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# Children in Lockdown

*The Consequences of the  
Coronavirus Crisis for  
Children Living in Poverty*

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## *The Consequences of the Coronavirus Crisis for Children Living in Poverty*

As the coronavirus pandemic continues on and the government-imposed measures remain in place, The Childhood Trust is extremely concerned about the ways in which this crisis is adversely and disproportionately affecting disadvantaged children and young people living in London. While this crisis is hard to endure regardless of age, it is exceptionally challenging for those who are not included in the national discussion and who rarely get to vocalize their needs.

We have engaged directly with children and families living in poverty who have been severely affected by this crisis. Families who were already enduring hard, challenging lives have had to survive lockdown in the most appalling circumstances. For children in poverty, the crisis has multiplied the impact of the adversities they endure such as hunger, fear, isolation and stigma. The consequence of this have not yet begun to be understood. Whilst research is being initiated, it may take many years for the devastating impact on children to be fully documented.

In parallel, against a decade of austerity, a network of charities, community organisations and volunteers are now often the only means of support available for disadvantaged children. These entities now find themselves fighting for their own survival as the pandemic wreaks havoc on the economy and charities' ability to fundraise.

The Childhood Trust has launched the Champions for Children campaign to raise £3 million to fund 96 charities that collectively support over 170,000 children and young people in London. These organisations have never been more needed by children than they are now. The unconditional love and care they provide will be critical in helping our most vulnerable and disadvantaged children fully recover from the impact of this crisis.

In this report, we draw together emerging evidence from available studies to highlight some of the most pressing concerns that government and third sector organisations need to address to mitigate this crisis for children.

We hope that you find it helpful in thinking about how you, your company or organisation can play a role in fostering conditions conducive to children's wellbeing. If you haven't already, we invite you to join our community of donors and supporters who have backed Champions for Children



and are helping us to alleviate the impact of poverty made worse by this unprecedented pandemic.

On behalf of the thousands of children and young people across London who will benefit from Champions for Children, we heartily thank everyone who has backed the campaign. Without your kindness and generosity such support for children would not exist.

**Laurence Guinness**  
**Chief Executive**  
**The Childhood Trust**

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# Summary

## Section 1: Emotional and Physical Abuse

With lockdown orders in place, children and young people are spending more time in their homes with their family members. This increases the opportunity for them to witness domestic abuse and/or endure emotional or physical abuse at the hands of their family members. This is especially concerning considering the stresses that this crisis has imposed including unemployment, and increased drinking within the home. Children and young people no longer have the opportunity to take refuge at school, youth clubs or organisations; and are spending less time with their teachers and coaches who are all trained to pick up on evidence of abuse.

## Section 2: Mental Health Concerns

The coronavirus crisis is having a significant impact on the mental health of children and young people. They are worried about contracting the virus, spreading it to their family members, and losing loved ones. They are adjusting to restricted access to support services, spending less time with friends, and more time online. Children and young people are reporting higher instances of depression, anxiety, and loneliness, compared to older cohorts, and this is most evident in concerns about their future schooling and/or careers.

### **Section 3: Educational Learning Loss**

With the majority of children and young people transitioning to remote learning, students from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to fall behind and experience educational learning loss. They have significantly fewer, if any, resources including limited access to technology and internet connection, restricted supervision or guidance over educational activities and an unstable working environment. If this inequality is not accounted for immediately, the attainment gap between these children and their more advantaged peers will widen at every following stage of education.

### **Section 4: Hunger and Food Insecurity**

For many children and young people living in poverty, the free meal they receive at school is their only hot meal of the day. The closure of schools has meant that many are suffering hunger and malnutrition, and the voucher system that the government rolled out is not adequately responding to this challenge. Moreover, families are struggling to make up for this loss of food because of the economic challenge that COVID-19 has imposed. Consequently, there has been high levels of demand at food banks across the UK, and this is likely to persist through the summer as the government decided to end the voucher system.

### **Section 5: Homelessness and Temporary Housing Risks**

Practicing social distancing and staying safe and health is significantly more difficult for families that experience homelessness and/or are living in temporary housing. Shared facilities are likely to be cramped so that children have virtually no space to crawl or

play, families often have to share kitchen and toilet facilities with other people, there is limited access to soap and other hygiene practices, among other challenges. Spending the majority of the day in overcrowded spaces with few activities is detrimental to the physical and mental health of children and young people.

### **Section 6: Playtime and Well-being**

Looking towards the recovery process of this crisis, the physical well-being and the ability to play is of crucial importance for the health of children and young people. Having access to outdoor space and spending time with other children and young people will likely help them heal from the stresses that COVID-19 has placed on them. Additionally, investment in communities, including youth centres, schools, social clubs and libraries—will help promote the long-term recovery of children and young people's well-being.



# Section 1:

## Emotional & Physical Abuse

Lockdown orders, which have helped slow the spread of coronavirus, have also created new challenges for disadvantaged and vulnerable children and young people. Children and young people witnessing domestic abuse and/or subjected to emotional and physical abuse by their family members can no longer take refuge at school, youth clubs or organisations, or anywhere outside their house. Their access to support and resources is limited, now that they have restricted contact with their friends, teachers, youth workers or mentors—many of whom are trained to pick up on evidence of abuse. Additionally, evidence suggests that there is an increase of child abuse patterns during periods of economic crisis and unemployment.[1]

Sajid Javid, former home secretary, is amongst those to voice concern about child abuse during coronavirus lockdown, calling it a 'perfect storm.' He stated, "children are left to isolate alongside their abuser and they will therefore suffer severe long-term damage and this kind of thing isn't reflected in statistics just yet, but it will be, and I'm very concerned about that" [2]

The early warning signs of these issues are starting to manifest themselves. Reports of abuse submitted by teachers or health professionals have plummeted in recent

weeks as children and young adults become more isolated under lockdown. [3]

Jaine Stannard, chief executive of School-Home Support (SHS), a Childhood Trust-funded charity that supports disadvantaged state school pupils, has indicated that this downfall of public referrals is concerning and warns that when children go back to school the government is going to see a 'tsunami' of safeguarding referrals." SHS, in the meantime, have reported a 750% increase in the number of children needing to be referred to social services, compared to the same period in 2019." [4]



**The government is going to see a 'tsunami' of safeguarding referrals.**

**-Jaine Stannard, Chief Executive, School Home Support**

A related concern is the rise in total alcohol sales during the period of the epidemic. Retail sales grew by 21% in value since the beginning of the lockdown.[5] In a country where there are 2.6 million children living with a parent drinking hazardously, with 705,000 living with a dependent drinker, these increased drinking patterns are cause for worry due to their adverse effects on children and young people. [6]



Indeed, alcohol dependency and alcoholism are both linked to issues of violence, domestic abuse and sexual assault. The Institute of Alcohol Studies found that 25%-50% of domestic abuse perpetrators had been drinking at the time of assault. Moreover, cases involving severe violence were twice as likely to include alcohol and the risk of rape was twice as high for attacks involving drinking offenders.[7] Children and young people caring for family members with substance abuse and/or alcohol problems may find their physical and mental health relationships and educational outcomes significantly more impacted than prior to the COVID-19 restrictions, as school closures and unavailability of in-person contact with services means fewer opportunities for support and respite from their caring roles. [8], [9] Undoubtedly, not all incidents of domestic abuse cases are reported, notably due to stigma surrounding substance and alcohol misuse [10]; and, as mentioned above, COVID-19 poses new challenges for the disclosure of such cases.



A second concern pointed out by Dr. Aric Sigman is that because children are spending more time at home during lockdown, they are more likely to witness their parents drinking patterns.[11] Evidence suggests that this exposure can have harmful and long-lasting effects. One study found that “hazardous parental drinking predicts mid-adolescent hazardous drinking”[12]; another uncovered that “parental alcohol use during adolescence has recently been found to be directly related to adolescents’ heavy drinking.”[13]

Another unique challenge that children and young adults face is online abuse. For those able to access computers, phones and/or tablets, lockdown has likely meant more time spent in front of the screen. Abusers are aware of this and have an unprecedented opportunity to target children, especially those who are increasingly feeling isolated and lonely. As a result, “reports of obscene online material more than doubled globally to more than four million between March and April.”[14] This problem is exacerbated by the reduction of online moderators as tech firms respond to lockdown orders.[15] As a result, “there has been an 89% drop in site deletions by [the] tech companies”[16] since lockdown began, leaving children open to more online abuse and exploitation.

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## Section 2:

# Mental Health Concerns

The coronavirus pandemic has created a lot of uncertainty and instability for all age groups. Children and young adults, however, are facing their own unique challenges which have had adverse effects on their mental wellbeing. The mental health charity Young Minds carried out a survey with over 2,000 young people with a history of mental health needs to understand the impact of the pandemic on their mental health and establish their ability to access support.[17]

Of those that participated, 32% agreed that [coronavirus] had made their mental health much worse, and 51% agreed that it had made their mental health a bit worse. The most pressing areas of concern for children and young adults was relating to worries about their family's health, the closure of schools, a loss of routine, a loss of social connection and anxieties about their future.

For children and young people caring for family members with a disability, illness, mental health condition or substance abuse problem (named young carers and young adult carers), the increase in caring responsibilities compounded by the physically and emotionally demanding nature of caring roles may have far-reaching effects on their mental health. [18], [19]

Indeed, young carers and young adult carers are more prone to mental health problems due to their caring responsibilities. [20], [21] And, as mentioned above, the COVID-19 restrictions mean they may spend more time caring due to the closure or reduction of local and health services.

Moreover, the pandemic may escalate their anxieties as they fear "bringing the virus home" to the person they care for [22], and worry about their financial situation. [23] Due to the lack of support and respite, their feelings of social exclusion and loneliness may be heightened, instigating and/or accentuating mental health problems. [24]

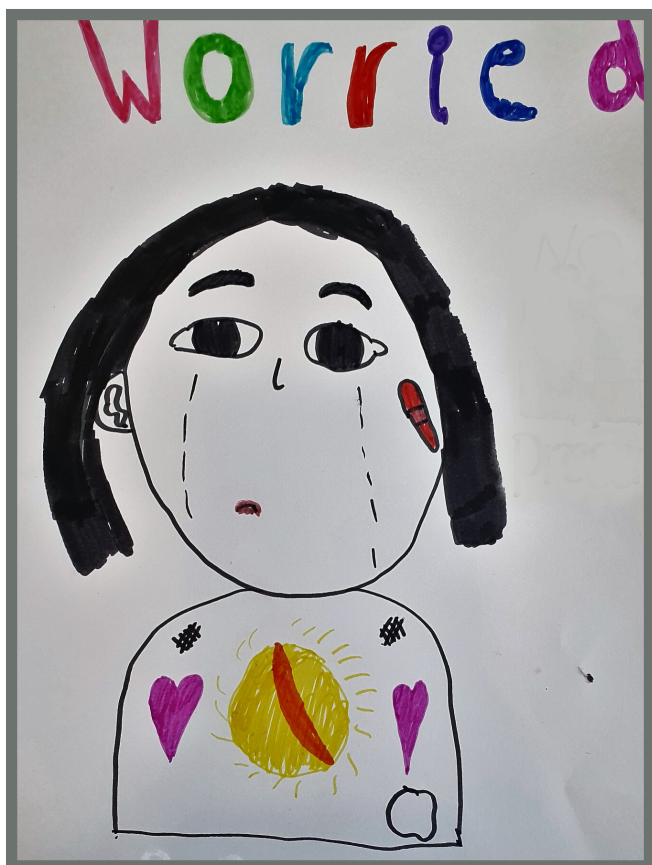
**"I feel sad because people are dying all around the world.. I'm worried about dying if I got it"**  
-Jonathan, 8 years old

**"I'm really worried about my family getting coronavirus."**  
-Emily, 10 years old

**"Since theres been a lot of deaths, it to me, feels like its going to end humanity soon"**  
-Thomas, 11 years old



Mental health support for children and young adults has adapted to the pandemic by transitioning to digital and virtual interventions. While it is important to continue mental health support by any means possible, there are some relevant challenges that need to be considered. First, not all children and young adults have access to technology; if they do, it is often not a private or personal device. Second, many children and young adults reported concerns regarding lack of privacy at home and fear that their family members are overhearing the session. [25] This is especially problematic for those that do not want their families to know they receive mental health support. Third, many are reporting long wait times to access online support, and less thorough appointments due to the increase of demand. [26] Lastly, many children and young people reported a lack of clarity of how they can access support as their normal channels have been interrupted. [27]



“

**Current social distancing measures enforced on children because of COVID-19 are likely to increase the risk of depression and probably anxiety, as well as possible post-traumatic stress.**

**-Dr Maria Loades, University of Bath**

A systematic review of 63 studies and a total of 51,576 participants pointed to the long-lasting effects the pandemic will likely have on children and young adults. [28] Uncertainty about the length of quarantine, infection fears, boredom, frustration, lack of necessary supplies, lack of clear information, financial loss, and stigma will likely contribute to an increase of negative psychological outcomes.[29]

**“My friends call to check up on me, but sometimes I scream into the phone because I’m so stressed”  
-Olivia, 10 years old**

It is hard to know how long these issues will impact mental health however the study indicated that loneliness and mental health problems can predict “future mental health problems up to 9 years later.” It was also found that “children in enforced isolation or quarantine were five times more likely to require mental health service input after previous pandemics.” Lastly, the “current social distancing measures enforced on children because of COVID-19 are likely to increase the risk of depression and probably anxiety, as well as possible post-traumatic stress.”[30]

The University College London has been conducting COVID-19 Social Studies each week of lockdown to measure people’s social and psychological experiences during the pandemic. There have been over 60,000 participants and the findings suggest a clear pattern: mental health is a significant concern for the younger population.[31] he study found that those aged 18 to 29 years old reported higher instances of depression, anxiety, loneliness and thoughts about self-harm, as compared to older participants. In regard to the future:

**2 out of 3** young people are worried about a future recession

**1 out of 2** young people are worried about unemployment levels rising

Only **7%** of young people are feeling fully in control of their future plans.

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# Section 3: Educational Learning Loss

The educational attainment gap defined by class and economic status was already a significant challenge before coronavirus. The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), an independent charity dedicated to breaking the link between family income and educational achievement, offered insight to these challenges. Their research shows that children and young people who are eligible for free school meals are consistently falling behind their counterparts. The GCSE attainment level between the two groups is already split when they begin school at 5 years old and this gap “grows wider at every following stage of education.”[32] These findings are aligned with the significantly lower educational outcomes of young carers and young adult carers, who tend to report higher rates of absenteeism, lower grades, diminished future aspirations, and inability to pursue employment due to their caring roles. [33], [34], [35]



The coronavirus will further extend this rift as students become increasingly dependent on their own resources. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds have significantly fewer - if any - resources including limited access to technology and internet connection [36], restricted supervision or guidance over educational activities [37], and an unstable working environment.

**"Students from disadvantaged backgrounds have significantly fewer, if any, resources including limited access to technology and internet connection, restricted supervision or guidance over educational activities and an unstable working environment."**

A recent report from The Sutton Trust, an educational charity, showed how these discrepancies affected the transition to online learning. They found that pupils from middle class homes were much more likely to participate in online lessons (30%), compared to working class pupils (16%). In private schools, 51% of primary and 57% of secondary students were able to access online lessons every day, more than twice as likely as their counterparts in state schools.

Research published by The Chartered College of Teaching regarding 'summer learning loss' suggests that children from lower income families are usually more adversely affected by closures during the summer holidays, and that they tend to proportionally affect older children's academic progress more than that of younger children. However, in the context of COVID-19-related school closures, both the 'summer learning loss' effect and the learning that is missed during school closures need to be taken into account, which may affect younger children more. [39]

**"I'm very sad that I'm not going back to school"**  
-Jack, 8 years old

**"I feel I'm falling a bit behind because my older sister is always doing her work too so she doesn't have time to help me"**  
-Lily, 10 years old

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## Section 4:

# Hunger & Food Insecurity

Another area of concern resulting from the closure of schools is an increase of food deprivation. For many disadvantaged children and young adults, the free meal they could receive at school was their only hot meal of the day. Without access to this, they are facing hunger and malnutrition. Moreover, families dealing with unemployment as a result of the coronavirus recession are struggling to make up for this loss. [40] Supply chain disruptions caused by the coronavirus will likely make food—especially fresh fruit and vegetables—more expensive and the economic crisis will push family income down, making it increasingly difficult or even impossible for families with low incomes to meet their nutritional needs. Upon the decision to close schools, the UK government did recognize the need to ensure food for disadvantaged children and young adults. However, their action plan—a voucher system—has been slow and flawed. Recently, Human Rights Watch has called the UK government's approach to solve this problem a violation of children and young adult's right to food. As quoted by them: "The government's failure to properly ensure all pupils had sufficient food as soon as it closed schools means children have been going hungry. The government should scrap



its reliance on the flawed voucher system it has used to replace school meals in England and instead follow good practices being developed in other parts of the UK." [41] Setting aside the difficulties of the voucher system, an additional concern is now present: the government stated they will not make the vouchers available during the summer.[42] This move will deprive many families and children of this much needed extra support, and make this upcoming summer all the more challenging.

**"Research suggests that around 2 million children have now directly experienced hunger since March 23, beyond the 1.3 million children that are entitled to free school meals before the start of the pandemic"**



Carolyn Harris, a Labour MP, expressed concern over this decision saying that “the summer is the time when kids most need that help. Families can ill-afford to feed kids under normal times, but this summer will be extremely hard.” [43]

Consequently, more families are experiencing food insecurity or hunger. The Food Foundation estimated that “5.1 million households with children already experienced some form of hunger...during the first four weeks of lockdown.” Additional research suggests that around 2 million children have now directly experienced hunger since March 23, beyond the 1.3 million children that are entitled to free school meals before the start of the pandemic. [44] This is echoed by the increase in demand seen at food banks across the country. The Trussell Trust, the UK’s biggest food bank network, reported an 89% increase in emergency food parcel demand during April 2020 compared to the same month last year, including a 107% rise in parcels given to children. They also report that the number of families with children receiving parcels has doubled compared to the same period last year. [45], [46] Similarly, Barrow Food Bank reported a “300% increase in demand during the first two weeks of the UK’s coronavirus lockdown.” [47]

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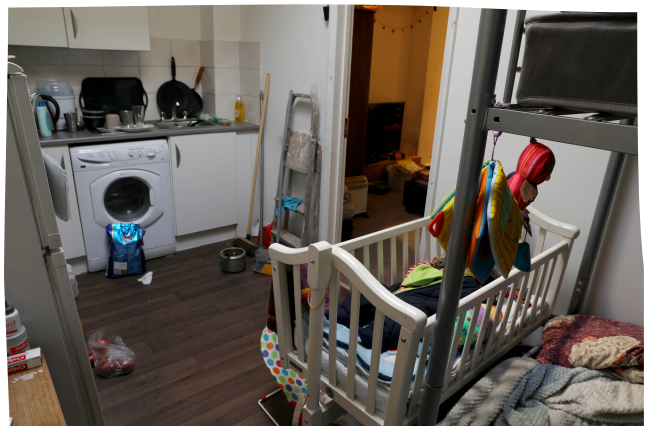
## Section 5:

# Homelessness & Temporary Housing Risks

Unquestionably, coronavirus imposes significant challenges for all age groups experiencing homelessness. That risk, however, is often unnoticed in younger age groups as they are less likely to be “rough sleepers” but still experience shelter insecurity. They are more likely to be staying with friends or family, in shelters, bed and breakfast lodging, or sofa-surfing. This instability makes it hard to social distance, making these children and young adults more susceptible to the virus, especially for those who have diabetes, asthma, epilepsy, anxiety and/or depression. [48] A study titled “Impacts of COVID-19 on vulnerable children in temporary accommodation in the UK” [49] have outlined several ways the coronavirus pandemic has worsened the situation for families living in temporary housing. These include, but are not limited to:

- 1 Overcrowding due to limited space, shared kitchens and toilet facilities, make self-isolation impossible. [50] Often, children have inadequate space to crawl or play and no access to fresh air.

- 2 No face-to-face contact with general practitioners and health outreach services is available, including health visitors, which limits routine checks such as early identification of need and risk, health and development reviews with screening assessments, immunisations, promotion of social and emotional development, support for parenting, promotion of health and behavioural change, prevention of obesity, and promotion of breastfeeding. [51]
- 3 Hand-washing and hygiene are reduced because of minimal access to soap, water, disinfectants, and bathrooms.



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Risks to parental mental health are increased, especially among single mothers, given that housing instability is associated with an increased risk of depression in mothers. [52]

"The people need better homes and better care because if you just be selfish no one would have a happy life"  
-Sarah, 11 years old

5

Access to basic essentials (e.g. food, nappies) is scarce, with no resources to shop online and many charities and drop-ins now closed.

"I think the prime minister should build proper houses for children"  
-Charlie, 8 years old

6

No access to regular support services (e.g. legal advice, weekly allowances, housing or immigration, online access to resources from the National Health Service via WiFi).

#### Section 5 References:

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# Section 6:

## Playtime & Well-being

As the UK shifts out of lockdown and recovers from the pandemic, one area of child welfare that needs to be considered is playtime, especially outdoor and physical activity. Children and young adults living in a flat or house with no access to a garden or private outdoor areas face greater challenges to maintaining their physical health and enjoying space to play. The Association of Play Industries suggests that playtime is an essential component of children and young adults healing process and have urged the government to prioritise decisions that improve their social, emotional and physical well-being. [53], [54]

An additional area of concern is long-term physical health trends for children and young adults. This year, the Institute of Health Equity revisited their 2010 Marmot Review covering health related concerns in the UK. [55] Although this new report does not capture the detrimental effects of the coronavirus, the trends they identify track areas that we should be concerned about as we recover from the pandemic. Between the years of 2010 and 2020, there have been significant cuts to public spending, especially in areas where “the need is highest and conditions are generally worse.”[56] This is most apparent at the local authority level where services for children and young people “fell by £3 billion between 2010/11 and 2017/18.” Decreases of these kinds severely impact children and young adults because if they do not have access to quality education, after-school programmes

meals and other support, they will lead less healthy lives, including exclusion from school and potential involvement in crime. Indeed, the Marmot Review wrote that “positive experiences early in life are closely associated with better performance at school, better social and emotional development, improved work outcomes, higher income and better lifelong health, including longer life expectancy.”[57] A recovery from COVID-19 that promotes the health and well-being of all children and young people will have to reinvest in communities that need the most support; including increased funding for the education system, public libraries, and youth centres.



### Section 5 References:

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[56]. Ibid, p. 5

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# About The Childhood Trust

The Childhood Trust is London's Child Poverty charity. We fund a network of over 200 child poverty charities in London, through our matched fundraising campaigns, corporate volunteering programmes and advocacy on behalf of children living in poverty. We empower charities through financial support, and through training, coaching, media coverage and networking to help build capacity so even more disadvantaged children can access the services and support they need to flourish. And we bring companies, philanthropists and other donors together to ensure that resources are directed to exactly where they are needed the most.

## Champions for Children

Without financial support from The Childhood Trust, 75% of the projects we fund would not be able to operate. The Trust raises money from London's corporate sector, trusts, philanthropists and other donors. We run two fundraising campaigns a year – the Christmas Challenge and the Summer Give – through the Big Give, an online fundraising platform. This year in response to the coronavirus crisis we have replaced our Summer Give campaign with our new Champions for Children campaign. This was created to support children living in poverty who have been disproportionately impacted by the crisis. Champions for Children aims to raise over £3m to fund the delivery of 93 projects across the capital supporting over 100,000 children and young people. The projects funded by the Childhood Trust deliver vital year-round services such as after-school and holiday support, hot meals, help with homework, mentoring, social work referrals, counselling, sports, arts and cultural activities and family support in the home. To make a donation please visit our website:

**[www.childhoodtrust.org.uk](http://www.childhoodtrust.org.uk)**

