

MEDIA RELEASE

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Children’s Word of the Year, ‘virus’, demonstrates the pandemic has impacted us all

This year’s shortlisted words provide valuable insights into the minds of school-aged children during the COVID-19 pandemic

After a disrupted school year of remote learning and virtual classrooms during the COVID-19 lockdowns, it’s not surprising that Australian students have voted for ‘virus’ as the Oxford Australian 2020 Children’s Word of the Year (CWOTY).

While Australian children have had to grapple with global issues in a way unseen by previous generations, this year’s word demonstrates the far-reaching impact of the pandemic.

Children’s language experts analysed more than 50,000 short stories written by three million Australian children for this year’s Storyathon writing events. Students in years 3-8 voted on shortlisted words which included ‘friends’, ‘virus’, ‘zombies’, ‘lockdown’, ‘fun’, ‘world’, ‘shocked’, ‘school’ and ‘people’, to determine the 2020 CWOTY.

Anne Bayetto, Literacy expert at Flinders University, highlighted the word usage of ‘virus’ had increased by 15232.4 per cent compared to 2019.

“In previous years, students may have occasionally used the word ‘virus’ in science-fiction texts. This year ‘virus’ was clearly top of mind as students were concerned about the immediate and long-term impact,” Ms Bayetto said.

“Perhaps being able to write about the virus was therapeutic, as students were able to voice their concerns through a creative medium.”

The complete shortlist of words paints a vivid picture of life during the pandemic for Australian children.

“The second-place contender for the CWOTY was ‘friends’. Along with words like ‘school’ and ‘fun’, the analysis showed that while studying from home, children yearned for social connections that are hard to substitute outside of the classroom environment,” Ms Bayetto said.

“Many children cited their desire to spend time with friends and have had to find new and virtual ways to keep in touch with their peers.

“On the other side of the coin, words such as ‘zombies’, ‘lockdown’ and ‘shocked’ showed remarkable popularity this year with students drawing on the challenges that Australia’s young people have faced.”

Ms Bayetto also noted the 2020 CWOTY – virus – is a noticeable departure from previous years.

“The words selected in the past three years of the CWOTY program have demonstrated a distinctly more positive insight into the language use of children. Words like ‘creativity’ in 2018 and ‘bravery’ in 2019 are a clear contrast to the word ‘virus’ which elicits feelings of concern,” Ms Bayetto said.

“However, this is not the first time we have seen the social conscience of Australian children play out in their CWOTY choice. The word ‘equality’ was chosen in 2017, the same year as the marriage equality plebiscite. Both ‘equality’ and ‘virus’ can be seen as indicative of growing social awareness in school-aged children.”

The CWOTY initiative is currently in its fourth year, however 2020 is the first year to benefit from the partnership with Storyathon, Australia’s largest online story writing event.

Lee Walker, Director of Publishing at Oxford University Press, spoke about the CWOTY research.

“It has been truly fascinating to examine the stories over the course of the year and be able to analyse language use at such a pivotal time,” Ms Walker said.

“In our analysis, we noted a surge in students writing about what was happening in the world, namely the pandemic, which ultimately has impacted almost everyone around the world in some way, shape or form.”

The words collected as part of CWOTY have been added to the Oxford Australian Children’s language *Corpus* – a collection of texts which records the development of children’s linguistics over time and informs Oxford University Press’s research and assessment of children’s language trends.

For more information about the Oxford Australian Children’s Word of the Year, visit oup.com.au/cwoty.

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About Oxford University Press

Oxford University Press (OUP) is dedicated to improving communication through an understanding of, and a passion for, language around the globe. As experts in children’s language, OUP is constantly listening to Australian children, and reflecting on their use of language, in order to develop an understanding of the challenges they are facing.

The Oxford Australian Children’s Word of the Year is one of the ways OUP engages with the ever-changing language of Australian children. Previous Children’s Word of the Year include: ‘Creativity’ (2018) and ‘Equality’ (2019).

About Storyathon

Storyathon is a new and exciting online writing event for students in years 3-8 that encourages creativity through writing microstories.

Writing a microstory is an inclusive classroom activity that makes writing fun and accessible, even for the most reluctant writers.

Storyathon is the brainchild of Shane Hill who was a teacher for eleven years prior to creating programs such as Writing Legends, Mathletics, Spellodrome, Skoolbo and the da Vinci Decathlon.

About Anne Bayetto

Anne teaches special education at Flinders University, with a focus on how to teach students with literacy and numeracy difficulties. A former schoolteacher, she has taught in both mainstream and special needs classes. Anne has been a disability support coordinator, a founding member of the Learning Difficulties Support Team (SA), and a literacy policy and project officer. Anne offers professional learning sessions for The Specific Learning Difficulties Association (SPELD) and provides consultancy and professional learning sessions for educators across Australia. She was also the reading expert for the Principals as Literacy Leaders (PALL) project, initiated by the Australian Primary Principals Association.

About Lee Walker

Lee is Director of Publishing, Editorial and Design at Oxford University Press Australia New Zealand and is also President of the Australian Publishers Association. She has almost 30 years’ experience in Australian educational publishing, a career that first focussed on primary literacy and mathematics research and resource development, and then expanded to secondary and higher education publishing, including a significant focus on digital innovation.