

# Effect of pandemic on children's wellbeing revealed in new report



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A new report published to mark World Mental Health Day today (Saturday 10 October) has provided an in-depth picture of the experiences of children and young people during the pandemic and how it affected their wellbeing.

Some challenges were identified including isolation from friends, learning from home, or worries that family or friends might get sick but many parents also reported improved relationships with their children and that the majority of children spent time in outside green spaces at least a couple of times a week during lockdown.

The Government's second annual State of the Nation report finds that children and young people aged five to 24 generally responded with resilience to changes in their lives between March and September 2020, and despite indications of challenges to their mental wellbeing they report stable levels of happiness and only slight reduction in satisfaction with their lives.

The report brings together a range of published data to help the Government, schools and colleges, public services and parents better understand children and young people's experiences of the pandemic and the continued support that will be needed to ensure that recovery is maintained. It suggests that returning to school or college is likely to be playing a vital role in improving the mental wellbeing of many pupils by easing some of the main worries identified in the research: time off from education, being isolated from friends, fewer opportunities to be more physically active and also providing access to pastoral support.

It comes as 97% of local authorities confirm they have taken

up training offered by the Government to enable teachers and education staff in schools and colleges to support their pupils wellbeing on their return to education. Backed by £8 million, the expert training programme Wellbeing in Education Return launched last month to provide continuing support during the Autumn and Spring terms for the additional pressures some young people may be feeling as a direct result of the pandemic including from bereavement, stress, trauma or anxiety over the past months.

Children and Families Minister Vicky Ford said:

There is no denying that this pandemic has been a difficult experience for parents and children alike and I applaud the amazing resilience of our young people.

Right from the start of this pandemic we prioritised children and young people's wellbeing by keeping schools open for vulnerable pupils and developing resources for parents and schools to use remotely, as well as making sure communication continued online between mental health and education professionals when it could no longer happen face-to-face.

Getting all children back into the classroom from September was our national priority because we know that is the best place for their mental health and wellbeing. Many still need support and this report is part of making sure that the investment we're making helps those who need it the most.

The State of the Nation report captures a wide range of existing evidence on the impact of the pandemic on children and young people's wellbeing. Key findings include:

#### 1. Friendships:

Most children and young people up to age 17 remain happy with their relationships with friends, but younger children's contact with friends varied – only one-third to one half of primary age children had regular contact with friends between April and August. Loneliness was an issue for some older young people.

## 2. Family relationships:

Children's happiness with their families has remained high, with the majority of parents reporting their relationship with their children had remained the same over the pandemic – while more than 25% say it had improved.

## 3. Health:

Children and young people have been worried about the potential that friends or family could catch Covid-19, while other common worries include catching it themselves and missing school. On the whole children are happy with their own health, though one in every 15 children has low happiness with their health. There are also indications that mental health difficulties have increased for some school-aged children over the months of the pandemic, and an increase in psychological distress has been found for older young people.

## 4. Remote learning:

In most cases, children and young people continued to learn to some extent through home schooling from parents and remote education from schools or other organisations, though they did not necessarily find this easy with consistent difficulties in maintaining motivation to learn, for parents to find time to help their children and to access enough support and guidance.

## 5. Physical activity:

The majority of children and young people were fairly physically active between April and July, although the proportion achieving the recommended amount of 60 minutes a day may have reduced.

## 6. Being outdoors:

The majority of children spent some time in green and natural places at least a couple of times a week between April and August.

There are indications from the data that some groups such as

young disabled people have reported higher and increasing feelings of being anxious. Parents have also reported that children with special educational needs or a disability from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds may be feeling more anxious. Similarly, young people who were economically disadvantaged reported lower life satisfaction in April to early May than those who were financially better off, though between July and early September there was no significant difference between these two groups.

Overall, however, the data collated in the report shows a positive picture of the experiences of most children and young people during the time period covered, given the unprecedented challenges faced.

The Government has used this evidence to make children's wellbeing and mental health a central part of its response to the coronavirus pandemic and informed the significant programme of mental health interventions introduced in its wake working closely with experts and charities. This includes its Wellbeing for Education Return training programme and online resources that reached thousands of school and college staff as they supported pupils during the summer term and as they returned for the autumn term.

Minister for Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Nadine Dorries said:

This global pandemic has brought challenges, disruption and uncertainty to many lives and has impacted not only our physical health, but our mental health and wellbeing too.

Despite these additional pressures, children and young people across this country have shown huge resilience in the face of change.

The results of this report are testament to the impact that government funding and NHS support can have on our mental health.

During the pandemic, key services were adapted to make sure children and young people continued receiving mental health and wellbeing support, and that local areas continued to

collaborate to maintain essential services, including:

Collaboration between the Department for Education and Public Health England to support parents and carers with guidance on how to help their children and young people's mental health and wellbeing during the lockdown period, and work with BBC Bitesize to provide content with a substantial focus on mental health, wellbeing and pastoral care.

The Department for Education accelerated the publication of the training module for teaching about mental health as part of the new Relationship, Sex and Health Education curriculum to help schools to be ready to support pupils in September.

The Link Programme, which brings professionals working in education and mental health together, moved its services online instead of face-to-face. Evaluation of the expanded Link Programme pilot published today found that the training has successfully supported joint working between schools and colleges and local Children and Young People's Mental Health Services (CYPMHS). Training on a national scale through this programme will continue, feeding into the Government's wider Mental Health Green Paper programme.

Across the education sector, the Department for Education has provided £5.4m worth of grant funding through the College Collaboration Fund - five of the projects funded support student and/or staff mental health and wellbeing via online programmes and remote support.

The Office for Students has provided up to £3 million for its Student Space platform, a collaborative mental health resource that bridges gaps in mental health support for students at English and Welsh universities brought about by the coronavirus pandemic. It provides a range of information, access to dedicated support services (phone or text), details of the support available at each university, and tools to help students manage the challenges of student life.

This is in addition to the steps taken to secure continued access to more specialist mental health support to respond as issues are identified, and where there are indications of potential increases because of the pandemic, Mental health

services have remained open for business, providing 24/7 phone and online support and we have provided £9m to charities to provide additional mental health support.

In the longer term the continued roll out Mental Health Support Teams within schools and colleges across the country, who provide early intervention on mental health and emotional wellbeing issues. This is in line with its commitment to establishing these teams in up to 25% of the country by 2023, as part of the reforms to provide additional support for children and young people's mental health in the NHS Long Term Plan.

DfE enquiries

Central newsdesk - for journalists

020 7783 8300

General enquiries - for members of the public

0370 000 2288

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