

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

Research Project Output 2

December 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. Members of the project team are speaking with participants on a monthly basis during the course of the pandemic to document the extent to which both the pandemic and associated series of lockdowns and circuit breakers across the UK are impacting on the lives of families.

Conversations with participants cover a range of topics which change depending

on the age and circumstances of each participant but broadly the following topics are discussed: 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 second batch of monthly conversations, which are based on a total of seven participants and include two young people and five parents.

Profile of research participants

Participants in the second month of the project are based in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and include:

- 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 Northern Ireland with two young children, both of whom have a special educational need and/or disability.
- A (female) parent based in the South West with two young children – one pre-school age and one primary school age. One of the children 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, both of primary-school age.
- A (female) parent based in London with one teenage child.

The evolving nature of national lockdowns

An important contextual factor is the varied nature of the lockdowns across the United Kingdom in the period that the second batch of interviews were undertaken. In England, regions lived under a three-tier level of restrictions for a number of months in early Autumn and the entire country was placed under a four-week lockdown that ended in early December. Immediately after these interviews were conducted, a four-tier level of restrictions had been introduced across England, with many areas living under the highest level of restrictions (i.e. Tier 4). In Wales, a short

fire-break lockdown was introduced in late-October for a period of two weeks, whilst in Northern Ireland, a complete lockdown (termed a circuit breaker) was introduced from mid-November until mid-December 2020. The key difference, however, between the first national/regional lockdowns in March 2020 and those introduced around the time of these interviews, was the focus on keeping schools open and conducting as much teaching as possible face-to-face as opposed to online.

Perceptions of Covid-19 prevalence

In the course of undertaking the research, one of the parents had been diagnosed with Covid 19 and was in self-isolation. The diagnosis came as a surprise to this individual as they had noted that they had been very conscious in terms of their social contact.

"I think we're quite cautious people, the Covid-19 virus has made me think about social contact."

One of the young people interviewed noted that one of their classroom peers and a close friend had been diagnosed with Covid-19 following their return to school. This resulted in the young person having stay at home for two weeks, which

was not a particularly positive experience. In addition, the young person was aware of other classes in their school that were similarly impacted.

"I was in contact with someone who was diagnosed with Covid-19 and one of my best friends tested positive... so I can't go to school at the minute, which isn't fun... the year below me had 60 people off at once."

A number of respondents reported a perception that the prevalence of Covid-19 had significantly increased since the first lock down in March and that they were more aware of individuals who had had tested positive for Covid-19 in the

workplace and/or the community.

"It just seems to be here, there and everywhere... [In] that first surge with that first lockdown, other than people that I actually work with

professionally, I didn't know anybody who had Covid-19. This time its just everywhere... everyone you speak to... my mum's had it... one of the kids had it."

Practical impact

Support services

There appears to be little change over the last 1–2 months, with families reporting that the quality of support provided by services had been limited by the knock-on effects of the pandemic. For most families, they reported that assessment and support was continuing to be provided using online platforms. One mother noted how an online assessment with CAMHs had resulted in significant levels of anxiety for her daughter. A subsequent unannounced visit by an Education Welfare Officer (EWO) added to both the parent's and the child's level of stress. The pandemic, therefore, has understandably led to a more limited service being provided in an online environment that does not appear to meet the needs of young people and provide that level of engagement that face-to-face sessions might otherwise provide.

"We had an online assessment with CAMHs... eventually she [daughter] ran out of the room, sat under the sink in the bathroom... when she [experiences] something stressful, she gets flu symptoms... [then] the EWO called around, whilst I was out shopping – no arrangement had been made. There is supposed to be a beneficial aim of their intervention... if it's causing more damage, then it's not beneficial."

Another parent noted the constant struggles to get support in place for her child. For a period of seven months since the first lockdown, the parent describes the situation as a period of getting 'nothing'. Whilst that has recently improved with a number of physio and speech and language plans in place, this only happened after the parent had consistently advocated on behalf of her child and had submitted a number of complaints. She noted how, in her view, services were initially slow in coming forward to provide support and how she believed that they were possibly using the Covid-19 pandemic as a reason to justify reduced or scaled-back services. She believed that the needs of families such as hers had actually increased rather than reduced over this time.

"I feel its like an attitude that because of the lockdown, we can kind of not think about doing those things we would normally do... but if anything [they] should be doing more of that."

A young person noted how CAMHs support was being provided by telephone and how she would have preferred using Zoom, although that was not available. Whilst the young person noted how personable the CAMHs staff were, the extent of support was quite limited and not very impactful.

"A lot of the staff are lovely, but just the way their protocol is, they can't really do anything for you other than tell you to drink a cup of tea or take a bath... A cup of tea is great, but it's not the solution to every problem. CAMHs really isn't up to much."

Within the family

Parents reported a range of positive and negative aspects of the lockdown on family life. One parent noted how the pace of family life had slowed down from being '24/7' with a move to home working, which gave her more time to spend with her two children to focus on more interactive activities.

"Actually, it has given me a lot of time with my children that I wouldn't necessarily have had and there's a nicer, slower pace of life. I said to my kids, 'this is what it was like when I was growing up'. Life [just before the lockdown] was 24/7... I kind of like the slower pace of life."

However, for many parents this also brought its own challenges with parents stating that they were constantly looking at ways of keeping their child(ren) pre-occupied with constructive activities. This was a particular issue in the most recent lockdowns due to more inclement weather and also because many of the extra-curricular activities that children would have been involved in were temporarily not running. In addition, for those parents whose child(ren) have special educational needs, this was a particular challenge which involved balancing the needs of their child alongside those of their siblings.

"He really like attention and he wants one-to-one attention all of the time if he can have it... it's too much when it's every day. There was no break as my partner and I were working... but also I have a young child, so it's not possible... so I have tried to build up his capacity to play a little on his own... "

Another parent noted how her child had become withdrawn and had retreated from everyday life during the initial lockdown. At a number of times during the lockdown, the child's appetite was suppressed and energy levels were lower. In addition, the parent noted the constant 'daily battles' to support her child to keep routines such as washing, brushing teeth, getting dressed and eating food, on track.

"I always think of it as gestating! She's kind of retreating... it's like a pregnancy... the main battles are around washing, brushing teeth, maybe getting dressed and food."

Throughout the various lockdowns, support provided by the extended family was critical for most of those interviewed; it helped reduce social isolation and was critical in helping families cope throughout.

"Yes, and then to be honest, a few times [we had] families over because they needed a break as well. So that helped him to have a little bit of company, a little bit of variety."

Another parent noted the how her parents had moved to live closer to them and having that extra contact helped to build her resilience to cope. The support included help with shopping, provision of financial support and doing the small things like buying ice creams for the children.

"[My parents] came over in July. That changed my life and without that support I don't really know what I would have done... because I don't know where that support would have come from. My dad did as much as he could... helping me financially and taking the kids for ice creams."

Education settings

Parents generally expressed a certain degree of concern about their child(ren) returning to school. This was mainly because of their fears for their child(ren)s

safety. One parent was particularly anxious as both she and her daughter were in a shielding category.

"The other thing I suppose that's slightly unique to us, I would have been in a shielding category and so would my daughter... When the kids went back to school, I felt a bit worried and a bit anxious about that."

Generally, it appears that young people have settled back into school quite well and most feel well supported. Schools appear to have put successfully implemented student/pupil bubbles and parents generally felt that the support systems in place were effective. In addition, schools online provision appears to have improved over time and in most cases resources and lessons were reported to be available on online learning platforms.

"You've got key people around you who support you. It definitely pretty cool... and we've got our year bubbles... and hopefully in the next month or so, I'll be getting my own counsellor... which will be a good support."

Notwithstanding this, parents and young people identified a number of issues of concern regarding the impact of Covid-19. Firstly, a number of young people are reported to have missed considerable periods of school or were studying from home. Even where children had returned to school, there appeared to be assumptions that they can just pick up from where they had left off. Whilst this is an issue for every young person, it presented particular challenges for children with special educational needs.

"There's still a pressure coming from school... as you know one of my children has special educational needs and sometimes it seems that there's an assumption that these

kids [are] somehow going back as they were before... it doesn't feel like the curriculum has been adjusted massively to take that into consideration."

One parent expressed frustration that they had not got an accurate picture of the areas of learning that the school had planned for their child(ren) and the educational targets, if any, that were set. They were therefore unclear about how their child was progressing. Another parent stated that the lack of a parent/teacher evening (even virtually) had resulted in them being unsure of what gaps, if any, there were in their child's learning leaving her unsure of how she could support her child.

"School still has not sent me a plan of what he's learning; I don't know what his targets are for this year. They haven't thought that was important to share with me... so I couldn't say that he is learning very much; I wouldn't know what he's doing."

"I'm not sure where the gaps of learning are. The school didn't do any parents evenings, not even virtually. I'm a bit concerned about that actually, because I don't really understand what the expectation is or what I'm supposed to do to support her."

For the young people themselves, both were preparing for exams and were focused on keeping their study and revision on track. One of the young people noted that whilst they achieved good grades in the last school year, they were keen that all of the exams go ahead so that they know they have done their best.

"I was very fortunate last year. My teachers gave me really good marks and I just want to do the exams, so that at least I can say that I've done my best."

Impact related to mental health & emotional wellbeing

The impact of the pandemic has been wide-ranging and varies greatly according to family contexts. For many, there was an ongoing and persistent sense of anxiety, however this was often accompanied with a general unease of not knowing when the lockdowns are going to end. For one family, the lockdown meant they could not celebrate Diwali with their family. Diwali is a particularly important event for Hindus/Sikhs and an event that helps children, in particular, to get together and celebrate collectively.

"Times like Diwali are really important to our children. For our disabled children its quite an accessible holiday, they really can participate in it and get involved."

The restrictions in place during the pandemic have had a significant impact on young people's involvement in extra-curricular activities and negatively impacted on their physical as well as emotional health and well-being. This, combined with the limited opportunities to undertake activities outside in the Autumn/Winter, has added to the demands on parents to entertain their children, leaving them with a general 'sense of tiredness'. This is compounded with the general assumption made that parents and children and young people are expected to 'bounce back' from each lockdown and subsequent easing of restrictions.

"My daughter would have had quite a lot of extracurricular stuff that she did – swimming and Irish dancing... all of that has stopped. I don't think

they are getting as much stimulation as they would normally have got before lockdown... that adds to my general tiredness."

Generally, however, there is a sense in which the second lockdown was not as tough on people's emotional health and well-being as the first lockdown. One parent noted how she felt that the second lockdown hasn't felt like a lockdown, with a significant increase in traffic and consequent impact on her journey time to, and from, work. There were a few more opportunities for families to do activities together (e.g. visiting a museum), but some important social events (e.g. birthday parties) could not take place and there were generally fewer opportunities for children to meet up with friends which caused continuing upset. However, it appears that some extracurricular activities are increasingly moving online, which was a positive.

"I think meeting their friends, having play dates outside of school is what they are missing, not being able to go to birthday parties and everything. I think they (children) are quite upset."

"Some of the fitness classes, gymnastics and other stuff are going to happen online... its quite important that they have something to do."

For one of the young people, the continual lockdowns were having a significant impact on their emotional well-being. Not knowing what exams were going to take place, and when, alongside pressure on

young people to think about their future career choices, was a source of continual angst.

"Well obviously, I'm worried about my school work. I'm doing my AS

levels. I need to do well and I'm stressed... all my teachers are like, you're meant to have your career planned by now."

Next steps

This second report shows that whilst parents and children and young people have tried to adapt to the continuing impact of the pandemic and bounce back as much as possible, there is little doubt that many are experiencing lockdown fatigue. Many of the support services around families have tried to adapt their service provision and there is an acknowledgement that schools, in particular, have risen to the challenge. Notwithstanding this, parents noted how the lack of extra-curricular activities, in

particular, had negatively impacted on their child(ren). In addition, not having an accurate picture of their child(ren)'s learning goals and/or targets meant that many felt unable to support their child(ren)'s learning.

The issues identified above will continue to be explored over the coming months, alongside other aspects of the pandemic that continue to have an impact on families.

United for a better childhood

The National Children's Bureau brings people and organisations together to drive change in society and deliver a better childhood for the UK. We interrogate policy, uncover evidence and develop better ways of supporting children and families.

Let's work together: 020 7843 6000 | info@ncb.org.uk

London: 23 Mentmore Terrace, London, E8 3PN

Belfast: The NICVA Building, 61 Duncairn Gardens, BT15 2GB



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