

News Release

Issue date: Monday 21 March 2022

Young V&A, UCL and the University of Sheffield launch first online exhibition *Play In The Pandemic* shedding new light on the impact of the global pandemic on children's play

- Drawing on the experiences of children during the pandemic, the exhibition showcases contributions to a collaborative research project involving IOE, UCL's Faculty of Education & Society, The UCL Bartlett Centre for Advanced Spatial Analysis and the School of Education at the University of Sheffield
- From child-created artworks to Barbies participating in Joe Wicks' workouts, the digital magazine *HomeCool Kids* made by and for children, and objects from Young V&A's collections, a new online interactive uncovers children's creativity, resourcefulness and resilience in the face of Covid-19



Today, [Young V&A](#) launches its first ever online exhibition, *Play In The Pandemic*, created with children from around the world. Hosted on the [Play Observatory](#) website, the online exhibition is the culmination of a collaborative research project exploring how the global pandemic affected children's play, in partnership with researchers [IOE](#), [UCL's Faculty of Education & Society](#), [The UCL Bartlett Centre for Advanced Spatial Analysis](#) and the [School of Education at the University of Sheffield](#) and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.

Launching on Wednesday 23 March, exactly two years on since ministers announced the UK would enter the first of several national lockdowns in the fight against Covid-19, *Play In The Pandemic* reveals the impact of play during this time of seismic change.

Spanning 2020 to 2022, The Play Observatory research project, led by Professor John Potter, invited children, their families, schools, groups and organisations to submit their experiences of play during the period through an online survey led by the University of Sheffield. The public call-out generated 100s of global submissions from the UK to Australia ranging from music videos to digital magazines and artworks created by children, alongside films by parents showing their kids splashing in puddles or making snow angels.

Working with artist [Marcus Walters](#), online interactive designers, Juliette Coquet and Sindi Breshani from [Episod Studio](#), Dr Valerio Signorelli and play specialists from Great Ormond Street Hospital, Young V&A's Katy Canales has curated an interactive online experience. This places survey submissions alongside objects from Young V&A's collection and a series of activities from how to make your own origami house to creating dens and window boxes for people to get involved. The exhibition takes the form of an unfolding origami house – inspired by children's activities, the playful design reflects how our homes were the settings for many pandemic experiences.

Capturing moments of fun and light-heartedness including Barbies taking part in Joe Wicks' PE classes, face painting, and beach walks, the exhibition juxtaposes these with expressions of anxiety and grief recorded in children's art and poetry from the time. There are photographs of 'Keep Out' signs chalked on the pavement outside children's homes to ward off Covid-19, as well as a digital monthly magazine *HomeCool Kids Magazine* and the experience of a child who created a Minecraft funeral for his father who was unable to attend his friend's funeral in person.

The exhibition shows that even the youngest contributors were aware of the virus and how the pandemic became integrated into their playtime, including toddlers Covid-testing their teddy bears and creating make-shift face-coverings for hospital role play and finding 'extreme escapism' through dress-up and imaginative play. This project and exhibition are testament to how resourceful and creative children and their families were during the successive national lockdowns, and their experiences will give invaluable insights into the pandemic for future generations.

Katy Canales, Online Exhibition Producer, Young V&A, said: *"The devastating effects of the global pandemic have impacted everyone – especially children and young people, who saw their lives upended as schools and playgrounds closed, were isolated from their friends and extended families, and restricted to their homes. Championing, co-curating and co-producing with children is central to Young V&A's approach – and the Play In The Pandemic project strives to capture and amplify their voices and experiences, celebrating their resourcefulness, creativity, and empathy through a new playful online interactive experience. By collaborating with families and working alongside researchers at UCL and University of Sheffield, this project has caught a unique moment in children's lives, providing insights into the pandemic for generations to come."*

Dr Yinka Olusoga from the School of Education at the University of Sheffield led the online research survey for the project [which is still seeking contributions from children](#). She said:

"Our survey aims to preserve for the historical record information about children's experiences during the pandemic. We placed the child at the centre of our design as we want to hear about children and young people's play from them, and their families, in their own words. One source of inspiration was the work of [Iona and Peter Opie](#) and their surveys of play and folklore in the second half of the 20th century. 21st century technology means that as well as children's own words, contributions have also included drawings, photographs, and films. These illustrate the numerous ways in which children have maintained and adapted play to connect, communicate and create."

Professor John Potter, IOE, UCL's Faculty for Education and Society and project leader of The Play Observatory, added: *"I am immensely proud of this project, the work of the whole team at UCL and the University of Sheffield, and our collaboration with Young V&A, Great Ormond Street Hospital, and the British Library. We owe a great deal to the contributors, the children's parents and carers who shared their experiences with such honesty and enthusiasm. We have put the spotlight on play as something which can foster wellbeing and resourcefulness of children and their families in difficult times."*

"We've also heard about when things didn't go well and about the deeply mixed feelings and strong emotions children felt since Covid started affecting their lives. This project has enabled us to move the discussion on from 'learning loss' as the only effect of the pandemic on childhood

and given us a chance to reflect on how children may respond now and in the future to crises and emergencies. I hope the exhibition and project will move those who interact with it and help to illustrate how play is not just ephemeral and transient, but something which is central and essential in our lives.”

About the Play In The Pandemic online exhibition

The exhibition is organised into four themes: **Constructing, Imagining, Exploring** and **Innovating**, with each theme exploring three different modes of children’s play.

Constructing looks at how children use play to build their understanding and control situations that they find difficult to process. During the first and second national lockdowns, children created safe spaces, like dens, to play in. They made artworks that conveyed hopes, joys and fears, as well as small worlds with their toys, often playing out real-life scenarios in a safe setting. Highlights include a sitting room den created by Sheffield-based Rosie Whitehead’s children aged one and three and a poignant lino print *I Don’t Want Life To Go Back To Normal I Want It To Go Back Better* and film submitted by eight-year old Woody, who is autistic, and his father Sonny Adorjan.

Also displayed is the drawing *Germs and Hand-Sanitiser* by 4-year-old Cadi from Pontarddulais, shown alongside Young V&A’s *Study of a gas mask* made between 1939 and 1942 by Byron Dun, aged between 11 and 14 at the time. These works speak to how art has been used to respond to crises over time – and how items such as masks, protective equipment and hand sanitisers have become normalised everyday items for children.

Imagining explores how during the pandemic, children used their imaginations to conjure up moments of escapism and comic relief. Making and using props, telling stories and creating performances enabled children to play with reality and immerse themselves in alternative scenarios. Highlights include the poem *All Alone* by 9-year-old Austin Coolin from North Walsham and 11-year-old Leo Kelly’s music video *Lost Without You*, juxtaposed with objects from Young V&A’s Eileen Brock Archive packed with theatre programmes, sheet music, costume and plays. Growing up between the Wars in the 20th Century, and following the loss of her father, Eileen and her mother found happiness in performing.

Exploring focuses on how outside exploration makes for happier, healthier, and more confident children. During the UK’s first and second national lockdowns children’s access to places and playmates outside the home were restricted. In response to these limitations, play became more localised. Families began exploring their neighbourhoods during their daily walks. Gardens, window boxes and parks provided fertile ground for seasonal play and some communities devised activities like scavenger hunts and nature trails for families to engage with and explore while following restrictions. Highlights include photos and films documenting children and their families taking part in outdoor treasure hunts, nature trails and building forts in the snow. The exhibition also includes examples from the Donne Buck Archive of Play and Playgrounds archive, which have been used to highlight the ongoing importance of having dedicated spaces for children to play.

Innovation explores how children are constantly exploring and innovating new ways to engage with and learn from objects, settings, and the people around them. During the national lockdowns, many children who were fortunate enough to have access to digital devices used

them to transform their school and recreational activities into more stimulating, and enjoyable pursuits. They developed ways to connect socially with friends, family, and peers, and to voice their ideas with a broader audience. For other children, this was a period to disconnect from digital technology. A time in which to devise and discover activities and interests away from the screen and to explore alternative ways of connecting with others. Across history, children have been inventing their own games and rules for friends and family to enjoy – submissions show that families came up with games including ‘Chase’ and ‘Café’ and played old favourites like Monopoly together during the pandemic. These instances sit alongside a cricket-inspired game from the Young V&A collection, which was created, developed and played by generations of the Ellerman family from the 1930s onwards.

-ENDS-

Notes to Editors

For further PRESS information about *Play In The Pandemic* please contact Laura Mitchell on l.mitchell@vam.ac.uk / 020 3949 4509 (not for publication). A selection of press images is available to download free of charge from pressimages.vam.ac.uk.

About Play In The Pandemic

Launching on 23 March 2022, Play In The Pandemic is an online exhibition curated by Young V&A celebrating how play empowered children's resilience, well-being, and creativity during the pandemic. The exhibition showcases children's artworks, games and films across the UK that were submitted to the Play Observatory alongside those from the Young V&A's collection. playinthepandemic.play-observatory.com

About Young V&A

Currently under redevelopment and reopening in 2023, Young V&A is being reimagined as a powerhouse of creativity for the young from birth to early teens. It will be a place to imagine, play, create, debate and design for tomorrow, as the UK's premier national museum entirely dedicated to children. Designed with and for 0–14-year-olds, Young V&A's central mission is to inspire young people with the creative ingenuity of art, performance and design, to empower educators to promote creativity, and to influence child-centred museum practice. vam.ac.uk/info/young

About UCL – London's Global University

UCL is a diverse global community of world-class academics, students, industry links, external partners, and alumni. Our powerful collective of individuals and institutions work together to explore new possibilities.

Since 1826, we have championed independent thought by attracting and nurturing the world's best minds. Our community of more than 43,800 students from 150 countries and over 14,300 staff pursues academic excellence, breaks boundaries and makes a positive impact on real world problems.

We are consistently ranked among the top 10 universities in the world and are one of only a handful of institutions rated as having the strongest academic reputation and the broadest research impact.

About The University of Sheffield

With almost 29,000 of the brightest students from over 140 countries, learning alongside over 1,200 of the best academics from across the globe, the University of Sheffield is one of the world's leading universities.

A member of the UK's prestigious Russell Group of leading research-led institutions, Sheffield offers world-class teaching and research excellence across a wide range of disciplines.

Unified by the power of discovery and understanding, staff and students at the university are committed to finding new ways to transform the world we live in.

Sheffield is the only university to feature in The Sunday Times 100 Best Not-For-Profit Organisations to Work For 2018 and for the last eight years has been ranked in the top five UK universities for Student Satisfaction by Times Higher Education.

Sheffield has six Nobel Prize winners among former staff and students and its alumni go on to hold positions of great responsibility and influence all over the world, making significant contributions in their chosen fields.

Global research partners and clients include Boeing, Rolls-Royce, Unilever, AstraZeneca, GlaxoSmithKline, Siemens and Airbus, as well as many UK and overseas government agencies and charitable foundations.