

Hello. My name is Conor James. I am 11 years old. I live in Dublin, having returned from Toronto in 2016. I have been on The Ark's Children's Council since 2019. Thank you for asking me to speak to you today.

The pandemic was a challenge for everyone. My mum and dad are doctors, and my mum still works with COVID patients. We all know the pandemic was hard for health workers – but it was hard for their families too.

The hospitals were very busy and overcrowded and stressful. I couldn't hug my parents when they came home from work. Luckily, they both got their vaccine 4 months ago. Since then, I have been looking forward to getting back to normal life.

Although there are many negatives about COVID I think there are also some positives, especially about how communities changed. There was a big effort to keep people outdoors, which I really enjoyed, and there was a big effort to help keep small businesses running, which helped the lives of a lot of people and small communities like where my grandparents live in Westmeath.

People really supported each other during the pandemic. For example, because our childminder had to leave due to COVID 19 and school was cancelled, it was hard for my parents who still had to go to work every day. Other parents in our community and my aunt offered to help. I hope this community support continues long after the pandemic.

My favourite sport is basketball. During the pandemic, our training was cancelled because basketball is an indoor sport. We don't have a big garden so I couldn't practice my drills. Four basketball courts near me in Dublin took down their hoops to prevent people coming to play. The only public court near me was constantly overcrowded. Basketball players had no access to their favourite sport for 9 months.

My sister missed her swimming and gymnastics. Many children in our call out spoke about the sports they missed. One six-year-old from Dublin, said he wants to go to soft play, taekwondo and play dates. Students at St. Michael's National School in Limerick missed sports, dance classes and hockey.

Not everyone has access to a large safe outdoor space. Sports are important for communities. They help people stay fit, keep people in a good mood and are good for mental health. If we have another lockdown, it is important that the government improve facilities for all sports to encourage everybody to stay active and to be as inclusive as possible. We should support access to sports for everyone, even if there isn't another lockdown.

It was a shame that the Ark Children's Cultural Centre couldn't stay open during the pandemic. I was having lots of fun on the Children's Council. I was enjoying meeting lots of new people who were interested in different things, and I was watching some plays, concerts and exhibitions and giving feedback on them. We had to go online – and it is very hard for the arts to operate this way.

I really missed orchestra. I made new friends there. Other children across Ireland felt the same. Marta aged 9 spoke about missing her violin and music lessons. When you're involved in music or the arts, you meet different types of people that often aren't at school. It's important to have different types of interests in your life and I'm looking forward to starting orchestra again. I hope the government supports centres like The Ark, the National Concert Hall and other institutions involved in art and culture.

Arts and culture are very important because they help boost creativity and confidence. It's a way to express your feelings. It also is a way to get your head clear for a while. I love nothing more than playing my cello for my grandparents whether it's over zoom or in person.

I was trying to think about why art and culture is important for everyone. Sometimes people think that art doesn't affect them. But everything in our lives has art within it and people take it for granted. Art and Music and culture are there for us at the best and worst times. When we are very sad like at a funeral, we recite poems that explain how we feel, like when we sang Danny Boy for my great Granny's funeral. Or when we are very happy and joyful, like at a wedding, we use music and dancing and art. Arts and Culture are there at the most important times of our lives and I hope we appreciate the arts and artists even more after the pandemic.

Thank you!