

Children from low income backgrounds show elevated mental health difficulties throughout lockdown

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Children and young people from low income backgrounds show elevated mental health difficulties throughout lockdown. Credit: Shutterstock

Emotional difficulties were consistently elevated among children and young people from low income households over a month of lockdown compared to those from higher income households.

The most recent report from the Co-SPACE (COVID-19 Supporting Parents, Adolescents, and Children in Epidemics) study highlights that:

- Emotional and restless/attention difficulties (and behavior difficulties for primary [school](#) aged children) were consistently elevated among children and [young people](#) from [low income households](#) over a month of lockdown compared to those from higher income households, with around two and a half times as many children experiencing significant problems in low income households.
- Parents and carers from low income households reported that their children (aged four to 16 years) had higher levels of [emotional difficulties](#), such as feeling unhappy, worried, being clingy and

experiencing physical symptoms associated with worry than those from higher [income](#) households. Their children were also more fidgety and restless and had greater difficulty paying attention. Those with younger, primary school aged children also reported that their children were experiencing higher levels of behavior difficulties, including temper tantrums, arguments and not doing what they were being asked to do by adults than those from higher incomes.

Other findings were that children and young people from single and multiple adult households were generally found to have similar levels of emotional, behavioral and restless/attention difficulties. However, when looked at on their own, primary school aged children from single adult households were reported as having more emotional difficulties than those from multiple adult households.

The study also highlighted that over the course of lockdown, there were increases for children of [primary school](#) age in emotional difficulties, behavioral difficulties and restlessness and attention difficulties, with the proportion of children having significant (clinical level) difficulties, increasing by as much as 35%. However, in young people of secondary school age, there was a reduction in emotional difficulties, no change in behavioral difficulties and a slight increase in restlessness/inattention.

More than 11,500 parents have now taken part in the Co-SPACE survey led by experts at the University of Oxford. Crucially, the study is continuing to collect data in order to determine whether this has changed as school re-open and many children return to the classroom.

Andy Bell, Deputy Chief Executive at the Center for Mental Health, said, "The pandemic and the lockdown have already had a significant impact on children's [mental health](#) across the country. Every family and every child's experiences are unique to them, but this and other research points to a worrying rise in distress overall, and a chasm between the most and the least deprived children and families. There is compelling evidence that poverty and inequality are toxic to children's mental health. Sadly the pandemic has reinforced that divide. We must now see action at every level to close the gap and support children through the emotional challenges of this year."

Professor Cathy Creswell, Professor of Developmental Clinical Psychology, University of Oxford, and co-leading the study, said, "These findings highlight not only the huge variation in how children and young people have been coping throughout the pandemic but also how pre-existing vulnerabilities associated with inequality have continued during the crisis. It is crucial that we continue to build understanding of who has been most impacted by this challenging situation so that effective action can be taken."

The Co-SPACE survey is still open and keen for parents and carers to share their experiences, especially at this crucial time of schools re-opening and many children returning to school. 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.

More information: The survey can be found on the [Co-SPACE website](#).

Provided by University of Oxford

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