Covid-19 – Pupil Wellbeing

Introduction

Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus. Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses which may cause illness in animals or humans. In humans, several coronaviruses are known to cause respiratory infections ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases such as Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). The most recently discovered coronavirus causes COVID-19.

Most people infected with the COVID-19 virus will experience mild to moderate respiratory illness and recover without requiring special treatment. Older people, and those with underlying medical problems like cardiovascular disease, diabetes, chronic respiratory disease, and cancer are more likely to develop serious illness.

Children are less often reported as cases when compared with adults, and the illness they experience is usually mild. From data reported to WHO, children and adolescents up to 18 years of age represent 1 - 3% of reported infections, even though this age group makes up 29% of the global population.

While children may be less affected, they may also have a greater number of contacts in school and community settings. Further studies are underway to assess the risk of infection in children and to better understand transmission in this age group.

At this time, there are no specific vaccines or treatments for COVID-19. However, there are many ongoing clinical trials evaluating potential treatments. The World Health Organisation (WHO) will continue to provide updated information as soon as clinical findings become available.

What does Keeping Children Safe in Education 2020 say about Covid-19?

The way schools and colleges are operating in response to coronavirus continues to be different to business as usual. However, as more children return, a number of important safeguarding principles remain the same:

- the best interests of children must always continue to come first
- if anyone in a school or college has a safeguarding concern about any child they should continue to act and act immediately
- a Designated Safeguarding Lead or deputy should be available
- it is essential that unsuitable people are not allowed to enter the children's workforce and/or gain access to children
- children should continue to be protected when they are online

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on children and young people

The Covid-19 crisis will have turned many childhoods upside down and for young people who were already struggling, life will seem even more of a challenge.

Children's well-being has been in decline since 2009 and this outbreak will undoubtedly create difficulties for those having to cope with widespread changes to their daily life.

Currently one in eight children aged 5-19 have a diagnosable mental health condition. Covid-19 may result in heightened feelings of anxiety and worry and could exacerbate low mood and other mental health conditions.

The impact of lockdown

With schools closed for most, children and young people are directly experiencing social distancing, high levels of isolation and wider dislocation. They'll also be exposed to endless news stories and social commentaries about the virus.

The Children's Society "Good Childhood" research, highlighted that young people worry about society and global issues, so we would expect levels of worry to be high during this crisis.

For children and young people with anxiety, depression, OCD, ADHD and serious physical health conditions, the restrictions caused by Covid-19 will be extremely challenging. Mental health services will struggle to deal with demand as staff have to isolate, appointments have to be rescheduled and waiting times increase. The uncertainty of support will be damaging for many children's well-being.

Home alone

Many children and young people have spent a lot more time at home with family and carers, and less time with their friends. We know that familial relationships are an important building block in children's well-being.

The impact Covid-19 might have on family members or carers who are older or vulnerable could have significant impact on children's well-being. Plus, being at home and not having the autonomy and choice they're used to could have been quite damaging.

Similarly, spending less time with friends or being restricted to online socializing can impact children's well-being, especially for those who can't get online, don't feel confident with it, or experience cyberbullying. This disconnection can increase feelings of loneliness and lower well-being.

Money and the future

We know that children growing up in households with problem debt are five times more likely than other children to have low well-being. The consequences of loss of income due to Covid-19 will be significant. Young people whose families who can't access laptops, phones or online learning, may also miss out on vital education, interaction and support.

It may also impact how they think about their future, possibly worrying about the consequences for their family.

Children at risk of abuse and neglect

School closures mean children and young people will be spending a lot more time at home. For many, home will not be a safe space. There are concerns that for children and young people who are experiencing abuse and neglect in the home these risks could be magnified.

With less contact between young people and trusted professionals, it's more likely that cases of abuse, neglect and exploitation will go unseen and unreported. On top of this, individuals may see an increase in unsupervised hours as opportunities to target and groom for sexual or criminal purposes.

This is especially true in the online world. Young people will have been spending a lot more time online and will be at greater risk of online grooming and exploitation. It's important for schools to continue the conversation about staying safe online.

Children at risk of exploitation

School provides a safe place and supervision for vulnerable children, and it is a real concern that without this they may be more at risk of being targeted by criminals seeking to exploit them. Police, public and professionals need to look out for the signs that a child may be at risk and be able to raise any concerns they may have.

Young carers

Schools give young carers a break from their caring responsibilities and provide them with trusted professionals who are aware of their situation. Without school, young carers lose an important part of their support network.

How to help your pupils?

As a teacher or a member of staff in school, it seems that there is an expectation that we instinctively know what to say and do with pupils who are experiencing mental health struggles. However, the coronavirus pandemic will have created a whole new range of traumatic experiences that will have affected many children in different ways. Staff empathy and compassion and the ability to maintain positive and meaningful relationships with pupils could be tested by the behaviours they exhibit.

Children will need to have an adult to talk to about their feelings and emotions, which will need processing after experiencing trauma. Due to the lack of funding in many mental health services, it often comes down to teachers or a member of school staff who can be that safe and trusted adult.

Schools will need to pull together as a community to create a narrative and support structure for their most vulnerable pupils to process any traumas from coronavirus. Here are some strategies and ideas which could be used to help staff to support pupils showing signs of trauma.

A support plan: Schools may need to develop a support plan for vulnerable children that can be shared with their teachers confidentially. For example, an exit pass may be needed to allow a pupil to leave a lesson and go to a supervised designated safe space when they are feeling overwhelmed or too anxious to cope with their lesson.

Coping with grief: Helping the child to process grief will be challenging if they have lost a close friend or family member. They might need to be guided through different ways to express their sadness. This could be through writing, art, music or whichever therapeutic style works for them as an individual. They need to express their feelings and emotions in a way that is right for them. There are many great charities set up to help childhood grief, including Winston's Wish, Child Bereavement UK or online resources from Young Minds.

Strategies and techniques: Giving pupils different techniques and strategies to help to manage anxiety such as exercise, cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) exercises, music or art therapies will be useful. The traumatised body needs strategies to self-calm and soothe so that they can bring down the unnecessary levels of adrenaline in the body and feel more in control.

Rolling news and social media can cause a lot of anxiety. Remind children of the facts and explain what false or sensationalised information is. It's important to allow children to ask questions about the things they see online. And if you don't know the answer, letting them know that some things aren't certain or known yet is okay.

Family engagement: Working closely with families will be vital. Giving pupils' families practical strategies and education about how to support their child will make a huge difference to how they are able to process their trauma and develop coping strategies.

Give parents the opportunity to share concerns they have about their child. They might notice some changes in their child's behaviour that aren't apparent in school. Younger children may start thumb sucking or bedwetting and older children may have mood swings and be irritable. Parents may have noticed changes in appetite or sleep patterns. These can be ways a child is experiencing stress. It takes time to adjust to change and children may need lots of support and reassurance to help them through it. Information from parents is vital, and schools will often need to offer support to families as well as children.

Supporting school staff: School staff themselves will need to have a system in place in school to manage their own mental health. There needs to be a procedure in place for being able to "offload" in the same way that trained counsellors receive supervision.

Also, children may want to disclose some of the traumatic things that they have experienced during "lockdown" and this will need to be reported through usual child protection procedures. However, staff should not be left to sit with these stories on their own. They may need support themselves.

Talking to a child worried about going back to school

There are lots of reasons why a child might be worried or anxious about going back to school. They may be nervous about the changes they'll face – from different teachers to less freedom. They may not enjoy school and are happier at home. They may have experienced bullying or are worried about being bullied. The beginning of the autumn term, and the transition into new year groups, will be a critical time to reassure and reintegrate pupils into a safe and secure school system.

Clear and consistent rules, support and communication will be essential for all pupils, whatever challenges they have faced during lockdown.

Refer your concerns

- Concerns about a child's welfare can vary greatly in terms of their nature and seriousness, how they have been identified and over what duration they have arisen.
- If you have concerns about a child, you should ask for help.
- Follow your child protection policy and speak to the Designated Safeguarding Lead.

It is important to make sure therefore that ALL staff know how to respond to a disclosure from a child. If a child discloses harm to any staff member it must be remembered that the school role is to recognise and refer abuse, not to investigate.

Additional guidance and further reading

- **Your school's risk assessment and Behaviour Policy**
- **Corona Virus (Covid-19): safeguarding in schools, colleges and other providers**
  https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-safeguarding-in-schools-colleges-and-other-providers/coronavirus-covid-19-safeguarding-in-schools-colleges-and-other-providers
- **Essex Schools Infolink – Covid-19**
  https://schools.essex.gov.uk/admin/COVID-19/Pages/default.aspx
- **NSPCC Corona Virus support**
  https://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/coronavirus-advice-support-children-families-parents/
- **Keeping children safe in education –statutory guidance for schools and colleges (September 2020)**
- **Essex Safeguarding Children Board – Corona Virus advice**
  https://www.escb.co.uk/2265
- **World Health Organisation (WHO) advice for preparing the workplace**
  https://essexprimaryheads.co.uk/files/who-advice-for-preparing-the-workplace-covid-19.pdf
- **EPHA Coronacast with Dr Matt Butler**
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qXsWp4Qib3k
- **Student trauma and wellbeing post-lockdown**
  https://www.sec-ed.co.uk/best-practice/student-trauma-and-wellbeing-post-lockdown-mental-health-coronavirus-pastoral-schools/