people really want to explore an issue that's really important to them.

And also community groups bringing lots of different young people together to discuss issues that are really important to them, so for example, things that have been happening recently with the coronavirus and how that's affected their education. And trying then to help adults understand the important issues for young people and what we could potentially do to support them through that process.

KAREN FOLEY: One of the things we were talking about a little bit earlier today was-- someone was sharing their experience as a primary teacher meant that children had so many more emotional needs right now that they were dealing with as a result of the pandemic. And you've been working on some projects, one of them specifically looking at children's experiences of the pandemic.

NATALIE CANNING: Yeah, that's right. So Liz Chamberlain, a colleague at The Open University, and some other researchers did a survey with young people, asking them for their experiences during the pandemic and how that made them feel and what they potentially see as the solutions to some of those issues. And then they brought that together in a report and a poster that's child friendly but also really accessible to lots of different people.

And some of those things are quite surprising. So yes, although children are saying that the pandemic has been impacting on their health and well-being, also there's been some really surprising things come out of that-- for example, the way in which children have found real resilience through the process of not doing normal things and the way that they have been really creative in finding ways to connect with other children and to be part of something even though that might be remotely online.

KAREN FOLEY: And we've got a widget that we'd like people to fill in at home which I know people are talking about already, which is, what does resilience mean to you? Donna Marie says, "Persisting in the face of adversity." Kitty says, "It means bouncing forward and not back after a setback." So really interesting sorts of projects there that you're looking at. Another one that you've been working on is the Children's Heard Project.

NATALIE
CANNING: Yep, that's right. So partnering with the organisation, Children's Heard, and again looking at the way in which the coronavirus has been impacted on young people and the effect that that's had on their lives. So you can go direct to there, the Children Heard website, and have a look at that research and report findings.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. Eric, how is everyone doing at home? I know people are talking a lot about resilience in the chat, some interesting points being made there in terms of what it means for everybody.

ERIC ADDAE-
KYEREMEH: Yes, and a couple of examples, so Colin is talking about coping and dealing with extraordinary pressures and demands. Sangeeta has raised an interesting point around staying strong at the face of trouble, struggles at hard times. And I think people are finding ways to remain resilient and remain strong with all the different challenges that we're facing.

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely. But it's difficult, I think, for children because while we can articulate some of our experiences, Natalie for children, it may be hard to sort of voice or conceptualise some of these things. They may not even sort of understand what resilience might mean or why it might be important.

So you've been using different methods in terms of artwork, for example, to be able to talk to and communicate with children. Can you talk to us about some of the ways in which you're trying to elicit their voices and let them be heard?

NATALIE
CANNING: Yeah, so, yeah, children might not understand those big terms that we use as adults. But actually, just giving children opportunities to do things that they are really interested in is really important. So allowing them to follow their own interests, whether that be perhaps through artwork or other creative ways, through drama, or role play.

Also being outside-- if you've got the space to do that, that's always a really great thing for children to be able to be outside and exploring their natural environment, different things that are going on in that environment. If you have a pet, they're usually really fantastic to be able to support children also emotionally as well as thinking about what they're doing when they're playing with their pets and following that through.

In terms of thinking about what are they actually showing you-- so although the end product might be a picture, or it might be a play that they want to put on for you, what are the things that are underlying in that? What are they actually showing you through those things? What are the messages that you can take away as an adult from that?

So can you see the enjoyment that's happening while they're playing, while they're creating those art materials, creating that little play, involving their pets along the way? Can you tune into their conversations that they're having? Can you see from what they've produced whether there is something particular that is really important to them that you could potentially follow that through at a later date or a later time? Or perhaps something that you would like to follow up and talk to them a little bit more about?

So it's kind of like taking notice of what children are doing, allowing them to have that ability to follow their own interests and have their own kind of agenda with what they are doing within the situation. But then picking up on those cues that they are showing you through what they're producing or what they're saying at the time or perhaps how they feel afterwards, having a conversation after they've done an activity, and asking what they particularly enjoyed about it, and then perhaps trying to build on that at a later date-- all of those things really help to understand what's happening for children at the time in that moment and then realising how, as adults, we can support them further.

And it's, I think, the same principles are there for older children as well. So for teenagers, it's the same kind of thing. They might not want to do the same kind of activities that young children want to do. But equally, just giving them that space for them to allow to do something that they want to do, there's always a concern that young people spend too much time on devices or online or in front of not interacting with other humans but actually just giving young people that space to do that. And as long as there's a balance within that, then as adults, we shouldn't be too concerned about that.

KAREN FOLEY: As Deborah says, "It's about knowing when to step in and when we need to take control of those situations." Zoe says, on the subject that you were talking about animals and things, they've got a therapy dog at their school, which is amazing. And the children really love it.

But the experience, as you say, has been quite different. And one of the things that it's been different for is people with special educational needs and also this whole notion of home schooling. I mean, it's been a challenge for the adults-- it certainly has in my house-- but also a real challenge for the students. And we've been spending a lot of time talking about our own work-life boundaries. And I imagine much have been the same for children.

But in particular for children with special educational needs, there must have been quite an impact. One of the-- people are saying-- Shirley says her grandson's speech has suffered because of the school closure. So there's been less interaction, and now he's feeling very shy about things also. I mean, of course, kids have missed out on things which are now quite big, like the forest schools and outdoor things, which we know we weren't able to enjoy during the pandemic.

So Natalie, you've looked at children with special educational needs. What were your findings and colleagues' about some of the ways in which the pandemic had an impact?

NATALIE CANNING: Yeah, so myself and Beryl Robinson, who is a parent of an autistic teenager-- we did some research about how they were coping-- children and their families were coping through the first lockdown, because that was just so very different to what anyone had ever experienced before. So we did that through social media groups and online interviews and telephone interviews, talking to parents and young people about how they were feeling and how they were coping with those situations.

And it was interesting to think about how the technology that everybody kind of jumped on in that very first lockdown-- you know, the hundreds of thousands of online meetings that were going on and the way that schools were kind of timetabling in the same way that they perhaps would have timetabled in a face-to-face situation, how that was actually really quite a stressful process for children with additional needs and complex needs and how that pressure filtered down to parents as well.

So they felt that they had to put their child in front of that screen to take that call with all their classmates, and so on. And actually, it was important for parents to feel empowered that they could say no to that and that they could see what was happening to their child and think about what was best for them. And what was best for them was not always taking part in all of those online activities that schools had planned for them.

I think there's a real need to be able to step back from those situations and to understand what's right for your child at that time. And what's right for one child might not be right for another child and, as an adult and as a parent, to be able to feel that you can say no to that and not put your child under additional pressure to take part in those kinds of things.

And there is that society pressure that you think, oh well, if I don't do that, my child is going to fall behind, and they're not going to learn enough, and they're not going to have enough. But actually, well-being and mental health for your child is much more important than anything that they might or probably won't learn by being put in a pressurised situation.

And some parents were reporting that actually they were having to do the work that was set for the child themselves on top of their work as well, their employment, because they felt like they had to show that their child was participating and doing something, when actually, they were almost falsifying that because they were doing it for their child. And it was putting an awful amount of pressure on them.

And so one of the biggest outcomes of that research was the importance to understand what's right for your child at that time and to step back from it and to understand that actually learning-- children and young people need to be in a situation where they really feel comfortable and confident enough. And when you're in those situations, then you will learn.

But in a pressurised situation where you're worried about other things and anxious, all of those things compound. And you're not going to learn anyway in those situations. So it's important to kind of give yourself a bit of breathing space. I think that translates also to, if you're studying for The Open University, those key messages are actually exactly the same. Don't put yourself under too much pressure. There's so much going on that you need to be able to stand back from that and to understand what are the things that are most important to you to be able then to learn more effectively.

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely, absolutely. And as you say, it's about thinking what is best for the individual. Eric, there's lots of different discussion going on in the chat. Some people have experiences working with children with autism. Other people have thought of different sorts of innovations and inventions that have really helped. Do you want to share some of the things that people have been talking about?

ERIC ADDAE-KYEREMEH: Yes, so in addition to the therapy dog that Zoe mentioned in-- at her workplace, I mean her school, there's been a lot of focus on learning and forest school approaches, which gets children outdoors and looking at the environment as well as learning as well, which is always fab and I think is one of the things that the CRC often talk about as well.

Kitty is also talking about giving children a safe space to explore their own provocations and being an important aspect of their development, which I'm sure CRC colleagues will agree with. And then there's an interesting experience being shared by Joanne, which is about the resilience that his own son developed over that period. So she was away for a couple of months.

And through that period, it looks like the son developed some resilience in terms of being a little bit more independent and went on to be a peer mentor for another pupil at school, which is a good example of how our youngsters have dealt with the challenges that we face. So it's not just been us adults, but the youngsters have also developed some level of resilience.

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely. And Sangeeta shared something which I thought was really interesting. Sangeeta works with children with autism and mentions that "resilience is about staying strong when they're having a bad time and giving them time to recover," which I think is so important. We often don't really think about that.

I know that certainly in that whole sort of drive to complete all the mummification of the various tomatoes and the science projects and the home schooling that we were trying to get done, it was hard to actually think where are we going to breathe? And Sangeeta said it's about being patient with their moods. So some real key things there.

Let's take a look at our word cloud when we asked people at home what they thought resilience meant to them. And then we can perhaps pick up on a couple of points from this. So key words here are around bouncing back and seeing the good, not the bad, keeping going, so persistence. I mean, many of these things, we can recognise within our own studies also.

So redirecting, being stronger, demands, not giving up, self-protection, pressures positively, being able to overcome things, adapting, being unafraid of falling, which I think is very, very brave, learned recovery. Would you like to pick up on a couple of these points that students are making at home, Natalie?

NATALIE CANNING: Yeah, I mean, I think they definitely link into, for children, for young people, for adults, they're all things that are going to be important for all of us. So it's something that we can all learn from, I think. And the idea that we just give ourselves some space and to be kind to ourselves is something that we kind of forget. I think the pandemic has given us all a different way of working and learning.

But equally, it also needs to give us a reminder that we need to be kind to ourselves, and that's not just in the way in which we learn, but also thinking about the amount that we take on and the different ways in which that we see our lives and what's important in our lives. And especially for children and young people, that's really important as well, to recognise that they have a lot going on in their lives. It's something that we look at carefully within the CRC all of the time. And a lot of our research evolves around what are children doing, what are they feeling, and what are they thinking, and how can we better understand that and then further support them in those processes.

And I think we've all had a bit of an experience of that in this last year because you kind of get used to what you're used to. So you carry on as normal, and you don't realise all the things that you've taken on and all the things that we put pressure on our children and our young people, all of those things that we just take for granted and make as normal.

And actually, we've kind of had to adapt and rethink about the way in which we communicate, and the way in which we learn, and the way in which we interact. And that has opened up new ways of thinking about learning and teaching and also the ways in which we communicate and support our youngest children but also our teenagers as well.

KAREN FOLEY: Because many of the things that we took for granted-- throughout the day, we've been talking about things like time and space that we sort of value in different ways. One of the things you were saying in terms of how children are feeling and Kitty has a lovely idea. They have a cuddle corner so that when a child is sad or anxious, they can take a few moments and have a soft toy and have a nice cuddle.

But I think with so much of this lockdown as well, it may be difficult for children to be able to interact and be able to live and feel some of these things that perhaps we had more of beforehand. So those things, I guess, are important also, aren't they?

NATALIE
CANNING: Yeah, and also to be able to kind of take the time to be able to really realise that, so to give children space. I mean, everyone thinks that going back to what we had before is going to be the greatest thing. But actually for some children, it might not be.

They have perhaps been very isolated for a lot of the time and to then go back into a big group with other children with their peers that, although people think that's going to be a great thing, perhaps it's not going to be such a great thing for all children. And it's trying to understand that different children have gone through different things. And they're going to experience things in different ways and just to be sensitive to that.

So it's not to make assumptions about what is best for children and for young people, but to really take the lead from them and to understand what works for one child might not work for another. So for some children, yes, going back to school, seeing their friends again, interacting, is going to be great. But for other children, that can cause a real anxiety point as well. So it's just being mindful of that, I think.

KAREN FOLEY: And you've learned things from children. But also, some of these things are very reminiscent of the things that we're doing as adult learners in terms of motivation, persistence, and feeling anxious about particular things also. So what would you say, just in one sort of brief summary, would be the main finding of the research?

NATALIE
CANNING: I think the biggest thing that we found is the importance to really just be able to stand back from that situation and to evaluate what's happening for you at that time and almost to be a little bit selfish about that. So in the research, in both of those research, in the Children Heard research and in the research with the children with additional needs, it was about what works for you might not work for somebody else and not to put that onto somebody else.

People are experiencing these difficult times in different ways, and they're coping with it in different ways. And it's about being creative and supportive of those flexible ways of working, flexible ways of seeing and being with other people. So it's not one size fits all. It's not always going to be the best option to do home schooling. It's not always going to be the best option to be in school.

And I think it's about being a lot more flexible about the way that we see how different people learn and learning from that experience so that we are much more accepting of the different ways in which people can learn and can grow and can experience different ideas and environments at different times.

KAREN FOLEY: Natalie, that's been absolutely fantastic. Thank you so much for coming along today and sharing the huge range of research that you've been doing. Again, both hearing and letting children's voices be heard, but also showing how relevant they are for us as adults also. So thank you for that.

NATALIE No problem.

CANNING:

KAREN FOLEY: There are links to all of this in the chat. So you can find out about the Children's Research Centre from those links if that's of interest to you. And also, I know that Vanessa has been putting links into a very short survey. If you haven't done that already, we'd be ever so grateful if you could take just a moment to let us know your thoughts and preferences.

And, of course, any feedback, visit the Student Hub Live website. In fact, while you're there, you can also sign up for our newsletter. We send a monthly newsletter out of the various events that we've got going on. So make sure that you subscribe to that so you can always be in touch with some of the exciting things we have in store for you.

We are now going to show a video, which will be really interesting, about manga and children's literature. And then we'll be back for our spotlight on the School of Languages and Applied Linguistics. And then we're going to have a spotlight on the School of Education, Childhood, Youth, and Sports. So please stay tuned. But now's your opportunity for a cup of tea. If you haven't got one already. Be back very soon.

[MUSIC PLAYING]