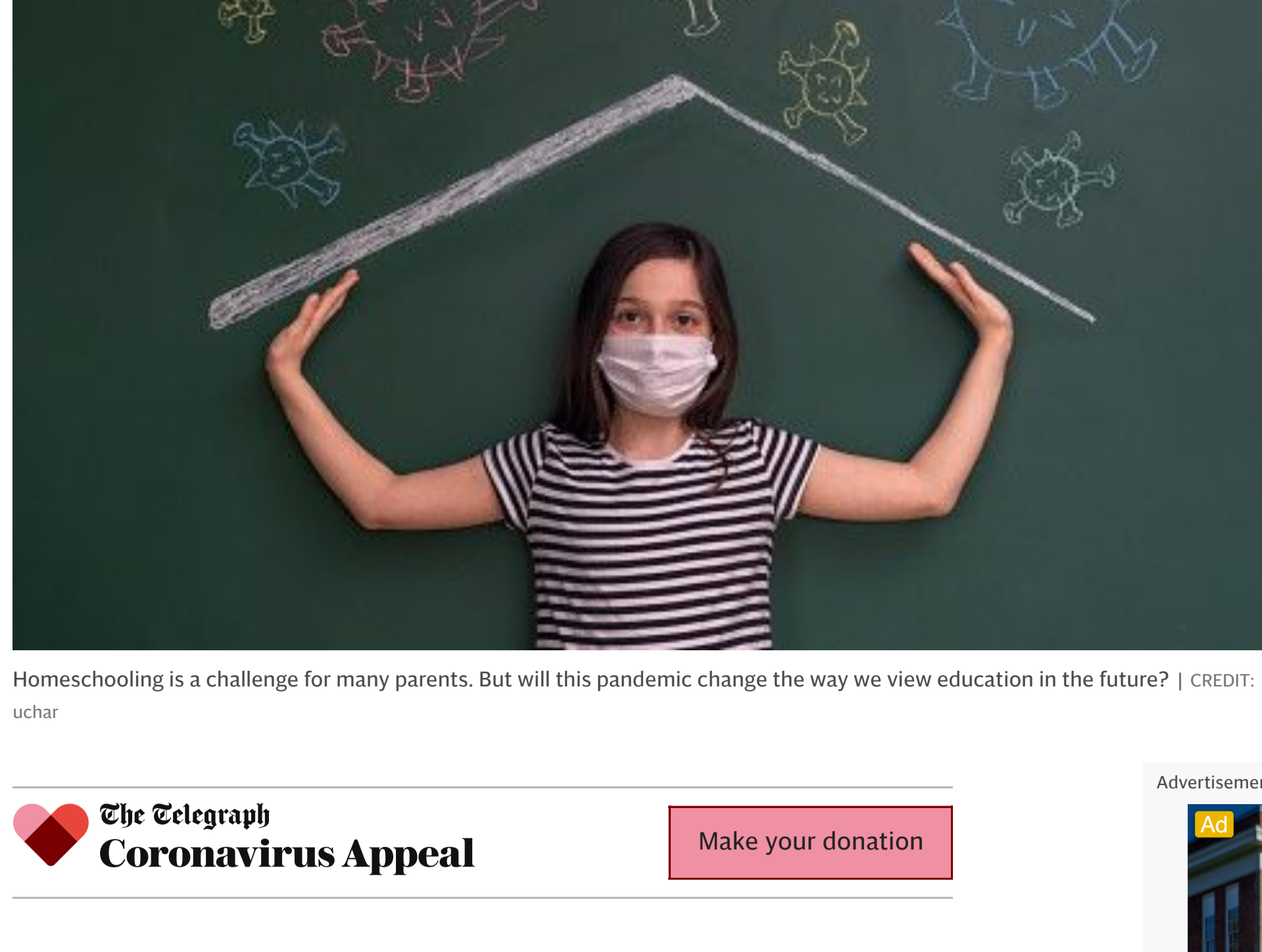
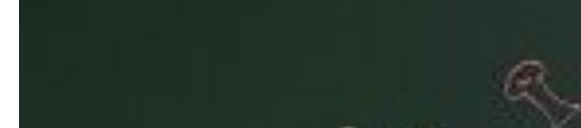


Will homeschooling spell disaster for a generation?

As schools stay shut, Judith Woods talks to parents struggling to cope and experts who fear long-term consequences

By Judith Woods
25 April 2020 • 4:00pm

Premium



Homeschooling is a challenge for many parents. But will this pandemic change the way we view education in the future? | iStock.com

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Of all the stay-at-home stresses thrown up by the Covid-19 pandemic, the unexpected challenge of home education is surely in a class of its own.

At the start of **lockdown**, the social media witticisms came thick and fast. Messages such as “Homeschooling is going well – one student suspended for fighting and one teacher sacked for drinking on the job. Easy peasy...” received thousands of likes.

“If you see my children picking weeds and crying in the garden, they’re on a field trip” was met with wry appreciation, along with: “Ironing is on the national curriculum, right?”

Five weeks later, and the mood has dramatically changed as initial can-do energy has given way to can-don’t despair.

“It’s a nightmare,” admits Julie, from the West Midlands, who works in payroll. “My husband and I are desperately trying to keep our jobs, shop for food and deliver medication and groceries to my elderly aunt while wrangling three boys out of bed every morning to do a Joe Wickes workout at 9am, before settling the younger two down at the kitchen table to do school work.

“I’ve not managed it once. I now consider it a good day if any of them are up and dressed by 11am,” she says. “The eldest is 18, and his A-levels were cancelled, so he’s demob happy, lounging about and winding up his brothers about having to study. Most of my days are spent refereeing squabbles.”

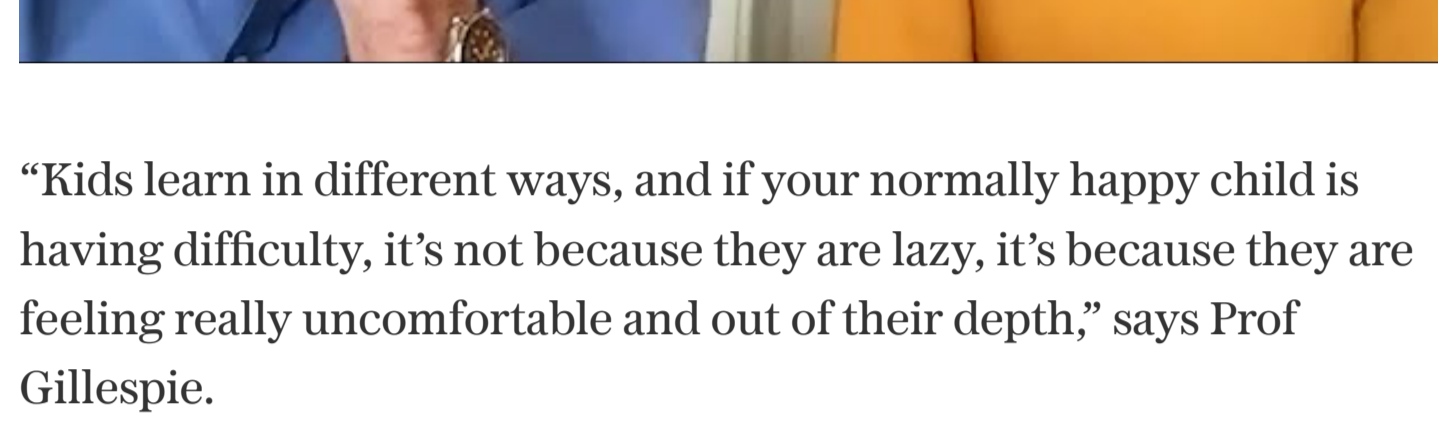
Julie admits she has no idea what her sons do, or need to do, in order to keep up with schoolwork. Nor how to measure their progress.

She is far from alone. “There is a great difference between children being occupied and children learning,” says Professor Helena Gillespie, professor of Learning and Teaching in Higher Education at the University of East Anglia.

“Your son or daughter might be online for five hours, but without feedback or interaction they might not be taking in any new knowledge at all”

Parents at least are learning – mostly, that **teaching** is both harder and more complex than they ever imagined. They are discovering, too, that bright-eyed, bushy-tailed self-starters obediently poring over science books at the kitchen table are exceedingly rare.

A great many of the nation’s children are proving to be lethargic, indifferent, hostile even, to learning. It turns out when teachers talk about the importance of the “social dimension” of school, they don’t just mean letting off steam at playtime.



“Kids learn in different ways, and if your normally happy child is having difficulty, it’s not because they are lazy, it’s because they are feeling really uncomfortable and out of their depth,” says Prof Gillespie.

“Children thrive in the social setting of a classroom, where they interact with the teacher and their peers, it’s no accident that schools everywhere are set up the way they are.

“At least 50 per cent of learning comes from classmates, by listening to the questions other kids ask, working in small groups or pairs, sharing ideas and making connections with the knowledge they already have. Now they are at home, they have lost their learning identity which is tied up with the others around them.”

This might go some way towards explaining research by the Sutton Trust last week that revealed two-thirds of pupils have not logged onto online lessons since the lockdown began.

Some schools have been providing **remote classes** for pupils to prevent them falling behind, but only 19 per cent of pupils from state primaries and 22 per cent from state secondaries have taken part in the daily tuition.

Privately educated pupils are twice as likely to access online tuition as state school peers. In private schools, 51 per cent of primary age and 57 per cent of secondary age pupils took daily lessons in front of a screen. While this may suit some children, others feel alienated.

“My son used to be full of energy and noise and lived for football. Now he lies around aimlessly it’s like somebody has unplugged him,” agonises Hannah, a mother-of-two whose children (used to) go to an inner-city academy.

“He always did enough to get by and, although we knew he could do better, his teachers reassured us that once he found his academic passion, he would be a late bloomer. But I worry he’ll never catch up, and I can’t find any way to enthuse him about anything.”

In the midst of curricular chaos, a tsunami of confusing online resources and no end in sight to school closures, her concerns are legitimate.

Educational academics estimate that it takes a full six weeks for the average child to make up for everything they have forgotten due to the “summer learning loss” caused by the long break in July and August.

Extrapolate that to three or even six months, and the scale of the problem becomes clear.

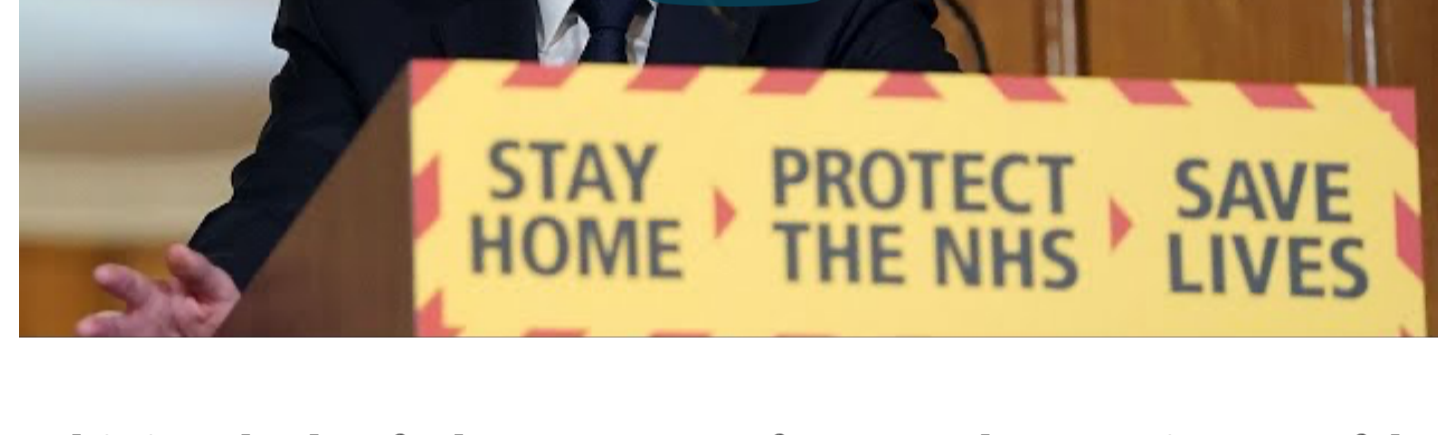
“In Wuhan, when the children went back to school, they had to start a lot of topics again because the children were so behind,” says leading educationalist, teacher and author Stephen Curran. “Many many children are not going to be able to make up this ground – it’s going to be lost forever.”

Curran agrees that our Government needs to try everything to flatten the curve of rising Covid-19 cases, but fears long-term closures of schools could be a very heavy price to pay.

“First and foremost, I worry for the mental health and wellbeing of our young people if schools are closed for too long,” her emphasises. “I would implore with the government that if they are contemplating a much longer-term shutdown to consider the educational and social cost and balance this against the health risks.

“Any other course of action other than a limited shutdown would be disastrous on so many levels, and may well have serious consequences that will stay with us for years.”

Experts broadly agree that in these unprecedented times, schools have responded rapidly by making resources available. It’s not enough – but it is all they can do under these extraordinary circumstances.



“This is nobody’s fault,” stresses Professor Becky Francis, CEO of the Education Endowment Foundation. “But the longer school closures go on, the harder it’s going to motivate children.

“There’s an argument that the focus should be on pupils in year 10 and year 12, who will be sitting exams next year. But the truth is, you can almost make any group into a priority.

“My message to government would be to start thinking about how schools can support children to remain motivated and keep up their learning and how we can create a structure and environment that provides that safety.”

A week ago, Denmark instigated a **limited re-opening of primary schools**; class sizes have been reduced, desks set six feet apart, hands are washed every hour, and children must bring in all they need, including packed lunch, pens and books as no borrowing is allowed.

The eyes of the world will be on them to see whether the experiment is a success and should be emulated elsewhere, including Britain.

Until then, British children **must rely on technology**, however far it falls short. Concerns have been voiced about the widening gaps between the mainstream and the socially disadvantaged, who already start school with a 40 per cent lower attainment rate.

One million homes in the UK do not have broadband; children can only access the internet via their phones. In families where minimum-wage parents are working in essential jobs such as transport, cleaning and retail, older children may be required to look after their siblings.

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It makes for a bleak picture. But small steps can make a big difference. Research by the National Literacy Trust, showed that children who read daily outside school are five times more likely to read above the expected level for their age, compared to children who never read outside class.

Supervision during the day is crucial, which places pressure on parents who work from home and on those hampered by a lack of education. When a child is reluctant to learn then, it’s no wonder run high.

“My 11-year-old daughter simply refuses to co-operate,” says David, an accountant who has been furloughed. His wife is a doctor on the coronavirus frontline, so home-schooling has fallen to him.

“I have loads of great projects we could do, but my 13-year-old is so sullen and unwilling to learn that I don’t recognise her. She complains the work the teacher has set online is too easy but then can’t seem to get the questions right.

“I’m more than happy to ditch maths and spend a couple of hours doing art and crafts or an online tour of the National Gallery with her, but she point-blank refuses to do that either.

“If I’m honest, I feel a failure; I’m also deeply ashamed that I’m not able to motivate my own child.”

The mantra seems to be that as literacy and numeracy are the basics and concentrate on them. But there are other ways in which parents can give their youngsters a head’s start.

In East Anglia, Prof Gillespie suggests we can use these weeks to “turn the ship around” – namely, by teaching life skills.

“Employers don’t care about what degree a candidate has got,” she says. “They want someone who can speak effectively on Skype, work remotely with others, communicate well, have digital know-how and nous.”

We are told that life will be changed when the lockdown is lifted. That includes education. Rather than trying to recreate schools of the past, perhaps it’s time to reimagine schools of the future.

Here’s what our readers had to say

@Yalla Imshi
“My wife and I ‘home schooled’ our 6 and 10 year olds on a boat for two years. Well that was the idea. Both have masters degrees, one is at Oxford working in the team to developing the vaccine.

“All I can say is focus on maths and English, develop an enquiring mind and have fun along the way, they will be fine!”

@James Faulkner
“The upshot of mass schooling is so poor that surely this is an opportunity to reset the whole educational system. Does everyone really need to turn up and leave at exactly the same minute to study something that takes no account of their personal interests or biorhythms?”

@TomHJ
“Having taught online for a little while now, I can attest that it’s more stressful and tiring than teaching in school; I’m not sure why. When the school holidays do finally arrive, I for one, will need them.”

@George Dunn
“The children have only been away from school for a few weeks and are likely to be back by the beginning of June.

“There is an argument for scrapping the long summer school holiday this year. It won’t happen.”

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