

## International

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Youngsters and covid-19

# Lockdowns could have long-term effects on children's health

Sitting at home playing video games and eating crisps is not good for them

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Jul 19th 2020

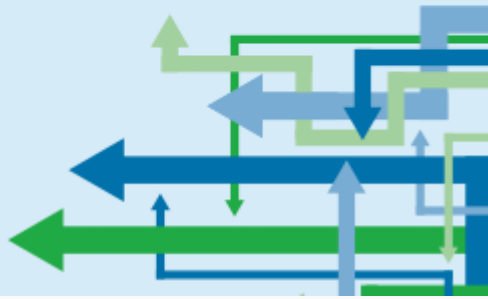


THIS MAY seem a foolish time to stage a gigantic volleyball tournament in Florida, a covid-19 hotspot. Yet this week several thousand young athletes turned up in Orlando to smash balls back and forth over a net. At least they will get some exercise. Many of their peers will not.

The pandemic is harming children's health. Not that they are dying in large numbers of the virus itself, which seems to affect them only mildly. And not only because of a growing body of evidence suggesting that lockdowns harm their mental health. It is also because life under confinement in rich countries has been making children fatter and more sedentary. These effects may well last much longer than the restrictions designed to curb the disease.

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Research on children's behaviour during these strange times is of course in its infancy. But early-stage data suggest that their diet has changed. A new study in *Obesity*, a science journal, looked at already overweight youngsters who were confined to their apartments in Verona, Italy, during the coronavirus outbreak. It found that although the children's intake of fruit and vegetables was unchanged, within three weeks they were consuming considerably more crisps, sugary drinks and red meat. The researchers

found they were sitting down, on average, to one extra meal every day.

One reason for this is that they spent more time gawping at their phones, televisions and computers. Screen time among the *Obesity* survey sample increased by close to five hours a day. That not only means more time spent sedentary, but is also linked to higher consumption of unhealthy foods. Partly, this is because staring at a device presents an

opportunity to snack, says Myles Faith of the University of Buffalo, one of the report's authors. But children are also bombarded with marketing for junk food. As fast food and sugary drinks are known to be addictive, their appetite for such fare is likely to continue when lockdown ends.

Sloth can become a habit, too. According to a study by the University of Wisconsin, during the pandemic American children over the age of ten have engaged in 50% less physical activity. Younger children who spend more of their time staring at a screen than running around (or vice versa) tend to carry that behaviour into adolescence, says Anthony Okely of the University of Wollongong in Australia. Lack of sleep is another problem, he says. Children have

Sleep is another problem, he says. Children have spent on average half an hour less in the land of nod while under confinement, he reckons. Worse, their sleep patterns have changed. Locked-down kids are going to bed much later (and lying in a little longer). Such behaviour is associated with poorer cognition and self-regulation. It may also increase a child's weight.

All of these effects can be traced, in part, to schools being closed. School not only gives structure to pupils' lives, affording them less time to stare at a phone, spacing out their meals and prompting them to go to bed earlier. It also forces them to move around more. Break-time kickabouts and games lessons help hugely. Even the physical act of going to school—the walk to the bus stop or the cycle ride to class—adds to youngsters' daily exercise. But even when schools reopen, many of these health benefits may remain lost, at least for a while. Parents worried about germs on public transport will be more likely to drive their offspring to school. At break, social distancing will be the rule. After-school athletics clubs will hardly be a priority.

Indeed, organised youth sport has been another casualty of the pandemic. Children who play sport

are less likely to be obese, to smoke or to take drugs, says Jon Solomon of the Aspen Institute, a Washington think-tank. They also tend to get higher grades and, eventually, better-paid jobs, even after controlling for family income. All this is associated with better long-term health. Yet after just two months of anti-coronavirus measures, nearly a fifth of American kids have lost interest in playing sport, according to a survey by an Aspen division called Project Play. Something similar seems to be happening elsewhere, too. New Zealand was one of the first

countries to leave lockdown, and has also lifted nearly all covid restrictions. Even so, registrations for organised rugby in the 5-13 age group are down by around a fifth from last year. The number of players is expected to rise as the season progresses, says Steve Lancaster, head of participation and development at New Zealand Rugby. But being a “close proximity sport” probably counts against it, he thinks. Social distancing in a scrum is impossible.

In all of this, it seems that hard-up kids will suffer most. They are more likely to rely on schools for nutritious meals. They are also less likely to have the space at home in which to exercise. And as their

neighbourhoods tend to be more dangerous, playing outside is less appealing, says Mr Okely.

That means organised sport should play a bigger role. Yet according to Aspen's survey, although 60% of parents who earn over \$100,000 say their kids will resume sports at the same or higher level once pandemic restrictions are lifted, only 44% of those earning under \$50,000 say the same. Furthermore, because ethnic minorities in America appear to be at greater risk from the virus, black and Asian parents are more fearful that their children will fall ill while playing sport. They are correspondingly less likely to say their kids will resume activity once the pandemic passes, says Mr Solomon.

Back in Florida, one hopes that the young volleyballers come away with nothing worse than the odd twisted ankle or pulled muscle. For many children elsewhere, the effects of 2020's confinement may last for years.

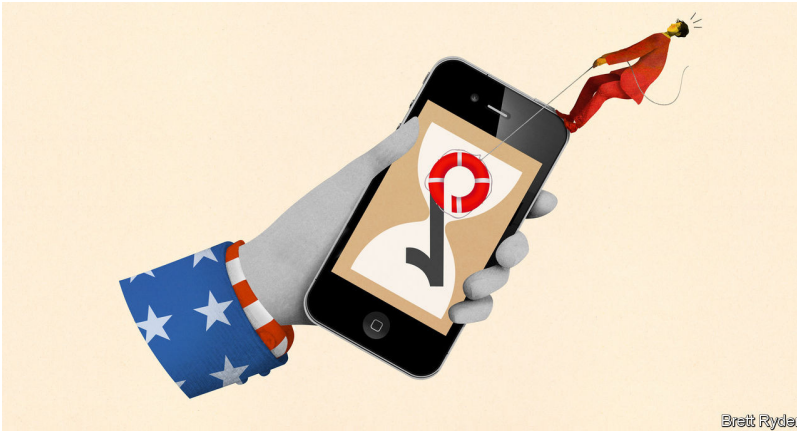
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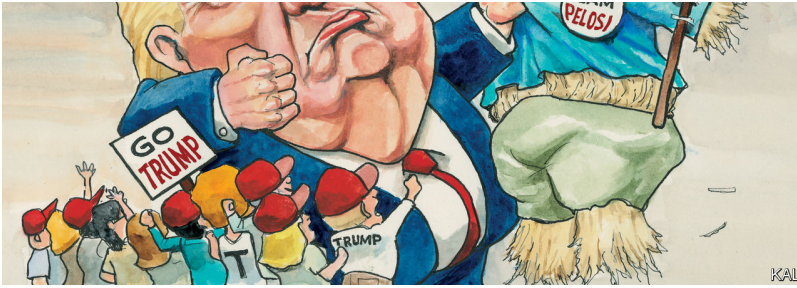
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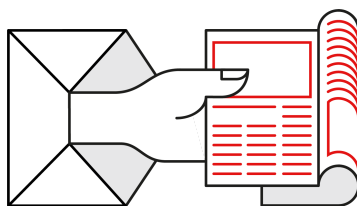
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