Student experiences of COVID and lockdown: institutional report.

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STUDENT EXPERIENCES OF COVID & LOCKDOWN: INSTITUTIONAL REPORT

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INTRODUCTION

This report summarises key findings from a study into student experiences of university during the COVID-19 pandemic, their own responses and coping strategies, and their understanding of what universities need to do to support them. We also highlight how students felt they were perceived societally during the pandemic and lockdowns.

Specifically, the team of researchers conducted 124 surveys and three focus groups, between March and June 2021, to better understand the effects of COVID-19 and lockdown on students at Scottish universities. Building on this understanding, we co-developed a wellbeing toolkit to help students access support, resources, and guidance during and after COVID. Here, we report findings that are of relevance to higher education institutions in Scotland and that can inform approaches to mitigating future crises and to make institutions aware of the struggles students have faced in order to prepare for—in the case of some students—their first experiences being on campus as restrictions lift.

"EVERYTHING JUST FEELS OVERWHELMING SO ON YOUR OWN WITHOUT THE DAILY CONTACT TO FELLOW STUDENTS WITH WHOM YOU CAN SHARE ALL THIS"

"BEING A STUDENT IS STRESSFUL IN ITSELF, BUT WHEN YOU'RE IN A GLOBAL PANDEMIC, IT'S MADE EVEN MORE COMPLICATED"

"WE ARE TRYING OUR BEST, AND...IT CAN BE EXTREMELY DIFFICULT ON MENTAL HEALTH TO GO MONTHS WITHOUT SOCIALISING NOT ONLY WITH YOUR PEERS, BUT YOUR FAMILY TOO."

The pandemic and lockdown have affected all of us differently. Some students in our study voiced that lockdown had allowed them time to focus solely on their studies and self-care, but **the majority of students we heard from had found lockdown to be extremely challenging, frustrating and isolating**.

In this toolkit, we highlight the five key challenges that students told us that they faced: mental health, financial and material support, study skills, community connections, and health and exercise. While this report is organised around these five areas, our research showed us that every student's experience was—and continues to be—different. As one student explained "it's different kinds of difficult" and we acknowledge that all experiences are valid.

We begin with an overview of what students have experienced, followed by a discussion on how students have coped, before highlighting the points that students would like institutions to consider. Finally, we summarise what students suggest are the key action points for each of the challenges they have faced.

01 MENTAL HEALTH

02 FINANCIAL & MATERIAL SUPPORT

03 STUDY SKILLS

04 SOCIAL & COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

05 HEALTH & EXERCISE

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF BLAME

We wanted to know how students had perceived themselves and others during the pandemic and lockdowns. In our survey, we asked students several questions about blame and stigmatised groups during the past year.

More than half of respondents felt that students were being blamed for the spread of COVID-19.

Of those who felt that students were being blamed, **over 60% attributed this perception to the media** (including social media) and more than a quarter to general public discourse (including comments directed towards or overheard by students).

As a university student in Scotland, have you felt any sense of blame directed towards the student community?

Did not feel that students were being blamed
45.5%

Felt that students were being blamed
54.5%

" Of course there would be outbreaks in confined spaces filled with key workers? Of course, some have been due to parties and its those individuals that need blamed not students as a whole. "

If you felt that students were being blamed, where did this narrative emerge?

Public comments
26.4%

Workplace
1.9%

Government narrative
11.3%

Media & social media
60.4%
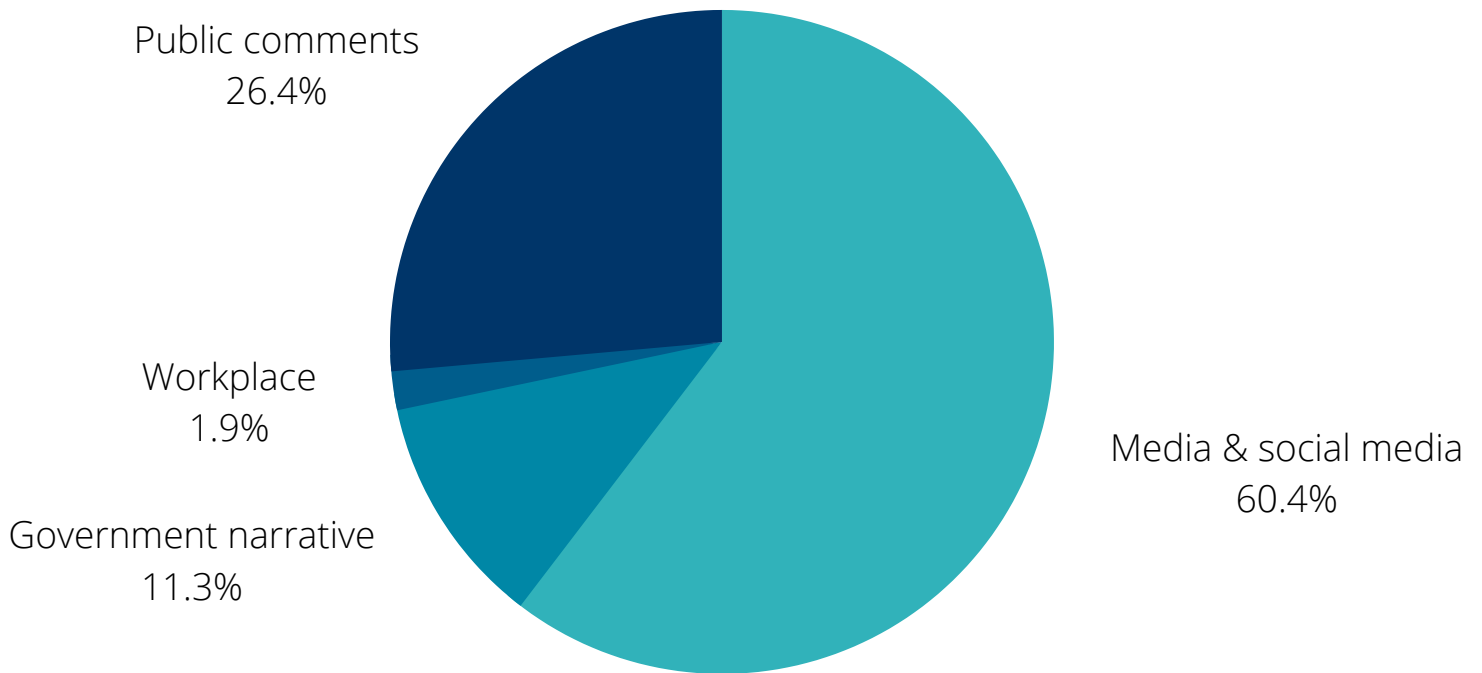
"I feel that as a generation we have been blamed, maybe not on a individual, personal level, but just young people in general."

" I resent people and politicians now more since they threw us under the bus and now don't trust us.."

" I have pretty bad paranoia about the whole situation. Communities feel so broken I am sort of scared of all my neighbours even if I don't do anything wrong."

" I lost my job because they thought I was too high risk because I was a student."

STUDENT EXPERIENCES OF UNIVERSITY DURING LOCKDOWN: 'DIFFERENT KINDS OF DIFFICULT'

Discussions of students' experiences centred particularly on mental health and wellbeing, social connection, financial and material impacts and impacts on academic performance.
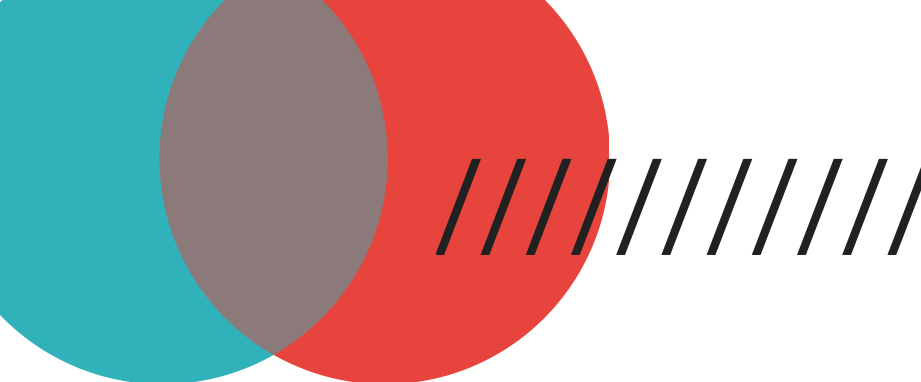
Crucially, focus group participants were keen to emphasise the diversity of experiences among students – as one respondent put it, students have faced 'different kinds of difficult'. There was a significant financial impact for many participants, with the additional costs of studying from home and the loss of part-time jobs key factors.

However, while some respondents were having barely any contact to other people and felt isolated, there were students with caring responsibilities for children who encountered the challenge of home-schooling while studying. Others shared rooms with working partners or family members and struggled to focus on their studies. There were also specific challenges for first year students:

> It's certainly not been what I expected. I started first year […] and obviously when you go to open days they're like "you'll have Fresher's" and all this. And societies weren't running. And I've met twelve out of the eighty-six people on my course.

Lockdown and the associated impacts on the student experience were overwhelmingly perceived as negative and challenging, but there were a minority of students who used lockdown as an opportunity to learn new skills or become involved in online activities, and attend webinars and talks related to their areas of study. The greater flexibility provided by studying online and reduced class sizes for face-to-face teaching were viewed as positives.

"I was physically separated from my support group, my friends [...] the first few months of the first lockdown over a year ago was probably the loneliest time, because in my case because I'm immunocompromised I have to be particularly careful, I'd go weeks with barely any human interaction."

"When university had in-person teaching, you'd talk to people on your course, ask them stuff, build up a friendship through talking to them in class and start a conversation that way. Obviously it's really different online. I tried to be friendly to socialise with people on my course but it wasn't the same, it's quite different."

"I was really stressed out and I started getting depressed indoors."

"So, I was on my phone a lot more, my sleeping pattern was absolutely terrible. [...] I got into a really deep hole during the first pandemic, and I felt like there was no support."

"But it was also really isolating, and at times overwhelming. I live in a flat share with three other people, and I share a room with my partner, and he's working full-time, in a lot of meetings, he's teaching, and I study architecture so I need a lot of quiet time. So, at some point it was not manageable anymore, so I had to defer."

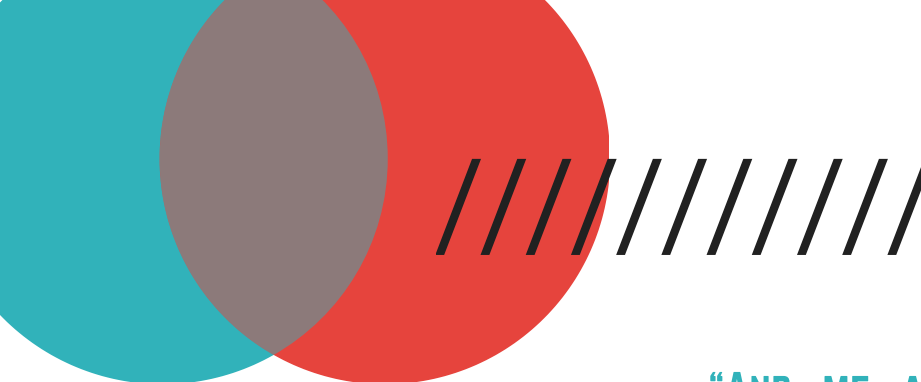# STUDENT RESPONSES & COPING STRATEGIES

Our research provided important insight into students' own proactive ways of coping with and adapting to the challenges the pandemic brought.

Students reported using a number of strategies to improve their wellbeing during lockdown:

- Having a daily routine, such as always waking up at the same time
- Working out at regular times during the day: 'I began working out a lot more because I realised when I worked out in the mornings, my mental health would be better throughout the day.' Others took daily evening walks.
- Mediation and mindfulness, with some students using specific apps
- Working in different parts of the house
- Being connected via phone to friends or family members throughout the working day

"ONE THING ME AND MY SISTER DID, BECAUSE SHE LIVES IN A DIFFERENT COUNTRY AND SHE WAS WORKING FROM HOME MOST OF THE LOCKDOWN WAS THAT AT THE BEGINNING OF HER WORKING DAY, SINCE THE UK IS AHEAD, WE WOULD CALL AND I WOULD KEEP HER ON SPEAKER PHONE AS WE WORKED AND WE WOULD TALK, SOMETIMES THIRTY MINUTES OF SILENCE WOULD GO BY, BUT JUST KNOWING THAT IT FELT LIKE THERE WAS SOMEONE BESIDE ME. "
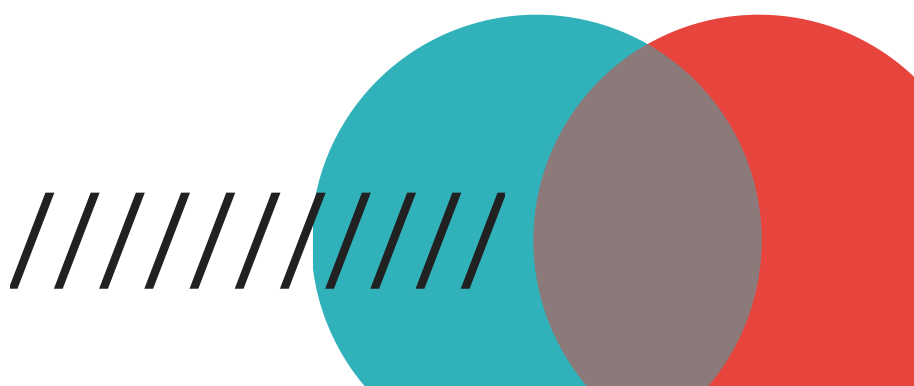
"And me and one of my best friends, because we would literally meet up on the street and be on opposite ends and just talk, then we'd sometimes send each other presents just to get each other's mood up."

To combat social isolation, respondents organised **game nights** or **Zoom meet up** or drinks, or, where possible, **socially distanced face-to-face meet ups.** Again, a minority of students found lockdown to provide new opportunities for social and community engagement, with one joining committees at university and another starting a knitting group for charity.

When it came to study skills for online learning, respondents found a range of strategies helpful. Good **time management** was discussed extensively as being more important than before the pandemic. This included use of the **Pomodoro technique,** leaving a greater time 'buffer' than usual before deadlines, keeping physical **to-do lists and using a planner**: 'I got a planner and decided what days I would do my lectures and tutorials that way, so I didn't just sit and do no work.'

Respondents set themselves **'goals of the day'** or implemented their own reward systems: 'I always had one big task for the week, whether it was finish chapter one of my dissertation, or do this, and if I hit that goal, I got takeout on Friday night, and if I didn't, I didn't get takeout.' There was discussion of the effectiveness of limiting or even deactivating social media. Productivity management apps and **project management apps** were mentioned by two focus group participants as helpful.

Most of these strategies and knowledges seemed to have been developed proactively by students, with only one referencing being familiar with the Trello tool, an organisational app, from university. We summarise the implications of these insights for universities and their readiness for future crises in the next section.

WHAT INSTITUTIONS NEED TO DO

The focus groups and survey responses provided an opportunity for students to voice how their universities could have better supported them during the pandemic and what institutions can do now. The research also highlighted some examples of best practice.

Students very much welcomed the provision of mental health support by universities, with a number of participants having received university-provided counselling. It was felt that this provision should be extended so that students can access support for longer and more immediately. Respondents also suggested that universities should provide resources such as webinars on mental health and wellbeing or offer institutional subscriptions to guided meditation such as Calm or Headspace.

In terms of helping with increasing social connection, students made a number of practical suggestions. Practical guides should be given to students to help them settle in their new university cities. As one interviewee put it:

> For new students who just arrived from thousands of miles away […] and then this lockdown happened, so where is the nearest park? What can I do? Where can I buy cheap food? Where is cheaper, in Asda or Tesco, or whatever? How do I get there? Very small practical things that might have helped those who arrived from far away the first time, just to orienteer in the city.

Students would have appreciated care packages that would include some of the gifts, stationery and information materials about the union: 'something physical, gift somethings, or something interesting that could be packaged in a way that shows students that we care about you, we care about your education, we care about you graduating and becoming equipped for the outside world.' These could serve to increase students' sense of belonging to their university even if they are not in its physical space.

While students were proactive about organising social interaction, this could be extremely difficult if one did not have existing friendships with coursemates. One example of best practice in relation to social connection is a School administrator who organised weekly catch ups with all students:

> So we could see each other's faces, we could chat about absolutely random things. And she also buddied us up into pairs because we could go on walks with one other person, so she really insisted if you could go and meet together, so we actually met quite a lot of people. So, now she organises groups of however many is allowed just now just for walks in the park. And I think to get that kind of support from university was absolutely brilliant, especially for international students because most of us are here on our own and we kind of live alone scattered around the city.

In terms of providing material resources, discussions centred on the need to provide laptops or to financially support faster internet connectivity as well as help with additional electricity and heating costs. More generally, students felt that their universities did not appreciate the financial effects of having to set up a home office on student budgets. One respondent told us:

> I had to buy a chair, a keyboard, a mouse, instead of just working with the laptop all the time. I did ask the university "can I borrow a chair? There's hundreds of chairs in the university, can I just get one and bring it back whenever the lockdown is over?" No, the answer was no, to any question about physical resources, the answer was always no, so I still don't understand that policy, there are so many chairs in there, why did I have to pay so much money to get one home?
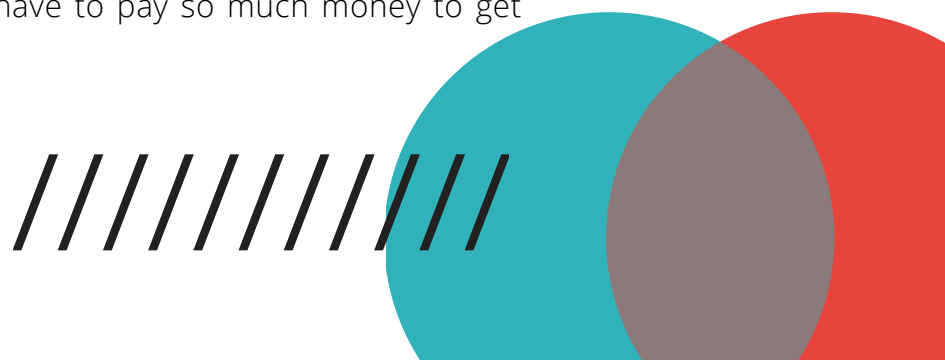
There were also requests for provision or subsidising of cleaning products for shared student accommodation, of face masks and sanitisers:

> Having to add these extra things into a student budget can be difficult at times, especially if you're wanting quality face masks. Because they can be expensive, there should have been a way for the government or the university to provide students with either discounted or completely free just to help.

Some students were not aware of the financial support that has existed, such as hardship funds. There was a sense in the focus groups that information about resources and support should be more accessible in one place, rather than in different locations across CampusMoodle.

In relation to study skills and learning online, respondents suggested that institutions could provide a number of additional resources:

- Buy institutional subscriptions to productivity apps such as Flora and Trello
- Organise webinars about productivity, time management and other study skills
- Post out a learning online starter kit with pamphlets and other hard copy resources
- Post out organisers and post-it notes or reusable whiteboards

Contrary to the perception of young people as 'tech savvy' and not requiring support in using online learning and communication technologies such as Teams or Zoom, some respondents noted the lack of an induction or guide for such software. While these will now be familiar to students, universities should take note of this insight for future crises and not assume particular technological capabilities from students.
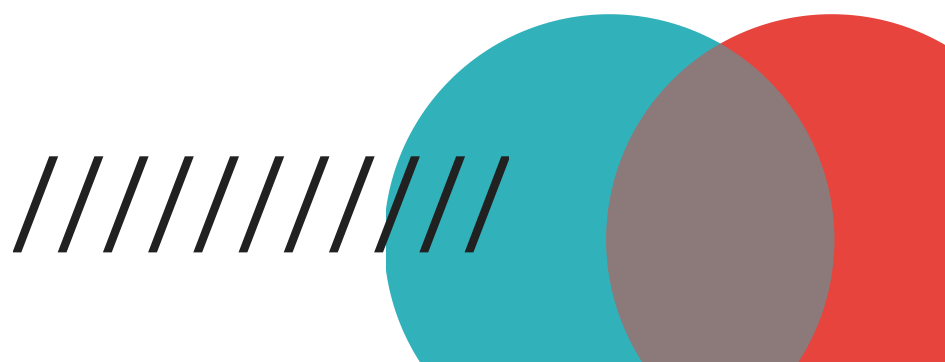
Conversely, students also raised the issue of adequate institutional support for teaching staff:

> Some professors they have not been trained at all or given any guidance on how to go through the pandemic teaching. Or some professors, for example, their microphones are not for giving classes online, they simply don't work, they have connection problems. And I am sure that [my university] have not checked if those professors, there's not been tests about their landline or the internet was good enough for them to teach properly.

While a majority of respondents felt that individual University staff had been 'very supportive', frequently checking in with students and signposting to other resources, what was less well received was the lack of substantial changes to assessment requirements. For example, exams were sometimes changed to coursework but all coursework was still bunched in a two week assessment period, which was experienced as worsening the mental health impacts of lockdown. Overall, students wished for 'better listening' and for more recognition of students' circumstances and how differently challenging they were.
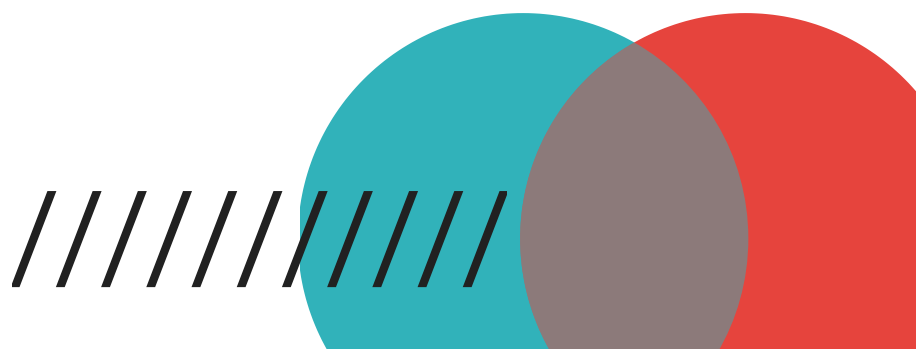
SUMMARY

In summary, the research revealed important ways in which universities could support students across all the main areas of difficulty they experienced:

MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING
- Prompt and lasting counselling provision
- Online resources such as webinars on wellbeing and institutional subscriptions to meditation apps
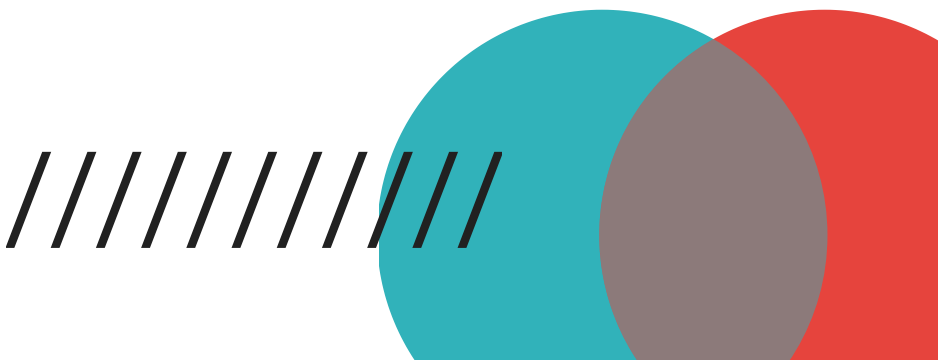
SOCIAL CONNECTION
- Practical city guides to students who are new to the area, covering topics such as economical shopping and good places to get exercise
- Individual care packages to demonstrate care and boost feelings of university belonging, including for example pens, pads, post its, biscuits
- Course-level organisation of social interaction e.g. weekly catch ups for whole course, buddying, group meet ups within regulations

FINANCIAL AND MATERIAL SUPPORT
- Provision for home working, such as laptop and office equipment loans; grants for wi-fi and heating
- Easily accessible information about financial support (such as hardship funds) all in one place

ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE
- Institutional subscriptions to productivity apps like Flora or Trello
- Webinars on study skills including time management
- Individual 'hard copy' learning starter kits, including paper organisers, plus leaflet guides to online technologies (these could be combined with care packages described under 'social connection')
- Where exams are changed to coursework, ensure that deadlines are spread out
- More listening to student experience and the diversity of problems they face during online learning

"WE HAVE NO MONEY, WE HAVE NO FAMILY, WE HAVE NO FRIENDS,
WE ARE IN A BOX WITH NOWHERE TO GO. BE PATIENT WITH US. WE
ARE NOT QUITE ADULTS AND WE ARE NOT QUITE CHILDREN. THERE IS A
SPACE IN BETWEEN WHERE WE ARE TREATED AS BOTH."