

# 6th Episode

## The challenges of homeschooling

*Welcome to Doorstep Revolution, a project emerging out of the heart of South Riverside in Cardiff and run by gentle/radical, an arts organisation based in the neighbourhood, and interested in connecting up culture, community, politics, spirituality, and healing justice.*

*Supported by a grant from the National Lottery Community Fund, this sound archive was born out of the pandemic of 2020 and 2021.*

*We spent time knocking on doors, hearing people's stories and finding out how our thinking about the future might have changed under COVID.*

*From homeschooling to weddings under lockdown, from acute isolation, to finding new forms of togetherness, these conversations with neighbours reveal questions and profound reflections on recent times and how we might wish them to be different.*

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*One of the greatest changes to our communities and the pandemic was the shutting down of schools, requiring parents to teach children from home over extended periods. In this episode, we hear about the joys and challenges of homeschooling from Riverside residents, Phil, Peter, Isha, Hana, Sandra, Gillian and Andrea and Shanara.*

### **Phil**

It was bizarre as a joke, it said to my mate in work as I got out, "see you tomorrow, depending on what Boris says" as a joke. And then by six o'clock, he shut the school. So that was me done, it was that. Because me and my partner were in the same place. So it was either one of us has to stay home with the kids, and she's in part of the invoicing department. So the owner of my company straightaway was, well, we need you, you're the one bringing the money in. That was basically like, right, we've played 'parent-trumps'... and I lost. And that was it. That was me done, so for two weeks, I didn't even know what was gonna happen, because they just said everyone's got to... the schools are shut. And then for two weeks, we were just at home not knowing what was going on. And it was only towards the end of the two weeks, then when they made an official lockdown and created the furlough, it kind of lifted, lifted the release in a way because I didn't know what was going to happen, until they found the 3 billion hiding under the sofa to create a furlough scheme. Because otherwise we were in big trouble, financially.

I didn't think about me at the time because this was such a big thing. It was more just trying to make it as normal for the kids as possible. I mean, I suppose certain parts where I 'broke', because obviously you hit low points and I had some really low... low ones during the various lockdowns. The first one not so much, because you felt like you were contributing. And you were doing things for the better, for the greater good sort of thing. And it was, you know, I mean, when everyone was putting rainbows in the window and clapping on a Thursday, and everyone was doing stuff and there was a real community vibe. And then we were kinda like, all right, everyone's coming back out now.

And then, full well knowing when they put the kids back in school in September October, there's going to be another spike. Even though I knew it and it happened, I was still gutted thinking, you give yourself a false hope. And... I even told my boys in October when we went in again and I said look, don't worry about it, there will probably be a couple of mini versions of these until about a year's time, so next, this October coming. And then every time there was another announcement for another lockdown, I was the one that was gutted. I was the one losing my temper. I was having a full on meltdown. And I was just thinking I've just told the two boys don't panic for a year. This is going to happen on and off and then I am the one sulking like a toddler then and it was weird. I suppose I've got a bit disappointed in myself in that respect. It did bring me down more than I thought it was going to.

### **Peter**

In effect, you know, myself, my partner, we both work at university. We embrace the sort of ability to work online, the home-schooling of course, that took our minds off things in a way and helped structure. I mean, we went into that first week of home-schooling during the first lockdown with you know, myself, my partner and our daughter saying right, what can we do, right? You know, Lilly, what do you do in school? Tell us your school day, so that we can sort of replicate that day as best we can with home-schooling. And it ended up structuring not just her homeschooling day, but our work days. And our daughter got a whistle from a drawer and she blew a whistle at five to nine every day, and blew the whistle, I can't remember... something like quarter past 10 for a 15 minute break where we went out. Because my daughter is useless at sports, yeah? I mean, she's a very good swimmer, but ball oriented sport... So the first thing we did, first day of home-schooling, and you know, during that first lockdown, I said to her, right, we're not just going to go out in the garden, but we're going to play ball for 15 minutes. We did that every day, all the way through that first, you know... focus on school. We were like the Harlem Globetrotters by the end of it, I tell you! I could throw it, you know, she could catch it. I caught it with one hand, and she could sort of catch it even without looking, you know. And we sort of kept ourselves buoyant, and whatever. And she's not a lover of our garden, because unlike the sort of larger garden that I grew up in as a kid, ours is quite small. And she's scared of the spiders as well.

But this was an opportunity where suddenly, we rediscovered the garden, discovered the garden for the first time, and again, it all helped reduce anxiety. And we just had a laugh. Yeah, we didn't see anyone for nine weeks and the horrendous news that was coming, you know, from across the globe,

and this country, and so on. I mean, the harrowing scenes in Italy at the time, and so on. But yeah, we kept our heads above water in that respect, and sort of kept buoyant.

### **Isha**

So the lack of routine, I actually enjoyed. The fact that everybody was home, everybody was in front of me... we were not moving all in the other directions, obviously, that I really liked. One thing that I really, really noticed in life, mainly about my son, is before that, I generally noticed that he used to be slightly more cranky. And I always thought that's his nature, you know, he's just somebody who's just like that by nature, like he's just somebody who gets irritated very quickly.

But during the lockdown, I actually noticed that was not the case. So it was actually the whole routine of the school, you know. I think he's not a morning person. Seven, he was that time. So even if he was seven, the whole process of getting up in the morning, going to school, coming back. I always thought that's his nature. And he used to come back cranky and used to fight a lot with his sister, so my daughter is two years older than him. And there was a lot of fighting between the kids and everything that was like a norm. But during the lockdown, I especially noticed the change. My daughter's always kind of the same so that wasn't the problem.

But with him, I noticed a lot of difference, where he was a much nicer person by nature, he was more cheerful. He was better with his sister. There was much less of a fight. Whereas when the lockdown initially happened, I thought it's going to do my head in, because both of them will be home. But surprisingly, it wasn't like that, like, as far as the kids were concerned, I wasn't, you know, bothered about kids being home.

### **Phil**

Definitely home-schooling, and I've never tried anything so difficult with my kids in my life. I mean, obviously, you always try and give them little, little nuggets of information as a Dad, especially if they're boys, you're just trying to teach them how to grow up to be a man. So in your head, you're just thinking - right, I am just going to teach them how to be a person. And then all of a sudden, you've got to teach them everything.

And it's difficult. I mean, especially the first one we were just thrown in at the deep end. They were like yeah, no worries... here's the information, go! No breakdown on how they want it done. No explanation on some of the stuff. And you just sat there completely lost and I mean, my boys go to a Welsh speaking school. So... I don't even speak Welsh fluently. I can understand it. If there's a conversation going on, I can tell you roughly what's happening, but I can't teach. So we were almost having to do everything twice where it was, translate what was going on, talk about it, get the answer out of them and then put it back into Welsh to then send, hand in, so that was difficult. So yeah, if home-schooling ever came back again that'd be it for me, I think, I'd just get a dingy ride out into the sunset, because I couldn't do it again.

**Hana**

I have three daughters and started school last April. Last year, they all in online learning in our country. So everybody is in the house doing the online. It is quite stressful for them, I think for children, right?

**Tony**

How do you find the online learning with three children and I only had the one to manage with my, with my devices? Did you find that a challenge in terms of having enough equipment for your children to do online learning?

**Hana**

Yeah, I think I have no problem with some of them. But I just can't keep up. What? What, are you facing the problem or not? Because they seem to be fine. Because maybe it's a gadget, right? It's like (laughs) it's a current thing for them. So when they get back to school, this is like, fresh new stuff for them to go to school, back. I can see that it's a very huge difference for them. I mean, in terms of physically, right? They can play around if, compared to in our country, because we cannot go to school. So yeah, I think it's a good... it's a good thing, I guess for them. They seem more happy? (laughs) Seems like they are more connected to each other so they can play around. Otherwise, they just stay in the room and I mean, all the kids are facing that, right?

**Phil**

My little one got his head 'round it really quickly, the tasks, and he can do what he wants. So potentially for him, he could be done within two, three hours. And he's off... he's off again playing. And then the older one he was moaning then why was he upstairs playing? I'm like "well, he's done". Just because you've decided to now sit there for two hours not doing it, doesn't mean that you're not going to finish. So yeah, there were some really long, horrible days. But I think it was, it was just personal. I mean, I spoke to some parents, they were like, oh, yeah, we did like an hour. We did a few tasks online and that was it. And I just thought I could have done that. Why... Why did I decide to go the hard way? And argue with them constantly and damage a relationship. Over this when no one else seems to be doing it, I got a bit fed up. And I just thought it was important I think. The reason why I just carried on by... I think we, my boys, everything's got to be a little bit harder than it has to be. It is just the way they are as boys, I think, even if we're doing something simple. It just seems that we have to go the long way around to get there. Then when we're trying to do something like this, which is important, we actually went a long way around on a lot of it to get there. So that's what made it tougher.

**Tony**

And Andrea, you're saying that you had children, you have children? And that initially they found it "hurray no school!" How do you think that's changed over the course of the year?

**Andrea**

No. My son loves staying in anyway. My daughter does miss her friends. She goes to gymnastics. But they were quite happy to stay at home. In school, because obviously, it's rules, sanitise, go toilet, only in your own bubble. They don't let you eat, eat your food, you haven't got time, you're in a slot. As you said they'd rather be home and doing home-schooling, because you can have a rest and eat when you want and have longer time to eat. Drink when you want to...

**Sandra**

It's hard for them, you don't realise how much of... I don't think none of us will realise what the effect it'll have on a child yet?

**Andrea**

And I think because my kids are home, I feel more safer. Because obviously, kids are carriers. And when they're not at the school and in that environment, no one's bringing anything in. And when they're home, they're safe. You make sure they wash their hands and you know they're clean and then you know, the washing is clean, not touching things they're not supposed to, because I washes everything and sanitise and I do prefer them home, even if I know they do need to go school.

**Phil**

There were certain things like grammar and stuff. Yeah, there was a lot of stuff I'd forgotten. But we used to do stuff for a full stop, if he hadn't put a full stop on the end, I'd just keep reading and then I'd just (makes joke gasping sound) pretend I've run out of breath... So I'd be talking, talking, talking and then suddenly (makes joke gasping sound) he realised that he missed the full stop, because I couldn't stop until there was a full stop. So there was funny ways of chucking it in. But with maths then, for me was the one, because they've changed how they want everything done again. It's different methods all the time. So we will constantly argue about maths, so we're both gonna get there because numbers don't lie. But he's shouting at me and I'm shouting at him and then... because the numbers are just... the numbers don't lie, but he's telling me it's wrong. And then obviously, you're like, well, there is no teacher here to say otherwise. But yeah, that was a tough one.

But I mean, the first lockdown was hard because I think teachers didn't get time to put a package together to help out. And they also changed the way that they did it halfway through, where we were using an app called seesaw, which was fine for little ones, because there was not a lot of room... like if there was an error it was really easy to undo. So if they didn't match the buttons by mistake, it was really easy to fix. And then for some reason there was like, what's it called, like a questionnaire must have gone out to parents. And then I don't know who decided that they weren't happy with it. But then all of a sudden, after the second half term, it became Google Classroom, which is something that we will be using if we took an online course, because it's got access to everything, documents, word, spreadsheets. You can do... however you decide to do the work, you could do it in 100 different ways.

And now then, for me especially, for my younger one it was more trying to teach him how to use a computer rather than trying to do the work. So that was an extra thing on top. That was definitely harder. But this time now, I mean, after Christmas, when he used to do an online lesson every morning with a teacher. That was massive, just to have a half hour or 40 minute lesson...

I think my older boy took a little bit longer, because obviously the one teacher wanted to really hammer home what the task was. But yeah, that was huge, just having that face to face contact. If this ever happens again, they've got to keep that side of it. So yeah, it's definitely an eye opener. I mean, funnily enough, one of the mums at football training yesterday just quit now from being a teacher, not because of this, but just for life in general. And she even asked me yesterday, do you have more respect for teachers, now? Having to do it. And I was like, well, it's a bit different. Personally, I think it's different when you're trying to teach your own two kids who you've known their whole life, something quite important, but they don't see it that way. To try and teach thirty kids who all know you're there for that purpose... Like I'm lucky I am doing the coaching aspect, but my boy, guaranteed, is the numpty in the corner, messing around in rugby training. But the other, however many kids I've got in my group, they're looking to me to learn or to do the drill. So kids have got a different view of the person who's put there in front of them as the teacher. Whereas in the house, other than put a hat on and say right now the teaching hat is on, my boys still wouldn't look at me as someone who's supposed to be teaching them things. So yeah, that was difficult. I think in a way because I got furloughed, and I just thought well, I didn't have a job anymore. I just thought that this would be my job now. I just become "homeschooling-dad-man", and do all the gubbins involved in that. And then it just depended on them really and the tasks. I did try and do whatever they said. I did try and do a lot of it. But then I did get a bit fed up towards the end of the first one, because I don't know if you know, but they did.

When lockdown was easing, just before the end of school term, they did these things where you could get a morning or an afternoon slot with a teacher. I think it was more of a teacher to check in on the kids to see if they were okay. But when they wanted... the two times my one boy went in, he painted a mask and then he painted a rock and I thought, right, okay, I kind of get it. I didn't even ask then...

Because I even told him to go in and ask a question about one of these things we've been set. And they didn't go over it. They just painted a mask and I was like, well, I can paint masks in the house! And then it made me even more annoyed then because the flipping... the next day's work was something brand new and it was "explain photosynthesis". I was like... you just painted a mask! Don't you think it would have been nice to put some groundwork in for this? The hardest task you give us in a week. That was the sort of stuff that really got on my nerves so that towards the end I was getting a bit fed up.

## **Shanara**

It has been very nice because you kind of reestablish a closeness back to your children. But you do realise how much of our life we kind of subcontract or sublet to other people, like the responsibility of educating our children or having other people look after our children, while we are busy doing... doing necessary things. So there were a lot of things that I needed to realise, but I would not have (realised) if

it had not been for the pandemic. I realise that as a parent, we do need to take much closer involvement with our children's education. That the schooling system has been a certain way for a very long time, and it's not exactly individualised to suit the needs of different children, you know. So that's one thing. And it's a positive, I would say. But it's just a shame that certain things are so closed to us, we don't see, you know, unless something like a pandemic happens.

### **Stephen**

So how have your kids found... doing school at home, how's that experience been for them and for you?

### **Shanara**

We've had our highs and lows, we've had really good, good peaks. And then I came to the point where I was thinking, they are young, and they do find it difficult to organise their thoughts in the sense of what they learn. They're not able to recall it as a teenager or a mature person. So then I came to the point where I realised teaching is the easy part. The hard part is just constant memorization and recalling. And that part, I realised, when I did realise, I had a lot of empathy for the teachers.

### **Phil**

We got there! I mean, we did some really cool stuff, but it depended on the subject as well. I mean, one week the theme was pirates. Now, little boys, pirates, you can't really miss, can you? I mean, you can do all sorts of stuff. And I mean, we did a really cool thing where they have to send... you have to write a letter and so do the message in a bottle thing. But... I obviously didn't want to chuck a bottle in the Taff and so we made, I made like a little raft out of sticks and string and we put the message on the raft and we sent it down the river. And then we sort of ran, we followed it, we ran with it down the path and followed it down the river until we lost it. So that for a school day was really good! Because obviously without realising we did a little bit on the history of pirates and stuff like that. And then we got to do something really fun at the end. Then a week later, we're talking about the lifecycle of a snail. I mean, how can I jazz that up!?

### **Isha**

What did happen, obviously, because before that everything was so robotic, and that was very normal for us. School and the job and my husband going to work and then this and that. And that was the norm. And then suddenly a change where it was a very natural change. Like it's not that my husband was planning to stay at home, you know, quitting work or calling and saying... it wasn't like that. It was like a very... It was with everybody... So it wasn't like just us, where I could think, why us? And why is my husband doing this? It was pretty much everybody. So I think initially it was the fact that I actually enjoyed the family time and everybody being at home. That was slightly surprising because before that... apart from the weekend and even on the weekend, we have so much to catch up. That never

happened. So that was a bit surprising and OK you know what I am actually a family person and I do enjoy (laughing) not being on my own, because before you go to work, you go to school leave me alone, my time (laughing). But then I later realised that actually I do like my family!

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*We hope you enjoyed hearing from some of the voices in our community. Doorstep Revolution is an ongoing project. So if you're a Riverside resident and want to get involved, do get in touch with us at [gentleradical.org](http://gentleradical.org). In the coming months and years, we'll be continuing to build a resource of stories, perspectives and dialogues exploring the realities as well as the dreams of people living on our doorstep.*