

Children's and young people's mental well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic



Research brief

Summary

The academic literature on the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated measures on the mental well-being of children and young people is surprisingly rich given the novelty of the topic. This research brief summarises the available evidence. It is based on collating and reviewing 84 studies (74 peer reviewed papers and 10 grey literature papers).

Key findings:

- There is strong evidence that the COVID-19 pandemic has affected most aspects of children and young people's mental well-being.
- Families from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, young people not in education or employment, adolescents, and girls and young women are negatively impacted by the pandemic much more severely than other groups.
- There is a concern about children and young people witnessing or becoming targets of Violence against Women, domestic abuse, and sexual violence during lockdowns, especially if they have lost access to social support due to school closure, conflict with family, and distance from friends.
- The closure of educational and childcare institutions constitutes one of the biggest disruptions to children and young people's lives and it impacts all aspect of their mental well-being. Many of their worries and anxieties relate to (i) loss of accessibility of non-academic support from schools and (ii) the quality of education received.

Introduction

While the physical health repercussions of COVID-19 are relatively mild when it comes to children and young people (CYP), the provisions and measures that were put in place to stop the spread are likely to affect the lives and well-being of the younger generation disproportionately, at a critical time in their emotional and physical development.

This research brief summarises the main findings from a literature review and data analysis commissioned by Public Health Wales and carried out by Alma Economics to inform a Mental Well-being Impact Assessment. It outlines the impact of the pandemic on the four core protective factors that influence the mental well-being of individuals and communities: (i) enhancing control, (ii) increasing resilience and community assets, (iii) facilitating participation and inclusion, (iv) wider determinants of population mental well-being and inequalities.

Enhancing control

Research suggests that parental sense of control has a strong influence on children's mental well-being. The children of parents who feel stressed or struggle to deal with the pandemic score lower on well-being measures.

Evidence also suggests that children and young people exhibit high awareness of how to combat the virus, such as washing hands and physical distancing. Understanding of the virus and its implications correlates to better well-being outcomes and health-related quality of life. However, there is a cost to compliance because measures such as social distancing and limiting physical contact go against important aspects of adolescents' quality of life, such as engaging in activities outside their homes and spending time with people in their communities.

Findings on the prevalence of confidence and hope among young people is promising, as many of them feel that the situation will improve and are optimistic about the future. These beliefs and feelings are effective in mitigating some of the negative impact of the pandemic on well-being.

Increasing resilience and community assets

The emotional well-being of CYP have showed a decline during the pandemic, especially in terms of increased stress. Some also have exhibited worsening health behaviours (e.g., sleep disruptions and unhealthy diets) and negative coping mechanism like substance use, avoidance and keeping one's feelings to oneself.

However, some CYP have stated that there have been positive effects to the pandemic like spending more time with family and relief from social and peer pressure. Many have adopted key health behaviours like increased physical activity and positive coping mechanisms, such as connecting with friends and taking up new hobbies.

There is a concern about CYP witnessing or falling victims to Violence against Women, domestic abuse, and sexual violence during lockdowns, given unprecedented increases in calls to domestic abuse helplines. Generally, many CYP report that the pandemic has resulted in some loss of social support, especially due to school closure, conflict with family, and distance from friends.

Evidence suggests that babies in lockdown exhibit increases in behaviours like clinginess and tantrums, but also increases in positive outcomes like playtime with parents and language development. Of concern is that many parents of babies report increased feelings of stress and anxiety, which can affect the mental well-being of their babies. They also report lacking in confidence to get help. These negative outcomes were more pronounced for younger parents and families from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

Facilitating participation and inclusion

The lockdown has significantly affected CYP's opportunities to participate in activities outside their home and spend time with people in their communities, at school, and at work, which increase their feelings of social isolation and loneliness.

The closure of educational and childcare institutions constitutes one of the biggest disruptions to children and young people's lives during the pandemic and it impacts all aspect of their mental well-being. Many of the worries and anxieties that have been experienced by CYP not only relate to educational outcomes but also to the loss of access to non-academic support from schools, including receiving social support from friends and staff, having nutritious meals, and accessing shelter, counselling, and safeguarding services.

The shift to online or remote learning also creates mental and emotional strain on young people. The unfamiliarity of the new teaching and assessment modalities, the lack of clarity in communication, the distant supervision from teachers, the perceived poorer quality of online education, and concerns about graduating emerge as the contributing factors to increased stress.

Wider determinants and inequalities

Being unemployed or not in work, education, or training results in particularly low scores on emotional health, especially in terms of anxiety. Being unemployed at the start of the pandemic is a major risk factor for young people's mental health and well-being and it can lead to long term poorer health outcomes compared to those who are employed and in education.

Regarding socioeconomic background, the situation of many families already struggling with financial pressures has been exacerbated due to the pandemic. Many struggle to feed their children and lack the resources and skills necessary to educate their children at home. School closures disproportionately affect students from disadvantaged backgrounds who depend on free, non-academic services from schools. In Wales, Free School Meals (FSM) have been maintained during the pandemic, but there are some concerns about their coverage and eligibility thresholds.

Regarding demographic characteristics, adolescents and young people exhibit more negative outcomes than younger children and older adults. Additionally, young women and girls exhibit worse outcomes than their male counterparts.

*This research brief is based on the work commissioned by Public Health Wales to Alma Economics "Children's and young people's well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic", which reviews the evidence on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated government measures on the well-being of babies, children, and young people. This report carried out a thorough review of the evidence on issues relating to children and young people's mental well-being up to the age of 24 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and related factors and measures and include an analysis of data from Understanding Society that describe recent changes in mental well-being.