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Social Science

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Early years inequalities in the wake of the pandemic



Economic
and Social
Research Council

This presentation

- Aim is to set the stage for discussion about the best ways to reduce inequalities in early childhood in the current context
- Brief synthesis of research on the impact of COVID-19 on the lives and development of babies and young children
- Outline key dimensions through which the pandemic has affected babies and young children and done so in unequal ways
- Discuss emerging evidence on the impact of the pandemic on children's outcomes

The importance of early childhood

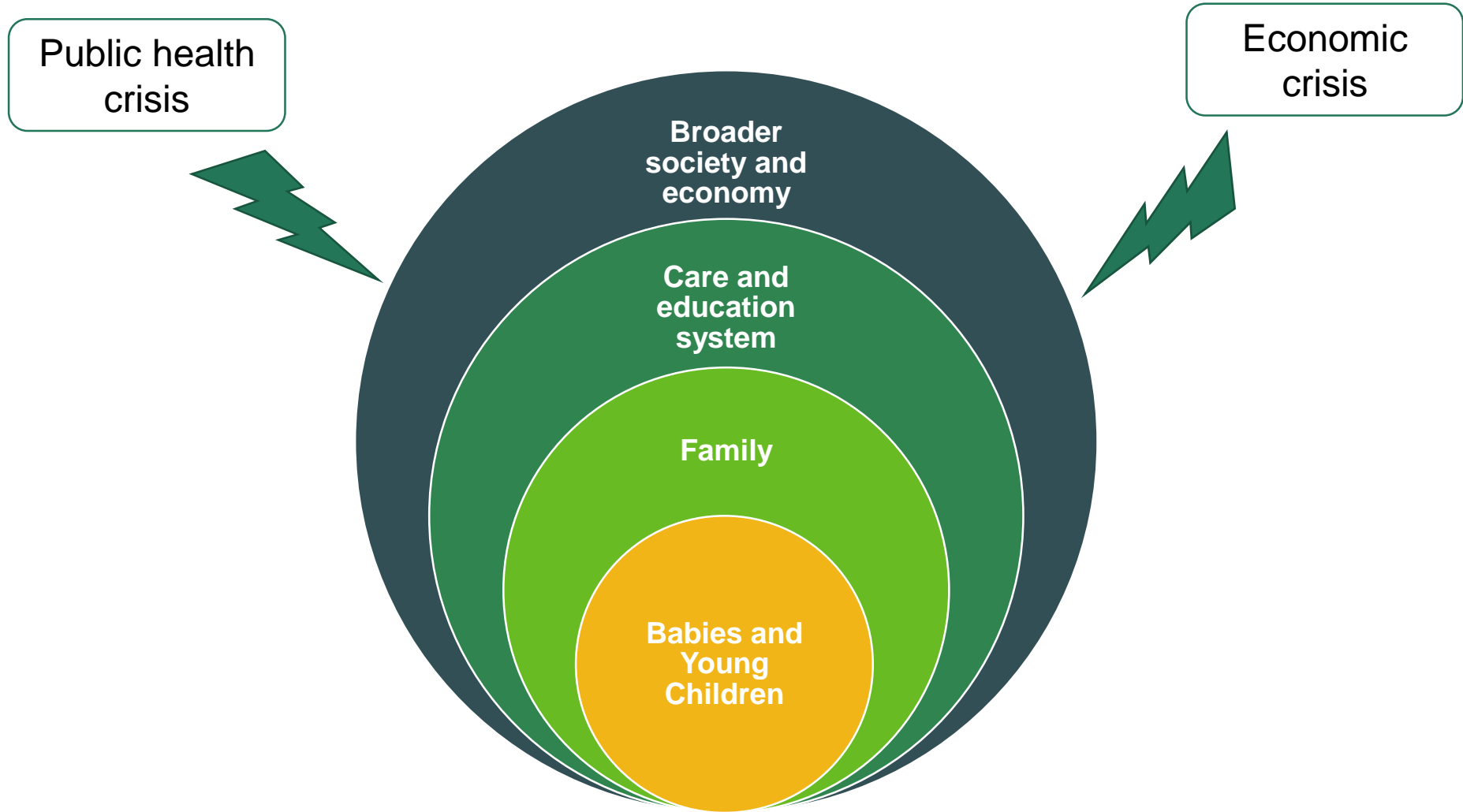


- Early childhood is a key period for human development
- Crucial role of early experiences and environments in shaping development
 - Family and home learning environment
 - Non-parental childcare
- A period of great opportunity but also of great vulnerability for children exposed to poor, unsafe and unstable environments

Early years inequalities before COVID-19

- Developmental gap between more and less disadvantaged children open early and is large by the time children start school
 - In 2019, development of disadvantaged pupils was 4.5 months behind those of non-disadvantaged pupils at the end of reception
- Signs that decreasing gaps in school readiness between 2007 and 2012, but widening since 2017 (Stewart and Reader, 2021)

Seismic impact of COVID-19



Impact of COVID-19 on families with young children



Health impact

Risk of infection

Social impact

Disruption to social routines

Economic impact

Job loss and insecurity

Impact of COVID-19 on families with young children

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Job loss and insecurity

Upheaval of routines

Reduced income

Parental stress and inter-parental conflict

More time with parents

Impact of COVID-19 on families with young children

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Job loss and insecurity

Upheaval of routines

Reduced income

Parental stress and inter-parental conflict

More time with parents

Mixed experiences

Likely detrimental effects for children of most vulnerable and low-income families

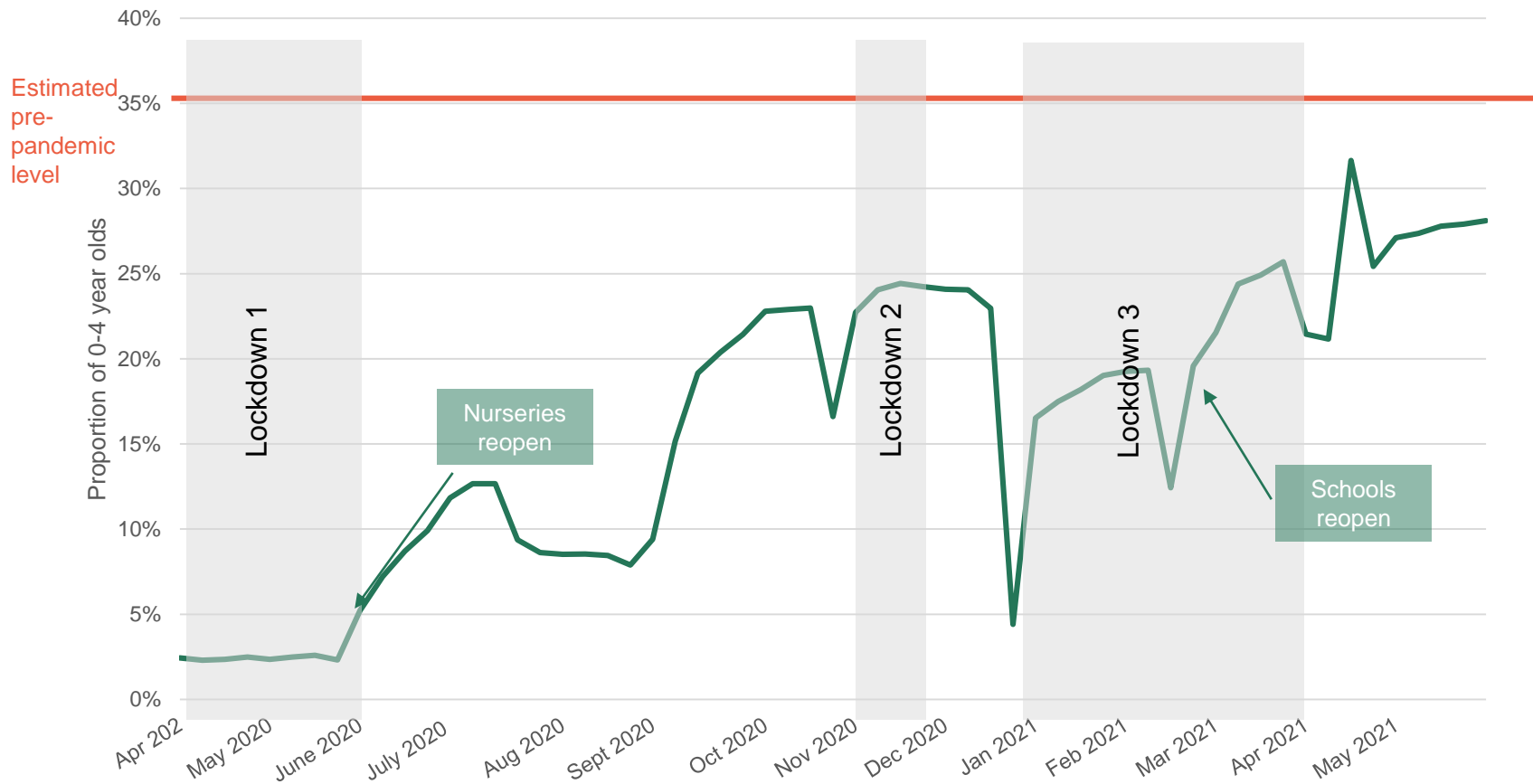
Impact of COVID-19 on the care and early education sector



- Nursery closed for most children during the first lockdown (March – May 2020)
- Nursery attendance dropped and has not yet recovered to pre-pandemic levels

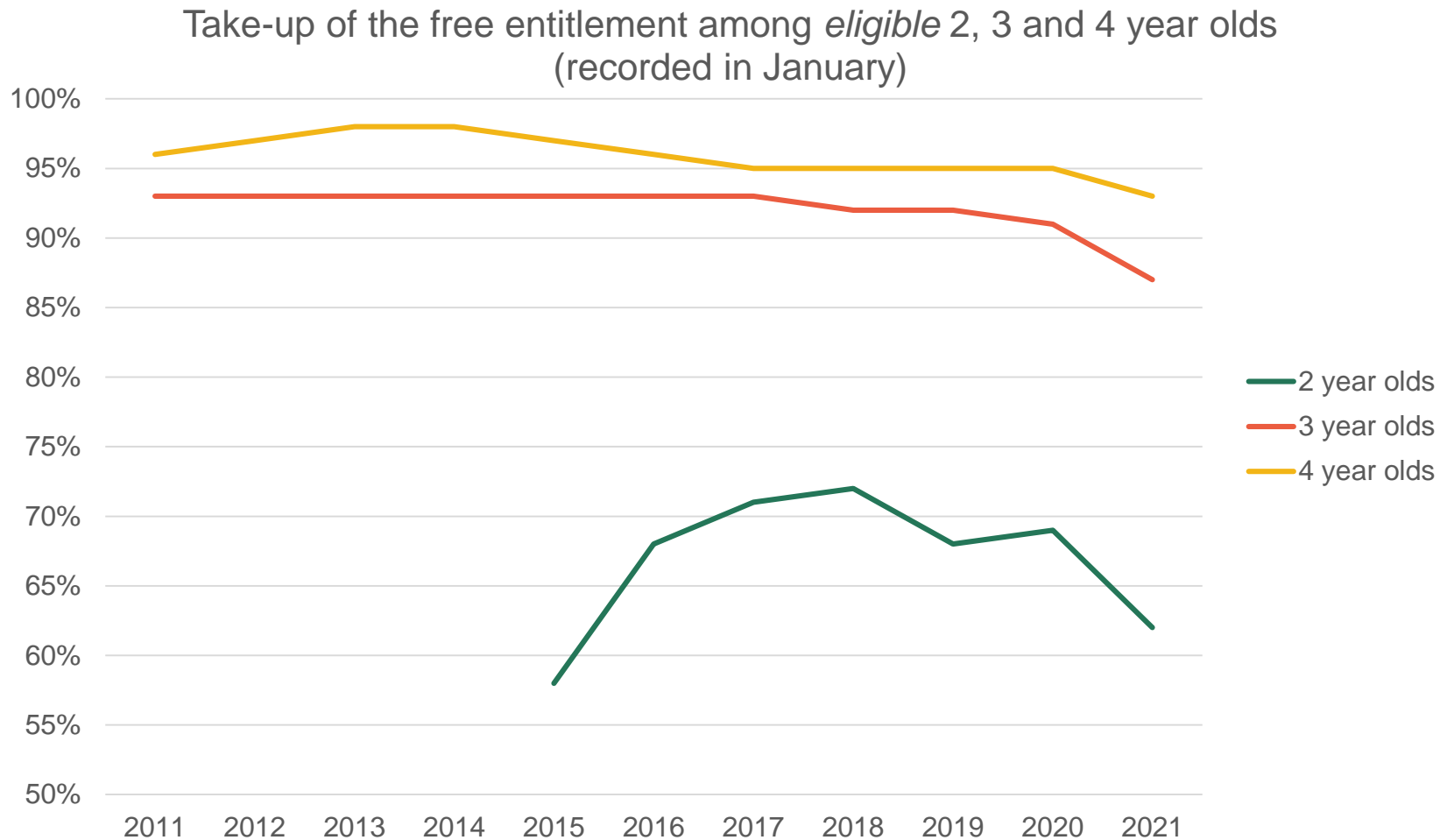
EY settings attendance among 0-4s

Proportion of 0-4-year olds attending an Early Years setting between April 2020 and May 2021



Source: Department for Education (2021), "Attendance in education and early years settings during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic", <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/attendance-in-education-and-early-years-settings-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak>

Take-up of free entitlement



Source: Department for Education (2021), "Education provision: children under 5 years of age", <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/education-provision-children-under-5>

Impact of COVID-19 on the care and early education sector

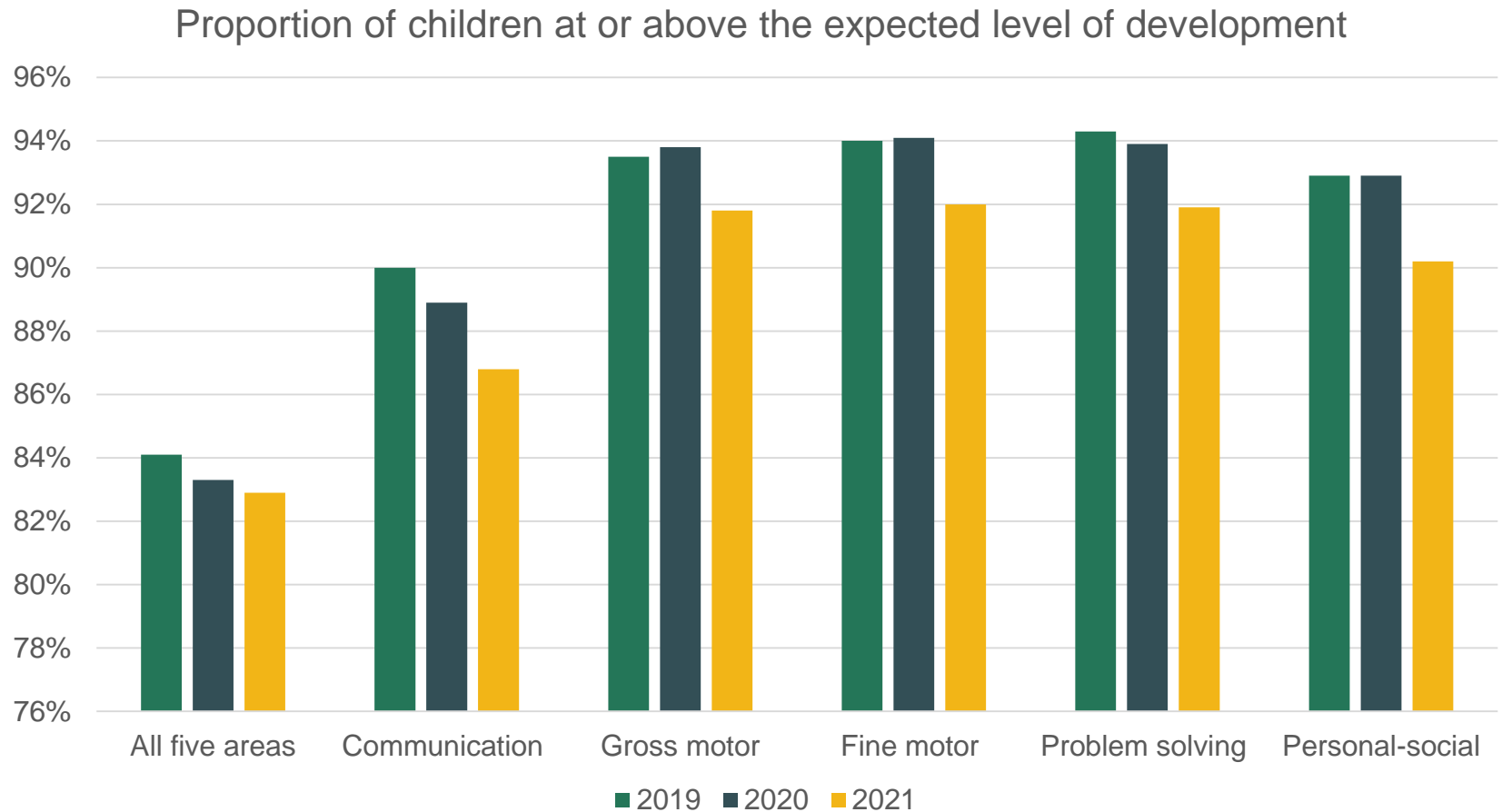
- Nursery closures during the first lockdown
- Attendance to nursery dropped and has not recovered to pre-pandemic levels
- These changes will reflect changes to the demand for and supply of childcare ([Covid and Childcare study: Local Impacts Cross England](#))
 - Evidence that demand is affected by perceived risk of infection and parental employment
 - Concerns about increased financial pressures on providers
 - Concerns about workforce morale and mental health, exacerbating existing issues about recruitment and retention

Impact on early childhood development

- Changes to family environment and lower EY attendance, especially among low-income children could have consequences for child development
- Unfortunately EYFSP collection was interrupted in 2020 and 2021
- Emerging evidence suggesting that COVID-19 had detrimental impact on the development of babies and young children
 - Child development outcomes at age 2 – 2 ½ ([Office for Health Improvement and Disparities](#))
 - Parents, nursery and school leaders' concerns about school readiness ([EEF study](#), [Ofsted study](#))

Child development outcomes at age 2 – 2 ½

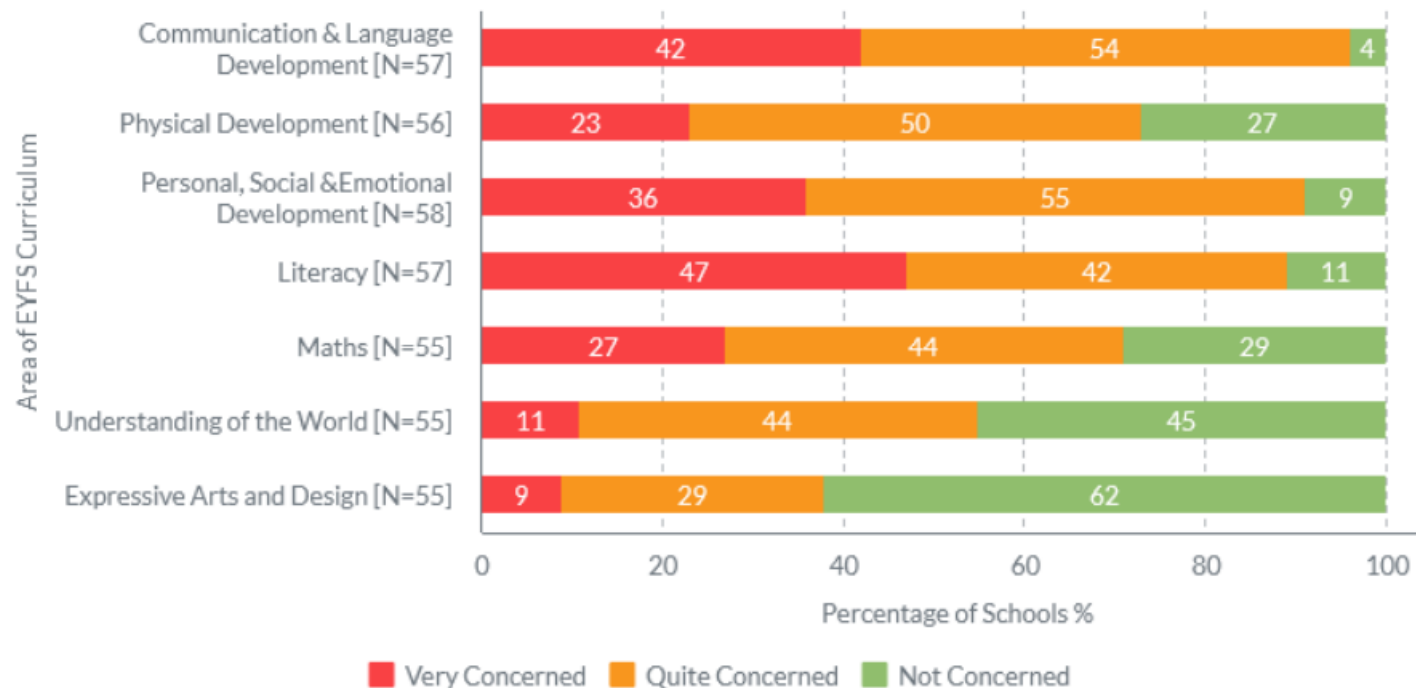
(Healthy Child Programme)



Source: Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (2021), Child Development Outcomes at 2 to 2 and a half: annual data for 2021 and earlier years, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/child-development-outcomes-at-2-to-2-and-a-half-years-annual-data>

School readiness

Areas of the EYFSP schools were concerned after schools reopened in September 2020



Source: Bowyer-Crane, Bonetti, Compton, Nielsen, D'Apice and Trasey (April 2021), "The impact of Covid19 on School Starters : Interim briefing 1 Parent and school concerns about children starting school", Interim Briefing 1, <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation/projects/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-school-starters>

Conclusion

- Serious concern that the pandemic will widen socio-economic inequalities in the early years, with knock-on effects for schools
- How persistent this effect is will depend on practices and interventions to help families recover from the crisis and children's ability to catch up on missed learning
- Old and new challenges: To what extent policies to tackle inequalities in the early years need to be adjusted to address new challenges brought by the pandemic?

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