

Working with children, young people, and families to mitigate the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic

Every child and young person will have been affected in some way by the Covid-19 pandemic. This guidance is aimed at professionals working with children and young people, and combines the current evidence-base with expert clinical opinion. It is intended to make recommendations on how to mitigate the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on children and young people to reduce their vulnerability to psychological distress. We take a trauma-informed perspective, understanding that all children and young people's risks and protective factors need to be understood in context. This guidance is not intended to be an exhaustive protocol for working with children and young people, nor does it aim to address every kind of distress a young person may experience. Though this guidance may be applicable to a number of different professional settings, it is aimed primarily at those working in mental health and social care.

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has caused a lot of disruption to children and young people's lives with potentially increased exposure to distress (e.g. grief and illness, heightened stress within homes). This is happening within a quickly changing national picture, which can cause even more pressure and anxiety for families. Not all children who experience adversity will be negatively affected or go on to experience further mental health difficulties, though, and the presence of protective factors can help lessen the cumulative impact. All children and young people live within a systemic context of families, friends, teachers, wider support networks, as well as any services they access. This context will be embedded within its own culture and traditions, leading to unique coping strategies and styles. Any support for children, young people, and their families needs to be tailored to their circumstances and context.

There is a lot of uncertainty at the moment, particularly for children and young people. There has been a lack of consistent messages about return to school, and ongoing academic pressure with less available support. Many families are facing increased financial hardship. Despite the importance of social support, many children and young people have not been able to play or socialize with friends in person, and many are experiencing increased anxiety about the health and wellbeing of their family and friends. Uncertainty, though, is easier to tolerate when there is a perceived sense of safeness. This guidance looks to help address children and young people's contextual vulnerabilities and to help strengthen protective factors and personal resources.

Key underlying considerations

- Don't make assumptions. Highly stressful situations can bring out both difficulties and strengths that were not obvious beforehand; risks may be(come) hidden, or families may come together in unexpected ways.
- Ensure basic needs are met, including a balanced sleep/wake pattern, nutrition, and basic safety.

- Be aware that stress can be expressed differently by children at different ages, or differently by children of the same age. If you're not sure how a young person is feeling, ask them.
- High levels of stress can impede effective communication between services. It may be worth considering increasing information sharing with other professionals following contact with children, young people, and their families.
- Pay particular attention to the needs of children and family from Black and Minority Ethnic communities, particularly in the current context where political movements (e.g. Black Lives Matter) are highlighting the multiple, systemic discrimination BAME communities are currently facing. BAME families have been disproportionately affected by the wider impacts of the pandemic, including struggling with greater economic and practical hardships, and may be less able to access health advice. Combined with higher Covid-related deaths in these communities (in the community and in health and care settings), BAME children and young people are more likely to be experiencing increased grief and anger.
- A perceived sense of safeness will help children and young people cope with ongoing uncertainty, support greater openness about thoughts and feelings, and form closer social connections. This will help protect against later posttraumatic distress, mental health difficulties, and prolonged experiences of grief.

How to support children and young people

Level of influence	Recommendations
<p><i>Individual</i></p> <p>Even very young children can be sensitive to changes within the family and to their routine, and they may react to this emotionally or behaviourally.</p> <p>As stated, not all children will react in the same way. For some children, including those with neurodevelopmental conditions and mental health difficulties, increased time at home with family may have been easier than being at school or amongst lots of other people. For others, they may be experiencing increased emotional and behavioural difficulties.</p>	<p>Helping children and young people to make time for things which matter to them is likely to be protective of their mood. Try to create a routine which helps to establish a sense of predictability, and help children and young people understand what is and is not within their control. Encourage a mixture of activities that provide a sense of Achievement, Closeness, and Enjoyment.</p> <p>It is important to allow children and young people time to play.</p> <p>Clearly communicate and respond to children and young people’s questions as honestly as possible, including being open about uncertainty. Follow children’s lead to know how much detail to share, and provide opportunities for children and young people to talk about their thoughts and feelings, rather than suppressing them, and help normalize these feelings.</p> <p>Support children and young people to find ways of coping by thinking together about what has helped previously or what might have helped others.</p> <p>Age-appropriate communication is crucial.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● For younger children - their understanding is more factual and concrete, and their focus will be on the present moment as their understanding of past and future will be less developed. It is important to be as honest and clear as possible, without excessive detail or analogies. Using picture prompts, stories, or acting out with toys can help children talk about their worries. Younger children will also struggle to understand that others will have thoughts and experiences that are different from their own, so try to focus the discussion on their experiences, thoughts, and feelings. ● For older children and teenagers - they have an increased understanding of more complex concepts and of experiences outside of themselves. More open questions can provide the

	<p>context for wider discussions about thoughts and feelings. Be aware that, for teenagers in particular, friends will be important sources of support and, with age, they may be less open with professionals and families and more honest with peers.</p> <p>Be aware of past experiences of mental health difficulties or earlier experiences of adversity, as well as any mental health difficulties a child or young person may have been experiencing prior to Covid-19. Both are a risk factor for later posttraumatic distress and mental health difficulties, so these children and young people may need extra support.</p> <p>Give particular attention to those who may be extra-sensitive to times of change, e.g. young people with a history of childhood maltreatment and young people who are neurodiverse. With frequently changing social boundaries, these children/young people and their families/carers may need extra support to think about how to structure their time and may need more reassurance to feel safe.</p>
<p>Family</p> <p>Many families will be under increased stress and anxiety, and also potentially grieving. Parents/carers are likely to be more distracted at the moment and potentially less attuned to children and young people’s needs. For ‘keyworking’ families, vicarious trauma and increased worry about health and well-being is also likely.</p> <p>There have also been increased reports of domestic violence, coercive control, and abuse within family homes. With social distancing, children may have fewer opportunities to disclose. It is important to remember that some children</p>	<p>Support parents/carers to look after themselves so that they can respond to children/young people safely and appropriately. This includes helping families think about what kind of social support is available to them and how this is being used by the family.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Be aware that some children are in situations where they are more vulnerable to becoming young carers. <p>Help families think about the needs of each member of the family and to be alert to how each member of the family may be feeling. This includes helping parents/carers to make time for their own needs so they are then able to look after their children.</p> <p>Help parents/carers recognize signs of distress in children and respond to these behaviours as such rather than interpreting the child or young person as ‘being difficult’. Boundaries should be gently maintained.</p> <p>Try to help families find a balance of what is discussed within the home - only talking about the pandemic and its impact can eclipse other important areas of life.</p>

<p>experiencing abuse within the home may not yet be known to statutory services.</p>	<p>Pay extra attention to safeguarding, particularly as safeguarding and risks assessments may be harder to do virtually.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● If possible, try to maintain some continuity in contact with families where there is a risk of violence or abuse within the home. ● If abuse within the home is suspected, a child or young person is unlikely to disclose with others present. If contact can only be achieved virtually, then as far as possible, try to ensure that child or young person is alone. Encouraging children to use headphones for virtual contacts can also be useful. This way, if the session is being listened to by others in the home, you can provide them with alternative ways to disclose as no one else can hear you. Provide support to access services and alternative housing, if needed. ● Where relevant, ensure that families know that it is permitted for someone to move to a friend's home for a few days in order to 'cool off' from arguments in the house.
<p>Friends</p> <p>Interaction and a sense of belonging with peers and friends is a healthy part of children and young people's social development and a key protective factor for mental wellbeing. Social isolation and loneliness can lead to mental health difficulties later down the line.</p> <p>Teenagers, in particular, are particularly sensitive to social influence, and interaction with peers is a particularly important part of developing autonomy and social identity. Much of this is happening online at the moment, and 'screen time' can play an important role in maintaining social connections.</p>	<p>Help children and young people find sources of support from people they can trust and with whom they feel safe. Think together with children and young people about different ways of socializing with friends to reduce loneliness, emphasizing the importance of <i>quality</i> of interaction rather than <i>quantity</i>.</p> <p>Ensure children have time and opportunity to play with friends in a safe way. Play is important for children's developmental needs and is not a waste of time.</p> <p>Importance of social interaction may be a strength (mutual support) or vulnerability factor (e.g. inability to meet friends in person, exposure to a lot of news, abuse/exploitation).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Encourage children and young people to adopt the same social rules they would online as they would 'in real life' - e.g.) talking to, or meeting, people they don't know; comments made to posts on social media ● Professionals and parents/carers should be open about the benefits and risks on online social interaction, and the use of the internet should be monitored to ensure it is safely used. For younger children, be their 'friend' online. For older children and teenagers, promote openness about their online interactions.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Be aware of changes in children or young people’s mood and behaviour following extended online interactions
<p>School</p> <p>How and when all children and young people physically return to school is currently unknown, though a combination of home- and school-based learning is likely. Nonetheless, schools continue to play a vital role in supporting children and young people’s wellbeing, irrespective of whether they are physically attending.</p> <p>It is, therefore, vital that mental health and social care services work together with schools to mitigate any ongoing risk or vulnerability factors by thinking holistically about the entire student body whilst targeting support for more vulnerable children and young people.</p> <p>Staff support and well-being must also be prioritized so that they can be sensitively attuned to, and flexibly meet, children and young people’s changing needs.</p>	<p>Prioritize mental and emotional wellbeing of children and young people, alongside academic achievement. This includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Allowing children time to play and not just to ‘catch up on lost time’. ● If physical distancing, support children to find ways to stay connected to each other and with teachers/school staff. This will help with a sense of continuity and consistency for the child or young person. ● Stigma is a key barrier for children and young people accessing mental health support. Provide opportunities for all children and young people to be open about any fears or worries about being in or out of school. Note that communication may not always be verbal, so be observant of any changes in behaviour. ● Help boost children and young people’s self-confidence by thinking together about what activities will help them achieve a sense of competence, autonomy, and belonging. <p>Be aware of children and young people’s individual circumstances and contexts during the pandemic, and continue to play a key role in Safeguarding.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Try to speak to children on their own and not just through their parents. ● Follow-up directly with students who are not maintaining contact with the school. ● Help teachers to sensitively ask children and young people about their well-being to provide an opportunity to be open about any need for help or additional support. <p>Advocate for children and young people who may be academically disadvantaged, for example, through access to technology</p> <p>Work together with children and young people, parents, and schools to think about what support may be needed during any breaks, such as over the summer holidays, or reintegration back into a physical school setting. Support access to local offers during summer holidays, and ensuring that there is a joined up plan between services and organizations</p>

	Transitions can be incredibly difficult, particularly for children and young people with additional learning needs, neurodevelopmental conditions, or mental health difficulties. Transitions will need to be managed sensitively and collaboratively.
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This guidance has brought together current research and psychological theories to help think about how to mitigate potential vulnerability to mental health distress in children and young people. There continues to be ongoing uncertainty, particularly with the potential of a 'second wave'. It is important to learn from children, young people, and families, and think together about what is needed to provide safe social and educational experiences. It is clear that all services should work in tandem to support the most vulnerable in society and the mental wellbeing of children and young people should be a priority.

The longer-term impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, though, remains unknown. Ongoing research, ideally co-produced with children, young people, and families, is needed. In particular, this research should focus on hearing the voices of those from the BAME community, and on providing interventions that combines an individual and whole system's approach

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Further resources (please note that this is not an exhaustive list of available resource):

Resources for working with children and young people, including vulnerable and care-experienced children and young people

- British Psychological Society (BPS; <https://www.bps.org.uk/coronavirus-resources>) - The BPS has a number of different resources for professionals ranging from talking to children about illnesses, supporting care-experienced children, and return to school
- Advice for foster carers (<https://www.lucymaddox.co.uk/advice-for-foster-carers>) - clearly-written and brief advice for foster carers
- NSPCC (<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/coronavirus-advice-support-children-families-parents/>) - advice and support for parents and carers, including keeping children safe online
- Anna Freud (National Centre for Children and Families; <https://annafreud.org/coronavirus-support/coronavirus>) - advice for young people, parents and carers, and schools and colleges
- Think U Know (<https://www.thinkuknow.co.uk/>) - information for children and young people of different ages, parents, and professionals about staying safe online and offline
- Young Minds (https://youngminds.org.uk/?gclid=CjwKCAjw-D3BRBIeIwAjVMY7C4pHf_Grc5-O4EEanyY9ILtsez5sk4ApCkthx7fplDhYqMWg2RyYBoCaqcQAvD_BwE) - organization focusing on young people's mental health, with a specific section on Coronavirus advice and mental health support.

Children's books about Covid-19, managing worries, and talking about illness (all free to use)

- Rain Before Rainbows - http://stayhome.walker.co.uk/rainbows/pdf/Rain_Before_Rainbows.pdf
- Bombini the Bee - <http://www.bombinithebee.co.uk/>
- Everybody worries - <https://en.calameo.com/read/000777721945cfe5bb9cc?authid=Xu9pcOzU3TQx>
- Coronavirus: a book for children - <https://axelscheffler.com/books-for-older-children/coronavirus>

Ongoing research about the needs of children, young people, and families

- Emerging Minds (<https://emergingminds.org.uk/>) - guidance for parents and professionals, including a webinar series that provides an overview of a number of topics from leading researchers. This group also hosts the Co-SPACE/SPYCE study, looking at the needs

BAME

- BAME Positive Practice Guide: <https://www.babcp.com/files/IAPT-BAME-PPG-2019.pdf>
- Royal College of Psychiatrists - https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/docs/default-source/about-us/covid-19/impact-of-covid19-on-bame-staff-in-mental-healthcare-settings_assessment-and-management-of-risk_13052020v2.pdf?sfvrsn=1068965_2

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