

Survey shows one in six children have a probable mental disorder

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The proportion of children experiencing a probable mental disorder has increased over the past three years, from one in nine in 2017 to one in six in July this year.

The rate has risen in boys aged five to 16 from 11.4% in 2017 to 16.7% in July 2020 and in girls from 10.3% to 15.2 per cent over the same time period, according to The Mental Health of Children and Young People in England 2020 report, published today by NHS Digital, in collaboration with the Office for National Statistics, the National Center for Social Research, the University of Cambridge and the University of Exeter. Children and [young people](#) with a 'probable' disorder were identified using their (and their parents') responses on a validated measure, the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, which assesses different aspects of mental health, including problems with emotions, behavior, relationships, hyperactivity and concentration, as well as the impact on their life.

The likelihood of a probable mental disorder increases with age, with a noticeable difference in gender for the older age group (17 to 22 year

olds); 27.2% of [young women](#) and 13.3% of young men in this age group were identified as having a probable mental disorder in 2020.

This report looks at the mental health of children and young people in England in July 2020, and how this has changed since 2017. Experiences of family life, education and services, and worries and anxieties during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic are also examined. The findings draw on a sample of 3,570 children and young people aged between five to 22 years old in 2020, who were surveyed in both 2017 and July 2020.

Dr. Tamsin Newlove-Delgado, of the University of Exeter, is one of the authors of the report. She said: "The increase we found is very concerning. If you think about a class of 30 children, the rise we've seen between 2017 and 2020 represents an increase of three children in a class with a probable mental disorder, to five children. The survey can't tell us whether and to what extent this increase is due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but it does contain evidence of its impact, with many children and young people saying the lockdown had made their lives worse. This was the case for the majority of those with a probable mental disorder, who also reported higher levels of loneliness. As we are facing a winter of varying levels of restrictions and disruption to children and young peoples' lives, we need to understand more about their experiences, and to use these findings to reach and support those who need it most, and to prevent longer-term problems."

Data in the publication is broken down into the following sections:

- Trends and prevalence of mental [disorders](#)
- Family dynamics
- Parent and child anxieties about COVID-19, and well-being
- Access to education and health services
- Changes in circumstances and activities

Family dynamics

The report revealed that among girls aged 11 to 16, nearly two-thirds (63.8%) with a probable mental disorder had seen or heard an argument among adults in their household, compared to 46.8% of girls unlikely to have a mental disorder.

Parent and child anxieties, and wellbeing

Overall, 36.7% of children aged five to 16 years had a parent who thought their child was worried that friends and family would catch COVID-19. More than half (50.2%) of children with a probable mental disorder had their parent report this, compared with a third (33.2%) of children unlikely to have a mental disorder.

Over a fifth (22.3%) of children had a parent who thought their child was worried about catching the virus during the pandemic; those with a probable mental disorder were almost twice as likely to have their parent think this (36.1%) compared to those unlikely to have a mental disorder (18.6%). Additionally, 37.7% of children had a parent who thought their child was worried about missing school or work during the crisis.

Sleep problems seemed to be a factor during the pandemic with more than a quarter (28.5%) of five to 22 year olds having problems sleeping. Again, those with a probable mental disorder reported experiencing [sleep problems](#) (58.9%) than those unlikely to have a mental disorder (19.0%).

This was more common in girls, with 32.4% reporting sleep problems compared with 24.7% of boys. Issues with sleep affected 17 to 22 year olds (41.0%), more than any other age group.

One in ten (10.1%) children and young people aged 11 to 22 years said that they often or always felt lonely. This was more common in girls (13.8%) than boys (6.5%). Children and young people with a probable mental disorder were about eight times more likely to report feeling lonely often or always (29.4%) than those unlikely to have a mental disorder (3.7%).

Access to education and health services

Children that were unlikely to have a mental disorder were more likely to receive regular support from their school or college during the pandemic (76.4%) compared to those with a probable mental disorder (62.6%).

When it came to receiving help for mental health problems during the pandemic, 7.4% of all 17 to 22 year olds reported they tried to seek help for mental health problems but didn't receive the help they needed, this rose to 21.7% of those with a probable mental disorder. This is compared to 3.8% of all five to 16 year olds and 17.5% with a probable mental disorder in this age group. Around one in five (21.7%) of 17 to 22 year olds with a probable mental disorder reported that they had decided not to seek help for a mental health concern due to the pandemic.

Changes in circumstances and activities

The report also covers changes in household circumstances during the pandemic. Nearly half (46.7%) of children aged five to 16 years old had a parent who said they or their partner worked from home more often than before. Almost three in ten (28.1%) children had a parent who said they or their partner had experienced a fall in household income, and 28.7% had a parent who said they or their partner were furloughed or used the self-employed support scheme during lockdown.

It was also revealed that [children](#) with a probable mental disorder were more likely to live in a household that had fallen behind with payments (16.3%) during lockdown, than those unlikely to have a mental health disorder (6.4%).

Overall 37.0% of 11 to 16 year olds and 36.4% of 17 to 22 year olds reported that lockdown had made their life a little worse, while 5.9% of 11 to 16 year olds and 6.7% of 17 to 22 year olds said it had made it much worse. Children and young people with a probable mental disorder were more likely to say that lockdown had made their life worse (54.1% of 11 to 16 year olds, and 59.0% of 17 to 22 year olds), than those unlikely to have a mental disorder (39.2% and 37.3% respectively).

More information: The Mental Health of Children

and Young People in England 2020:
[digital.nhs.uk/data-and-inform ... -follow-up/data-sets](https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-inform...-follow-up/data-sets)

Provided by University of Exeter

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