



Children and Young People’s Mental Health during Covid-19 Policy Statement

The Mental Health Foundation Scotland is acutely aware of the significant challenges that COVID-19 has posed to the mental health and wellbeing of children, young people and their families, as well as the demand that has been placed on schools, charities and community support networks. **In response, we’ve collaborated with young people, schools and professionals in the field and assembled guidance, resources and signposting to help combat the challenges we are all facing.** A summary of this guidance is available at the end of this statement.

The impact on Children and Young People

The growing body of evidence suggests that COVID-19 has had a significant impact on the mental health and wellbeing of Scotland’s children and young people.

Our research conducted in March-April¹ found that four in ten 18-24-year olds experienced loneliness during the pandemic – more than any other age group surveyed. Research by the Scottish Youth Parliament, YouthLink Scotland and Young Scot from early to mid-April² also showed that around two fifths (39%) of children and young people aged 11-25 felt moderately or extremely concerned about their own mental wellbeing while 61% were moderately or extremely concerned about the impact of coronavirus on their future. And a recent survey from Young Minds³ showed that 80% of young people with an existing mental health problem felt their mental health had worsened during the first weeks of the coronavirus pandemic.

There are levels of uncertainty around the future, particularly the impact of this pandemic and the subsequent lockdown on their education and future prospects. Additionally, adolescence is a time that can be centred around a young person’s social life, their friendships and relationships, which have been disrupted during lockdown.

In addition to the broad, and widely varied, experiences of all young people, there are a significant number of children and young people dealing with a whole range of complex and potentially traumatic experiences during the lockdown period, without their regular coping strategies and escape mechanisms of school and social activities.

The importance of school environments to mental health and families

¹ <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/news/almost-quarter-adults-living-under-lockdown-scotland-have-felt-loneliness>

² <https://www.youthlinkscotland.org/media/4534/lockdownlowdown-results-by-demographic-breakdown.pdf>

³ <https://youngminds.org.uk/about-us/reports/coronavirus-impact-on-young-people-with-mental-health-needs/>

Our time spent in school, during those important developmental years of our adolescence shape us and pave the way for our future. Schools offer children and young people routine, purpose, friendships and connections with adults who they often trust and rely on. School life also offers respite for victims of domestic violence – children benefit from the positive relationships they build at school which can compensate for less supportive or accepting home environments.

As we begin to take steps back out of the core of this pandemic, how schools respond and support children and young people will have a significant influence on the mental health and wellbeing of our next generation. Schools will need to be patient, flexible and bold in their support of both their pupils and their staff.

We know that many families are struggling to juggle home-working with home-schooling and still find the time to unwind and self-care, particularly single parents or those in insecure or low paid work.

Beyond the academic and learning environment that schools offer there are many families who rely on the more holistic support available; breakfast clubs, free school meals, additional support for learning, out of school care services and extra-curricular activities. It's clear that schools have an important role to play in tackling poverty and the all-round support and development of the children and young people in their care.

Blended or part-time schooling – a mental health perspective

The Scottish Government and Local Authorities are working to find models and approaches that meet that fine balance of maximising the time spent in schools without risking the physical health of pupils, parents and staff. Regardless of the approach however, for the foreseeable future, pupils will not be in full time education and as such, there are several important considerations:

- To begin an academic school year with social distancing measures in place in classrooms may compound distress for children, especially those already susceptible to mental health problems. Adolescence is a period of cognitive, psychosocial and emotional development which is characterised by peer interaction. There is a growing body of research⁴ illustrating the damage of lockdown and social distancing measures to young people's mental health as a result of their reduced capacity to interact with friends and family. The psychological impact of introducing social distancing measures in our schools should be fully considered by the Scottish Government.
- Pupils will have had no physical contact with school life for five months and will have reduced contact, potentially for the entire upcoming academic year. This has important implications for pupils from poorer households who, under normal circumstances, are known to be less likely to succeed in school than those from more affluent backgrounds. Lockdown and blended learning could result in a significant widening of the attainment gap. Consideration must also be given to the potentially serious implications for vulnerable children, who so often rely on school for food, social contact, and safety and who have been, and will continue to be, without this support.
- A blended approach will affect children in different ways. We shouldn't underestimate the challenge of easing children and young people back into a routine, particularly if the part-time school model is only temporary. Issues normally affecting teenagers such as poor sleep, the teenage body clock and increased usage of social media may be compounded at this time. On the other hand, some children and young people might

⁴ [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanchi/article/PIIS2352-4642\(20\)30186-3/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanchi/article/PIIS2352-4642(20)30186-3/fulltext)

welcome a phased approach back to normality. The prospect of coming back to school and being in large groups has the potential to be incredibly overwhelming – socially and emotionally – particularly given that many are likely to be catching up on the last few months and processing a really difficult time.

- Many parents will be expected to return to the workplace which will raise issues around childcare and supervision. Those families who relied on grandparents for childcare will have to make alternative arrangements, particularly if older people are shielding for the foreseeable future. This leads to reduced meaningful contact of key people in children's lives. At the very least, this will continue to widen the attainment gap, particularly if homework materials need supervision or digital access. Additionally, there could be significant safety concerns for children and young people, vulnerable or otherwise, if they are left at home alone.
- Staff and pupils are feeling increasing levels of stress and anxiety around the uncertainty of the pandemic and how it will unfold. Teachers, pupils and parents are seeking better communication and clarity from decision makers about deadlines and timelines.

Recommendations

1. Prioritise Health and Wellbeing in first two months of term

School leaders and government must recognise the pressures that young people faced during lockdown and potential traumatisation. Now is not the time to pile on academic pressure on young people and their families. Between August and the October break, schools should set aside timetabled hours for play, personal development, peer-to-peer support work and building young people's social development and resilience skills. This will help them ease their way back into school life and cope with the challenges created by the pandemic.

For younger age groups, play could be permitted in smaller groups in a way that is safe, allowing children to benefit from some form of close interaction with peers.

There should be no competition between the health and wellbeing strand of Curriculum for Excellence and core areas like literacy and numeracy. By spending time on personal development and learning about how to look after their mental health, pupils will strengthen their ability to perform right across the curriculum.

Many young people are worried about exams and future prospects and need reassurance from school leaders and government that their academic progress will be protected and that steps are being taken to ensure that they don't fall behind.

Support for learning should be expanded in schools across Scotland in recognition that some pupils will need help to catch-up and that many have been struggling to engage with online lessons.

2. Increase and expand the range of Mental Health Support Workers in schools

Now is the time to invest in mental health community support staff in our schools. The number of children needing specialist mental health support was already rising before the pandemic began – and it's likely that we'll see a further surge when schools return in August. This will require mobilising a wide range of support workers, including youth workers, third sector workers, mentors and parents.

It would be a mistake to assume that school counsellors hold all of the answers. Counsellors should be seen as a targeted approach and part of a wider package of support available to schools. Clinical models are not always the best route in addressing many of the issues young people experience. That's why we're calling on local authorities to mobilise a wide range of mental health support workers with different skillsets available to all schools – including emotional support workers and family support workers who can assess young people's needs in the context of their family environments. We should not be waiting for young people to become emotionally unwell before we step in and offer support. By investing in prevention we can help them identify their feelings and give them the tools to navigate adversity.

3. The Scottish Government should conduct an impact assessment on the psychological consequences of introducing social distancing in schools – and involve young people in the process

The Scottish Government must fully consider the psychological consequences of introducing social distancing in schools through an impact assessment that takes account of emerging research. We are particularly concerned about the impact of social distancing on vulnerable children and young people who thrive on the relationships and bonds granted by school life which vital for their social and emotional development.

As part of that process, the Scottish Government and local authorities must hear directly from young people and their lived experiences.

It is vital to ensure that children and young people are consulted and given a meaningful opportunity to contribute to the decisions that are made about them, in every setting. We recommend that schools and local authorities prioritise setting up formal consultation processes such as youth advisory panels to inform young people of the latest updates in ways that make sense to them, ask for their input to decisions that are being made and take this on board. The process in itself is an opportunity for young people to feel empowered and like they have ownership over what has been a really uncertain and complex time.

4. Roll out a “Wellbeing Hour” in schools across Scotland

It's clear that there will be a high need for increased and enhanced pastoral support, safeguarding and wellbeing services in all schools. This means making more time for wellbeing lessons in the school timetable, ensuring that all young people are given the opportunity to reflect and open-up about the experience of lockdown and the pandemic more broadly.

While schools dedicate two hours of physical education per week, there is no equivalent for mental health. We're calling for the introduction of a wellbeing hour in every school to encourage conversation in a safe environment and allow young people to express themselves, if they wish, on the impact of Covid19, and more broadly, a range of topics that impact on their lives.

This could be done through a weekly 'wellbeing hour' or 'check-in' where small groups of young people are taught how to recognise their emotions, fears, anxieties and how to respond to those feelings. Peer education programmes could also be delivered during this hour, where pupils are trained to engage with each other about their feelings and tackle stigma.

To achieve this, the Scottish Government will need to roll-out training for school staff ahead of 11th August to enable them to have such conversations. Staff need to feel equipped to appropriately signpost to further support. We know that work to train teachers was underway before the start of the pandemic but progress must now be accelerated.

5. Work with employers to guarantee flexibility and protection for parents

Parents are increasingly concerned about returning to work while schools are not fully operational. The Scottish Government should work with employers to guarantee flexibility in working hours and arrangements to enable parents to juggle childcare and work and prevent a widening of the employment and socio-economic gap. No parent should be negatively affected in the workplace as a result of childcare needs during Covid19 and the Scottish Government should outline what support will be available to parents adversely affected.

6. Resume and prioritise school-based activities when safe to do so

Families rely on the social and supportive networks that school communities offer. Children at risk of domestic violence and other challenges in the home, those who benefit from after-school activities, will be affected by the lack of alternative supportive environments. There is also a risk that children are becoming demotivated, with the lack of extra-curricular activities and vocational learning that schools offer. When safe to do so, these activities should resume – if possible before 11th August. In the meantime, the Scottish Government and Local Authorities should work with the third sector to find alternative ways to support families that need help now.

7. Support the mental health of teachers and other school staff

Based on our conversations with school staff, beyond their regular role as teachers and concern for the welfare and learning of their pupils, they are predominantly worried about their own personal health and safety as well as the massive uncertainty around how education, assessment, exams look moving forward.

They will require additional training on mental health and wellbeing both in the knowledge and understanding around the topic but also the practical tools and resources to use with themselves and the young people they work with. They will also need additional time to prioritise the pastoral care of their pupils and empower them to signpost to additional support, both within the school and in the wider community. Finally, teachers will benefit from being able to work together as a team to support each other.

Resources for children, young people, parents and professionals

- 1. Returning to School After Lockdown - Guidance:** As some schools begin to reopen, we know that teachers and school leaders will be thinking about the emotional wellbeing, as well as the academic needs, of their pupils. To support them in this, we have drawn together some advice and guidance for teachers and school leaders which is available online here:
<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/coronavirus/returning-school-after-lockdown>
A downloadable PDF version of the guidance will follow, ahead of the new academic year.
- 2. Time for Us - Activity Pack:** This pack of practical activities is designed for any adults with caring responsibilities for children and young people to use in order to start some of those more difficult conversations and about feelings, connections and coping strategies during this time. It is available to download in this web page:
<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/coronavirus/parenting-during-coronavirus-outbreak>
- 3. Parenting During Coronavirus Outbreak - Guidance:** the activity pack above is intended to provide some practical tools to complement this guidance around parenting during the Coronavirus Outbreak, and can be accessed via the same link:
<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/coronavirus/parenting-during-coronavirus-outbreak>

4. **Coping with coronavirus: a guide for young people - Guidance:** This guidance was produced together with the MHF Young Leaders, assembled in partnership with Leaders Unlocked – they are a diverse group of young people with a wealth of general life and specific mental health experiences who are helping to shape our work with families, children & young people:
<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/coronavirus/coping-coronavirus-guide-young-people>
5. **Talking to your children about the Coronavirus pandemic - Guidance:** This guidance outlines some of our tips for having open and honest conversations with children about the pandemic in an attempt to minimise the negative impact it is having on them: <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/coronavirus/talking-to-children>”

Contact us:

Mental Health Foundation Scotland

E: scotland@mhf.org.uk

T: 0141 572 0125

W: www.mentalhealth.org.uk

Follow us on Twitter: @MHFScot