Speaker 1:

Hi, everyone. Thanks for joining us for this #ArkTalks. We're just going to give it a moment for a few more people to join, and then we'll get started.

Ann Mroz:

Hello, everyone, and welcome to this #ArkTalk. How should we rebuild childhood after the pandemic? There's been a lot of talk about this in recent weeks, and we've got three speakers here to discuss this and to take your questions this evening. We've got Dame Rachel de Souza, who is the Children's Commissioner for England. Sophia Parker, who's the incoming director of innovation at the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, and she has just stepped down as CEO of Little Village. And lastly, we have Zareen Roy-Macauley, who's a recent graduate from the University of Cambridge and a former head girl of Ark Globe Academy. She was the first Ark Globe student to receive an offer from Oxbridge.

Ann Mroz:

Before we start, there's a big of housekeeping. If you do have a question for the panel, can you please submit it using the Q&A button at the bottom of your screen? And please include your name and organization. Closed captions are available. To turn these on, just select the closed caption button at the bottom of your screen. You cannot be seen nor heard during the event. And lastly, the session is being recorded. First, we go over to Zareen. Hi, Zareen.

Zareen Roy-Macauley:

Thank you so much. Hi, everyone. I'm Zareen. I'm really, really excited to be here. I suppose I'll just give a whistle-stop tour through who I am. I suppose my journey up until this point and how, as a young person, I found the pandemic and potentially what we can do moving forward. I was the first person to receive an offer from my school, Ark Globe Academy, as part of the Ark family. I attended the University of Cambridge. I graduated last year, so it was very strange to graduate in a pandemic. I marked the end of my exams walking from one end of the room to the other, so that was a really strange experience.

Zareen Roy-Macauley:

But I was very fortunate enough to receive an internship from the Ark Ventures team at a time where many young people my age are struggling with job opportunities. I myself had a grad job that unfortunately got canceled, so I was very fortunate to receive the opportunity where I did a lot of exciting projects like managing the digital rollout of Ark digital curriculums and starting the first diversity and inclusion network. That was really great. But I've also continued to have a lot of support from my school, from Globe. I'm still in touch with a lot of people at Globe. A lot of the experiences that I had at Globe, I don't think I would be here if I didn't have those experiences.

Zareen Roy-Macauley:

For example, I was very involved with the student body and slam poetry and making sure that people knew that poetry isn't just for medieval old men, but rather for young people to use as a way to express their voices. That very much propelled me to a place of confidence and a place where I could grasp a lot of opportunities and help a lot of my fellow students do so as well. Globe very much has a special place in my heart, I would say.

Zareen Roy-Macauley:

And moving on from there, now that I've graduated from Cambridge, I'm taking a little bit of a break before I start my law conversion course, where I'll be starting a training contract with Clifford Chance in 2023. It's been an intense ride up until now, but again, very fortunate to have received a lot of opportunities in this difficult time.

Zareen Roy-Macauley:

But I would say that some of the difficulties that I mentioned, a lot of people, again, in my position, are definitely feeling. As someone who has a lot of responsibilities at home, I would say that I've definitely felt like young carers, people who potentially have vulnerable people in their households and they have a lot of caring responsibilities, have really had to contend with this pandemic in a lot of nuanced ways. I myself have a brother, he's 18 years old, he's autistic with severe behavioral issues. Stepping up, as well as trying to help him through the pandemic, helping him with the suspension of a lot of his activities as a vulnerable young person. Also, having to contend with those opportunities for a wider social bubble as effectively canceled is really difficult, and I think is something that has to be ring-fenced moving forward for special needs children in particular. And as well as that, I think respite for young carers, for parents of children with vulnerabilities, should be talked about more, and that's something that's really difficult. That's something, definitely, that I think needs to be focused on.

Zareen Roy-Macauley:

And especially being part of different communities, multiple communities, the intersections of being a Black, queer person, having people in marginalized communities who perhaps rely on their outer communities, who have faced isolation and who have faced... Young people face increased anxiety for a variety of reasons, is something where I think communities are strengthening communities. And the community care that we have is something that we think about, we talk about a lot in my personal circles. But yeah, I think those things are elements that I wanted to join in my personal life as a young person that I've felt, and something that I think needs to be looked at moving forward. But that's a brief whistle-stop tour through myself and my perspectives, and I hope to really hear way more about a lot of these things through the panelists and the discussions we'll have moving forward.

Ann Mroz:

Thanks, Zareen. You made a lot of very good points there, especially about vulnerable children and the parents of vulnerable children. They really need support. And I loved your comment about, "Poetry isn't just for medieval old men," as Amanda Gorman showed us at the inauguration.

Zareen Roy-Macauley:

Exactly.

Ann Mroz:

She really sparked a whole revival of poetry, didn't she? It was marvelous.

Zareen Roy-Macauley:

She did. Yep.

Ann Mroz:

Okay. Thank you for that. And over to you, Rachel.

Rachel de Souza:

Thank you, Zareen. That was great to hear from you. What an act to follow, and really proud to be following you. Thanks for inviting me to speak today. I wanted to start by saying thank you. Thank you to all the Ark staff and all the staff listening from schools, or colleagues who work around schools and young people, and particularly vulnerable young people. The last 12 months have been such a challenging year for children, but also for schools. The latest school attendance numbers are the best since the beginning of the pandemic. So much of that is down to the hard work, dedication, and professionalism you've shown since March last year, from keeping schools open for vulnerable children during lockdown to setting up remote learning from scratch and to getting children back in school safely. It's been an incredible success.

Rachel de Souza:

I think this pandemic and the lockdowns have reminded us all, including children themselves, of the huge part that schools do play in children's lives. You could see that when schools reopened. I saw children running into school when they reopened, and it was wonderful just to see how happy most children were to get back into school again with their friends and even their teachers. But our children have made so many sacrifices over the last year. Not seeing friends and family, spending months out of school, and missing out on so many of the things that children love to do and need to do. And while life is starting to slowly get back to normal, some of the big challenges from last year are not going away. It's part of my job as Children's Commissioner to give children a voice, to make sure they can come out of this pandemic feeling that they've weathered the worst of the storm, and there's a happy future ahead for them and for all of us.

Rachel de Souza:

But I don't believe COVID has made a lost generation inevitable. In the short term, now schools are open again, it's so important that children are able to catch up on the essential experiences of childhood. Catching up will of course include learning, and I do think that's achievable. It's so important that we don't panic children about which lessons they've missed or how far they've fallen behind. In my previous roles, I can remember going into schools where there hadn't been a proper maths teacher for four years or more, but we got it turned around, and we got those children and young people through their GCSEs. I know that catch-up in this situation can and will happen, and I'm confident that you and your schools will show children that we know how to look after them, and we can help them through this.

Rachel de Souza:

I made sure that Sir Kevan Collins, who was on your last #ArkTalk, was one of the first people I spoke to when I took up this role, and I'm really pleased to be working with him on getting children back on track. I know his focus is going to be as much on helping to boost children's wellbeing and catching up on their social experiences as it will be on helping them to catch up with their learning. Giving children opportunities to rediscover all of the things they missed, sport, clubs, activities, just spending time with friends, is so important, and there are so many ways it can be done.

Rachel de Souza:

But there will be plenty of children who've found the return tough. Maybe they enjoyed the flexibility of learning from home, or find school particularly challenging, and we need to make sure they get back on track, too. We also know the disruption of last year will go a lot deeper than children falling behind at school or losing some of their social skills. There are generational problems compounded by the

pandemic. Millions of the most vulnerable children were already living in homes with serious problems long before the pandemic. There the children in care who miss out on the stability and love often that all children need. Children with special educational needs and disabilities sometimes not receiving the right support, and who feel shut out. The social media which dominates so much of our children's lives, for good and for bad, the social and regional inequality, rising youth unemployment, increased pressures of services and spending. And of course, the epidemic in children's mental health and mental wellbeing, where the numbers of children with probable mental health problems raised from one in nine in 2017 to one in six in July 2020, according to NHS Digital research.

Rachel de Souza:

Many of these problems are not new, and sometimes, our solutions to them in the past have not been good enough. That doesn't mean we should be afraid of taking on the big questions. Isn't that what children expect us to do as adults? And this post-COVID moment is a golden opportunity, a once-in-a-generation chance to put children at the top of the agenda. This is not just about getting back to where we were a year ago. It's about improving the chances of every single child wherever they live, and I want to be the Children's Commissioner who drives the change that improves the chances of all children.

Rachel de Souza:

I think we should take our inspiration from how we emerged from the dark years of the '40s with renewed optimism, with ideas and solutions to many of the social ills that have been around since before the war. We need to grab a bit of that positive can-do spirit and be positive about children's futures. The Beveridge Report, published during the war years, created a blueprint for social security for NHS and for the Education Act of 1944. This is our big moment to do the same, to repay children for all they've done for us over the last year. Let's aim higher than simply returning to the old normal. This COVID crisis gives us the same chance as the post-war generation had to look at what's going wrong for many children in our country and to put it right.

Rachel de Souza:

And that's why I launched my Childhood Commission in my first month in this role. It's inspired by the same ambitions as the Beveridge Report. It will reveal the barriers that hold back many children from reaching their full potential in life, it will propose policy and service solutions, and it will develop targets to monitor improvements as part of a 10-year plan. It will look at the ways in which society and political structures have often shortchanged children, and it will make the case that children should be at the heart of our post-COVID recovery, so that our children have the best childhoods, the best preparation for successful futures, and a better life than their parents. We're going to provide an interim report before the summer and a final report by the end of this year.

Rachel de Souza:

And at its heart is the Big Ask. The largest consultation, hopefully, ever held with children in England. As Children's Commissioner, it's my job to be the eyes, the ears, the voice of children, and to do that, I first need to hear from children about how the pandemic has changed their lives for better or for worse, what their aspirations are, what's stopping them from doing better, how things are at home, how their communities and local environments could be improved, and how they feel about the future and the challenges facing the world. That's why we launched the Big Ask last week with a little help from someone you might recognize. And I've got a short clip to show you.

Rachel de Souza:

I am your eyes and ears, and I'm here to stand up for your rights. I'm independent of government. This means if sometimes I don't agree with the plans government is making for children, I tell them. That's because I work for you, not the government. The first thing I'm doing as Children's Commissioner is carrying out the largest ever survey of children in England. It's time to give something big back to children in England, and we need your help to do it. What is life like for you? What are your dreams and ambitions? What is holding you back?

Speaker 5:

The things that are holding me back in life is that I can be quite shy, and I don't have the skills yet.

Speaker 6:

When I'm older, I would like to be a doctor, maybe a surgeon.

Speaker 7:

When I leave school, I would like to be an army officer.

Speaker 5:

My aspiration when I'm older is to be a top hair dresser.

Speaker 8:

I want to be a teacher when I grow up.

Speaker 6:

If you don't go to school, we don't get jobs. Education is really important.

Speaker 9:

Good education is really important, because you need to follow things in life. If you have a dream, then you should follow it always.

Speaker 10:

Life is hard at the moment, because I don't get to see all my family.

Speaker 11:

Coming back to school is hard, because I have lots of work to catch up on.

Speaker 5:

Lockdown's been really boring, and it's been a struggle to learn.

Rachel de Souza:

I'm going to use what you tell me to show the government what you need to live happier lives. It's called the Big Ask, and it's a chance to think big and get your voice heard. I promise to listen, and would ask

you all to take this opportunity to take our survey. But of course, I think it's a great idea, so don't just take my word for it. Here's footballer and children's champion, Marcus Rashford.

Marcus Rashford:

Hi, guys. Just a quick message to let you know that if you're asked to participate in the Big Ask, I feel like it's a great chance for you guys to have your own say, really. You can voice your opinions on what's been happening and speak on what you want to happen next. I feel like it's a brilliant way to express yourselves.

Rachel de Souza:

The response from schools to the Big Ask has been incredible. We've got more than 100,000 responses back in just a few days, and it's been fantastic to see on social media whole classes taking part in the survey, talking about their experiences last year, and their hopes and dreams for the future. Obviously, I want more than 100,000 children taking part. It'd be great to have a million. And I do need your help to do it, because without the support of schools, we won't reach the children that we need to hear from. We're going to every YOI, into children's homes, into Secure Children's Homes, and we're reaching out through Brownies, guides, Youth Service, everywhere we can. But do it in the classroom, set it the homework, get children talking about what's holding them back at school or with their parents, and let's get them talking about their hopes for the future. The more children who reply, the easier it is for me to go to government and to other supervised services for children and to say, "This is what children are telling us they want from the adults."

Rachel de Souza:

I want to see children at the top of the government's agenda, so every speech from the prime minister and the senior ministers are talking about children, every department's constantly pushing to improve the lives of every child. I'm really optimistic the Childhood Commission will give government and others a blueprint for change and transform the way they think about children, where they're making decisions about spending or school reform or healthcare. I want us to be able to say we came out of the pandemic determined to do better by our children after all the sacrifices they made for us. We paid them back, we gave every child the chance to thrive. Working with schools, with politicians on all sides, with people who work with children, and listening to children themselves, I'm convinced we can do it, and I look forward to working with all of you to make it happen.

Ann Mroz:

Thank you, Rachel. That's a pretty good number, 100,000.

Rachel de Souza:

Good so far. Four days. Well, it's 108,000.

Ann Mroz:

108? Excellent.

Rachel de Souza:

Yeah. Yeah, yeah. [crosstalk 00:19:05].

Ann Mroz:

I'm looking forward to you grabbing some of that positive can-do spirit. If anyone can grab it, Rachel, it's you. Good luck. Now, over to you, Sophia.

Sophia Parker:

Thank you very much. Yeah, it's brilliant to hear the energy in what you're saying, Rachel, and how amazing to have such a response already. Let's hope you get to your million.

Sophia Parker:

I wanted to share three reflections, really, to follow up from what we've already heard from Zareen and from Rachel. I guess my reflections are really drawing upon my work at Little Village, which is the charity I founded in 2016. It's like a food bank, but for baby clothes and toys and equipment, and we support families across the whole of London. We've supported, I think, 11,000 children since we started back in 2016. We really are a movement of parents against child poverty, and the families that we see and the families that are supported by other families across London are those who are really struggling. I guess what I'm going to say comes from that perspective, really.

Sophia Parker:

And I think the first thing to say is I think it's wonderful to hear Rachel talking about the importance. Of course, we need to ensure that children have the opportunity to catch up on missed learning, but actually to think about catch-up in a much, much more holistic way than that. Not only about education, but also about social connections and friendships and time away from their parents, actually, particularly for teenagers. It's such an important chance for them to spend time with their friends.

Sophia Parker:

And I just wanted to flag as well that Children England have been running with a group of 26 young leaders, a ChildFair State study, which has similar aspirations, really, to what Rachel, you want to do in terms of putting children at the center of everything. Children England have been working with a panel of young leaders, and those young leaders have been saying, actually, when we're talking about what needs to hope next for children post-pandemic, it's really important to go beyond education, to think about mental health and emotional support, which is often patchy at best and not great quality at worst.

Sophia Parker:

They also talk in the Children England work about some stuff which I really recognized from my time at Little Village as well, which is about making sure that the basic resources are affordable. It might be uniforms. Great news today on school uniforms in Parliament. It might be uniform, it might be school trips, it might be transport, it might be equipment. But a lot of these things, if they're not affordable, it's difficult for children to participate. And ensuring, of course, that basic needs are met. Children will find it hard to study if they're hungry, they're coming to school hungry, or if they have not got enough warm clothes and so on. Yeah, first point, really broadening the focus beyond education.

Sophia Parker:

Secondly, it's great to hear Rachel talking about needing to not rebuild back to the normal of before the pandemic. I actually think we should be talking about re-envisioning, not rebuilding, and I think it's really, really important that we recognize that, before the pandemic, things weren't great for a lot of

children in this country. 4.3 million children now growing up in poverty. That is a figure which I find very hard to accept, and I find it even harder to accept when the numbers are actually continuing to rise. And we know that poverty has a devastating impact on children. It casts a very long shadow over educational outcomes, over health outcomes, over employment outcomes. It shortens lives. It's as simple as that.

Sophia Parker:

Now, that was pretty bad before the pandemic. It's certainly been worsened, and inequalities have been exacerbated, solidified, extended by the last year, and I think we should be very, very concerned about that. School closures have expanded the digital divide. Being in lockdown when you're in a single room with no space to work, crawl, walk, is very different to experiencing lockdown when you're in a better-off position. To truly re-envision for children, I think we need to really take a direct focus on poverty and on income inequality. And I think that does involve looking at things like the way in which the benefit system reinforces those issues, for example, the two-child limit, and also looks at the infrastructure we're putting around families to support them.

Sophia Parker:

Maybe we can talk about this more in the Q&A, but I think, for modern families, they rely on two incomes to keep their heads above water, and yet, childcare is the most expensive we have in Europe. Until we start to tackle some of those issues, I think it's going to be very, very difficult to really address child poverty, and if we don't address child poverty, we're not going to really [inaudible 00:23:56] for children.

Sophia Parker:

And my last point is just to say I think it's so important, when we talk about children, that we have a very explicit focus on the early years in particular. I love the Big Ask. I think it's really exciting. I hope, in these conversations, you are also really harnessing children's imagination, so not only asking them what could be better, but getting them to imagine the future, getting them to dream a little bit, because we need some dreaming here. But I also think it's important to recognize that, in processes like that, it's difficult to ask babies and very young children to participate in things like that, but we must not lose sight of that very, very important time in life. It's a critical time. We know now about how the brain develops in the early years. We know about their significance in terms of nutrition, language, mental health. These are things that are set in those early years.

Sophia Parker:

Little Village did some research with Joseph Rowntree foundation earlier this year to mark our fifth anniversary, and what we found is that one in three families with a child under five is in poverty. Families with children under five are at greater risk of deeper poverty, more persistent poverty, and poverty is rising faster for that group. We really, really need to have a very explicit focus on what's happening for those babies and very young children. In the pandemic, they didn't even have the connection of school, so they're very, very isolated at a very, very vulnerable and critical time in children's lives.

Sophia Parker:

I'll stop there. I guess the only thing I'd just like to finish, I think at this time last year, Arundhati Roy wrote a wonderful piece in the Financial Times talking about the pandemic as a portal, and I really love that. A portal throws open the light into the fact that we could build a different future to the one we

seem to be hurtling towards, and where, actually, as Rachel said, children really are at the heart of everything, and I want us to hold onto that energy and that hope and that optimism in this conversation. Thank you.

Ann Mroz:

Thank you, Sophia. I think you make a really good point there. If you don't address child poverty, you can't say, "We're here for children." How do you think we should go about addressing that? And this is really for all three of the panelists. It's huge. It's huge. As you said, everything wasn't great before the pandemic, and there seems to be this whole narrative that suddenly we've discovered disadvantaged children, and we've discovered children who weren't learning. They were there before, but for some reason, we seem to have a little blind spot. What should government be doing? What should everybody be doing?

Sophia Parker:

Is that to me?

Ann Mroz:

It's to all of you. It's to all of you. Maybe you can kick it off, because you were so eloquent there.

Sophia Parker:

Okay. Well, I think there are many things that government can and should be doing, and they fall into some fairly obvious categories. Really thinking about benefits and welfare support and the way in which that is helping families lift themselves out of poverty, so that's really important, and I do think there are some policies at the moment that are working against that. In particular, the two-child limit is driving larger families into much more significant poverty than need be. I think we need to look at housing. Massive, massive increase in low-income families trapped in private rented sector, which is then extremely high cost and low quality and insecure.

Sophia Parker:

And we need to look at work. Work is changing. The families that we support at Little Village generally are in very precarious employment. As I was saying, they rely on both parents being in employment, so that's a big, big difference to 1940s. Beveridge was built on a kind of invisible army of women keeping the home fire burning. That is not the case anymore. In order for families to keep their heads above water, both parents have to work. And actually, what we're seeing in low-income families is they're just really struggling to get the hours that they need to stay afloat. I think we really need to be thinking about work, the nature of work, how we make better quality jobs, and then finally, how we build public services to wrap themselves around those children. I really think we need to start to treat childcare as a vital piece of infrastructure, just as important as the things that need high-vis jackets, because families aren't going to be able to stay afloat without more affordable, better quality, more reliable childcare. Just a few things.

Ann Mroz:

Thank you. Rachel.

Rachel de Souza:

It's really interesting. Looking at the first responses from those 100,000 children, it's so interesting. It's a shame I haven't got them up on the screen, because I'd read some of them to you. Things like fairness in society is coming heavily. Things around, "I wish Mom and Dad could change their work so I could actually see them together." Things around family, family strain. I think the work point is really salient. Such hope and desire for education and work going forward, and hopes for the future, but also, a real sense of hopelessness as well. When we were talking about the '40s to now, nevermind the '40s, the '80s or the '90s, there's almost a strand of... They're seeing older siblings not necessarily getting jobs. We're getting a bit of a real strand of hopelessness along with their hope for the future. I think it's fascinating.

Rachel de Souza:

I think two things I would add to what's just been said. I think one would be about... I honestly do not believe that anyone in this country wants to see children in poverty. I don't honestly think you would get anyone to stand up and say that. What we need to make happen, I think, is some really creative policy thinking so we get out of our silos of UC or not UC, or to chuck it out or not to chuck it out. Let's try and go beyond that and get some better policy thinking and more targeted policy thinking.

Rachel de Souza:

I'm really interested. I've been talking to politicians on both sides, ministers, and a range of people about what could we do that would target benefits better to children and to families. I think the policy thinking, but there's also something massive about joined-up thinking. What I'm really challenged by in my first experience of working in Westminster, I've been in schools for 30 years, is almost this silo thinking of government. You've got naught to twos here, you've got family hubs here. I'm having conversations with health. I'm having conversations all around. How do we get all this joined up? We've got a range of different departments with summer schools and food and things like that going, but they're not talking to each other. One's Justice, one's here, one's DCMS, one's whatever. I really think we need a minister for children to be attending Cabinet to actually help get a joined-up strategy for children and to make some of this happen. That was just two things in addition to the good points made by my colleague.

Ann Mroz:

Okay. Thank you. And Zareen.

Zareen Roy-Macauley:

Yeah. I don't think there's so much more for me to add, but I think one thing that I've felt as someone in a household of people of color, with supporting children, and being in my family, is the pressure on young people perhaps like me who grow up to support our families. Although we're told that education is the great leveler, it's the way for social mobility and it's the way to break those intergenerational cycles of poverty and hardship. I think something that's really difficult, perhaps there's intersections, the way that we support our families moving forward and the way that that perpetuates moving forward young people who have those additional strains and burdens. I think perhaps not necessarily centered on children, per se, but on young people. But that perhaps intergenerational and intersectional perspective is something that I don't often see considered in discussions on how social mobility helps young people and children move out of those particular scenarios.

Ann Mroz:

Yeah, that's a good point. Thank you. Can we move on to another question? Rachel, in your talk, you mentioned how children were really pleased to be back at school. Attendance is really good. What do you think of the government's proposal for behavior hubs? Do you think the 10 million could've been spent in a better way?

Rachel de Souza:

It's a really interesting question, isn't it? I've spoken about this before. I think we saw that wonderful thrill of coming back to school, and I think those of us who were engaged with schools at the time, it was such a delight. We also have seen challenges, or certainly, teachers I know have seen challenges. Now, I suppose my point now would be, why? When I look at the kids I'm most concerned about, it's those who've been in the trickiest of situations during lockdown, and those who have been vulnerable and the support taken away. I think what headteacher colleagues are telling me is that, actually, trauma and vulnerability sit behind some of these issues around behavior. For me, it's the why, and if we get the why right, then we can think of what the support is that we need.

Rachel de Souza:

I'm probably more interested in seeing mental health, mental wellbeing support in schools. I'm more interested in seeing teenagers... That's why I love Kevan Collins's extra time. I want to see teenage brains being able to get back to normal, because teenagers are able to engage with each other in activities in school and around post-lockdown, so they can actually get back to normal. And we know that there's an absolute cause. I was talking to Sarah-Jayne Blakemore just the other day, the Oxford neuroscientist. She's saying we have evidence now that high-quality peer relationships, teenage... Not lots of them, but as long as they've got some, that is the best indicator of good mental health 10 years later.

Rachel de Souza:

I think everyone's trying to do the right thing, but I would say, let's focus on those who've had the toughest time, the trickiest situations, and helping to actually solve the problems, and using school in a really positive way to do that. I'm not against behavior hubs, and I've always been for really good behavior models. Totally, I think that's great. But on its own, I think we need to support around that with the real support that vulnerable children and all children need, and all children after lockdown, frankly.

Ann Mroz:

Yeah, thank you. Sophia, you mentioned mental health and emotional support, didn't you? Do you think the behavior hubs are just framed wrong, that it should be framed in a different way, what they're helping with?

Sophia Parker:

I don't know if it's the internet at my end, but I lost you halfway through your question. Sorry. Apologies, everyone. Would you mind asking it again?

Ann Mroz:

Yeah, no. I'm just saying, from what Rachel was saying there, do you think that behavior hubs are the wrong way to frame it? Should we be talking more about the support rather than behavior? If somebody says behavior, I think bad behavior.

Sophia Parker:

Yeah. It implies control and needing to discipline people, doesn't it? I'll be honest. It's not an area I have expertise in. I don't know exactly what's been proposed in terms of what's going to happen in behavior hubs. To echo what Rachel was saying, I do think it matters how we frame these things. I think it matters how we talk about these things. Actually, behavior has got a controlling edge to it and a slightly disciplinarian edge to it, where actually, I think really, we need to be thinking about how we're nurturing this generation of young people and children. Therefore, let's really focus on mental health, because there is an absolute crisis, and I think it's a crisis not only for teenagers, but as I say, I think it really is a crisis that goes back to those children who can't even speak about these things.

Sophia Parker:

But some of the stuff I think has been coming out in very young families is extremely concerning as well. Parental mental health in the early years can have a profound impact on how children develop, and it's certainly something we... At Little Village, we work with over 1,000 frontline family workers, social workers, health visitors, and so on across London, and nine out of 10 of them told us, when we did a survey of them last year during the pandemic, that they were concerned about children's wellbeing and mental health and development because of the impact of the pandemic on the family wellbeing. Yeah, I think that really is where to put the energy and the effort. I feel like the behavior of it showing up is probably a manifestation of the result of those difficulties rather than the thing to tackle.

Ann Mroz:

Okay. Thank you. Zareen, it has quite an impact on children with vulnerabilities, doesn't it?

Zareen Roy-Macauley:

Yeah, definitely. And I think, particularly, access to mental health services throughout the pandemic for children with vulnerabilities has been really difficult, because I think we take it for granted that... Or rather, accessing things digitally is hard in itself. But then also, I think if you have vulnerabilities or special needs, accessing things digitally might not be the easy solve that a lot of people think it is. For example, my brother can't really engage with CBT very well via a video, for example, which has proven really difficult throughout the pandemic for him to get the services that he needs, which already were really, really hard to access, considering the NHS wait times, et cetera.

Zareen Roy-Macauley:

I think, if we're speaking about mental health, we're speaking about its link to behavior and wellbeing. Access to those services in the first place has been really challenging, and then if we're looking at its impact on behavior, then having a more nuanced, empathetic stance towards it rather than... I've seen a little bit about behavior hubs, and it does feel... Maybe that's not necessarily the intention, but the term is punitive rather than empathetic. And I think, from the perspective of having caring responsibilities, that's not necessarily the way I think it should be.

Ann Mroz:

Okay. Thank you. Got some questions coming in. I'm going to put this one first, because I think it's probably relevant to what we've been talking about. From Karen with PISA, "Lockdown has actually been a positive experience for some families and children. How can you pursue the important points you have been making without negating these families' experiences and catastrophizing childhood?"

That's quite a strong expression, catastrophizing childhood. Who'd like to come in and take that one on first?

Rachel de Souza:

Yeah, I'm happy to, Ann. I think Karen's absolutely right. We have heard from lots of children that actually have enjoyed being with their parents. Particularly, there are lessons that we've learned through lockdown, what with online learning, that I think we'd want to take on into the future, and particularly for some young people with special educational needs and how well lockdown learning and a calm environment has worked.

Rachel de Souza:

Also, actually, I think we picked up on... This is certainly something I've experienced a lot in the areas I've worked, where you've got young families, Mom and Dad working long, long hours, long jobs, often at separate times so they can manage childcare. Children talking to us about having both parents at home and how great that's been, and just to spend some time. I think there are lessons to learn. There are educational lessons to learn. There are lessons that we've learned from using online learning really well. Just think of something like Oak National Academy, how everyone just got together, sorted it out, and made a curriculum that everyone could follow. That's been a holy grail for years that we'd all share everything and do that. It's brought out the best in some ways. I think we mustn't lose those lessons.

Rachel de Souza:

I don't think we're catastrophizing childhood, though. I think, for me, this is like a punctuation mark. It's a like a line in the sand where we can actually rocket-boost a brilliant approach to childhood in this country. Let's now build on what we've learned, build on this time that has been difficult for many, and try and turn around these issues around childhood and go for the positive. I've got sympathy for Karen's points.

Ann Mroz:

Okay. Thank you. Zareen, what do you think of that? Do you think we're catastrophizing it? We're either in danger of catastrophizing, or we're romanticizing. I think we can never seem to get a middle ground. What would you say to that?

Zareen Roy-Macauley:

Yeah. I don't think it can be denied. I'm sure a lot of families have felt some benefits of lockdown. A lot of the people that I've spoken to have said that they've really appreciated the time that they could spend with their families. I did, up until the point that it got a bit much. But people have definitely said that working from home and being able to spend time with their children, et cetera, has been beneficial.

Zareen Roy-Macauley:

I think catastrophizing childhood is a strong point. I don't necessarily think that emphasizing the difficulties of lockdown necessarily translates to that. I think a lot of the things that we are talking about were things that have been exacerbated by lockdown, or rather have been highlighted, whether it's access to mental health services, whether it's anxiety for young children, and behavior, et cetera. I think those things are being highlighted by lockdown, rather than presenting lockdown as this all-encompassing wrong that's been done to children. Obviously, it's been a terrible time, but I do think

that, overall, for me, the setbacks have been significant. And while we can acknowledge that there have been benefits, I think I'd lean towards highlighting those things and not shying away from them.

Ann Mroz:

Fair enough. I'm going to go on to another question and take it straight to you, Sophia. "How do we reconcile the recognition of importance of childhood play as part of their development with pressure on schools to increase hours and potential of summer school?" There's quite a lot in there. You've got two competing things.

Sophia Parker:

Yeah. I'm just trying to figure out what's underneath that question, because as you say, there's a lot in that. What do I think? I think play is obviously a really critical part of child development, particularly in the early years and in your initial years of school. I think it's quite important for all of us, whatever our age, as well, but that's probably a separate point.

Sophia Parker:

I guess, for me, the fact that we've become very much more focused on academic achievement and so on is partly because we've started to see education in those very academic terms, and we've lost sight of some of the way we've talked about early year childcare in the past. Certainly, in the '70s, when I was growing up, my parents were part of a play group, which is what you might call a nursery now. There was no educational target set there. It was just making sure that we all had a good time. Childcare has emerged as a sector. It then gets professionalized and then starts to have targets put around it, particularly as government has started to put more money into it. It loses some of the benefits of it being an informal parent-to-parent activity. But anyway, that's not a great answer to the question, because I'm not sure it's quite where I have knowledge. Just a couple reflections there.

Sophia Parker:

There is just one thing I want to say on the previous question, though, which is I think there is a catastrophe, where one in two children in certain parts of London are growing up in poverty. It is a catastrophe. It's not a catastrophe that's been created by the pandemic, but it is a very serious public crisis that hasn't had enough attention, and I think it is really important we don't let that go.

Sophia Parker:

What I would say is, in terms of the other parents, what we've experienced at Little Village is there's enormous solidarity between parents who've actually not had it so hard with those parents who are struggling. And I think there's an enormous weight, a depth of love, compassion, empathy, solidarity, that we can draw on to support those families who have been struggling. And those who have not found it so hard, who have found there have been nice things about the pandemic, actually are very conscious that that is not the universal experience. That is a really powerful resource we can work with, and we've certainly seen that at Little Village. But anyway, sorry.

Ann Mroz:

It's all right. [crosstalk 00:47:57].

Sophia Parker:

I took the opportunity to answer that previous question as well.

Ann Mroz:

Go back on questions.

Sophia Parker:

Sorry.

Ann Mroz:

Rachel, what about the competing interests?

Rachel de Souza:

Was that to me?

Ann Mroz:

Yeah. Yeah, of the previous question.

Rachel de Souza:

I think it's a really interesting question, because we're right at the point now, aren't we, where Kevan is working on his catch-up plans, he's got his three T's. Just a couple of reflections. Certainly, as someone who's worked in sponsored academies all my life and in challenging and disadvantaged areas, we always put summer schools on, and those summer schools were always a mix of work and play, and they were always voluntary. I think in there lies some of the answer.

Rachel de Souza:

What's interesting is, last summer, I certainly opened my old school's Inspiration Trust in mid-August, for the examination groups were desperate to get back. They were running to school. They were asking us to do it. No one had to come, and no teacher had to do it. It was completely voluntary. But I also think, what a great opportunity this summer to get all the activities, all the fun stuff, all the wider things going, and provide a safe place for those activities to happen. A little bit of English and maths won't hurt either. There's no harm with a little bit of catch-up, I'd always say, as long as we also recognize the need for young people to be with their peers and to be really enjoying.

Rachel de Souza:

One of my biggest areas of worry is key stage one. The teenagers, I think we know what to do. I'm looking at key stage one and thinking about language. There's key milestones around language, things where those little ones just haven't been in their classrooms enough and with their peers enough. And again, that's where play, that social activity, guided and supported by people who really know what they're doing, could really help families. I'm hearing a lot of worries from parents about isolated younger primary children.

Rachel de Souza:

I'd say take the opportunity. Come on, there are youth groups, Outward Bound groups, community groups, loads of people dying to put great stuff on. We just need the government to give us a great

settlement for this summer and for the next three years to really make sure that fantastic activities and academic catch-up can happen. I honestly don't think there's... There is no talk of anyone having to do this. This is about a voluntary, positive, with loads of people wanting to step into this space and do it to support young people. I'm in favor, and I think we can do both.

Ann Mroz:

Okay. But just give us the money.

Rachel de Souza:

Well, yes.

Ann Mroz:

I'm going to take another question and come straight to you, Zareen, on this. This is from Kelly Challis at Driver Youth Trust. "How do we ensure that aspirations are as high as possible for learners with SEND and not curtailed by a lack of assessment or intervention or experienced teachers in schools, or shrouded in the catch-up discussion?" Zareen?

Zareen Roy-Macauley:

Sure. Big question. Just to make sure I've got it right, how can we ensure that young people with special educational needs can progress without getting mired in the whole catch-up discussion and assessments, et cetera.

Ann Mroz:

Yeah.

Zareen Roy-Macauley:

Sure. I think a big part of helping young people with special educational needs, broaden their horizons beyond the school environment. I think something you'd touched upon, youth groups, community groups, things that allow those young people to have an exposure to different interests and aspirations that may not always be filtered through the school environment.

Zareen Roy-Macauley:

Again, speaking from personal experience, that's exactly what's happened with my brother. A lot of the ways in which he has progressed and the ways in which he's found different interests that aren't necessarily linked to his performance in things like English and maths are through youth groups. There's a group Heart n Soul, which works with autistic young people and introducing them to music lessons, introducing them to drama and dance and creative outlets that don't always have a huge focus. And I think those community groups and that support from role models in the community are really important, and make sure that those young people can flourish through different social interactions, but also these particular activities that lead to other goals that can go beyond activities. My brother doesn't necessarily have specific career goals in mind, but I know the things that he enjoys, I know the things that help him interact with other people, and it's through those community groups. I think encouraging those groups to continue is really crucial and is something that I've seen is really beneficial.

Ann Mroz:

Okay. Thank you. Sophia, do you want to add anything to that?

Sophia Parker:

Just a note. I totally agree with what Zareen's just said. I would say also to keep an eye on the early years. During pandemic, 60% of health visitors were redeployed to other activities, quite rightly. But that on the back of many cuts within that serve means that, actually, what's showing up now is that there are many young children, preschool children without those connections to schools and to nurseries, are now showing up with signs of adversity, developmental delay, safeguarding issues that just weren't picked up because they were getting lost to the system. I think there's a really important piece of work to ensure that those children, those babies who are born in lockdown or who are in their toddler years during lockdown, we're catching up with them and reconnecting and reintegrating them into some kind of framework of support that is picking up SEN issues early enough that they're then getting the support that's needed so that they can flourish and thrive as well.

Ann Mroz:

Okay. Thank you. We've not got very much time left, so I'm going to take one more question, and if you want to add to that, Rachel, when I ask you this one. I'm going to do it that way around. This is from Liz Taylor. "The last year has seen parents, particularly of younger children, playing a much more active role in their children's learning. How do you see us building on that and prioritizing parents and parental engagement in learning in the future?" And if you could answer nice and quickly, because I need to get the other two in, and then do a wrap-up.

Rachel de Souza:

Just to say yes, what a fantastic question, and it's the holy grail, isn't it, to get parents really involved and understanding and confident. I'll never forget going to China and watching those tiger moms in ordinary Chinese town absolutely engaged with their children's education. Now, I'm not suggesting we become a nation of tiger moms, but I think we have to get parents across that school threshold. We have to give them confidence, and the confidence to understand the curriculum. We need to spend more time doing that. And working on opening our doors in schools to be more as centers for supporting parenting, I think, is a key issue.

Rachel de Souza:

On the SEND issue and the SEN issue, everything that was said is great. I would just say we've got an SEN review promised and ongoing. Isn't this time? Isn't this the moment for some radical thinking about doing things really different there? I was an education reformer 15 years ago, and that was my path. Now, I think I want to be a SEND reformer and a pre-care threshold reformer. I think that's the area of the system that is ripe now for some really different thinking. We've got these SEND reviews, care reviews going on. Let's grab it, let's do different, let's think radically, rather than just settle. Let's do it.

Ann Mroz:

Okay. Thank you. Sophia, how do we keep the parents involved?

Sophia Parker:

Yeah. Great question. This is a little while back now. I did a study looking at childcare co-operatives, which is a model that isn't very common in this country, but it is basically about parents being involved

in the delivery of childcare in nurseries alongside professionals. And one of the things that's brilliant about that model is that it basically builds parental confidence as agents of learning for their children. I think it's something parents lack confidence in. Actually, one of the findings of this research we did on childcare co-ops is that the single best thing you can do to continue to keep parents engaged is to get them working alongside professionals who are almost building their confidence, showing them it's possible, stopping things like phonics seeming quite so scary and mysterious, showing them some simple techniques. I think it is very much about thinking about the partnership between the professionals and the parents and recognizing that parents and parental involvement in education has got a pretty big impact, certainly in primary school, in the educational outcomes we see alongside what the school's doing. Definitely partnership.

Ann Mroz:

Okay. Thank you. We are running out of time, so I'm sorry I won't be able to take any more questions. Thanks to everybody for sending them in. They've been great, and really making us think. I'm going to pass back to Rachel to hear her reflections on what she's heard and to tell us what her next steps are.

Rachel de Souza:

Just really simply, first I'd like to thank Zareen and Sophia for such fantastic and challenging thought. And Zareen, the voice of, I'm going to call you a young person, a young adult, the real voice of young people are what we need to hear, because that shows us the way that we need to go. And I do think we're at a transformative moment, and coming out of this pandemic is the time that we need to grab it. And I certainly will be sharing what the nation's children say, and I'll be writing it large. I think it's time for joined-up strategy, joined-up strategy for childhood, vulnerable children right at the center of it, but most importantly, at the heart of that, children and young people's voice. Thanks very much to Sophia and Zareen for all the challenge, and now we have the job to do, sort it all out.

Ann Mroz:

Okay. Thank you. Thank you to all three of you. You just need to get another 870,000 response or whatever it is [crosstalk 00:59:35] your million. [crosstalk 00:59:35].

Rachel de Souza:

We're on it. [inaudible 00:59:39] for me. Get it out there.

Ann Mroz:

[crosstalk 00:59:41]. Thank you all so much. That was really good. Thank you for your input. Thanks.

Rachel de Souza:

Thank you. [crosstalk 00:59:49].

Ann Mroz:

And thank you to Ark for putting this on. Thanks very much. Bye.

Rachel de Souza:

Thanks, bye.

Zareen Roy-Macauley:

Thank you.