

The safeguarding implications of COVID-19



The first reports on the impact of COVID-19 on children and adults at risk have been published. **Mark Foster** of the Child Protection Company picks out extracts from seven reports to provide a wider perspective on how it might affect you now and in the worst-case scenario in any upcoming lockdowns.

From the Centre for Mental Health [<https://www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/>] Briefing published in June 2020:

‘The COVID-19 crisis has had a profound effect on the nation’s mental health. While most of us will emerge without lasting negative effects, some communities and individuals are at far greater risk of worsening mental health.

‘This includes people living with mental health problems, whose access to services has been interrupted; people who live with both mental health problems and long-term physical conditions that put them at greater risk of the virus; older adults who are both susceptible to the virus themselves and much

more likely than others to lose partners and peers; women and children exposed to trauma and violence at home during lockdown; and people from the ethnic groups where the prevalence of COVID-19 has been highest and outcomes have been the worst, notably people from Black British, Black African, Bangladeshi and Pakistani backgrounds.

‘The people who have historically endured the biggest risks for poor mental health and the worst access to and experiences of support are among those now most exposed to the worst of the immediate shock of COVID-19.’

From *The Lancet: Child & Adolescent Health*:¹

Using social media might make up for some

of the negative effects of social distancing. The question is how much and what kinds of digital communication help to lessen the effects of physical distancing, as Dr Orben, one of the report authors says:

'Some studies have shown that active social-media use, such as messaging or posting directly on another person's profile, increases wellbeing and helps maintain personal relationships.

'However, it has been suggested that passive uses of social media, such as scrolling through newsfeeds, negatively influence wellbeing.'

Currently 69% of younger adolescents in the UK, aged 12-15, have a social media profile.

From the charity Young Minds:

Young Minds carried out a survey between 9 April and 10 May during lockdown, involving 1,854 parents or carers. Although the parents and carers who responded to the survey were more likely than the general population to have a child with existing mental health needs, nevertheless 745 respondents said that their children had received some form of mental health support (including from the NHS, charities, schools or helplines) in the previous three months.

Sixty-seven percent of respondents were concerned about the long-term impact of the coronavirus, the restrictions on movement and on their child's mental health. Respondents reported a range of ways in which the crisis had impacted the children and young people in their care, including:

- Increased anxiety and depression
- Increased sense of loss and fear (eg about going out for exercise, or uncertainty about what would happen next)
- Increased mood swings or children becoming more emotional
- Lack of structure and routine having a negative impact
- Children and young people finding it difficult to sleep or having nightmares
- Children either becoming more attached to their parents, or becoming more introverted/isolated within the house.

From the National Youth Agency (NYA): Young People's Lives Turned 'Inside Out' Report²

The fall-out from the crisis on school exam results has created a crisis of confidence for many young people, uncertain of their future. Its impact is far-reaching and has compounded existing inequalities made worse by COVID-19. The result is that young people, while at lower risk from infection by COVID-19, are put at much greater risk of

other physical or mental health issues.

Published on 18 August the NYA report reveals young people's health has suffered with:

- A decline in vulnerable young people's mental health almost three times the national average in response to COVID-19
- Over one million young people have been lost to youth services during COVID-19, many unknown to formal services and not accessing health services
- The loss of wrap around support and access to age appropriate health services with the closure of some smaller clinical services, walk-in clinics and youth centres
- The lack of group activities in schools and youth services, made worse by the closure of summer schemes, restrictions on leisure and outdoor activities, including local parks
- The lack of clear guidance for young people from trusted sources can lead to risky behaviour, poor sexual health, abuse, trauma, bereavement, addiction and anxiety
- An over reliance on online services for health advice and support.

usually have been available at key moments in their lives.'

The EIF report is based on 32 semi-structured qualitative interviews with heads of early help services, lead practitioners, and head teachers, conducted by EIF together with the charity Action for Children between March and May 2020.

They were particularly concerned about the significantly reduced contact that universal services would have with children and families, and the impact that this may have on referrals into early help services. Most interviewees recognised a particularly significant challenge in identifying children who may become vulnerable as a result of COVID-19, or during the lockdown, but who were not currently known to any service. These 'out of sight' children were seen as potentially the most vulnerable.

At the time of writing, only 14% of vulnerable children were attending school and only 11% attending early-years settings.

'We are less concerned about children in the children's social care system, and more concerned about the children who aren't – who aren't in touch with any services.'

'Professionals suspected that there would be many families who had not previously been identified as vulnerable and who would not have accessed support during this time, either because they had not tried to, or because support had not been available.'

From the Early Intervention Foundation (EIF): COVID-19 and early intervention: Understanding the impact, preparing for recovery³

'The impact of Covid-19 on vulnerable children and families is likely to be profound.'

In the foreword, EIF chief executive Dr Jo Casebourne says: 'Our research paints an ominous picture of a wave gathering pace beneath the surface. As lockdown conditions are eased, services face a double hit, not only from more families needing more support to deal with a wider range of problems, but also from the knock-on consequences of fewer people having received the support that would

Children's Services Manager, East Midlands

'I've got children on a Child Protection Plan who are now at home and not coming into school ... That's really depressing and that's what's keeping me awake at night.' *Primary Head, London*

Professionals suspected that there would be many families who had not previously been identified as vulnerable and who would not have accessed support during this time, either because they had not tried to, or because support had not been available.

Professionals were also concerned about their ability to support vulnerable children and families and to identify escalating risk

without home visits and without regular face-to-face contact with universal services. Innovative processes to mitigate these risks and provide safety nets had been put in place, but there was a recognition that some children and families who became vulnerable or became more vulnerable during the lockdown period would inevitably be missed. Schools were particularly concerned about their lack of face-to-face contact with children they knew to be facing challenges at home. The research also identified a clear sense of apprehension among professionals about the longer-term impact of the pandemic and particularly the lockdown period on vulnerable children and families.

attentional difficulties over a one-month period as lockdown has progressed:

Parents/carers of primary school age children taking part in the survey reported an increase in their child's emotional, behavioural, and restless/attentional difficulties. And parents/carers of children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) and those with a pre-existing mental health difficulty reported a reduction in their child's emotional difficulties and no change in behavioural or restless/attentional difficulties.

Parents/carers of secondary school age children reported a reduction in their child's emotional difficulties, but an increase in restless/attentional behaviours. Adolescents

local agencies are current as some may have changed to cater for staff working from home.

Above all, remember there's no such thing as a wrong referral when it comes to safeguarding. Prepare yourself well and have the confidence to report any concerns.

If you'd like any help with setting up your training, give the Child Protection Company a call on 01327 552030 or email help@childprotectioncompany.com today. Their friendly customer support team is always happy to help.

References

1. Orben A, Tomova L, Blakemore S-J. The effects of social deprivation on adolescent development and mental health. *Lancet Child Adolesc Health* 2020; **4**: 634-640.
2. National Youth Agency. Inside Out. Young people's health and wellbeing: a response to COVID-19. August 2020. Available at: <https://nya.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Inside-Out-NYA-Brook-2020-1.pdf> (accessed September 2020).
3. Early Intervention Foundation. EIF report. Covid-19 and early intervention: Understanding the impact, preparing for recovery. 16 June 2020. Available at: <https://www.eif.org.uk/report/covid-19-and-early-intervention-understanding-the-impact-preparing-for-recovery> (accessed September 2020).
4. The Children's Society. The Good Childhood Report 2020. Summary. Available at: <https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/good-childhood-report-2020-summary.pdf> (accessed September 2020).
5. Emerging Minds. Action for child mental health. <https://emergingminds.org.uk/>

'As a number of the reports indicate, some of the children will have been adversely affected by the pandemic and not all will have been able to seek, or get help. You, quite literally, could be the first person with safeguarding training that they've seen in months.'

From the Children's Society the Good Childhood Report 2020:⁴

The Good Childhood Report 2020 is the Society's ninth annual report on the well-being of children in the UK.

Findings from a survey, conducted between April and June 2020, of more than 2,000 young people aged 10-17 across the UK, and their parent or carer include:

- A continued decrease in average happiness with life among 10-15 year olds in the UK
- 15-year olds in the UK were among the saddest and least satisfied with their lives in Europe
- The coronavirus pandemic affected children's happiness due to the lack of choice they had in life
- In 2020, as in previous years, children are most happy on average with their relationships with their family.

From an Emerging Minds⁵ survey:

In the report, Emerging Minds examined changes in parent/carer and adolescent self-reported emotional, behavioural and restless/

taking part in the survey reported no change in their own emotional or behavioural, and restless/attentional difficulties.

This report used data from 2,890 parents/carers who took part in both the baseline questionnaire and the first follow up questionnaire.

So, what does that all mean to you?

Quite simply it means that you need to be especially observant, when in contact with children, young people and adults at risk as lockdown eases, your practice opens up again and your contact increases.

As a number of the reports indicate, some of the children will have been adversely affected by the pandemic and not all will have been able to seek, or get help. You, quite literally, could be the first person with safeguarding training that they've seen in months.

So, make sure you know what to do. Re-read your safeguarding policies and procedures, refresh your training and check that the contact details you have for the

Read more on safeguarding in BDJ Team

- <https://go.nature.com/2Sp8yLL>
- <https://go.nature.com/34idZZm>
- <https://go.nature.com/3cSbbG9>
- <https://go.nature.com/30tSkMp>
- <https://go.nature.com/2SkRJYW>
- <https://go.nature.com/3jmwFxf>
- <https://go.nature.com/3inJshL>

<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41407-020-0434-6>