‘We can play tag with a stick’. Children's knowledge, experiences, feelings and creative thinking during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract
Using a relational approach, we draw on repeated interviews with a group of 30 diverse children from Ontario to share and reflect on their knowledge, experiences and feelings early in the COVID-19 pandemic. Prioritising relational interdependence and relational agency, this paper illustrates our participants’ embedded engagements with the pandemic and their contribution to the co-production of knowledge. We emphasise their thoughtful responses to the pandemic; their creative, self-reflexive strategies for managing a difficult time; and their advice to others. We thus prioritise children’s viewpoints and emphasise their relational interconnections with others during a time that was marked by social isolation.

Keywords
agency, children, health & well-being, participation, youth

INTRODUCTION
Children across the world were affected in different ways by the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting protocols such as quarantine orders and school closures. As Mukherjee (2021) states, ‘these emergency measures [...] reassembled children’s everyday geographies—reshaping the social
institutions, processes, and relationships in which their daily lives [were] embedded’ (p. 24). Early in the pandemic, our research team sought to learn about children’s pandemic experiences, prioritising their perspectives by conducting interviews with 30 diverse children, ages five to 16 from Southern Ontario, Canada. Grounded in recent theorising in the sociology of childhood that recognises children’s agency as relational rather than individual and independent, this paper focuses on these children’s knowledge, their harder experiences and related feelings, their positive feelings and creative coping strategies and their advice to others. We illustrate the complexity of their feelings; their thoughtful responses to the pandemic and its challenges; and the range of their experiences as linked to their social relationships and locations.

Children’s participation in relational agency

The term agency has been present in many conversations within childhood studies (see Dépelteau, 2013; Esser et al., 2016; Spyrou, 2018), alongside related focus on ‘participation,’ ‘perspectives,’ ‘voice’ and ‘experiences’ (Spyrou, 2018). Theorising agency has included focus on the individually agentic child (James et al., 1998); distinguishing between ‘thick’ and ‘thin’ children’s agency (Klocker, 2007); recognising the connection between generational ordering and agency (Esser et al., 2016; Leonard, 2016); and more recently moving towards a ‘new materialist approach’ (see Spyrou, 2018) that recognises agency as ‘distributed over both human and non-human forms’ (Barad, 2007, p. 214). In this paper, we draw on relational agency, which critically responds to the notion of ‘children’s agency as a property of the self’ (Spyrou, 2018, p. 122) and instead foregrounds children as embedded in social relations and networks, with agency ‘conceived as a complex, situational and collective achievement’ (Raithelhuber, 2016, p. 99). This approach, which resonates strongly with many Indigenous ways of knowing (Rosiek et al., 2020; Todd, 2016), points to the deeply relational nature of children’s lives, including their interdependency and interactions with the human and non-human world (Rimmer, 2017).

Drawing on this approach, Rimmer (2017) explores interdependency in children’s engagements with music in relation to other people, such as children’s parents, and technology through which children play and access music. Huf and Kluge (2021) explore the relationality and materiality, or the more-than-human world, of early childhood education. They write about their entanglements as researchers during their ethnographic study, arguing that ethnographers are part of the phenomena they research. In another example, Spyrou (2018) draws on new materialism ‘to provide a more nuanced and non-essentialized account of children’s agency’ (p. 135). He focuses on Greek Cypriot children’s entanglements with human and non-human entities when crossing borders. Spyrou (2018), who draws on Barad, positions entanglements as ‘an emergence or becoming rather than a pre-existing entity in interaction with other entities both human and non-human’ (p. 137). Following these scholars, we focus on children as interdependent, embedded and contextually located, with an emphasis on relational agency as it is co-produced through their interactions with other humans, their environments and other non-human forces such as technology, arts, nature and animals. While attending to these diverse forces, we pay special attention to children’s entangled relationships with adults and other children to provide a deeper understanding of how these relationships shaped their experiences and produced their relational agency during COVID-19, a time when isolation intensified the centrality of social relations.
Literature review

While past research on pandemics has tended to overlook children’s views (Coyne, 2008; Murray, 2010), some has engaged with children, including Koller et al. (2010), who found that children understood complexities of pandemic planning, took infection control seriously and recognised their role in managing the pandemic. They valued activities like family visits (if possible), wanted health and safety information and offered suggestions to support other children in pandemic situations. Children struggled with anxiety and fear for the safety of others (Berger et al., 2021), issues exacerbated in longer quarantines (Cowie & Myers, 2020) and mediated through support from caregivers (Berger et al., 2021; Murray, 2010; Remmerswaal & Muir, 2010). Research also notes the values of play and arts-based support for children’s mental health during pandemics (Grabet et al., 2021).

Literature on the specific effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on children’s lives has grown exponentially since its onset, including focus on consequences of school closures (Andrew et al., 2020) such as loss of extracurricular (Gallagher-Mackay et al., 2021), peer interactions (Andrew et al., 2020), sex education (Plan International, 2020) and specialised programming (Cardenas et al., 2020; Gallagher-Mackay et al., 2021). Children’s distress, across various countries, included depression, anxiety, sadness, loneliness and trouble with sleep (Branquinho et al., 2020; Ghanamah & Eghbaria-Ghanamah, 2021; Girlguiding, 2021; Mantovani et al., 2021; Moore et al., 2020; Xie et al., 2020). Research in the UK found that loneliness, bereavement and worry about the future were intensified in later lockdowns (Kneale et al., 2020; Scottish Youth Parliament et al., 2020), a finding supported through surveys with parents in Southern Ontario (Cost et al., 2021). Young people were also worried about their futures, especially adjusting to in-person interactions (Mantovani et al., 2021) and long-term effects on education and employment (Benner & Mistry, 2020; YoungMinds, 2020).

Mental health stresses were exacerbated by limited physical activity, unsuitable childcare arrangements and increased likelihood of exposure to domestic violence and abuse (Humphreys et al., 2020; Kneale et al., 2020), especially for more vulnerable populations (Cowie & Myers, 2020; Pearcey et al., 2020). For instance, overcrowded housing increased risk of contracting COVID-19 and made it difficult to find quiet spaces, affecting family stress (see also Elliott & Leon, 2020 and Larkins, 2020). Lower income parents tended to work in riskier COVID-19 situations and had fewer resources for things like private tutoring (Gallagher-Mackay et al., 2021). The unequal effects of COVID-19 on children’s lives were magnified in poorer countries and those with significant inequality (Clark et al., 2020).

Our research adds to the fewer studies that directly sought children’s perspectives and experiences during COVID-19, including qualitative research projects using Zoom focus groups (Larcher et al., 2020); surveys (Stoecklin et al., 2021); Participant Action Research (Cuevas-Parras & Stephano, 2020); storytelling (Pascal & Bertram, 2021); and drawing (Kahuroa et al., 2021). In such projects, children discussed the difficulties they faced with lockdowns, including boredom, frustration with quarantine, inactivity and schooling challenges (Raby et al., 2021; Stoecklin et al., 2021). Many—but not all—missed friends, family and others in the community and at school (Branquinho et al., 2020; Raby et al., 2021). While connecting with immediate family was positive for many, it also brought increased family conflict (Branquinho et al., 2020; Stoecklin et al., 2021). Children were concerned about others (Larcher et al., 2020; Stoecklin et al., 2021) and sad about missing important life moments (Branquinho et al., 2020; Raby et al., 2021). Despite the challenges, many also adapted by finding new activities such as unstructured play, exercise and hobbies (de Lannoy et al., 2020;
Moore et al., 2020; Nathan et al., 2021; Pelletier et al., 2021) and ways to hold hope, such as focusing on the future (Branquinho et al., 2020; Girlguiding, 2021). Children talked about learning new things, developing new routines and organising their own time (Raby et al., 2021; Stoecklin et al., 2021; YoungMinds, 2020). They also developed detailed knowledge about the virus and how it spreads (Larcher et al., 2020; Stoecklin et al., 2021), and noted the importance of lockdown and other measures (Pascal & Bertram, 2021).

**METHODS**

As an inductive, exploratory project informed by relational agency in child and youth studies, we began with a conceptualization of children as capable, interdependent, relational participants (Davidson, 2017; Fraser et al., 2014) who build meaning together with adults within diverse contexts. We were also acutely aware that we were seeking to involve children in research during a difficult time. We thus sought a methodology that would ensure relationship-building and meaningful connection with a wide range of children from different kinds of backgrounds.

Through word-of-mouth snowball sampling, social media and a radio interview, we recruited 30 children across Southern Ontario between the ages five and 16: 14 male and 16 female participants. Fourteen participants were white, 10 were Black, three were East-Asian and three were Middle Eastern. Thirteen participants came from upper-middle class families, four from middle-class families, seven from working-middle class families and six from lower- and working-class families. Additionally, seven participants disclosed having disabilities. Our methodological goals were also shaped by quarantine restrictions which required that our research be conducted online. We thus conducted in-depth, semi-structured, bi-weekly, video-call interviews (and one set of phone-based interviews) and brief check-ins via email or video-call in intervening weeks, from April–June 2020. Informed parental consent and children’s assent were obtained prior to data collection. We also reconfirmed assent with children at the beginning of each bi-weekly online interview. To develop meaningful connections with participants, the same interviewer completed all the interviews for their group of participants, meaning that our participants were having regular check-ins with a single researcher for about 2 months.

During fall 2020 when restrictions began to ease, we conducted follow-up interviews with 23 participants. During this time, in-person school resumed for some while others continued online learning. We were interested in learning about their experiences returning to school and understanding how they participated in decision-making around this. Interviews prompted discussion of participants’ daily experiences with families, living situations, school and regular activities, as well as other topics they raised. We also asked about their feelings and views about the pandemic restrictions. The style and length of each interview varied greatly and depended largely on interview-participant rapport, but many were in-depth and wide-ranging. It is through these collaborative conversations that we learned about the children's worlds and insights. The researchers' virtual presence in the participants' worlds also allowed parents to occasionally make an appearance, for us to get a sense of the participants’ living spaces, and for participants to spontaneously share things such as pets and drawings, helping to provide a better understanding of their lives (Howlett, 2021). We recognised our relational entanglements with the participants: building meaning together as part of relational agency.

Our research team met weekly during the entire data collection process to begin thematic data analysis. After the first round of data collection, we transcribed and coded our interviews, using Quirkos online coding software. One member of our team coded our data into broad descriptive
and analytic codes and thereafter, other team members refined the coding and used it to develop key themes, informed by attention to experiences, perspectives, emotions and interdependencies.

Findings and analysis

We reflect on children's knowledge, feelings and experiences of the pandemic, recognising that they are relationally produced. First, we present children's knowledge of the pandemic that they shared with us, and then discuss difficult feelings that arose through their experiences. Following this, we discuss their positive feelings and their coping strategies. Finally, we present their advice to others. Through a relational conceptualization of agency (Spyrou, 2018), rather than assume agency ‘resides in a single individual’, (Oswell, 2020, p. 49), children are recognised as participants in dynamic relationships with others and their environments. It is these dynamic interactions that are part of the children’s enmeshed knowledge, feelings and experiences. We thus foreground children’s relational agency and understand it as networked, assembled, distributed, partial and relative (Oswell, 2013). Such analysis illustrates how the participants’ engagements with the pandemic unfolded not in isolation, but ‘as a result of their relational encounters of the world’ (Spyrou, 2018, p. 24).

Children’s knowledge

Most participants in this study were knowledgeable about the COVID-19 pandemic and why the lockdown measures were in place. Thus children were a part of the knowledge production that was happening as everyone in the world was first learning about COVID-19 and trying to make sense of what was happening. Some were aware of how the pandemic was unfolding in other Canadian provinces and globally, motivated by an interest and concern about the wider world (Larkins, 2020). Succinctly stated, Watson (12) said, ‘it’s kind of a reality check…how crazy and different everything is and it’s kind of become the new normal’. One participant even kept track of the global numbers of cases and deaths. As Dancer (9) explained when asked about the proliferation of cases during the quarantine, ‘it makes me feel like I have to, like, be aware of what’s happening around me’.

As part of self-care, some children were careful about information-seeking and sharing. While participants like GS (13) prioritised the news as ‘it makes me feel better because I know what’s going on…not just sitting out there and not knowing anything,’ others avoided it because it contributed to worry, fear, stress and concern about others near and far. As Sigma (10) said, ‘I’ve stayed off the COVID news because they’ve been freaking me out. I heard about this doctor who died because they didn’t have enough stuff manufactured’. They seemed to be aware of how much information they could tolerate and sought help from their parents with this. Another participant, Elizabeth (11) explained ‘I just like to get away from like the news, like my mom was trying not to listen to the news that much because it will just get me more stressed’. Elizabeth’s comments in this situation illustrate how her and her mom were taking action together in relation to one another and the news channel because of Elizabeth’s feelings of stress.

Participants were also aware of pandemic protocols and why they were initiated. For example, Chicken Cheerleader (12) explained: ‘I know that you can’t get closer than six feet […] And you’re not allowed to go in other people’s houses. And you’re not supposed to be at gatherings over five people’. They discussed their strategies for following the protocols, such as staying away from
larger groups of people outside (Jeff, 16) and using a glove or paper towel when pressing the buttons in her apartment’s elevator (Jordan, 12). Participants were also concerned about others not following protocols, causing the virus to spread. As Sigma explained ‘a lot of people I’ve talked with aren’t social distancing. They don’t feel the need to, but I think they should. I’m social distancing’, underlying how his views, frustration and actions were collaboratively created through his interactions with others, the space around him, his understanding of the pandemic, and in relation to other people’s interaction with one another in the world.

Some participants shared unique ways to adapt certain activities to prevent the spread of the virus. For example, Wham (12) played ‘parallel’ frisbee with his Dad and friends, each with their own frisbee. Lola (8) created a hole in a fence to pass notes back and forth with her next-door neighbour, and Ginjja (8), explained that when he went back to school, he would not be able to play tag and touch others, so instead he would possibly use a stick. The children interacted with others, both human and non-human, including sticks, frisbees and fences.

In sharing their views and specific moments, our participants’ entanglement with other people and entities contributed to their knowledge and decisions about their future enactments. Children reported their learning with others in a variety of different forms, including online with school peers and teachers; with parents, friends and relatives in their homes; and with more distant others such as politicians and news reporters who were frequently present on the television and social media platforms. Children were connected to others around them, face-to-face and through online encounters, and it was through these interactions that they were learning and making sense of the crisis. They were neither passively accepting information nor independently reflecting on information, rather they were a part of relationships and other entanglements in their learning and reflecting, illustrating how they understood the pandemic through their interdependence. We consistently observed that as they engaged with information and were informed through and with others, they were entangled in relationships beyond their individual location. The way that they came to know and move through the world, even while quarantined at home, was thus co-constituted by their relationality to others.

**PANDEMIC CHALLENGES**

In this section, we focus on the participants’ more difficult feelings, including worry and loneliness, and attending to their associated reflective thinking and strategizing about these challenges. We foreground these feelings and then reflect on their relationality.

Most of our participants talked about worry at some point in their interviews, especially about safety. Some spoke about protecting themselves from getting sick, but most were more worried about others. Phephe (9) and The Cheetah worried about their parents working outside of the home as essential workers and the potential for them to become sick or overworked, while Jane Eyre (14) was very concerned about her father going back to work, given his asthma and weak immune system. Many were especially concerned about the vulnerability of their grandparents. Elizabeth stated, ‘I don’t want to get my family sick because obviously my Nana and Papa are old, so they’re at risk and my aunt has a compromised immune system. […] so I try to remind myself that I am [following safety protocols] for my family and to help people who are compromised’. Phephe explained that she was concerned because ‘a lot of people are dying, which is a little bit scary’. Similarly, The Glitch (10) felt the worst part of the pandemic was ‘the death of thousands of lives’. Children were clearly thinking about the feelings and welfare of others around them, as part of their ‘entanglements with others in the world’ (Spyrou, 2017, p. 433).
Participants were also worried about their futures. In our initial interviews, some participants felt concerned about their safety when it came time to return to school. The Glitch explained, ‘I’d be scared. I wouldn’t even sit on the desks if the teacher tells me to sit down, I wouldn’t even sit at the desks’. Also, as found in other studies (Larcher et al., 2020; YoungMinds, 2020), some of the older participants, such as Elle (15), Jane Eyre and Lillian (12), worried about being ready for future grades, transitions to university and their careers. As Lillian stated, ‘I hope it doesn’t, like affect my future’. Elle fretted about keeping her grades up in anticipation of applying to university while Jane Eyre said, ‘it’s going to be way harder for me to get, like a job and that kind of thing’.

In addition to worry, participants felt significant loss, disappointment and frustration, mostly centred around missing other people, especially friends and peers (see Cooper et al., 2021). Dancer missed hugging her friends and extended family members, a loss that was becoming more difficult to deal with over time. This absence of physical face-to-face presence between the participants and others led to loneliness and boredom (Stoecklin et al., 2021). As Chicken Cheerleader stated, ‘it’s been the longest summer ever [...] because you can’t see anyone’. As she sought ways to pass the time, Jane Eyre felt a lack of purpose and felt trapped inside. She eventually resorted to sleeping to escape boredom. Isolation from friends was particularly tough for some participants without siblings, such as Elizabeth and Phephe.

Loneliness led many to want to return to school. As Elle stated in the fall when schools re-opened, ‘[loneliness] was like a driving factor [for] going back to school, because I was like, I need the social aspect. Because I’m going insane. Yeah...I’m glad I went back to school, because definitely seeing [friends] [...] has made things a lot easier’. The Cheetah wished she could see her toddler relatives grow, Cat (14) missed her cousins, and Jane Eyre missed being able to see her new niece and ‘all these really big milestones: that she’s holding her head up, and she’s sitting up...’ Many talked about missing grandparents, holidays and milestone celebrations with family and friends. Some children were also cut off from members of their immediate families. For example, McMuffin (9), who was staying with his dad, missed his mom, his little brother and his mom’s house. Lola, who was staying with her grandparents enjoyed their living space compared to her small apartment but missed her mom. Jordan appreciated staying with her cousins and similarly relished their larger living space and their homework help. It is the relationships with others that emerged within spaces that were different from in her own home that contributed to Lola’s appreciation for such spaces. While Jordan’s moves during the pandemic quarantine happened due to family necessity, they opened up some possibilities for new interactions that were not available to others and allowed her access to new space and help.

Participants also talked about loss of the physical activities and the relationships around those activities. Many participants whose families had the means to support them in extracurricular activities before the pandemic missed those activities unless they were available online. Dancer missed dance recitals, for instance and Rainbow (10) was ‘really sad about not doing any wheelchair basketball’. Elizabeth missed guidance from her coaches. Others, like Jinjja, Chaboogie (11), Jordan, Sigma and Crosby (13), were especially frustrated by the initial closure of local parks. Crosby explained, ‘Well, I do like to go outside and play but we can’t really because the parks [are] like shut’. Sigma noted that ‘We never realized how much we go to parks and go out for hikes and stuff until we can’t do it anymore’. These comments pointed to their loss of interconnections with people and places outside their homes, and effects on their bodies.

Some older participants were disappointed about lost employment during the pandemic, missing their paychecks and connections to others. LSAV (14) explained that he could not continue his usual summer job: ‘I haven’t been able to cut grass because I usually do that every summer and I usually make a lot of money from that’. Wham told us ‘I was going to be like, a camp
counsellor, but that got cancelled’ and Jeff explained that he could no longer tutor because the centre was shut down (although he later tutored online). These losses impacted older children’s experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, with each child’s world encompassing different possibilities or restrictions in terms of their age and relationships with space, time and others.

Some participants talked about their mental health, largely due to the loneliness discussed above, the stress arising from family conflict and challenges with school. For example, Chicken Cheerleader, The Cheetah and Dancer, all experienced frustration with siblings, which was similarly observed by Anakwe et al. (2021) and Gadermann et al. (2021) in their studies about family challenges with quarantines. In these cases, participants revealed how their relationships with family and daily interactions within their homes sometimes gave rise to frustration. Schooling was also difficult for some students who had trouble keeping up or concentrating on online work (see Raby et al., 2021). As the pandemic and its seriousness set in, some challenges worsened. For instance, Elizabeth reported consulting with her doctor over feeling scared and ‘cautious of everything’. Some participants were quite angry. As Lola said, ‘I hate COVID! If it was a person, I’d kill it!’ (see also Berger et al., 2021 and Cardenas et al., 2020).

Yet others talked about adapting to the pandemic situation. As Sigma explained, ‘I used to be all freaked out and like, I couldn’t sleep at night, I was having major anxiety, but now it’s kind of loosened out and I’m kind of getting used to it’. Other participants conveyed similar adaptation but also resignation and acceptance. Jeff said ‘I’m not feeling anything…I don’t think. It’s just…oh, they’re reopening again…’ Jeff’s sister Lillian agreed: ‘before, it was really weird to not go anywhere, and now I kinda got used to not going anywhere’. To Chaboogie, ‘nothings really changed and nothing’s gonna change for a while. So yeah, really, that’s it’.

In the children’s discussion of these challenges, we observed that what mattered to them emerged through relational connections, especially concern about others’ well-being and loss of in-person connections with family and friends. Our participants’ thinking about the present and worrying about the future were thus not created in isolation but produced collectively and relationally, including people in the children’s lives but also events (the pandemic), much more distant others (e.g. those creating restrictions) and places (their homes, but also places like parks and job locations). These are all a part of a larger network that includes these children and their feelings, thinking and emotions.

Positive experiences, feelings and coping strategies

Participants shared some difficult fears and worries, and sometimes explored the meanings of these feelings with us and their tactics for dealing with them; their tactics were thus frequently determined and explored with others in their lives, including us. Yet while many of our participants struggled, they also noted some positive feelings and had frequently developed thoughtful coping strategies resulting from their engagements with, and reactions to, the world around them. They felt positively, for example, towards many of the pandemic protocols. Elizabeth was encouraged that the social distancing guidelines, however difficult, were reducing active cases. Jane Eyre was proud of herself and her schoolmates for coping well and being careful once school opened again in the fall. Timber (14) also reported feeling happy and comfortable at home during the quarantine, saying that ‘it’s nice to just lay in bed all day and just work on my laptop’. Many embraced feelings of freedom that were facilitated by their contexts and relationships, including being able to sleep in, dress casually, and take the day at their own pace. As The Cheetah stated, ‘I’m like, look on the bright side, you get to stay home…and you get to do the things that you don’t
normally get to do, like sometimes sleep in’. Lillian appreciated having ‘more time to [...] think about ourselves’.

Most embraced time with their immediate family members. As Rainbow observed, ‘...one thing that COVID has actually done...like, it's brought families closer together’. The Cheetah enjoyed doing projects with her parents, Charli ‘felt fantastic’ watching movies and gardening with her family, and Jeff asked his mom to teach him how to cook. Participants were also comforted by spending time with pets (Jalongo, 2021). Sigma shared his delight with tending to his chicken coop. Chicken Cheerleader and Timber also often talked about taking care of their chickens. Elizabeth, Rainbow and Wham were excited about new puppies, while Watson spoke about his snails, including the research he had done about how to take care of them. These examples remind us of the relevance of children's non-human relationships and the role of these relationships in co-producing their perspectives and actions.

Participants also coped through their engagements with technology, enabling their connectedness to others and foregrounding the relevance of forms of materiality such as computers and cell phones. Video games, Netflix parties, virtual calls with friends and social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok and YouTube were ways in which children engaged with others and contributed to our participants’ understandings of their lived experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Technological materialities and the children's interactions with them created spaces for connection that by-passed the social distancing protocols. Crosby and Rinaldo (11) were both happy having more time to spend on video games with friends, for example, and Lola played Roblox to pass time and also connect with her mom while she was staying at her Grandma’s house. Charli even created a YouTube channel to share her stories with a larger audience. This finding corresponds with other studies that indicated a rise in Canadian children’s online engagements during the pandemic (Moore et al., 2020), and emphasises the importance of these social media engagements for many children (Magis-Weinberg et al., 2021; Resnikoff & Nugent, 2021).

Although the pandemic restrictions halted some children's hobbies and extracurricular, interrupting ‘their usual coping mechanisms’ (Larcher et al., 2020, p. 1193), most sought regular physical activity. Ginjja was using his Fitbit to try to achieve over 1000 steps a day, Dancer committed to doing daily stretches while her dance classes were no longer running, and Sigma explored his new scuba mask while swimming in his pool. As activities gradually reopened in fall 2020, some participants also resumed more organised physical activities that could fit with pandemic protocols, both inside and outside of school. Most were making a regular effort to engage in physical activity whenever possible.

Furthermore, many participants enjoyed this time for exploring new creative activities. Watson said ‘Um, kinda gets your creativity going when you’re locked in the house for a few days to keep yourself entertained’. Engagement with the arts, especially, was a reoccurring theme across multiple participants, including visual arts such as drawing, painting and creating stories (e.g. comics), and other creative tasks like beading, cooking, baking and making suncatchers or bath bombs. They also embraced performative arts such as dancing, singing, playing instruments, songwriting and creating music videos. The Cheetah explained that colouring was important for her because ‘it helps me by, like putting my emotions [out there] by coloring it’. Phephe similarly explained that arts and crafts helped her feel happy and more alive. Elle talked at length about how music helped her:

music has helped me a lot, like listening to it, playing it, like just spending like that time to reflect and relax. Like, even like away from everything, because like, you spend so much time at home. [...] So that's definitely been like a big thing that I've
been doing. Like just spending a little bit of time, even like late at night, just like alone, listening to music. It’s been good for me.

The Glitch was also interested in music and many of his musical experiences provided space for connecting with others, including the artists of a song, his music teacher and his family members. In this way, The Glitch’s musical experiences were part of a network. The Glitch explained: ‘I still really tend to like “Hold the Line”—hold, on let me see if that’s the name of the song. My music teacher told me about it: “Hold the Line”’. The Glitch then began playing the song for Laurel, his interviewer. His younger brother also came over to the computer to listen as well. This moment was followed by a discussion about rock music. It was connections like this that reminded us of the networks and the important moments that can be created together within research with children during interviews, contributing to the co-production of knowledge.

Other creative activities were shared as well, Amber (9) and Elsa (5) discussed doing chalk art with their mom and McMuffin made a music video with his brother and dad. Participants found strategies that worked for them and discovered ways they could spend time that made them feel good as they engaged with the materials and people around them. As Lee et al. (2020) note, creative arts can help address young people’s well-being, especially when dealing with difficult times. The participants were often self-reflexive and mindful about wanting to identify and pursue positive coping strategies like this. Rainbow talked about appreciating her strategies to keep herself motivated, for instance, ‘by saying something inspirational in my head, or just getting a song stuck in my head’. Some participants focused on a post-pandemic future. As Ginjja’s emphasised, ‘when the corona virus is over, I will feel happy’. Some participants also talked about a connection to the larger global community. The Cheetah wondered how people would feel after the strict quarantine measures, asking ‘is everybody gonna be, like so happy?’ Others reflected on the historical significance of the pandemic. For example, Elizabeth recognized the magnitude of this global event in her own life: ‘…it might even still be the biggest thing in my life… this is, might be one of the biggest changes in my life forever. Like it’s just crazy’. As Chicken Cheerleader stated, ‘I think this is a moment that is going down in history. Like this [has] never happened before’.

We see our participants’ coping strategies as creative and context-dependent, embedded in interactions with others, their living spaces and access to resources, illustrating how their agency was co-produced through social relations, contexts and also materialities. For instance, their engagements with family and friends through technology demonstrates how agency does not reside in one individual but is relational, distributed and interwoven with a range of actors and technological systems (Oswell, 2013). Their experiences and coping also emerged through entanglements that included their interests and talents, their parents’ views, their friends and siblings and their access to inside and outside space. We also note the participants’ awareness of how this large-scale, difficult event was shaping themselves and their engagement with the world around them.

**Children’s advice**

Many participants offered advice that emerged from their experiences, feelings and self-reflection regarding how they and people close to them handled the pandemic. Jane Eyre (14), Cheetah and Rinaldo were some of the participants who emphasised the importance of self-care during the pandemic. The Cheetah and Rinaldo encouraged people to go outside, and Jane Eyre advised:
Don't do what I'm doing. Go to bed at a healthy time. Don't have midnight snacks that make you stay awake [...] just get your work done the day your teacher assigns it because you do have the time to do it, even if you really don't want to.

Other participants also provided practical advice for supporting mental health during the pandemic. Elizabeth, who spent many days alone at the beginning of the pandemic while her mother was working, explained the importance of keeping in touch with friends:

[C]all your friends more. Because at the beginning, I didn't really, I wasn't really calling my friends. Like, just remember that you have people to talk with, cause I wasn't really talking with anybody [...] and I was very like, anxious and everything. So just like, relax, I guess. [...] and just like breathe.

Again, we see how absences are part of some of the children's relational contexts. Timber agreed with this advice, emphasising the value of staying in contact with friends online. Participants stressed the importance of organising time, scheduling and getting into a routine. Participants talked about how they were learning these tactics over the course of the pandemic as they reflected on, and subsequently adjusted, their practices. Participants like Cheetah, Dancer, Elizabeth, Elle, Phephe, Rainbow and Wham also discussed the importance of maintaining a positive mindset. For instance, picking up on the challenges of the pandemic for adults, Rainbow advised parents to stay positive and focused, because when the pandemic was over, they would finally be able to ‘relax’. Participants were self-aware and connected to others as they responded to challenging circumstances and identified tools, tactics and ways of thinking that would help themselves and others (see also Mantovani et al., 2021; Prime et al., 2020). This resilience and their consequent actions and advice can again be understood as illustrating relational interdependencies that emerged within a specific context and extended through our participants as they engaged with the world around them.

Another piece of advice from Watson demonstrated the critical, relational thinking of multiple other participants who were aware of their positions of privilege during the pandemic. He highlighted how the pandemic was impacting some communities harder than others:

... as we know, like marginalized communities are being hit way harder by this. But, um, it's because of the lack of support and the lack of that kind of, you know, lack of resources [...] which is also tied into a lot of the protests that are going on right now. I think the um [...] the counselors decided that racism was like a public health emergency or something like that. So yeah, it's, it's really tough [and it relates] to a lot of other issues.

Watson's comments illustrate how some of our participants understood their social location, the advantages or disadvantages of it, and the large-scale impacts of the pandemic beyond themselves. Jeff, for instance, enjoyed ‘having a lot more freedom’ but also noted that his pandemic experience was not the same as others, as it was ‘kind of perfect...and I think I’m lucky in that aspect’.
CONCLUSION

Our research takes a relational approach to examine children’s knowledge, feelings and experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic, providing a unique and challenging opportunity to take a closer look at the many entanglements that collectively contribute to children’s voice and their interactional worlds. We sought to foreground their relational agency, noting that children are not thinking and acting in isolation or wholly on their own, but relative to space, time and embedded sociocultural locations and social relations (Raithelhuber, 2016; Spyrou, 2018). In other words, we see how the participants were not passive children being shaped by a situation, nor independent actors navigating a situation, but rather actively interacting with other humans and non-humans. Even during a time when social distancing and quarantine restrictions were in place, their engagements were always contextually, relationally and interdependently co-produced.

This project contributes to childhood studies research on children’s perspectives and experiences and supports ongoing efforts to ‘move beyond individual and individuated agency’ (Spyrou, 2018, p. 4). We illustrate how the children were knowledgeable regarding the pandemic: they understood what the virus was, how it spread, and the necessity of pandemic control measures to care for themselves and others (see Stoecklin et al., 2021). Reflecting the work of other researchers (e.g. Berger et al., 2021; Murray, 2010) we found that most of our participants were negatively impacted by the pandemic in a myriad of ways, although these effects were compounded or eased by their diverse social locations. Their difficult feelings included worry for themselves and others, loneliness and boredom. We also highlight that there were positive aspects to the pandemic for many of them, for example the chance to slow down, to be with family and pets, to find innovative ways to connect with friends, and to explore their interests. They also spoke of an increased value for outdoor unstructured play, physical activities and various arts-based engagements. They talked about gaining new skills and new insights, including situating themselves within a broader global context and thinking about others.

These viewpoints, experiences and feelings were produced relationally with others around them and beyond, including their interactions, relationships, living environments and the shifting social and political culture (Raithelhuber, 2016). We have emphasised the interdependencies that informed the children’s experiences and interpretations of the pandemic, including the strategies they developed for coping with challenges. We encourage further inclusion of children in research projects and a recognition of their interdependent participation in the co-production of knowledge, particularly in the face of drastic events such as a pandemic. This project also supports past research recommendations to increase the availability of mental health supports for children (Cowie & Myers, 2020); including suggestions to encourage opportunities for interactional, arts-based engagements (Decosimo et al., 2019); and to foster outdoor physical activities and moments of unstructured or spontaneous play and exploration (Nathan et al., 2021).

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.
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