23rd June 2021

Emerging Evidence: Coronavirus and children and young people's mental health

Recommendations

EBPU
Evidence Based Practice Unit

A partnership of

UCL   **Anna Freud**
National Centre for
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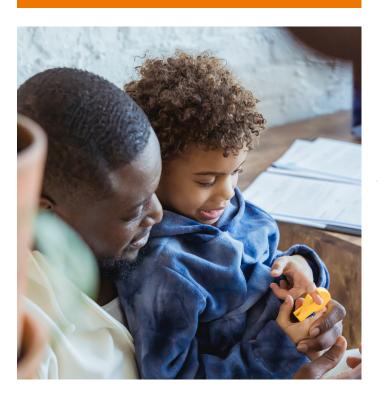
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When we published the first issue of the Emerging Evidence series in May 2020, the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on children and young people's mental health was only just starting to become apparent. Since then, across seven issues between May 2020 and March 2021, we have collated evidence on the varied mental health impacts of the pandemic.

Our concluding issue (*Issue 8*) aims to summarise what we have learned, and sets out the following recommendations for supporting children and young people's mental health as the pandemic continues and beyond.
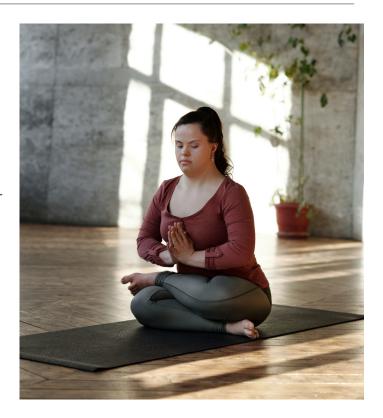

General recommendations

- **The mental health of children and young people must be given sufficient attention and resources, even as lockdowns are lifted and children return to school.** The pandemic has exacerbated known factors that place young people at greater risk for poor mental health, such as economic uncertainty, familial or parental conflict, and increased rates of domestic violence and social isolation, which will have lasting mental health consequences for many. The full extent of the mental health and developmental impacts of the coronavirus pandemic may not be clear for many years.

- **The responsibility for children and young people's mental health should lie with everyone.** Schools, Further Education (FE) colleges and universities, children and young people's mental health services (CYPMHS), local and national government, social services and other organisations need to consider how they work together to ensure that young people are well-supported.

- **It is important to consider the range of sources of support children and young people might draw on.** The ongoing demand for mental health support will be at a level beyond that which CYPMHS can address in isolation. As well as CYPMHS, school or community-based interventions and help from parents and carers may be important aspects of the picture of support for children and young people.

- **Increasing opportunities for play, socialisation, and social learning experiences for children is vital.** Time for play and socialisation is necessary for children's development, but many children and young people have been forced to grow up quickly during the pandemic. For instance, some children have had to help parents and carers with household tasks or the care of siblings, take responsibility for their own learning, or have had access to worrying information about the pandemic or experienced bereavement. As we move on from lockdown conditions, increasing play and fun experiences for children is extremely important.

Recommendations for young people

- **Play, socialise, and seek out activities you enjoy.** You can find lots of ideas for activities to try on On My Mind, an online resource from the Anna Freud Centre.

- **Get enough rest and exercise.** You may find you need more rest than usual to keep up your energy.

- **Try and spend some time each day away from screens such as your phone, video game or TV.** Getting outside for a walk can help if you are feeling down.

- **Be kind to yourself.** It has been a difficult time and doing the best you can is a real achievement.

- **Talk to a trusted adult if you are worried, feeling down, or unsure.** This could be a parent or carer, teacher, or someone in your community.

- **Talk to your friends about how you are feeling.** You may find that some of your friends have felt similar to how you are feeling.

- **Do not be afraid to seek help.** There are many online resources, hotlines, and professionals you can access. For example, your GP, local community centres, Mental Health Support Teams (MHSTs), the Youth Wellbeing Directory, and even teachers can help you find support.

Recommendations for parents and carers

- **Look after your own mental health and wellbeing.** Evidence has shown that parental distress during the pandemic has impacted children's wellbeing, so by improving your own mental health, you will also be benefitting your children.

- **Make time for discussion with your children about how they are feeling and concerns they may have.** You can help your children deal with ongoing changes, worries and uncertainty by talking about concerns they have and discussing ways to deal with change. This will help to provide a safe space for them to voice their concerns.

- **Learn how to recognise signs that your child may be struggling with their mental health.** These may include changes in behaviour, eating or sleeping, or mood. The effect of the coronavirus pandemic on children and young people's mental health may continue to be felt even though children have returned to school in the UK, given potential ongoing disruption. You can find resources to help with this on the Anna Freud Centre website: https://www.annafreud.org/parents-and-carers/

Recommendations for schools and Further Education (FE) colleges

- **Mental health and wellbeing should have a high priority in schools and FE colleges in the coming months and years.** While there has been an obvious disruption to children and young people's education, the return to school needs to appropriately balance wellbeing and educational outcomes. Evidence has shown that educational attainment is affected by mental health and wellbeing, so improving young people's mental health will support educational attainment. Staff mental health and wellbeing is also crucial to supporting students and being able to teach effectively.

- **Adopting a 'whole school' or community approach is fundamental to supporting young people.** This involves ensuring that staff are equipped with relevant skills and knowledge to support young people, that mental health is part of the curriculum, that parents and carers as well as the wider community are engaged, and that staff mental health is supported. Schools may find the 5 Steps to Mental Health and Wellbeing Framework useful for developing a whole school or college approach: https://www.annafreud.org/schools-and-colleges/5-steps-to-mental-health-and-wellbeing/

- **Take steps to actively identify pupils who are struggling with their mental health.** This can be done by implementing a regular needs assessment to understand specific areas where pupils need support. Schools and colleges should be systematic about checking in with students who may be vulnerable. Some tools for doing so, including the Wellbeing Measurement Framework, can be found here: https://www.corc.uk.net/resource-hub/wellbeing-measurement-framework-wmf/

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1.   Marmot, M., Allen, J., Goldblatt, P., Herd, E. & Morrison, J. B*uild Back Fairer: The Covid-19 Marmot Review.* (2020).

- **Be aware that some groups of children have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic.** Education staff should be alert to the differential experiences of children and young people over the last year and recognise that some may need additional support. However, staff should also be aware that recent research may not have identified all groups of children who are particularly vulnerable at this time, which is why it is important to regularly assess the needs of all children. Schools can find more advice and resources from Mentally Healthy Schools: https://www.mentallyhealthyschools.org.uk/

Recommendations for future research

- **Future research should examine the unprecedented risk-factors presented by the pandemic and resulting lockdowns.** Prolonged school closures, social isolation, anxiety surrounding contracting the coronavirus and loss of loved ones are risk-factors for poor mental health.

- **Studies looking at the long-term impact of coronavirus on children and young people's mental health and development are necessary.** Pre-existing cohort studies and other longitudinal samples will be particularly crucial to understanding the extent and nature of these impacts over time.

- **Research should focus on the widening social and economic inequalities exacerbated by the pandemic.** Reports such as the Build Back Fairer: The COVID-19 Marmot Review[1] have begun to highlight issues related to inequality. Future research should focus on identifying real-world interventions which reduce social and economic inequalities.

Read Issue 8 in full, and find all issues in the Emerging Evidence series: https://www.annafreud.org/coronavirus-support/our-research/

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The Evidence Based Practice Unit (EBPU) is a child and youth mental health research and innovation unit based at UCL Faculty of Brain Sciences and the Anna Freud Centre. 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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The Child Outcomes Research Consortium (CORC) is the UK's leading membership organisation that collects and uses evidence to enable more effective child-centred support, services and systems to improve children and young people's mental health and wellbeing. We have over 15 years' experience in bringing together theoretical knowledge on outcome measurement and relating this to the insights and expertise developed by practitioners working with children and young people on the ground.

www.corc.uk.net/