

Emerald Studies in  
Child Centred Practice



# Care and Coronavirus

Perspectives on  
Childhood, Youth  
and Family

edited by  
Tom Disney and  
Lucy Grimshaw

# Care and Coronavirus

A necessary book for indeterminate times. Viewing childhood through the prism of Covid, these interdisciplinary and international contributors marry research and experience to provide intimate views of how existing health inequalities are not only brought into relief – but can be effectively addressed – to better serve young people, families, and communities in pandemic eras. Informative, provocative, and grounding for those charged with caring about the very future of care.

—*Rachael Stryker*, Professor, Department of Human Development and Women's Studies, California State University, East Bay, USA

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# Care and Coronavirus: Perspectives on Childhood, Youth and Family

EDITED BY

**TOM DISNEY**

*Northumbria University, UK*

AND

**LUCY GRIMSHAW**

*Northumbria University, UK*



United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India – Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited  
Emerald Publishing, Floor 5, Northspring, 21-23 Wellington Street, Leeds LS1 4DL

First edition 2025

Editorial matter and selection © 2025 Tom Disney and Lucy Grimshaw.  
Individual chapters © 2025 The authors.  
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**British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-83797-311-8 (Print)

ISBN: 978-1-83797-310-1 (Online)

ISBN: 978-1-83797-312-5 (Epub)



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

*For our families*

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## About the Editors

**Tom Disney** is a Social Geographer and an Associate Professor of Childhood Studies at Northumbria University, in the Department of Social Work, Education and Community Wellbeing. His research centres on families and children experiencing interventions of the state, exploring how these interventions break or facilitate marginalisation. He has conducted research on residential care settings for children and young people, child protection practice and participatory arts-based research to improve local authority Early Help systems.

**Lucy Grimshaw, PhD**, is an Assistant Professor of Social Policy at Northumbria University in the Department of Social Work, Education and Community Wellbeing. Lucy is a Social Scientist whose research examines intersectional inequalities in urban spaces, communities and institutions underpinned by feminist critical pedagogy and employing participatory methods. Recent research projects have focused on children's sense of place in relation to local heritage and inequalities among staff and students in higher education institutions.

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## About the Contributors

**Jaden Allan** is an Assistant Professor of Nurse education at Northumbria University in the Department of Nursing, Midwifery and Health. Jaden's research and scholarly activity include peer humanistic support and development in higher education and healthcare, along with simulation-based education (SBE). Jaden also develops and delivers nursing transnational education programmes globally and is an executive board member for the International Family Nursing Association (IFNA) UK and Ireland Chapter.

**Laura Bellussi** has a background in psychology, and her research interests include adults' and children's mental health, domestic abuse, discrimination and social equality. Her work entails evaluating innovations and adaptations in children and families' social care using qualitative, creative, and mixed methods.

**Linzi Brown** has always had a passion for the early years and pursued this by training and working as a practitioner in Early Years and health settings, supporting children and families. She then continued her education and graduated from Northumbria University after studying BA Joint Honours in Childcare and Education/Early Years and Childhood Studies. Linzi studied on the Graduate Teacher Programme (GTP) at the school she currently teaches in led by Northumbria University. Linzi has worked in a Further Education college and three secondary schools in the North East of England over the past 17 years. She has held positions in teaching and learning, pastoral and now, alongside continuing to teach, leads a Faculty of Health and Wellbeing in a large secondary school in Northumberland.

**Dr Jason Burg** is a historian who completed a PhD entitled 'Remember where you are!: The use of English Cathedrals as sites theatrical performance, 1928–2015' in 2017 at the University of Birmingham. He worked for several years in academia before retraining to teach history at secondary school, completing his PGCE teaching qualification in 2020. He now works at a large rural secondary school in the North East of England teaching History and Politics.

**Elaine Chaplin**, a dedicated advocate for the well-being of young minds, intertwines her passion for early years and mental health in her impactful work. With a background in early years education, she creates narratives that delve into the delicate nuances of early childhood development and its profound connection to mental wellness. Elaine's commitment to fostering resilience and nurturing the

emotional growth of children is evident in her works. As an educator, and mental health ambassador, Elaine Chaplin leaves a memorable mark on the intersection of early childhood and mental well-being.

**Alison Ní Charraighe** is an Assistant Professor of Childhood and Youth Studies at Northumbria University. She has a professional background in Youth Work and Community Development work, having worked for 17 as a youth worker and manager in the North East of England. She has recently completed her training as a Counsellor, specialising in working with young people.

**Kelly Coates, Shannon Devine and Elisha Sanchez** are practitioners from Projects4Change a youth work project based in Newcastle upon Tyne.

**Stephen Crossley** is an Assistant Professor in Sociology at Durham University. He rejoined the university in June 2020, having previously worked at Northumbria University. He completed an ESRC funded PhD at Durham in 2017, examining the UK Government's Troubled Families Programme. Prior to entering academia, Stephen worked in a number of public sector and voluntary sector roles in the North East of England, working on issues such as estate-based youth work, community cohesion, tenant participation, health inequalities, and child poverty. He has published extensively on issues relating to 'troubled families', child poverty and social justice and his research interests revolve around policy responses to social disadvantage and inequality and the symbolic power of social policies.

**Dr Lucy Currie** is an Assistant Professor at Northumbria University, Newcastle. With an education career that started in Secondary Schools in Zimbabwe and Botswana, Dr Currie has worked in Higher Education in the United Kingdom since 2003, mainly in Special Education and Inclusion, Work Based Learning and Professional Learning. Dr Currie's interests are in educational equity, inclusive practice, widening participation and professional development. As such, her research interests focus on examining the relationship between culture, heritage and learners' educational experiences and outcomes.

**Dr Kirsty Deacon** was a Research Officer at the Scottish Children's Reporter Administration while carrying out the piece of research contained within this book. Her background is in criminal justice and her research interests focus on imprisonment, particularly in the context of families and relationships.

**Fabio Dovigo**, PhD, is a Professor of Education at the Social Work, Education and Community Wellbeing Department of Northumbria University, UK. He has held the UNESCO Chair in 'Supporting Early Years Care and Education'. His research interests lie in the fields of Early Childhood Education and Care and inclusive education. He is a convenor of the Special Interest Group Sustainability in ECEC of the European Early Childhood Research Education Association. He has coordinated several EU International Research Projects, including 'Building High-Quality Early Childhood Education Systems Supported by International Evidence' and 'Enhancing Quality in Family Day Care'. His recent publications include 'Educator identity in a neoliberal context: Recognising and supporting

early childhood education and care educators' (EECERJ, 2020), 'Early Childhood Care and Education teaching staff and educators: Challenges and Opportunities, WCECCE Global Thematic Report' (UNESCO, 2024), and 'Promoting transformative practices for sustainability in Early Childhood Education and Care' (EECERA Praxis Series, Routledge, 2024).

**Jill Duncan** is an Assistant Professor of Education at Northumbria University, former Teacher and Leader across different school settings including international activity. Jill's research and scholarly activity focuses upon an ethic of care, specifically focusing on holistic provision for postgraduate trainees within initial teacher education (ITE). She works in close collaboration with local partners such as The Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art and is a member of national organisations such as the British Educational Research Association (BERA).

**Charmaine Agius Ferrante**, PhD, Senior Lecturer in Education, Children and Young People, Northumbria University. She is currently the Director of Education for Undergraduate Programmes in the Department of Social work, Education and Community Wellbeing. She is Senior Teaching Fellow HEA and the Programme Lead for BA Childhood and Early Years Studies. She is also a consultant Developmental Educationist and has advised policy around inclusive education in Malta where she was involved in supporting the development and provision of inclusive practice. Her research interests are the politics, policy and practices of inclusive education with respect to the education of disabled children. Research themes include developmental education, early intervention, early years teaching and learning, creating spaces and places for all children, sexuality and relationships in young disabled people, the relationship between disability theory and the local and global disability movements together with the possible connections between inclusive education and disability studies. She is a committed advocate for inclusive education, assisting parents, individuals, schools and communities to work towards building inclusive communities of practice.

**Lucy Grimshaw** is an Assistant Professor of Social Policy at Northumbria University in the Department of Social Work, Education and Community Wellbeing. Lucy is a Social Scientist whose research examines intersectional inequalities in urban spaces, communities and institutions underpinned by feminist critical pedagogy and employing participatory methods. Recent research projects have focused on children's sense of place in relation to local heritage and inequalities amongst staff and students in higher education institutions.

**Frances Gunn** works in a Health and Social Care Partnership in Scotland as a Service Manager with responsibility for Health Visiting. Prior to this, Frances was a Child Protection Health Advisor, Health Visitor and Midwife. Frances is also an Associate Tutor and a PhD student in the Centre for Child Wellbeing and Protection, University of Stirling. Frances's doctoral research study title is 'An exploration of professionals and families understanding of child neglect using an ecological framework perspective, with data from Ayrshire & Arran providing a geographic case study'.

**Kay Heslop** is the Department Head of Education within the Department of Social Work, Education and Community Wellbeing at Northumbria University. Kay has worked with people of all ages in her professional roles over four decades. She has endeavoured to develop inclusive, authentic and motivational educational activities which meet personal interests and build upon current skills. As a Researcher, Kay favours a participatory approach which has an impact on practice and for people.

**Andrew James, Ciara Waugh and Zodie** are Board Members of Our Hearings, Our Voice; an independent children and young people's Board for the Children's Hearings System. It exists to ensure that the voices of children and young people are included in decisions about meaningful change within the Children's Hearings System and to ensure that any proposed changes are implemented in a way that does not disadvantage the Rights and participation of children and young people. Since becoming Board Members Andrew, Ciara and Zodie have played an active role in trying to improve the experiences of children and young people coming to Hearings. Information about the range of work that Andrew, Ciara and Zodie are involved in can be found at [www.ohov.co.uk](http://www.ohov.co.uk)

**Dr Siân Lucas** is a registered social worker and has research interests in perinatal support, migration, linguistic discrimination and social justice. She has worked on various research projects to explore dimensions of well-being and service delivery using creative, qualitative, visual and participatory research methods.

**Dr Sandra Lyndon** is a reader in Childhood and Social Policy at the University of Chichester, UK. Sandra is the programme coordinator for the BA Hons Early Childhood Studies Level 6 top up and teaches across a range of Childhood programmes within the Institute of Education and Social Sciences. She is the Childhood Research Champion and takes a lead on research within the team. Sandra has many years' experience working with children in a variety of settings; she is a qualified Teacher and an Educational Psychologist. She completed her doctoral studies at the University of Sussex and her research interests include poverty, homelessness, intergenerational practice and narrative methodologies.

**Clare Matysova**, University of Leeds, UK – Clare Matysova is a PhD Researcher at the University of Leeds focusing on gender equality and exploring the impact of the United Kingdom's shared parental leave policy from the perspective of couples' decision-making. She also works as an Equality, Diversity and Inclusion practitioner in Higher Education, currently at the University of Aberdeen, previously Head of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

**Cathryn Meredith** has practised and taught mental health social work for 25 years, and none of this prepared her for parenting through the pandemic. She leads Northumbria University's Approved Mental Health Professional (AMHP) and Best Interests Assessor (BIA) provision within the Department of Social Work, Education and Community Wellbeing. Her scholarly interests lie in social approaches to mental distress and the emerging discipline of Mad Studies. She

collaborates with people with lived experience to undertake ethnographic, naturalistic enquiries.

**Athenkosi Mtumtum** is a HPCSA Registered Counsellor and Co-Founder of Sizakala Wellness Counsellors in South Africa. Her passion for philanthropy has its origins in the belief of the innate resilient spirit we all possess. She believes that the act of empathy shown in our interactions with others serves as a subtle reminder to people in need of their resilience. This reminds them that even though they may be victims of circumstances, the will and power to overcome their challenges rests within them. Since her B-Psych Honours (2012) completion Athenkosi has acquired a BA Honours in Community and Health Psychology (2017).

**Kirstin Mulholland** is an Assistant Professor of Education at Northumbria University and former Primary Teacher and School Leader. Alongside her role at Northumbria, Kirstin is a Senior Associate for the Education Endowment Foundation and also collaborates closely with a number of national organisations, including the Maths Hub Network and Research Schools Network. Her research interests centre on educators' professional learning, including the use of research evidence to inform professional practice.

**Dr Sarah McGarrol** is a Senior Research Fellow with the NIHR funded Aberdeen Health Determinants Research Collaboration, based at Aberdeen City Council. Her research interests include social and geographical inequalities in health, ethics of care, the impact of adverse childhood experiences for children in conflict with the law and critical reflections on health inequalities fieldwork.

**Dr Catherine Nixon** is the Research Manager at the Scottish Children's Reporter Administration. Her research interests focus upon the lived experiences of children and young people who are care- and/or hearings-experienced. She is particularly interested in how changes in practice and policy affect the Rights and participation of children and young people.

**Cuong Nguyen** was living with Fiona Ranson when COVID first appeared in the United Kingdom; he is Fiona's foster son and was a care leaver, still living with her at the time. In this chapter he reflects on how COVID impacted on his time at home. Cuong was attending college and had a part time job, which both came to a halt during COVID. He recalls monitoring responses from elsewhere in the world and comparing these to what was happening in the UK, which made him more anxious about Covid. Later he returned to work, where there were robust COVID measures in place.

**Vikki Park** is an Assistant Professor of Interprofessional Education and Collaborative Practice (IPECP) at Northumbria University in the Department of Nursing, Midwifery & Health. Vikki's research and scholarly work explore collaboration and interprofessional learning between health and social care professions within educational and practice environments. She has an established national and international profile in the field of IPECP, and recent projects relate

to IPECP in the pandemic and strategy and policy development within UK universities, national and international organisations.

**Fiona Ranson** fostered young people who were unaccompanied and seeking asylum in the United Kingdom (known as UASC). The young people were in her care and remained in her care as ‘care leavers’ during COVID. Having previously worked as an education improvement adviser with responsibility for the achievement and provision of ethnic minority children in schools, including those seeking asylum in the UK; Fiona undertook her PhD in Northumbria University where she examined experiences of care of UASC, via participatory arts based research with carers and carried out a policy review.

**Rachel Rosen** is a Professor of Sociology at the UCL Social Research Institute. Her research focuses on unequal childhoods, stratified social reproduction and migration in neoliberal border regimes. Methodologically, she is interested in the ethics and politics of ethnography and participatory research with children and other marginalised social groups and is committed to change-orientated research for social justice. Rachel is the co-author of *Negotiating Adult-Child Relationships in Early Childhood Research* (2014, Routledge) and the co-editor of *Reimagining Childhood Studies* (2019, Bloomsbury Academic), *Feminism and the Politics of Childhood: Friends or Foes?* (2018, UCL Press), *Childhood, parenting culture, and adult-child relations in global perspectives* (2020, FRS) and *Crisis for Whom? Critical global perspectives on childhood, care, and migration* (2023, UCL Press).

**Ms Sibusisiwe Tendai Sibanda** is a qualified Counsellor, Co-founder and CEO of Sizakala Wellness Counsellors in South Africa. Her journey into mental health began after watching her grandmother battle with dementia. Her need to understand mental health issues drove her to pursue a B-Psych degree at Midrand Graduate Institute. After obtaining her degree in 2012 and through her voluntary work, Sibusisiwe realised that there was a crucial need for the provision of affordable mental health care services in disadvantaged areas. That is when Sizakala Wellness Counsellors was created: An organisation dedicated to providing vulnerable and disadvantaged individuals with free psycho-social support.

**Dr Donald Simpson** is a former Primary School Teacher with an early years specialism. He is now a Senior Lecturer in Education at Teesside University (UK) where he has taught early childhood studies for many years. Donald has conducted several research projects with an early years focus. His work has explored professionalisation of the early years workforce as well as preschools’ responses to poverty across England and the United States. He has published many research articles with an early years focus including contributions to several respected international journals. These include: *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, *European Early Childhood Research Journal*, *Early Years* and *International Journal of Early Years Education*.

**Julie Spray**, University of Galway, Ireland, is an interdisciplinary Medical and Childhood Anthropologist who researches children’s perspectives on health and

illness, public health policy and interventions and health inequalities. Integrating biosocial, ethnographic and visual arts-based methods, her work advocates for greater inclusion in health policy of those marginalised by dominant social structures and values, particularly children, young people, and racially or economically disadvantaged communities. Her research has been based in Aotearoa New Zealand, the United States and Ireland with analyses focusing on intersecting issues of rheumatic fever, asthma, stress, infrastructure, nutrition, self-harm, mental health, COVID-19 and health policy. She is the author of *The Children in Child Health: Negotiating Young Lives and Health in New Zealand* (Rutgers Series in Childhood Studies, 2020).

**Judy Thomas** completed her practice-based PhD at Northumbria University, with her area of study concentrating on the Artist Facilitator role and collaborative practice within the context of artist-led learning programmes. She is the current Head of Department at Teesside University for the School of Arts and the Creative Industries. She has worked in academia since 2010; her previous roles include Learning Manager at Creativity, Culture and Education (CCE), Learning Manager at Waygood and Programme Manager for Learning and Inclusion at Liverpool Biennial. Before this, she was Acting Head of Education and Public Programmes for Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead.

**Christopher Warnock** is an Assistant Professor of Education at Northumbria University in the Department of Social Work, Education and Community Wellbeing. Chris works predominantly across Post-Graduate Certificate in Academic Practice and Initial Teacher Education programmes, supporting colleagues in achieving HEA professional recognition and students in their journey towards QTS. His research interests focus primarily on the professional identity of the teacher as an academic and the academic as an educator, utilising narrative methodologies to explore the perceived tensions and dilemmas experienced during transition between these established roles.

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# Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge and thank the participants and presenters at our conference ‘Childhood Care and Coronavirus’ held in December 2022 at Northumbria University, UK, from where the idea for this book and some of the chapters originated.

Thanks also to the Social Policy Association (<https://social-policy.org.uk/>) which awarded us an Opportunity Grant to fund the conference.

We would like to thank the team at Emerald for their support and the anonymous reviewers for their comments on the book proposal.

We would also like to thank our colleagues Dr Stephen Crossley, Dr Lewis Mates, Prof Liz Holt and Prof Tim Rapley.

Final thanks go to all the authors for their contributions to this book and their patience during the process.

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## Chapter 1

# Introduction: Care, Childhood, Youth and Family in the Context of Coronavirus

*Tom Disney and Lucy Grimshaw*

Northumbria University, UK

### Abstract

This introductory chapter provides the context for this edited collection: *Care and Coronavirus: Perspectives on Children, Youth and Families* which aims to understand care in the context of COVID-19, the practices, experiences and potential futures of it for children, young people and families. In this chapter, the authors begin by exploring COVID-19 and its implications for children, young people and families. This includes a consideration of how particular discourses of childhood and youth often led to the marginalisation of children in care policy and practice during the lockdown periods. The authors then discuss interdisciplinary literature on care to identify directions in policy, practice and research, drawing attention to the political nature of care and the need for scholars of childhood, youth and family to engage with these critical and political approaches to care. The authors argue that developments in the field of Childhood Studies can be brought into productive dialogue with care to forge new ways of thinking through care and childhood. The final part of the chapter provides an overview of the ensuing chapters and concludes with the implications of this work for future research, policy and practice. The authors argue that COVID-19 heightened the attention paid to care and the ways in which care is vital for the maintenance of ourselves and the world around us, while also cautioning about the inequalities and the commodification of care that was revealed in these times. The authors end with a call for reflection on the failures and successes of caring during the pandemic and in its aftermath so we might plan a more caring, hopeful future.

*Keywords:* Childhood; care; COVID-19; family; politics of care; young people

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Care and Coronavirus, 1–16

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doi:[10.1108/978-1-83797-310-120241001](https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-83797-310-120241001)

## Introduction

On 3rd January 2020, the BBC reported on a ‘mysterious viral pneumonia’ and concerns that this infection might resemble the flu-like SARS virus, which killed 700 people in 2002–2003 across the globe (BBC, 2020). Within a month, the situation had changed dramatically, and the World Health Organisation (WHO) had declared the outbreak a global emergency. By 20th March, there had been 10,000 recorded deaths, with unofficial figures likely much higher; many countries began to lockdown borders and officially limit social contact between their citizens. What we now know of as COVID-19 is, according to the WHO (2024), officially connected to an excess mortality of at least three million people globally. We use the term ‘connected’ deliberately because as Horton (2020: 874) notes, COVID-19 did not act in isolation but was made particularly deadly through its interaction with a range of non-communicable diseases that clustered in particular social groups ‘according to particular patterns of inequality deeply embedded in our societies.’ This avoidable context of social and economic inequality that allowed COVID-19 to particularly ravage certain communities underscores the political nature of the pandemic. A common refrain during these uncertain times was ‘we are all in this together!’ yet when examining the impacts of the virus, exposure was deeply stratified across racialised and gendered lines with certain groups essentially positioned as ‘surplus populations’ (Tyner, 2013) pointing to the biopolitical nature of this pandemic. In addition, forms of state withdrawal and erosion of formal care services exacerbated community vulnerability to the virus. In the UK, for instance, a preceding decade of unrelenting and cynical austerity policies withered the state’s infrastructure and ability to protect its citizens. As Raghuram (2021: 865) argues these outcomes can be read as the ‘inheritance of uncaring economies and states.’ The necessity of care and the failure of its provision was starkly felt across the world. In amongst the horrors that were experienced throughout the pandemic, this period was also marked by hope; there was optimism that the intense shock of such a phenomenon might finally herald a change to the dominant capitalist system and precipitate a kinder, more caring form of governance (Mazzucato, 2020).

Today, it can feel like the possibility of radical alternative futures that prioritise care has diminished, as countries across the world have now largely reoriented themselves back to business as normal; lockdowns have now ended, the virus has cemented itself into everyday life, having become endemic, and capitalism has retained its hegemonic position. If anything, the virus itself has now become a new means of accumulation, co-opted by capitalism, reflecting its tendency to cannibalise seemingly everything (Fraser, 2022). Despite this, there were moments, practices and experiences during the height of the pandemic, where care, and its potential, offered a glimpse into what might be or what could be if we were brave enough to radically alter our state of being and approach to care. It is this premise which is the inspiration for this edited collection to understand care in the context of COVID-19, the practices, experiences and potential futures of it for children, young people and families. We argue that

COVID-19 has fundamentally challenged perspectives on childhood and care, opening up important new possibilities for Childhood Studies.

This collection draws on the perspectives of academics from a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds, including geography, sociology, art, child development, education, social policy and public health; insights from practitioners working during the lockdown periods, in fields such as early years, education, youth work and public health; and finally, also the voices of those who lived during these periods, including young people. In doing so, it provides unique insights into experiences of children, young people, families and practitioners during the peak of the pandemic across the globe but also indicates future avenues for care policy, practice and conceptual understandings within this area.

In this introductory chapter, we begin by providing an initial commentary on COVID-19 and its implications for children, young people and families to contextualise and situate this collection. In particular, we reflect on the ways in which children were often marginalised in care policy and practice during the lockdown periods, shaped by particular discourses of childhood and youth. Next, we draw inspiration from interdisciplinary literature on care through which we seek to forge future directions in policy, practice and research. There have been critical engagements with the pandemic in care literature that highlight the political nature of care, and we argue this is important for scholars of childhood, youth and family to reflect upon. We also take time to reflect on developments in the field of Childhood Studies, which we argue can be brought into productive dialogue with care to forge new ways of thinking through care and childhood. Finally, we provide an overview of a rich collection of chapters and conclude with the implications of this work for future research, policy and practice.

### ***COVID-19 and Children, Young People and Families***

In 2020, the virus spread across every country in the world, but there were differentiated policy responses; some countries introduced lockdowns with strict rules rendering some people housebound, while in other contexts there was the opportunity to leave the house for time limited periods for specific purposes. In contrast, some locations, such as some US states, resisted the imposition of state controls entirely and left people to regulate themselves. Regardless of lockdown measures, the spread of COVID-19 across the globe radically reshaped the lives of children, young people and families. Alongside direct impacts of the virus, such as illness and death, families were impacted by a range of indirect implications of lockdowns, such as income precarity, (un)employment, isolation and mental ill health (Lebow, 2020). In contexts where lockdowns occurred, there were concerns about the long-term developmental impacts upon children (see for example European Commission (2021) report on Denmark, Spain, Greece, Ireland, Germany and France). This period was also marked by diverse and heterogeneous experiences; for example, studies of family well-being across a range of countries during this time noted both heightened levels of familial stress due to prolonged proximity but also enhanced levels of closeness and resilience (see for

example [Shah et al. \(2021\)](#) for UK, Italy, Lebanon and Singapore; [Gadermann et al. \(2021\)](#) for Canada and [Lee and Ward \(2020\)](#) for US).

Childhood and youth, as social constructions that are constituted by and enmeshed in wider systems of power, were unavoidably impacted by the social and economic inequalities that contributed to COVID-19's rapid and deadly spread through certain communities ([Khan, 2022](#)). The closing of schooling spaces, for instance, has been noted as having a significant impact upon children and young people; 188 countries closed schools and educational spaces ([Cortes-Morales et al., 2022](#)), with an estimated 91% of the world student population affected ([UNESCO, 2020a](#)). But significantly, the impact of this is not even, and it is girls who are predicted to be most greatly impacted by the closures ([UNESCO, 2020b](#)). Similarly, while certain children and young people were able to draw on family units to facilitate resilience, certain childhoods were also particularly vulnerable. For example, the implementation of social distancing legislation led to the invisibilisation of children at risk of serious harm through the disruption of in person child protection practice (see [Katz et al., 2022](#) for a review of Australia, Brazil, US, Colombia, England, Germany, Israel, Japan, Canada and South Africa). The confinement to family also put LGBTQ+ children and young people at risk of violence or discrimination ([Shah et al., 2021](#)). Not all children necessarily resided in families either; children and young people entangled in the criminal justice system, in particular those institutionalised in detention settings, were particularly marginalised during this time ([Khan and Boswell, 2022: 18](#)). Writing about the US, [Khan \(2022\)](#) illustrates the intersectional impacts of COVID-19 on children and young people, with Black and Hispanic children more at risk of economic precarity.

Whilst research on the material, health and educational impacts of COVID-19 and lockdowns on children, families and young people is well-established, the role of discourses of childhood and youth, which heavily permeated societal engagements with children and young people at this time are perhaps less acknowledged or understood. In many Global North countries, social constructions of childhood as a period of 'innocence' and 'in need of protection' led to the imposition of policies that emphasised children's vulnerability; for example, many universities at this time prohibited research with children as a 'high risk group' ([Cortes-Morales et al., 2022](#)). While the intention was to protect, the outcome is a silencing of a particular group in society. Where it suited governments, childhood 'innocence' could be mobilised in public health messaging as a form of affect management to achieve behaviour change. This was particularly apparent in then New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinda Arden's seemingly child orientated speeches, which were lauded across the globe, yet as [Spray \(2025\)](#) notes New Zealand's own public health measures largely ignored children's voices and failed to address children as meaningful subjects. At the same time, children and young people were also considered 'risky' as potential vectors of disease and inherent rule breakers, indicated by the closure of schools to limit their mobility to family homes, but also through direct messaging such as in the UK where young people were warned to stay away from elderly relatives with statements such as 'Don't kill grandma!' ([Walker and Pidd, 2020](#)). In some contexts, the notion of young

people as reckless vectors of disease was notably stigmatising and resulted in stricter lockdowns, as [Cortes-Morales et al. \(2022\)](#) note in relation to Columbia and Chile. The unevenness of childhood experience during these times point to the important role of Childhood Studies in unearthing the distinctive construction of childhood and its variations across the globe. What is common to both the conceptualisation of children and young people as either in need of protection or vectors of disease is the erasure of their own subjectivity. Children and young people were largely sidelined during the height of the pandemic and treated as objects of public health intervention, yet they were central actors in caregiving in many contexts across the globe. Children and young people are conscious and sensitive to economic inequality and the impacts of poverty ([Ridge, 2013](#)), and the pandemic was no different ([Shah et al., 2021](#)), indeed if anything this awareness was heightened and demonstrated by their own caregiving activities.

### *Care and Childhood*

COVID-19 and the lockdowns became a defining moment when the essential nature of ‘care’ and the very word itself came to the fore in all societies in the world ([Fine and Tronto, 2020](#)); how could states enact care for their populations and protect them from infection? Who should be prioritised? How best to care for those who had become ill? Not only were there diverging opinions about what form this care should take, there were also intense and heated debates about whether or not caring policies had gone too far or not far enough to protect human life. These different approaches and debates are indicative of the complicated and multifaceted nature of ‘care.’

Care has been understood as a relational process and the work of [Fisher and Tronto \(1990\)](#) has often been central. They define care as

[...] a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complete, life-sustaining web. ([Fisher and Tronto, 1990](#): 40).

Academic scholarship has often separated care into two strands: caring *about* and caring *for* ([Tronto, 1989](#)), the latter encompassing care practice (both formal and informal) and the former focused on the emotional and affective dynamics of care. While it is often associated with being proximate, care is not limited to close physical contact; transnational care has been enacted in the form of remittances sent between countries to support families divided by borders ([Carling, 2014](#)). As [Milligan and Wiles \(2010\)](#) note, and hinted at in Fisher and Tronto’s definition, care extends to whole networks of relations and is multidirectional and weblike; analysis of care should encompass a focus beyond the individual and simplistic interpersonal relationships. Care and care giving is complex, extending additionally beyond human actors; the wider environment and natural world, and its

interconnected entities such as the soil, can be understood as a caregiver that sustains life rather than a resource for human consumption (Puig de La Bellacasa, 2017).

Care is also interlinked with social reproduction, and the inequalities inherent in care work have been of particular interest within feminist and Marxist thought (Schwiter and Steiner, 2020), pointing to the contested and political nature of care. It is this political and expanded notion of care that is of interest to us in this edited collection. Given the deeply unequal impacts of the pandemic, an attention to the political nature of care is thus unavoidable in our minds. Equally important, is that while proclamations such as ‘we are all in this together’ may have rung hollow, neoliberalism’s valorisation of individualism was undeniably undermined given how survival during these times was premised on collective action, and so care must be understood as deeply intertwined in the wider world beyond the individual, including the human and non-human. This points to a need to consider care as a form of radical interdependency, and recent developments thinking through care during the pandemic help to make sense of this. This is articulated particularly effectively in the Care Manifesto (Chatzidakis et al., 2020) in which the authors argue that predominance of neoliberalism and its fetishisation of individualism has led to societies that see little value in care, this in turn hastened the damage wrought by COVID-19. It is important, however, to note that neoliberalism is not a feature of all places; not all countries will have experienced this specific devaluation of care, and this reflects concerns that care literature studies are often Western-centric (Raghuram, 2021).

In a recent contribution on COVID-19 and care, Neely and Lopez (2022: 2) similarly argue to push ‘against neoliberal frameworks of individualism and autonomy, recognizing interrelatedness both as material fact and as ground through which to imagine worlds otherwise.’ However, they argue that during COVID-19, care across the globe has been impacted primarily by the role of racial capitalism rather than neoliberalism and highlight the concept of ‘othermothering,’ drawing on Black feminist care ethics. Othermothering originates within African American communities during and beyond slavery, where practices of education and socialisation took place outside of the nuclear family, involving wider networks of people in caring (Guiffrida, 2005). It challenges Western conceptualisations of care and family, resisting neoliberal individualism, the privatisation of care and the resulting exploitation within capitalist care relations. The attention to the Black Feminist care ethics and intersectional experiences of care necessarily emphasises the political nature of care and the fight against social oppression (Neely and Lopez, 2022). Both the Care Manifesto and Neely and Lopez’s use of othermothering are important and critical interventions within care literature to make sense of pandemic times. Both point to our interdependencies and the politics of care which inform this edited collection; we also aim to extend these debates in care by incorporating children’s own subjectivities during the pandemic.

Children are often obscured within caring processes and practices, with assumptions about their inherent vulnerability often positioning them necessarily as simple recipients of care. Children feature primarily as objects of care, and how

the care they necessitate may be stratified by inequalities. Rarely, are they meaningful subjects within care literature; Horton and Pyer (2017: 13) note that research ‘*with* - rather than *about* – children and young people in relation to care seems to be, problematically, rather marginalised; certainly it is relatively rare to encounter children and young people’s *own* voices, experiences, issues, practices, politics and ethics represented within the very rich body of work on care.’ While children and young people certainly are recipients of care, often within families or designated spaces of care, this does not mean that they are not also sophisticated and meaningful caring agents. Childhood scholars have been at the forefront of exploring children’s caring agency and responsibilities within both the Global South (Evans, 2010) and the Global North (Disney, 2015). We argue that there is much of value in literature exploring care during pandemic times, but they should be brought together with recent developments within Childhood Studies to think through the complexities of care during the pandemic.

### ***Critical Childhood Studies***

The current vibrant and expanding interdisciplinary field of Childhood Studies, often drawing from the sociological New Social Studies of Childhood (James and Prout, 1997) has pioneered more sophisticated engagements with the social and cultural contexts of childhood (Wyness, 2012) and has endeavoured to treat children as subjects and participants in social research (Wells, 2017). Central to much scholarship within Childhood Studies is that children are social agents and not passive recipients of adult culture, rather they are meaningful rights bearers and beings with the capacity to remake and reshape the social world (Corsaro, 2015). The social construction of childhood and children’s agentic capacity are now very much foundational aspects of Childhood Studies (Wells, 2017). With this rich scholarship has come limitations, however; the discipline has been argued to have remained largely preoccupied with the micro-scale of childhood and children’s everyday lives, despite now longstanding calls to reflect on macro-scale processes which shape and produce childhoods (Ansell, 2009). Additionally, the discipline has been argued to be ‘complicit in valorizing children’s agency to the point of fetish’ (Spyrou et al., 2019: 3). There are political consequences to the conceptual dominance of agency in Childhood Studies scholarship as Spyrou et al. (2019) caution; such approaches that celebrate individual action risk reflecting and supporting neoliberal and late capitalist agendas that have often had negative consequences for many children across the world, exacerbating poverty and inequality. The preoccupation with children’s agency in the discipline has furthermore restricted the discipline from other ways of knowing childhood and children’s everyday lives, resulting in more partial views and understandings. Psychological and developmental approaches are often perceived with wariness (Tatlow-Golden and Montgomery, 2021), and a focus on the micro-scale agency of children has neglected more structural approaches (Spyrou et al., 2019).

In an important recent conceptual intervention, Spyrou et al. (2019: 6) suggest reorientating our attention to ‘the relational and interdependent aspects of

children's lives as well as the ethics and politics that characterise them.' They employ a relational ontology to understand childhood subjectivities, embedding them within the wider political and structural contexts in which they live and thus move Childhood Studies beyond a fascination with the individual agentic child. Ultimately, what matters, they argue, is 'not what [children] are but how they affect and are affected in the event assemblages they find themselves in' (Spyrou et al., 2019: 8). Notably, their approach is implicitly underpinned by care ethics; they caution childhood scholars to question which child is brought into view by our research activities. This points to the important synergies between recent developments in care literature and Childhood Studies; a focus beyond the individual and a call for attention to the political nature of our interdependencies embedded in socio-structural scalar processes. Childhood scholars could find much of value in recent care scholarship that decentres the individual and radically embeds us within the world around us, acknowledging human and non-human subjectivities. Similarly, critical childhood scholarship has much to offer care literature – in questioning who we bring into view with our research and resisting the prioritisation of adult voice and the marginalisation of children's subjectivities. We suggest such an approach is vital in order to help understand childhood, youth and family and for conceptualising and developing future caring practices in the wake of COVID-19.

### ***Structure and Contributions of the Book***

The book is organised into five sections which explore the COVID-19's incursion into the everyday lives of children, young people and families across the globe. These sections comprise 'Early Systems of Care,' 'Children and Young People's Health and Well-being,' 'Parents as Subjects and Recipients of Care,' 'Schooling as Care' and 'Young People Navigating Care and Control Beyond the School.' Within each section authors present research on diverse topics across various contexts with a central guiding theme of how care was enacted, experienced or denied during these times. Each section ends with a reflection from practitioners and those who lived through the pandemic voicing their experiences of the lockdowns, providing rich and moving accounts that remind us how these times were felt.

The first section examines experiences and practices of care within systems of early childhood during the lockdown periods. In Chapter 2, Fabio Dovigo notes there has been surprisingly limited research focused on exploring the implications of the pandemic upon children's development and their socialisation within early childhood settings. This is mirrored, he argues, by a similar dearth of insights into the impacts of the lockdowns upon parents. His chapter provides an important reference point, addressing these lacunae through a systematic literature review of international literature to explore the experiences of children and their carers during the pandemic. He points to the need for interventions to address lost learning and socialisation but with a clear focus on supporting parents and carers