

The Impact of COVID-19 on the Emotional and Mental Health of Children and Young People

Perspectives from the front line.

June 2020

Introduction

This document provides a review from front line services and from children, young people and their families about the impact of the coronavirus pandemic. The information has been extracted from narrative accounts and case studies provided in response to requests from Children and Young People sub group of the 'Covid 19 Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing cell', as well as responses to surveys undertaken under the banner of Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership (CYPSP). The document is part of a suite of documents produced by the above sub cell and should be read in conjunction with the following:

- Managing the Impact on Covid 19 on The Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing of Children and Young People(MHEWB/CYP sub cell)
- Output products of the MHEWB/Impact cell.

Purpose of report

This document provides a snapshot of the real-time perceptions of service users, and front line staff in relation to the impact of Covid 19 on the mental health and emotional wellbeing of children and young people. These valuable lived experiences should be viewed alongside the emerging wealth of scientific data, but it is imperative that we ensure that the voice of service users and their advocates are heard. It is expected therefore that the information contained in this document will contribute to the consolidation of evidence of the impact of the pandemic, and inform service delivery going forward.

A significant breadth of information was provided from across the community, voluntary and statutory sectors. The list of all those who contributed feedback, case studies and survey responses are included in Appendix 1.

The collation of this information has enabled the CYP sub cell to determine primary themes which in turn will assist with contributing to the direction and priorities for children's mental health and emotional wellbeing service delivery during and post Covid. The themes below represent the main areas of focus which emerged from the feedback provided. These themes are:

- Fear and Anxiety
- Changes in behaviour and mental health concerns
- Concern about education and school closures
- Socio economic impact
- Access to services and responses to service delivery models
- The Positive impact of lockdown
- Looking to the future

Each of these themes will be considered in turn.

Fear and Anxiety

Feedback across the sectors evidences that fear and anxiety amongst families, children and young people has been manifested in the following ways:

- Fear about own health and the health of loved ones
- Anxiety about social distancing measures, and the use of masks/PPE
- Anxiety about the disruptions to family life
- Transference of parental anxiety to children

This anxiety and fear is particularly evident in, but not exclusive to children with additional needs and their parents.

"One child would not go out the door and couldn't sleep as he was too afraid he was going to die"
(Health Visitor)

Mum reflected on importance of ensuring that children can experience new norm of encountering individuals wearing PPE in a safe and friendly environment therefore reducing children's concern and worry.
(Health visitor)

The 2nd highest reason for referral to family support hubs has been parent's anxiety and worries ...not all required an outgoing referral but support and listening ear & regular calls from staff until they found a way to adapt to their own families new routine. (FS Hub)

*As the lockdown has progressed the young peoples' sense of not having to deal with life has begun to dissipate and young people are beginning to absorb their parent's anxieties. The lack of structure and routine is beginning to affect them. These were young people who found it difficult to emotionally regulate and were to a degree coping with the erratic nature of the lockdown. This has moved on now, and many of the young people are beginning to **experience real stress from the lack of routine and certainty in their lives.*** (Service provider)

Several mothers have told us that their children have the fear of going outside and meeting other children. This may have an impact later on when the lockdown is lifted,(service provider)

“My husband goes to work every day and can be transferred to support in areas where the virus has hit. This adds to the level of anxiety within the house as the children see him come home and watch the rituals that have to be carried out in order to minimize the risk of spreading the virus both within our home and within the community when we need to access shops etc.” (Parent)

Changes in Behaviour and Mental Health Concerns

Many service users and providers have reported concerns about children and young people's behaviour and have linked this to concerns about mental health and emotional wellbeing. These include:

- concerns about children being quiet and withdrawn,
- spending long periods of time in their room alone,
- regressive behaviour
- self-harm.

The following 4 captions contain feedback from a parent of 4 children, and is evidence of the range of challenges within a typical family unit.

My 17year old is more withdrawn than usual and rarely wants to leave room, He is usually very laid back but is quick to anger now and stressing over his tech course because unlike most, he's been unable to do any form of work online because the place shut down instantly and all the classes work were on the computer servers. He's trying to stay in touch with friends but it seems this age group has very differing

My 15year old was stressing at start and unsettled but got himself into a very good routine of home schooling and regularly handing in work. Regularly voice and video calling his friends and messaging all the time in between to discuss everything and anything and helping each other with school work. The group seem to be very supportive of each other. He seems the most relaxed about the whole thing but he also will hold discussion about it and asks questions regularly.

My 14year old has an ADHD/SPD diagnosis. As long as he can stay on a laptop or phone he copes. If he doesn't get one or the other the stress he seems to be exhibiting is extreme and the stimming is back in force. He's gone from disruptive sleep to no sleep. I've kept as close to a routine as possible in regards to bed times (they are all in bed slightly later) and I make sure to wake him at set time every morning. Breakfast/lunch and dinner all stay as close to same time as possible. Home schooling is non-existent. We tried at the start and it was going okay but with one laptop between 3 children if he didn't get on when he wanted to do the work it was full scale meltdown and then nothing got done. He's more anxious, he's not sleeping, he's agitated and even when on the computer he's loud, banging or tapping table and generally disruptive and fidgeting.

My 12year old daughter is anxious/depressed. She's struggling the most with not seeing her friends. She had just started 1st year and was having a lot of issues with the change of routine and the issues with a girl from her previous school causing issues in a new friendship circle there. This has carried on and I'm in process of trying to sort out some cyber bullying. She's teary, very quiet, withdrawn and a bit more clingy than usual. At present the school has been able to sort out counselling sessions for her and this started with a phone call last week. She talks to her closest friend almost daily and will video call her. Home schooling is almost overwhelming for her

Many parents of children with disabilities are particularly finding the changes of routine impacting on their children's behaviour challenging. Parents are also finding this is affecting their own mental health. Other family support services are reporting concerns about children struggling with social distancing and running away from home.

The behaviour challenges that I as mother would be dealing with anyway has escalated and the respite I would have benefited from through school has gone. The escalation has meant that education and fun activities are limited and I am just managing to tread water.

"since lockdown my 7 year old with Autism has been very tearful and anxious the only wee routine we have is our bedtime routine, his limited diet has become even more limited he attends a special needs school and always loved school but when you mention school to him now he shuts down and says no."

"My 10 year old has moderate **ASD** and **has really found the change in routine difficult**. At times he won't leave his room and has **started to wet himself a lot**. His **sleep is disturbed** and he will wake up around 4am then sleep until 1pm in afternoon I don't know what to do"
(parent)

Some young people are becoming more **socially withdrawn**, males in particular and a couple of **concerns about young males with an eating disorder (residential worker)**

"Many of the young people we work with have been traumatised and there is a sense of disorder in their lives ordinarily, but now they are finding it very challenging to continue to deal with this extra level of uncertainty. There is one young man in particular who had experienced emotional trauma while living with his grandfather. Being off school and caring for his mother provided him with a sense of relief, but he appears to have been allowed to dictate his rules and boundaries and is now **feeling overwhelmed and is struggling to emotionally regulate**."

I am a parent of 3, one of whom is an adult with learning disability and a rare genetic disorder, who is very vocal and shouts constantly as **he is unable to understand what is going on and why his usual routine is changed**. The impact of listening to this all day and the frustration of not knowing if my son is in pain or distress is mentally draining.

- the impact of the lack of routine in some homes and how this will impact the mental health of young people around motivation and health in general is worrying.
- Impact of isolation on their social skills and ability to socialise with peers/ profession
- How will we get children/young people back to schools who were previously non-attending
- Noticed a lot of fear with both children/young people and parents about the actual virus and the spread of this from person to person. I think we will see a lot of anxiety during the transition back to school"

"I have lost my network from work which has also impacted on my children as many times I picked up some wonderful ideas from other families and had been able to debate and discuss the impact of many areas of normal life and how we can manage these changes and support one another."

Unfortunately there has also been many negative impacts on children's mental health and wellbeing. We have experienced increased demand for support around behaviour management as routines have been disrupted, parents are under stress in the home which impacts on the children and this displays itself in a change in behaviour.

- *Regressive behaviour*
 - *Returning to baby talk*
 - *Toileting issues - bed wetting , lack of /no self-control due to fear and heightened anxiety*
 - *Heightened anxiety*
 - *Children are pulling their own hair*
 - *picking at their skin*
 - *night time terrors*
 - *Children are worried and fearful of going outside*
 - *Fearful of themselves/parents/grandparents dying*
 - *Fearful of meeting others outside*
 - *Children have become withdrawn and quiet*
- (EA Flare)*

Another young person who has experienced significant trauma has described the lockdown as 'no different to what life is like every day' for her. She misses going to school 'that was the only time I saw friends' (Family Support Worker).

"..... families like mine will have a long road ahead to get over the impact of this isolation. I do not lift a phone to helplines as I do not feel that we are a family in need. Families like mine are the ones that are at home dealing as best they can and not accessing services as they do not recognise themselves as in need or do not want to be a further burden on services that are already stretched before this pandemic even hit. Many families do not want anyone to "fix" their problems but just be a sounding board for them to process and work through and move on." (Parent)

Concerns About Education/School Closures

A significant number of parents have reported concerns about the impact of stress of home schooling, and their struggles to get children to study, juggling home learning and own work. There have been requests for access to resources such as internet, laptops etc. Parents have expressed concern about the longer term impact of school closures on their child's education, family life and the lack of socialisation. Parents of children with additional needs in particular conveyed concerns about the impact if changes to routine and the resultant effects on children's behaviours and emotional wellbeing.

The majority of autistic children have additional educational needs and 86% autistic children in NI are classified as SEN (stages 1-5). These parents and carers are facing additional strain and stress trying to provide educational support for their child at home. **The unprecedented crisis caused by the Coronavirus pandemic is having a profound effect on autistic young people. We have found a substantial number of families that are struggling to provide visual resources for their child during Covid-19 due to lack of resources (e.g., printers, laminators, ink etc. (Autism NI)**

The 3rd highest reason for referral to family support hubs is parents requiring support for their post primary children, this was mostly around accessing online learning or navigating a new system and issues with online learning resources."

"It is so hard to work from home, provide education and most importantly give your children the time and support they deserve and need at the moment to make sure they are emotionally ok." (Parent)

"I think it is too much. My son is expected to sit at his desk/computer for over 6 hours a day to follow his school timetable. This isn't good for his mental health" (Parent)

For the past nine weeks we, as a family have continued with support being offered through information packs which requires time to work through and pick out what is most relevant to your children along with not having access to printers and strong Wi-Fi. **By the time I have them in bed I am too tired to even contemplate looking at screens and resources to work out strategies on my own.** So many women manage this daily that are in a lot more difficult positions than I am in, but if I, **as a parent, am feeling I am failing my children, and they are feeling and understanding my issues that is only having a knock on effect on them and their mental health.**

The parents of older young people are concern about their schooling. They struggle to get this age group to do school work and feel in some cases there has been little support from schools to help young people to engage; school has just been set work and if the young person struggles (and so does the parent) the young person refuses to do the work and there are little alternatives to assist."

Socio Economic Impact and Poverty

Service users and frontline staff reported real and growing concerns about the impact on mental health and wellbeing of economic deprivation and a rise in food poverty.

Requests for financial assistance and for food, represents the highest number of referrals to family support hubs, since April 2020.

*Family Support Hub co-ordinators have indicated from their direct contact with families and service providers that they are very **concerned about rising levels of poverty.** There are examples of a family **not having a cot for a child who was sleeping in a playpen and another about a baby who had no shoes and the parent was putting 3 pairs of socks on.***

Another issue that we have become aware of is that mums of new-borns aren't able to register the births of their babies which means they're having difficulty accessing benefits and baby milk vouchers. They are eventually getting the milk vouchers but there are significant delays, up to 2 months, which means mums are trying to feed their babies for 8 weeks with no vouchers.(HV)

there are reports of some self-medicating or rising levels of alcohol misuse. (Family Support Hub survey)

Feedback also illustrates a rising number of families without food and a significant increase in the number of families being referred to foodbanks, as well as an increase in referrals from families who would not previously have needed the support of family support hubs or other agencies

Access to Services and Responses to Service Delivery

It is evident that changes to Service delivery models across agencies and disciplines, has had a significant impact for all frontline staff, and for parents and children. The feedback below illustrates responses to the use of new and creative methods of service delivery, the increased use of socially distanced and on line practices, and the implication of a reduction in face to face contact.

"I actually find the amount of advice, guidance, support, online classes/videos/resources etc. flagged up to me by other parents (via WhatsApp and social media), by workplaces (via email), by helping organisations (via social media and news articles etc.) as really overwhelming." (Parent)

Children with Selective Mutism who were previously making progress have reduced anxiety being at home, but the progress previously made has significantly decreased. Only a small number of class teachers have been able to engage with the children in a way that has supported their improvement. This group of children will be significantly impacted when they return to school.

- Some parents have realised the difficulties their child has been having and have engaged well with the outreach service provided by RISE, so it is hoped that they will continue to be more understanding and supportive of their children when they return to school. (PHN)

One issue that has emerged from all RCSLT's work on this is that there are significant numbers of children with SLCN for whom telehealth is not a feasible alternative to face to face services, for example some children with ASD and LD, or many children with speech sound disorders

Smaller family things are naturally becoming bigger in these restrictions - being a counsellor it's great as you get to hear these smaller things that are the things that make family life

"Some of the Antenatal mums have a different antenatal journey with reduced appointments and not having their partner during the entire labour experience. This is causing increased stress to many mums and of course this is not good for the developing baby."

(Sure Start)

Family Nurse Partnership reflected on how some of our more vulnerable clients have perceived professional distancing i.e. possibly raising feelings around previous abandonment. These clients often are more vulnerable to mental health needs and we, in FNP, have certainly observed these needs increasing in the early weeks of Covid restrictions

Some post-natal parents are also experiencing difficulties and due to COVID 19 cannot access the same level of services in cases for e.g. where mum may be suffering from PND; this can impact on the mental health and wellbeing of the baby with bonding and attachment and with early communication. (SureStart Manager)

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The Positive Impact of Lockdown

The responses from children young people, families and front line workers have illustrated some positive implications of the lockdown. Young people are reporting enjoying spending more time with their parents and siblings, have found ways to connect to friends and family members outside their immediate family group and learned new skills. Some young people who have experienced different stressors whilst at school are enjoying a break from these at this time, whilst this is a positive there should also be a note of caution as these children and young people may experience an increase in anxiety when they have to return to school.

These experiences do not apply to all the young people, but having had challenging experiences in life does to degree equip some of the young people with skills to deal with the lack of routine and structure.

"Many young people have been compliant with lockdown rules .Some, who were really struggled in school are delighted to have a new found freedom.

Some have embraced the advice on exercise by taking a daily walk and social media has helped young people to stay connected. (SW)

"There are glimmers of positive interactions with foster placement families in lockdown; as young people are not as torn between their family of origin and their foster family."

'I feel different and don't have confidence and don't fit in so I am enjoying not having to fit in. It's great having time on my own'. (Young person)

When the lockdown initially came into place a lot of the young people were coping quite well being with being removed from certain requirements of going to school or having to deal with stressors in their lives. As one young person put it to me (Youth Support Worker)

"I feel that time has stopped. There is less pressure to do this and that and go places. I can just be me." (young person)

*"Getting to spend more time with my sisters and mum like cooking, watching movies and playing games"
(Young person on spending more time with their family during lockdown)*

"Some young people have shown a level of maturity and respect towards family members and carers who are in the vulnerable category".

- *Child with selective mutism talked for first time with non-family member using zoom*
- *Post-primary child who would not engage in clinic, completed assessment on zoom*
- *A parent has reported progress with SLC development as parents are at home all day and are spending more time with their child. (AHP)*

In some cases remote delivery has helped EHWP, e.g. some ASD children for whom attending clinic is distressing are engaging better with remote services, and remote services have been requested by some parents. Remote working also reduces travel and makes input more flexible for families, especially those living in more isolated areas which may increase accessibility of services. Within SLT school services it can be difficult to get parental engagement in therapy and the zoom platform has increased engagement in some cases as it is home based. In Surestart, parents are responding well to online content, and this will continue as long as social distancing is a requirement.

However feedback from a few of my families has been that their **child has progressed in some areas, particularly those children who struggled with some of the demands school placed on them.** One parent whose child is non-verbal and has a learning disability reports he is now having fewer behavioural episodes and his sleep which is usually very limited (as few as 3 hours per night) has improved quite dramatically, he is now sleeping up to 6/7 hours per night. **She believes this is due to the reduction in anxiety he experienced in the school environment as he usually spends 1hr 40 mins on the bus before he gets to school. However the stresses on her are immense as she has 3 boys, 2 of whom have ASD and she has absolutely no respite from either school or the respite service she ordinarily received on a Saturday.**

“We have many positive stories like this and also reports that children are enjoying spending lots of time with their parents who under normal circumstances would be working. We have seen such creativity and imagination flowing from children and their families. A lot of the children have enjoyed and responded so well to interacting with the staff teams over Zoom/Facebook/WhatsApp and have also enjoyed seeing their friends in Stay and Play sessions online”.
(Sure Start Manager)

We are also seeing great peer support online between young people which is helping in some way with the isolation.

There are plenty of online support sessions running for those that are able and motivated to access them – including from many of the organisations that are part of the CYPSP networks

LAC - 10 foster carers reporting that children's behaviours have really settled since face to face contact has stopped with birth parents

Some children seem to be faring more favourably since the lockdown. For example, children who were experiencing problems at school such as bullying. Being away from bullies and other school-related problems is having a positive impact on some children's mental health. These children are happier and displaying more positive behaviour. Spending more quality time at home with parents is also providing invaluable bonding opportunities for some young people

“In my experience during the crisis the families that would have normally been in most need of support with their mental health have been doing much better. They have reported having less outside things impacting on their house that the whole tone and mood has changed the pace. They have no school, friends, extended family members ‘sticking their nose in’ and any contact with family has been online or in a garden outdoors and very rewarding and “the kids appreciated it more for what it was – just seeing family, no need to do anything – just talk

Views of the Future

As families progress through the lockdown and restrictions are relaxed families and service providers are thinking about the future.

"I do feel on the whole the families have settled into this new normal and aren't expressing any huge concerns but are actually more worried about looking to the future and how thing will go when they do have to get the children to attend school again and get a better routine established, but at the minute they are taking one day at a time and doing what they can".

"I am not alone and I know that so many within our communities are experiencing all of these things and more but for me at this time I feel like if I do not do something to help or contribute to support while supporting myself and the children I am afraid that we will lose the fight to stay above it. I am not just talking about myself I mean the general population, our local communities and our families within it"

**Kids are more resilient than we give credit for and a lot of the time it's parents worrying more for their kids.
The uncertainty of not knowing what's going on and having closure on when this will all end is a massive issue.**

The kids who already had social anxiety are in their element within lockdown restrictions as they are not forced to push themselves out of their comfort zones to go outside - so the issues will arise when they are forced to go back to school

Concluding Comments

As noted at the beginning of this document, the narrative information provides a snapshot of lived experiences. The information above highlights that children, young people and families, are experiencing the impact of Covid 19 and lockdown in a number of ways. Whilst the report organises the information into themes, it is important to acknowledge that all of these perceptions may apply to one child to a greater or lesser extent, and are dependent on individual needs, age and stage of development. These needs will evolve as the crisis continues, and it will be important to ensure that we continue to listen to their voice and draw on the learning this provides.

Appendix of Contributors

- Extracted comments from former Co-ordinator in Early Years, recently made redundant and Mum of children with ASD.
- Comments from LAC Education Support Officer and (14 Plus team) social workers
- Comments from Barnardo's YPP and Family Support Hub Co-ordinator
- Family Nurse Partnerships
- Early years
- Sure Start Manager
- NIACRO Practitioner
- EA FLARE (Facilitating Life and Resilience Education) Programme Co-ordinator
- Strathfoyle Women's Activity Group
- Ethos Family Support Hub Co-ordinator
- Newpin family centre
- Manager Start 360
- Director of Family Support Autism NI
- Designated Nurse for Safeguarding Children and Young People
- Public Health Agency
- Disability Project Worker, GOLD Community Partnership, Barnardo's
- School Counsellor Carrickfergus
- Service Co-Ordinator, Family Support Hub Service, Action For Children, Antrim
- LPG Coordinator – Belfast Area
- Parenting NI recently published the findings from the Parenting in a Pandemic Survey for the full report follow https://www.parentingni.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Parenting-in-a-Pandemic-Survey-Findings_compressed.pdf
- Findings from the Streetbeat Youth Project – The Impact of Lockdown on Young People completed by 308 young people Aged 11-21 Participants
- were recruited through Streetbeat Youth Project's existing networks of
- young people and was promoted by both the Belfast Model School for Girls and Belfast Boys' Model School.
- For the full report follow the link: <https://streetbeatyouthproject.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/The-Lockdown-Survey-Results.pdf>
- Service Users Empower Project

- *Co-Space Study Parents/carers report on their own and their children's concerns about children attending school Date: 24th May 2020 Report Authors: Samantha Pearcey, Adrienne Shum, Polly Waite and Cathy Creswell*