

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children, young people & families

Research Project Output 1

November 2020



Introduction

In September 2020, NCB's Research & Policy and Northern Ireland teams launched recruitment for participants in a new qualitative research project to explore the impact which the Covid-19 pandemic is having on children, young people and parents. We are speaking with participants on a monthly basis during the course of the pandemic to document the ways that both the pandemic and associated lockdown is changing the lives of families in different ways. Conversations with participants cover a range of topics, and will change depending on the age

and circumstances of each participant but broadly we will be discussing: how their lives have changed since March 2020; practical impacts, particularly in relation to accessing support services, within the family environment and educational settings; changes in emotional wellbeing or mental health; impact of local or regional lockdowns and restrictions. The following outlines the findings from the first batch of monthly conversations, these are based on a total of seven participants and include both young people and parents.

Profile of research participants

Participants in the first month of the project are based in England and Northern Ireland and include:

- A 15-year-old (female) young person based in the north west of England
- An 18-year-old (male) young person based in Wales
- A 16-year-old (transitioning genders) young person based in Northern Ireland
- A 14-year-old (male) young person based in the south west of England
- A (female) parent based in London with three young children, one of whom has special educational needs
- A (female) parent based in the north west of England with one teenage child who has special educational needs
- A (female) parent based in London with two children, one of secondary and one of primary-school age.

Practical impact

Support services

Participants were accepting of the lack of or change in support services which they see as inevitable whilst still remaining anxious about the impact on their family. One parent, who would usually be accessing a number of support services for one of her children who has special educational needs, described the 'radio silence' from the usual support providers between March – September, 2020: 'we received a phone call in September, asking us how things were going, that would have been more useful several months ago'.

Another parent described the impact that differentiated local restrictions are having on her family who need to access support from two different local authorities which she described as nobody wanting to 'play the same game'.

Parents reported that they saw little evidence in real life of support services, particularly health services, returning to normal, despite the messages being given encouraging people to access support if they need it.

Within the family

The first national lockdown period which included school closures was described as 'chaos' by those parents trying to juggle homeworking, care for younger children and homeschooling. One participant described her fears that the home environment was no longer safe for her pre-school-aged children whilst

both parents were in continuous online meetings.

A young person participant, who, because of parental split working shifts, would often be required to prepare meals for younger siblings, during lockdown, then had to also supervise learning for both younger siblings, whilst also simultaneously managing their own homeschooling.

Another young person described the impact which lockdown had on their diet, when they would often be required to make their own meals. This would usually be toast and Nutella or, on a 'good day', a tomato Cup-a-Soup.

Education settings

The provision during the first lockdown was described as patchy with schools mainly providing worksheets for young people at home, as opposed to new material. Motivation was a struggle for some young people, especially with cancelled exams.

For those young people who have a lot of out-of-school commitments, the lockdown did however provide some more opportunities in those activities which managed to continue in some form, despite the restrictions. One young person participant talked about how they were able to fit a lot more into their schedule for the work, in lockdown, as they were able to work at their own pace for their school work, allowing more time for other activities.

Since the majority of pupils returned to school in September, participants highlighted what they perceive as poor provision for children who are self-isolating compared with those who are in school. The lack of services usually provided by schools, such as after-school clubs, libraries and 'the usual sixth-form perks' were also having a negative impact.

Other measures having to be taken by schools to ensure tracking of close contacts and bubbles, in the event of a

positive Covid case within the school environment, were also discussed. Allocated seating charts, for example, a way of a school knowing which close contacts are potentially affected, have had an impact upon friendship groups. Discouraging mixing between bubbles was reported as having an effect on those young people who are in new settings this year (for example, Year 7, Year 12 and first-year students at university).

Impact related to mental health & emotional wellbeing

Interviews start with a question to participants asking them how they are feeling on a scale of 1–10 – the average response given was 5.5. Interviewees described the dissipating adrenaline from the first lockdown leading to lower resilience as the months went on.

Many of the interviewees expressed that they welcomed the opportunity to talk to researchers about their experiences under the pandemic. This was especially significant for those interviewees who have had to self-isolate and those who have not had the opportunity to see family or friends because of shielding.

Interviewees described the toxic mix of boredom and stress which has characterised the experience of life under lockdown for so many. More free time for some has meant more time to dwell on any anxieties and some interviewees described how draining it can be to be constantly on the alert for physical health symptoms. Parents talked about how they trying to prioritise the emotional health

of their family, despite the pressures. One young person described how the Childline service had filled the gap in support during lockdown usually provided at school.

The burden of a heavier than usual cognitive load was highlighted by all participants. 'There is just so much going on' was a phrase heard repeatedly. Particular issues raised were generalised anxiety and stress around what is going to happen next, having to act on very little advance notice and the lack of ability to plan.

For students there was uncertainty expressed related to the ability to travel home for Christmas. Young people described the difficulty in forming new friendships in social situations where Covid dominates every conversation. Some did also however acknowledge that the common difficulties experienced by students could also be a bonding experience, with students in older years helping as much as social distancing and

bubbles allow. Parents also talked about how they have made more contact with parents of similarly-aged children as communities have forced to become more localised in their behaviour. In general, several interviewees noted how the pandemic had made people they knew kinder to each other and had noted less negativity online.

For school-aged young people, especially those in exam years, they described overwhelming uncertainty with one young person being advised before the October half-term to take home enough books and study materials to last them until February 2021 in case the school could not reopen after the October week-long break. Another participant described seeing teachers carrying books around the school in suitcases and witnessed some teachers in tears through stress. Young people referred to the academic pressure of feeling as though they were being assessed all the time. The stress and academic pressure of what would usually be felt around exam period was now being applied continuously throughout the school week, week after week. One interviewee talked about how draining

they find being in school in terms of trying to ensure that they are following the rules and constantly questioning whether they have sanitised their hands enough.

One young person participant whose parents are NHS keyworkers described how they found the differing responses in the community to Covid a stressful experience, especially the voices of those they feel don't take the restrictions seriously enough or are dismissive of potential symptoms. Another interviewee who has autism, and is therefore exempt from wearing a mask, described the feelings of guilt and worry that they might be asymptomatic and unknowingly spreading the virus. Others referenced their anxiety around bringing Covid-19 from school into the home environment where family members are shielding. And one young person felt resentful of what they perceived to be an unfair allocation of blame on young people for the rise in transmission rates, particularly at a time when many young people are juggling academic pressure, responsibilities within the home and managing increasing demands on their own mental health.

Next steps

This initial output has outlined some of the themes coming through the first monthly conversations with parent and young people participants of the project. Future outputs will draw upon the experiences of greater numbers of participants as recruitment continues. The impacts of more recent national and local

lockdowns and the Christmas period will form the next few monthly conversations. Participant recruitment is continuing and we are particularly interested in talking to more parents and young people in Scotland and to young male participants across the four nations.

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