

Children show increase in mental health difficulties over COVID-19 lockdown

16 June 2020

	Emotional difficulties	Behavioural difficulties	Restlessness & attention difficulties
Children (parent report)	Increased	Increased	Increased
Adolescents (parent report)	Decreased	No change	Increased
Adolescents (adolescent report)	No change	No change	No change
Children with SEN & mental health difficulties	Decreased	No change	No change

Credit: University of Oxford

Parents/carers of children aged 4-10 years of age reported that over a one-month period in lockdown, they saw increases in their child's emotional difficulties, such as feeling unhappy, worried, being clingy and experiencing physical symptoms associated with worry, according to early results from the Co-SPACE study, asking parents and carers about their children's mental health through the COVID-19 crisis.

Over a one-month period in lockdown:

- Parents/carers of primary school age [children](#) taking part in the survey report an increase in their child's emotional, behavioral, and restless/attentional difficulties.
- Parents/carers of secondary school age children report a reduction in their child's [emotional difficulties](#), but an increase in restless/attentional behaviors.
- Adolescents taking part in the survey report no change in their own emotional or behavioral, and restless/attentional difficulties.

- Parents/carers of children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) and those with a pre-existing mental health difficulty report a reduction in their child's emotional difficulties and no change in behavioral or restless/attentional difficulties.

More than 10,000 parents have now taken part in the Co-SPACE (COVID-19 Supporting Parents, Adolescents, and Children in Epidemics) survey led by experts at the University of Oxford.

Parents/carers also reported that their children's behavior had got worse over time, with an increase in behaviors such as temper tantrums, arguments and children not doing what they are asked. Parents/carers in the survey also reported that their children showed greater levels of restlessness/fidgety behavior and difficulties concentrating over the one month period.

Perhaps surprisingly, the same pattern was not seen in the older age group of 11-16 year olds. Teenagers themselves reported no change in their emotional difficulties between the two time points and their parents/carers reported that they felt that their child's emotional difficulties had actually improved. Neither teenagers nor their parents reported any changes in their behavior over this time but parents felt that their children were more restless and had more difficulty concentrating over time.

Tom Madders, Campaigns Director at YoungMinds, said, 'This research suggests that many [younger children](#) have found it increasingly hard to cope as the lockdown period has gone on, which may be because of loneliness, fears about the [coronavirus](#) or a loss of the routines and support that come with school.

'The picture appears to be more variable for older children in this study. Following the anxiety and uncertainty of going into lockdown, some are likely

to have found the restrictions more difficult as time as gone on, while others—including those who feel safe and secure at home but who find school challenging—may have adapted well to their new reality. For those [young people](#), going back to school after a long break may well be tough, and it's vital that there's a re-adjustment period where wellbeing is prioritized.

Provided by University of Oxford

'It's also important to recognize that some of the most vulnerable young people in our society—including those who have experienced abuse, violence or neglect—are often the hardest to identify. We need to ensure that effective support is available for all children who need it now and as restrictions lift.'

Professor Cathy Creswell, Professor of Developmental Clinical Psychology, University of Oxford, and co-leading the study, said, 'Prioritising the mental health of children and young people throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond is critical. These findings highlight that there is wide variation in how children and young people have been affected, with some finding life easier but others experiencing more difficulties. Our findings have identified some sources of variation but we need to continue to gain a better understanding of which families are struggling and what they need to help direct the right advice and support going forward to ensure that this does not have long-lasting consequences.'

The Co-SPACE (COVID-19 Supporting Parents, Adolescents, and Children in Epidemics) survey is still open and keen for parents and carers to share their experiences at:

www.cospaceoxford.com/survey.

This research is tracking children and young people's mental health throughout the COVID-19 crisis. Survey results are helping researchers identify what protects children and young people from deteriorating [mental health](#), over time, and at particular stress points, and how this may vary according to child and family characteristics. This will help to identify what advice, support and help [parents](#) would find most useful.

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