



Talking Mats survey confirms the impact of lockdown on children with communication needs

Introduction

Just over a year ago, the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT), published [*Speech and language therapy during and beyond COVID-19: building back better with people who have communication and swallowing needs.*](#)

Over 500 individuals and their families told us their stories of accessing speech and language therapy during the first UK-wide lockdown (March-June 2020). They also told us that having speech and language therapy makes their lives better – and the lives of their families and carers better too. They shared with us the impact on their lives of having less or no speech and language therapy during lockdown – and of it being delivered in new and different ways, some of which they found difficult, if not impossible, to access.

But the March-June 2020 lockdown was not the only lockdown we all lived through during the initial stages of the pandemic. There was the second national lockdown in England in November 2020. Then the third lockdown from January 2021 onwards.

As part of the #BuildBackBetterSLT project, the RCSLT was keen to understand the impact of these further lockdowns on people's access to speech and language therapy. We were pleased to work with [Talking Mats](#) to gauge the impact of the third lockdown on children and young people with speech, language and communication needs.

A Talking Mat is a visual communication framework which supports people with communication difficulties to express their feelings and views. It is made up of three sets of picture communication symbols – topic, options and a visual scale – and a space on which to display them. Once the topic has been chosen, the participant is given the options one at a time and asked to think about each one, placing it on the Talking Mat to indicate how they feel about it. Talking Mats were created for this survey in order to better understand children and young people’s feelings about remote speech and language therapy, face-to-face speech and language therapy, and their lives during lockdown. [Access the Talking Mats resources created for this survey.](#)

In publishing the findings of the Talking Mats’ survey today, the second anniversary of the first UK-wide lockdown, we owe a huge debt of gratitude both to Lois Cameron for all her advice on and support for the #BuildBackBetterSLT project and to Laura Holmes for supporting children and young people to tell us their stories. To the children and young people and their families who shared their experiences, we say ‘Thank you, we are very grateful for your invaluable insights. We will use them to try to make people’s lives better.’

What did Talking Mats tell us?

The Talking Mats survey covering the third lockdown mirrored the findings of the main #BuildBackBetterSLT support. Three separate mats were used relating to:

- remote speech and language therapy
- face-to-face speech and language therapy
- children and young people’s lives during lockdown

Remote speech and language therapy

Children and young people who were having speech and language therapy remotely told us that:

- they enjoyed the activities in the sessions.
- they were happy to have a parent sitting with them.

- they struggled with early morning sessions and knowing next steps.
- they felt that sessions were both too short and too few.
- they had difficulty with the technology.

Face-to-face speech and language therapy

Children and young people having speech and language therapy face-to-face told us that:

- they preferred afternoon sessions.
- they struggled with knowing next steps.
- they wanted longer sessions, and more of them.
- they enjoyed the activities.
- they were divided on PPE – some were happy with it, as it meant they wouldn't get COVID, but others struggled with face masks as they prevented them from seeing others' face and mouth.
- overall, they preferred face-to-face therapy.

Children and young people's lives during lockdown

Reflecting on their lives in lockdown, children and young people who were having speech and language therapy told us that:

- they struggled to talk, which made life difficult.
- they had difficulty communicating their feelings, which increased their anxiety.
- they had a limited social life.
- outside of communication, they felt positive.

What are we going to do with the findings?

Along with the findings of the main #BuildBackBetterSLT report, what the Talking Mats survey has told us will inform the RCSLT's ongoing campaigning and influencing work across a range of policy areas.

These will include the UK Government's forthcoming SEND Green Paper, our work with NHS England on service recovery plans, as well as our work on children and young people's mental health given the clear message survey respondents gave us: **struggling to talk makes life difficult and difficulty communicating feelings increases anxiety.**

Beyond yet, the Talking Mats survey reminds us of the fundamental importance of accessible and inclusive communication. Everyone's views, wishes and feelings, however they are expressed, matter. We must work towards a society where everyone, however they communicate, is able to have a voice – and be supported to make it heard. To enable that to happen those who communicate differently or with difficulty must receive the support they and their families need, including through accessing speech and language therapy where required.