

Children's mental health in the time of coronavirus: what we know about what hurts and what helps



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Why focus on children's mental health at this time?

Looking back over the last year it has been such a period of upheaval for all of us. Life feels very different from last year, and while our focus is quite rightly on shielding and protecting those most vulnerable to the coronavirus, those of us who live and work closely with children and young people have been only too aware of the huge impact this has had and continues to have on their lives. While children and young people are the least affected by the virus in terms of symptom severity, it's clear that the threat of the virus and the associated lockdown measures have had a significant impact on children and young people's mental wellbeing.

Research emerging from over this period has reported increases in worrying, stress, loneliness and low mood. In many ways these are feelings we can all identify with and are understandable responses to such unprecedented times. Young people have been concerned about threats to their own health and to the health of those around them, they have experienced significant disruption to their education and social contact, and many have missed significant

milestones such as transitions from primary to secondary school, leaving school or joining university. Many have experienced financial uncertainty, either through economic pressures facing their family or by themselves being in some of the jobs most vulnerable during lockdown (e.g., retail and hospitality). Some children have also experienced the illness or loss of loved ones through direct exposure to the virus or have been ill themselves.



What has the impact been on young people's mental wellbeing?

Given these wide-ranging impacts it's unsurprising that alongside these normal responses to this challenging time, studies have also begun to highlight increases in proportions of young people experiencing mental health problems at this time, including depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder. The effects for children and young people have not been uniform. Indeed, many young people have shown remarkable resilience during this period and some have even reported

feeling happier or less stressed. Many have been able to note some positives such as spending more time with family members or feeling positive that lockdown measures temporarily relieved some pressures on the climate.

However, some groups of children and young people have been particularly negatively affected.

- Those already experiencing some mental health difficulties have been particularly vulnerable, with conditions adding additional stress at the same time as usual supports have been either diminished or removed completely.
- Those with other health or educational needs have also struggled to access their usual supports, putting extra strain on them and their families.

- Children in already vulnerable families (e.g., those already in contact with social care) have also been at greater risk due to limited contact with their usual support systems, additional family pressures, increases in family conflict and, in extreme circumstances, greater risk of experience of domestic violence.
- The lockdown period has been particularly challenging for low income families, who have often experienced greater economic hardship and limited access to food, healthcare and other resources. Parents and carers in low income families are also much more likely to work in roles risking greater exposure to the virus leading to increased likelihood of infection and illness.



- The disproportionate impact of the coronavirus on people of colour has also been widely reported, with a recent report from Public Health England highlighting the higher rate of infection and mortality for Black and Asian people. It has become clear that the spread of the virus and the impact of the associated lockdown measures have amplified existing inequalities. In particular, parents and carers from minority ethnic groups are both more likely to be key workers, and more likely to work in shut-down sectors. They therefore have greater likelihood of exposure to the virus while also being more likely to experience loss of household income. Both of these conditions increase the likelihood of an adverse psychological impact for children and young people of colour.



Some positives?

Reviewing these findings might lead us to believe that all children and young people have experienced negative psychological effects, but this is not the case. Many have been able to identify some positives about the experience, including;

- spending more time with family,
- being able to maintain contact with friends,
- having some relief from the usual academic pressures, and
- seeing some positive effects on the environment while lockdown reduced carbon emissions.

Some young people, particularly adolescents have felt an improvement in their general wellbeing as a result of these positives. Previous research also leads us to expect that many young people who have experienced challenges in the short term will 'bounce back' in time, showing little long-term impact. However, what is clear from the research is that children, young

people and their communities are not fighting the pandemic on an equal playing field. While many will adapt in time and show little adverse effects, some will be experiencing significant distress. The range of changes the pandemic has led to in some children and young people's day to day lives – greater economic pressures, interrupted educational progression, increased exposure to domestic abuse – suggest a greater need for immediate and long-lasting support.



How can we best support children and young people's mental health at this time?

In the context of such global and unprecedented threat and disruption, we can sometimes feel powerless to support the children and young people we live and work with but the research points to plenty of strategies that can be helpful. The advice might be slightly different depending on the range of challenges young people are facing.

A. How to support those experiencing worries, low mood and stress

There will be a range of children and young people showing some signs of struggles during the current context, and even though these might not be severe enough to be classed as significant mental health problems, these young people may still need support from those around them, including parents, carers and others working closely with them, such as teachers and youth workers.



Here are some tips:

- 1. Keep up usual routines** including sleep routines, learning schedules and down time.
- 2. Maintain social contact** as much as possible with extended family and friends. Remember that older children may find this easier than younger children so supporting younger children to find ways to speak via phones and video calling may be helpful. Maintaining meaningful contact with key members of school staff during national and local lockdowns may also help reduce feelings of isolation.
- 3. Limit media exposure**, especially media sources that may amplify or distort messages about risks and potential health outcomes.

4. **Have open conversations** that recognise that conditions can feel uncertain or worrying but also give opportunities to contextualise these worries and emphasise what young people and families can do to keep safe and feel more positive.
5. **Look for early warning signs** of any escalation in mental health difficulties that might mean the young person needs some extra help or support. Some examples might include being more tearful, sad and withdrawn, showing increased signs of irritability or more angry outbursts, loss of interest in usual activities or poor concentration, and being more 'clingy' with parents or carers.
6. **Draw on evidence-based resources** to help give advice and support. As a starting point, there are lots of great resources here: <https://www.annafreud.org/coronavirus-support/> And here: <https://www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/childrens-mental-health/>
7. **Self-care strategies** can help improve wellbeing or reduce feelings of distress. Some great ideas can be found here: <https://www.annafreud.org/on-my-mind/self-care/>
8. **Remember some responses are normal in the circumstances.** It can be worrying sometimes to see young people feeling upset or distressed but it's also important to bear in mind that much of this is young people showing quite natural responses to these unprecedented times. Acknowledging that these feelings are not only normal but also legitimate in the current circumstances can be reassuring.



B. How to support those who have a significant mental health problem

All the guidance described above applies to those experiencing significant mental health problems as well, but some additional considerations might be helpful.

1. Be aware of early warning signs that mental health problems might be escalating or getting harder to cope with. Find ways to 'check-in' or keep conversations going about how things are.
2. Become familiar with sources of support that are available locally, online or by phone. Some local sources of help are listed on The Wellbeing Directory (<https://www.annafreud.org/on-my-mind/youth-wellbeing/>) and for more urgent help take a look here: <https://www.annafreud.org/on-my-mind/urgent-help/>
3. Maintain usual supports as much as possible. Where a young person is already accessing regular mental health support, try to keep that going

Many services have begun to provide video-call support and many have begun to resume face to face contact following recommended precautions.

4. Provide flexible support solutions. For those providing mental health support, including schools and colleges, think creatively about how to maintain support during this crucial period. Also, as much as possible plan for the potential increase in demand.



C. Be aware of disproportionately affected groups

Those working closely with children and young people should bear in mind that some young people will have had a much more challenging experience during the pandemic than others. Many of these groups were highlighted earlier in this briefing. However, we should be careful not to make assumptions about individual's experiences based on particular characteristics. Instead, finding ways to make support readily available, ensuring these young people know where help can be found, being vigilant about signs of distress and being approachable all help young people find the support they need.

Note: the topics and guidance covered in this briefing are drawn from a range of research and guidance we have been working on over the period of the coronavirus pandemic. For more information on these topics, go to: <https://www.annafreud.org/coronavirus-support/our-research/>

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About EBP

The Evidence Based Practice Unit is a child and youth mental health research and innovation unit based at UCL Faculty of Brain Sciences and the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families. Founded in 2006, this collaboration bridges cutting-edge research and innovative practice in children's mental health. We conduct research, develop tools, provide training, evaluate interventions and disseminate evidence across four themes: Risk | Resilience | Change | Choice

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