

# People at the Centre Update 18



## **Children and Young People Update - Isolation, mental health and wellbeing**

### **Mental health and wellbeing concerns**

Isolation, and its impact on mental health and wellbeing, is a common theme in reports about the impact of COVID-19 on children and young people.

The Scottish Huntington's Association COVID-19 Survey (June 2020) highlights that young people growing up in families with Huntington's Disease are becoming more isolated. Young people report a rise in their caring responsibilities, difficulty over being separated from loved ones in care homes and growing worries about education and household income.

Barnado's Scotland, in a report about supporting children and young people with experience of the criminal justice system (June 2020), shows that isolation and lack of contact with others (family, friends and services) is the biggest issue affecting those in contact with the justice system.

Young Scot's Lockdown Lowdown (May 2020) highlights concerns about school, college and university closures, employment and financial situation which drive anxiety about the future.

The Scottish Government's external version of the COVID-19: Children, Young People and Families October Evidence Briefing confirms the trends identified in the above pieces of research, adding that key issues for young people as they came out of lockdown were concerns about COVID-19 transmission, adapting to COVID-19 measures in schools (physical distancing) and returning to 'the outside world' (YMCA survey).

## **Lines of wellbeing and mental health inequalities**

The briefing also reports that, interestingly, UK representative surveys show little differences in mental wellbeing between pre-lockdown baselines and the situation over lockdown.

According to an ImpatEd study, the significant differences are to be found in sub-groups: gender (girls generally report lower mental wellbeing), disability (disabled pupils have lower wellbeing scores than non-disabled ones), language (similar trend with pupils for whom English is an additional language) and income (similar trend for pupils in low income households) are all lines of wellbeing inequality.

On the latter, the briefing also points to several Scottish studies that indicate increasing concern about the impact of rising poverty on the wellbeing and mental health of children and families, particularly those reliant on social security.

Additionally, transport difficulties are a key driver of feeling isolated for individuals and families living in rural areas and reliant on public services.

A focus on disabled children and young people in the briefing paints a contrasting picture: although the most recent Family Fund survey highlights that wellbeing and health (both physical and mental) levels are worsening, due to financial struggles and the lack of total recovery in formal support services, wider UK evidence shows that some children with special education needs and disabilities benefited from school closures, with decreases in social pressure and strict learning processes driving an improvement in anxiety levels. As a result, some parents were thinking about going for home education long-term. The National Autistic Society highlights that levels of anxiety increased in autistic children, mainly because of the loss of routine.

Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) Children and Young People (Research by Intercultural Youth Scotland in the briefing) report that police presence during lockdown restricted opportunities for them to exercise and socialise, and a wider sense of being disadvantaged in the COVID-19 impact and response.

## The Digital Divide

One response to isolation has been the increase in the use of technology, to allow people to keep in touch and continue accessing universities, employment, and other services.

CELCIS calls for bridging the digital divide for care experienced young people in a July 2020 article, pointing out that COVID-19 has further deepened the impact of digital exclusion for Scotland's care leavers.

Digital exclusion is also one of the key issues highlighted by Aberlour in their June 2020 response to the Equalities & Human Rights Committee call for views on COVID-19. The Sutton Trust, in the Scottish Government briefing, suggests that failing to address the digital divide will drive a higher negative impact of school closures on earnings for young people from low-income backgrounds.

## Play Deprivation

Accessing play could also be one of the responses to the increase in levels of isolation, poorer wellbeing and mental health for the previously described groups of children and young people.

The Scottish Government briefing shows that loss of play has a big impact on children and young people; disabled and seriously ill children lost a significant part of informal support to allow them to have access to play, social and other recreational activities.

Play Scotland recommends that play providers take into account the risk averse nature of safety advice and balance this with the advantages of play for children.

