

Issues that can affect and have an impact on children's Mental Health and Well-Being.

This essay will focus on the mental health and well-being of children who are of secondary school age. Due to the setting where these observations took place being in a secondary school, they will be referred to as young people for this assignment. It is important to establish how the terms mental health and well-being are understood as the terms can vary, depending on context and setting. Mental health for this essay will be understood as “our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel and act. It also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, and make choices.” (MentalHealth.gov, 2022) Well-being will be understood as “a positive state experienced by individuals and societies.” (World Health Organization, 2023).

Young people's mental health has been an issue from long before the pandemic, young minds reports that “One in six children aged five to 16 were identified as having a probable mental health problem in July 2021, a huge increase from one in nine in 2017. That's five children in every classroom”. (Young Minds, 2023). This statistic shows that is not just the global pandemic that affects young people's mental health however it has had a massive impact on the amount of young people who are reporting mental health struggles. It could be questioned however that this is not an accurate figure as not all those who struggle with mental health would ask for help or acknowledge the difficulties.

There are a variety of factors that could impact a young person's mental health and well-being. These include factors such as neglect, bereavement, economic background, level of education and family circumstances. Factors such as school bullying, friendship difficulties, exam stress and peer pressure also have a role. For this essay the focus will be on the role of the Covid-19 pandemic and the resulting lockdowns and social restrictions that occurred from

March 2020. Obviously, the pandemic had a huge impact on young people, Cowie 2020 claimed “pandemics have an extremely negative impact on mental health, with children and young people being especially at risk due to the limited understanding of the event”, and so there will be a focus on the impact that the Covid 19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown had on the young people and their mental health and well-being.

During the Covid 19 pandemic, schools were closed for most children in the UK. Schools did not just offer young people education, but also” offered predictable routines and a safe environment as well as a source of emotional support from peers, teachers, counsellors, and healthcare professionals”. (Cowie. H, 2020)

For those few young people who were still attending school, the children of key workers and those who are vulnerable or have additional needs, they had a very different school experience to what they would have outside of the Covid 19 pandemic. For those young people who were still attending school there were not normal lessons with peers of their own age, but instead mixed year groups and activities run by school staff rather than actual lessons. The advantage for these children however was that they were still getting some form of school experience, staying in a familiar routine and were having contact with staff and peers. In a study by McCluskey et al. (2021) when a participant was interviewed on their experiences of lockdowns during the pandemic, they were quoted as saying “they didn’t have much motivation and were sleeping more... (this) had a negative impact on their mental health” (McCluskey, 2021). So for those young people who were still accessing face to face teaching and learning in the school setting, even though it was not the same experience as they would normally would have had, it could be said that their mental health could have been less effected by the lockdowns of the Covid 19, as they had some sense of normality in their day.

For those who are learning at home, their parents became their teachers, changing the dynamic in the household. What long term impact this has had on children and young people we do not know. For those young people who have a difficult home environment, their parents becoming their teacher may have put more strain on a potentially already tense relationship. In addition to this, due to the fact the work was sent home to pupils online or lessons were taking place via live online classes, for those families who did not have access to technology or the internet this could have a detrimental effect on the home education of these pupils. Some of these pupils may not have engaged in education during lockdowns due to the lack of equipment or support at home. For many parents, the thought of trying to educate their children at home was a daunting thought but for some parents or caregivers that may not have had the level of education that would enable them to teach their children the work that had been set by the school it would have been a lot more difficult. This would not have just affected the mental health of the parents but also the children as if the parents were anxious or stressed then the children living in the household would pick up on this from their parents or caregivers. This would be an example of Bandura's social modelling theory (1961), which explains how children and young people imitating behaviours, attitudes and emotional reactions of others. In this example, as the young people would be having extremely limited interactions with anybody outside of their immediate family, they could be imitating their care givers behaviours, in this case it could be anxious behaviours brought on by the pandemic.

Cowie and Myers 2020 stated "children and young people from lower income families had higher levels of emotional difficulties, such as feeling unhappy or worried, being clingy and experiencing physical symptoms associated with anxiety than those in higher income households". They believe that this was indicating that the pandemic had a significant impact on the mental health of children and young people especially those from the most deprived

families. A child who is unable to access the work that has been supplied by the school, either through a lack of technology or educational support at home, could worry about how they may fall behind their peers if they are not completing the work causing further anxiety in an already anxious time of uncertainty.

Some young people have had difficulties re-engaging in education since the pandemic. This may have been for multiple varied reasons, but there are still many children and young people who are not attending education on a regular basis, many requiring intervention from school welfare officers to try and encourage them to come back to school. This is not a localised issue, in August 2020 world leaders called on the G 20 nations for “urgent action to avoid a ‘Covid generation’ affecting tens of millions of children and young people with no hope of an education, recommending priority to the 30 million children and young people who, according to a UNESCO 2020 report, may never return to school”. (Cowie. H, 2020). Some young people have found the thought of returning to education to daunting to process, while others have enjoyed the more relaxed education of home learning to a more stressful educational environment. When pupils first returned school they were in bubbles of classes to try and stop the spread of Covid 19 and were also having to wear face masks in all of the lessons. Pupils were asked to social distance from each other which meant that usual school activities could not take place. For some pupils this change was too much so they have struggled to return to school with some find it difficult to engage with the education.

For some young people who had returned to school after the pandemic, the changing attitude towards their education is noticeable, with many questioning ‘what is the point’. Young people have seen that since the Covid pandemic the community has changed, more importance are put on those jobs that kept us going during these difficult times such as shopworkers nurses and educators, which previously may not have been seen as important roles in the community pre pandemic. Also, for the pupils who are at the lower end of

secondary school when the pandemic hit, it may have been seen they would be less impacted than those in the year above who are sitting GCSEs or A-levels. This however has proven to be untrue, as those pupils are now the students that are sitting external exams after two years of disrupted education and lack of engagement that has led to gaps in these young people's education. For these pupils there will be no extenuating circumstances that will allow teachers to submit grades or additional support during their exams. They will be expected to sit the exams as if they had not been affected by the pandemic. For many who may have seen their friends or family members not to sit exams due to the pandemic they may be reluctant to themselves be made to sit these exams for the same grades that previous year groups were given without sitting examinations or coursework. This has only emphasised some pupils lack of enthusiasm towards their education. This is showing a lack of self-esteem in these pupils who no longer see the point in working hard and pushing themselves to reach the best they can be.

For some young people being educated online or at home was a welcome break for them. They enjoyed having the freedom of being at home and completing work at their own pace. For these young people returning to school and the pressures that that brings has been too much and some have preferred staying at home and have struggled to transition back to the classroom. It has been observed that for a few students the idea of returning to school has been too difficult, during the pandemic they became very reliant on their caregivers at home and the thought of leaving them for seven hours a day to return to school is something that they do not feel that they can do.

Due to the isolation that came as a result of the Covid 19 pandemic, many young people struggled with a self isolation at a time when they should have been engaging with their peers and discovering their community. Although, it has been seen that some young people thrived during the pandemic, enjoying spending the time with family which is family time that

otherwise they would not have had. This was not the outcome for some children and young people, for many the thought of being locked at home with your families, with very limited contact to the outside world was extremely distressing. “Social distancing in an abusive home resulted in increased risk of child abuse, neglect and exploitation” (Cowie. H, 2020). all of these would have a detrimental effect on a young person’s mental health and well-being and as there was limited support due to lockdown and social isolation the effects of these could be unimaginable. As a result of these difficulties some young people struggled with their mental health and well-being.

Some of the young people engage with the outside world through online platforms such as social media, however this itself comes with its own difficulties. The nature of social media in today’s society could have a massive impact on a young person’s well-being, of unrealistic expectations and the exposure to inappropriate materials. The dangers of social media were exacerbated at a time where there was limited contact with the outside world. More and more time was spent engaging with people online which for young people could be dangerous as they may have been engaging with those that they do not know personally, the average time spent on social media for young people is eight hours a day (Zouareg, 2023), this would have been a lot higher during the lockdowns. The unrealistic expectations that a young person may observe on social media could only be increased by them not being able to engage in their own community. People only post the very best on social media, often this is not a realistic view of their life. For many, before posting photos, these pictures are heavily edited to only show the best versions of themselves. For vulnerable young people looking at these pictures they may be gaining an unrealistic expectation of life or even themselves.

Social media and social media apps also gave young people unrealistic expectations for life. These young people claim to have hundreds, sometimes thousands of ‘friends’ from all over the world they have connected with via social media. It could be argued that connecting with

people from around the world is a positive thing for young people to be doing, and it is just a modern day version of pen pals that people would have had in the past, the access to people's lives and personal information that you get via social media could be dangerous especially for those who are younger and do not know how to manage their safety online.

An example that had been observed is of a young person who came back from the Covid pandemic lockdowns claiming that after school at the age of 16 that they would be moving to New York to meet with 'friends' they have met on the social media platform of TikTok. This young person had never met these people face-to-face, or spoken to them in real time they had only ever communicated on the social media platform. This was an unrealistic expectation for their future that they had gained from speaking to strangers online. When this young person realised that the plan of moving to New York was not going to come to fruition, they were not only disappointed but also anxious as they had shared personal information about themselves with these people they had met online, who were strangers to them.

Many young people found the social isolation during lockdown very difficult, at a time when they should have been out exploring the world they were isolated and had very limited communications of friends. In a study by McCluskey (2021) one young person interviewed stated that they "the lack of having social interactions in person also kind of affected people's mental health especially mine because I had a friendship group that completely fell apart during lockdown. And it was difficult to deal with especially because it was over text". (McCluskey, 2021). This was the case for many young people as friendships drifted apart after months of no communication. This would have been particularly impactful on those young people who did not have the access to technology that they would have needed to keep in contact with friendship groups.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1977) shows how children and young people are reliant on the family and the community around them to thrive. However, during lockdown young people would only have had access to some of what Bronfenbrenner calls the child's mesosystem, the child's family, but not the other individuals that impact on young people for example peers, friends and family, extended family or to some extent the attitudes and ideologies of the culture in which they live.

As previously discussed, some young people enjoyed the lockdown experience, not having to face the pressures of school, peer pressure or expectations that were put upon them. For some young people this gave them the opportunity to find themselves without social pressures to conform being put on them by their peers or the local community. When some pupils returned school it was observed that many looked like completely different people to the children that has left just months before.

During this time of social isolation some young people took the opportunity to experiment with new looks and styles to express themselves in ways that they would not have been able to if they were in school wearing a school uniform all week. Many who left looking like children returns the education setting as young people with individual styles and identities. This brought a new set of difficulties however, as friendship groups who may have grown and developed together had been kept separate from months with all members experiencing the pandemic differently. For some young people, who discovered their sense of style and individuality during the pandemic, may have found that their friends had also found their own individual style and identity which may be very different from their own. Some friendships were able to navigate through the individualities however many found that they had grown apart during this time away from each other. This impacted on many young people's mental health and well-being as being part of a friendship group is important to them.

During this time many young people took the time for self-discovery with some identifying as part of the LGBTQ+ community. According to this [verywellmind.com](https://www.verywellmind.com) “LGBTQ+ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (or sometimes questioning), and others. The “plus” represents other sexual identities including pansexual and Two-Spirit” (Cherry, 2022). It was observed in this education setting that several of the students in one class returned from the Covid lockdowns identifying as part of the LGBTQ plus community, with some expressing preferences with their sexuality and others with their identity. Within this group of young people it was expressed that as during this period of time during the pandemic they did not have the social pressures put upon them by the community all their peers, they were able to discover what they believe to be their true self and preferences.

These experiences of self-discovery could be seen in both the positive and negative light through the lens of the Covid pandemic. For some of these young people have incredibly supportive homes, who were very open to these young people who were on the journey of self-discovery. Others reported that their families were not so supportive of their decisions, with some discouraging their choices. This is particularly seen in young people who had communicated that they identified as either transgender or non-binary. As these young people were at home with limited communication with friends teachers and support outside of their immediate family, if they were not getting the support that they needed from the family then this has a detrimental effect on the young person’s mental health and well-being.

“LGBTQ youth are not inherently prone to suicide risk because of their sexual orientation or gender identity but rather placed at higher risk because of how they are mistreated and stigmatized in society.” (The Trevor Project, 2021) How the young people who identify as part of the LGBTQ community were supported during the pandemic would impact on their mental health. If they felt supported by those around them then this would have a positive outcome for the young people helping their self-esteem and having a positive impact on their

well-being. However for those who did not have support at home they did not have access to support within the community and so this may have impacted the mental health and well-being during this time.

When looking at all the areas that can affect mental health may be the bigger question is how could we support these young people? Many education settings have structures in place to support young people's mental health and well-being. Some settings have developed well-being hubs that can be accessed both in school and at home via an online portal, these portals giving links to agencies that can provide counselling and support for young people to reach out for help. Many education settings also have on-site support for their pupils who are experiencing difficulties with mental health and well-being. Of course the difficulty with this is that if the young person is not ready or willing to acknowledge their mental health difficulties, then they will not reach out to help themselves. For these pupils who are unable or unwilling to reach out to help and support, it may be the place of a trusted adult to support young people through mental health and well-being difficulties. This could be a parent or caregiver, a staff member in the school or another trusted adult.

Many schools are having outside agencies come into the settings to help train staff on how best to support children and young people with mental health difficulties. Agencies such as CAHMS are attending schools to provide drop-in sessions for young people. Schools also offer counselling sessions in school time to help children with mental health and well-being difficulties. The issue with the sessions is that there are so many pupils who are needing to access the support the wait time to see a counsellor is often weeks if not months. These sessions are also only offered on a short-term basis, usually for sessions one week apart, meaning that there is no long-term counselling support in school for these young people.

Outside of the school environment the same issues can be seen when trying to access support for children and young people's mental health. The wait times to be seen by councillors or CAHMS is often months if not longer, for some children this wait may just be too much. Many schools try to offer group counselling sessions to try and support as many pupils as possible at one time, or discuss mental health and well-being during personal social and health education lessons, trying to reduce stigma around mental health for young people and encouraging them to open up to trusted adults to discuss any issues that they may have.

“More than one in four young people said they had tried to take their own life as a result of having to wait for mental health support. More than four in ten waited more than a month for mental health support after seeking it and almost one in 10 young people were turned away”. (Young Minds, 2021). Statistics like these are very concerning as it is clear that young people are not getting the help and support that they've desperately need during these difficult times.

It is clear to see that the global pandemic has had a detrimental impact on children and young people's mental health and well-being. From the uncertainty of what was going on in the world, new experiences as communities went into lockdown, lack of education and school experiences and loss of experiences that should have been had during these times have all impacted on young people's mental health. The support for these young people is not available as freely as it should be due to lack of staffing and unprecedented demand on their services. There are simply not enough fully trained staff to support these young people through this difficult time but to what detriment.

The impact of Covid 19 will be seen for generations to come as this once in a lifetime experience has impacted on everybody's life regardless of age, stage of life or background. For some it was a chance to spend time with family, time that the otherwise would not of had, and they were able to draw positives from this time. For others social isolation, change of

routines, lack of education and difficulties in the home environment meant that the Covid 19 pandemic affected more than just their physical health but also their mental health and their well-being that may take years to recover from.

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