Mental health in trying times

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children and young people

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Live from Downing Street…

THERE IS NO WAY
What I will talk about

• Has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted on children and young people's mental health?
• To what extent has the COVID-10 pandemic amplified existing mental health inequalities, and what factors appear to underpin variability in children and young people’s mental health trajectories?
• What can schools and colleges do?
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• Before we look at what the research tells us, let’s think about how and why the pandemic may have impacted CYP’s mental health
• Not just the bad things! In what ways might things have improved for some children and young people?
Has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted on children and young people’s mental health?

- Co-SPACE study (Pearcey et al., 2020): 2.7k parents who provided data at start of lockdown and one month later
  - Primary school age: 35% ↑ likely to have significant emotional, behavioural and/or restless/inattention difficulties
  - Secondary school age: No change in % likely to have significant emotional difficulties, slight ↑ in % behavioural and restless/inattention difficulties
  - Low income households reported consistently higher % difficulties
Has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted on children and young people’s mental health?

- NIHR adolescent mental health study (Widnall et al, 2020): 1k 13-14 year olds who provided data in Oct 2019 and April/May 2020
  - No change in risk of depression, ↓ in risk of anxiety, ↑ in wellbeing
  - LGBTQ+ students and those reporting a health problem or disability had consistently worse mental health
Has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted on children and young people’s mental health?

- NHS Digital study (Vizard et al, 2020): 3.5k CYP who provided data in 2017 and July 2020

1 in 9 of 5-16 year-olds experienced significant mental health difficulties prior to the pandemic (NHS Digital, 2018)
Has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted on children and young people’s mental health?

- NHS Digital study (Vizard et al., 2020): 3.5k CYP who provided data in 2017 and July 2020
  - Correlates of mental health difficulties in 2020:
    - Witnessing arguments among adults in the household
    - Sleep problems
    - Lower levels of support from school/college
    - Living in a household that had fallen behind on payments
    - Reporting that lockdown had made life worse

This grew to 1 in 6 (16%) by summer 2020 (NHS Digital, 2020)
Has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted on children and young people’s mental health?

- Children and young people with ADHD or ASC report worse mental health outcomes during the pandemic than their neurotypical peers (Nonweiler et al., 2020).
- Children and young people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds aged 7-11 less likely to say they felt happy most of the time or safe most of the time, compared to those identifying as White Welsh or British (Children’s Commissioner for Wales, 2020).
Has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted on children and young people’s mental health?

- Teenagers’ Experiences of Life in Lockdown study (Demkowicz et al, 2020): 109 16-19 year-olds who provided written accounts in May 2020
  - Heightened emotionality in a time of change, loss and uncertainty
  - Placing value on self-care, positive outlook, and hope
  - Sense of togetherness is important
  - Frustration with government and media
Has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted on children and young people’s mental health?

• Co-SPACE study (Shum et al, 2020): young people’s concerns about returning to school
  – c.1k parents and c.300 young people (aged 12-16) surveyed in August 2020 (plus longitudinal sample of parents of young people aged 15-16)

• 15-16 years olds more worried about academic pressure than younger age group
  – Over 50% worried about impact of pandemic on their employment prospects and the economy
  – Those from low income households reported higher rates of worry about academic pressure and lack of support in school work than those from high income households
  – Worries increased over time in longitudinal sample
“All COVID-19 has done, as the tide has gone out, is expose the pebbles we already knew existed” (Gregson, 2021)
What can schools and colleges do?

Refer  Identify  Support  Environment
What can schools and colleges do?

- Think about the role that school plays in CYP’s lives, and how this supports their mental health
  - Secure base and safe haven for those whose home lives are challenging
  - Structure, predictability and routine in a time of great uncertainty
  - A place to connect and play with others
- Six principles for promoting psychological recovery and wellbeing ([UK Trauma Council, 2020](https://www.uktraumacouncil.org.uk)):
What can schools and colleges do?

- A whole school or college approach (Anna Freud Centre, 2020)
  - Model positive behaviour
  - Communicate clearly and consistently
  - Offer a range of support
  - Encourage self-care
  - Support the wider school community*
- *This includes staff!
- An opportunity to normalise discussion of our mental health and reduce stigma
  – we have all been affected by the pandemic
Supporting self-care

• Self-care strategies to support CYP who are feeling anxious (Anna Freud Centre, 2020)
  – Breathing exercises and relaxation techniques
  – Distraction
  – Physical activity
  – Learning about stressful situations

• These are just the tip of the iceberg (103 (!) self-management strategies identified by Wolpert et al, 2019)
  – However, evidence base is mixed
Supporting staff wellbeing

• Six things schools can do (Lamb, 2017)
  – Identify staff concerns
  – Get all staff involved
  – Ensure leadership support
  – Preach about the benefits
  – Stay positive
  – Make staff wellbeing integrated

• Making changes (Education Support Partnership, 2017)
  – Workload
  – Support
  – Structure
  – Control
  – Relationships
  – Change
The importance of hope

(it might pass like a kidney stone, but it will pass)