

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

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## Introduction:

It would be cliché to state that the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted mankind's existence in the 21st century in an unimaginable and unprecedented manner. Hygiene and health topics that would have previously graced the recesses of only the most fastidious minds are now in common discussion. Domestic budgets, health infrastructure and national policymaking has challenges on various fronts. Information technology in its various avatars seems to be our omnipresent friend in the war against our hitherto unrelenting foe. There is a race against time to find an effective and viable remedy.

Globally, there has been much discussion about the impact of the pandemic on specific groups and communities including patients with cancer, individuals living in care homes and minority ethnic backgrounds. I aim to give an overview of the impact on children and young people. Although I have described my experience from psychiatric practice in the United Kingdom and informal conversations relating to both the UK and India, the implications are not restricted to these two countries alone.

Children and youth especially in nations enjoying peacetime and

reasonable economic advantage have not experienced anything of this scale through their short lives on the planet. Although this cohort is not seriously affected by COVID-19 except rare cases of a severe multisystem inflammatory condition, children are likely to have the most life-changing impact from this pandemic for the longest proportion of their lifespan. This impact is expected to come from mediators ranging from financial effects of pandemic-related lockdowns on families to more traumatic ones such as physical and mental health events in parents and loved ones.

Universal concerns:

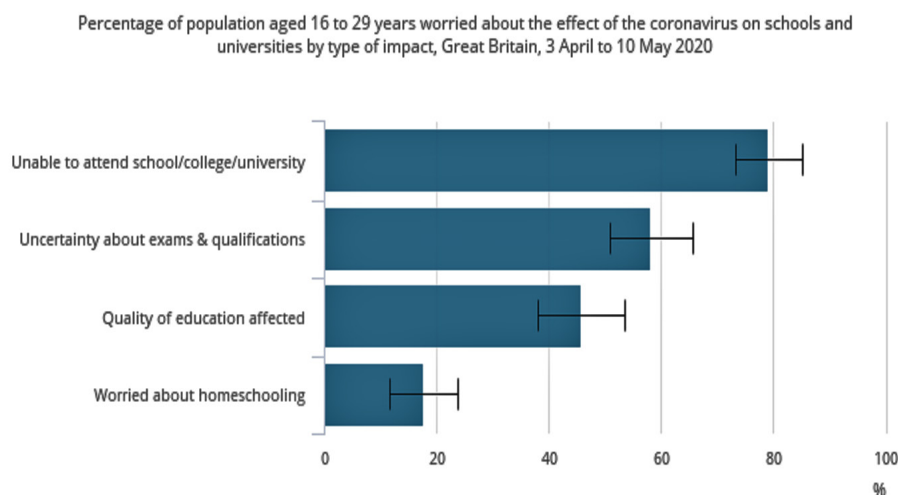
The key educational concerns for young people are about inability to attend school, college or university, uncertainty about exams and qualifications, quality of education and home-schooling<sup>1</sup> (Figure 1). Those in early adulthood have concerns about the change in the economic landscape and skewed employment opportunities.

With lockdown periods of two to three months at a stretch, school attendance was suddenly truncated with an underprepared transition to online learning. This restricted children to their home along with their siblings and parents working from home in many instances. Many parents have been multi-tasking between domestic chores, working from home and supervising their children's

education. This has created unplugged gaps in learning because not all parents have been able to provide individualised tuition to their children. Many children have been grappling with educational material on their own with no access to teacher support and no feedback on completed work. Some of them have been giving up on learning.

Older students appearing for high school board exams have unexpectedly been subjected to automatic progression based on teacher-assessed predictions. For some, this has been a welcome relief. However, for the most achievement-oriented pupils, this has led to a feeling of being robbed of something rightfully theirs and an uncertainty of the impact of such progression on career prospects in the future.

Figure 1: The most commonly reported impact by young people whose schools or universities had been affected



Source: Office for National Statistics - Opinions and Lifestyle Survey

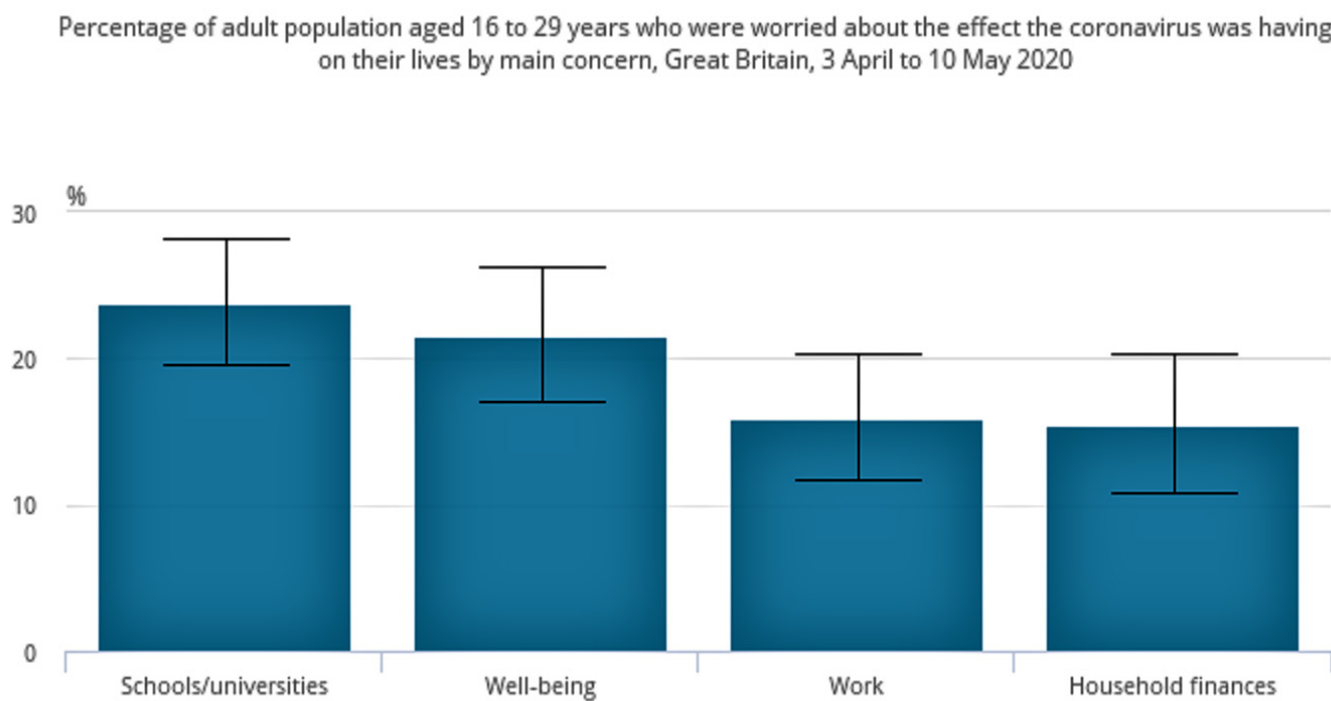
In the absence of a clear policy directive, educational institutions have been inconsistent in their pedagogical adjustments to the new normal. Parental responses have varied, with some parents being perfectly happy to give their children a break from the energy-sapping school day. Others have been highly dissatisfied with the lack of constructive intellectual challenge for able children.

Apart from academic concerns, this period has been marred by loneliness and boredom for many, with limited contact with extended family and friends and absence of outdoor entertainment.

There has been an over-reliance on electronic and social media for education, social contact and recreation. This increase in screen-time coupled with almost no outdoor activity has reduced opportunities for physical exercise. There has been a loss of daily structure with disastrous effects on sleep hygiene and the regularity of sleep cycles.

Well-being and household finances, apart from education and work have been some of the top concerns identified for UK youth during lockdown1 (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Top Worries for young people



Source: Office for National Statistics – Opinions and Lifestyle Survey

**Vulnerable and disadvantaged groups:**

Much of the above is about the large majority of children and young people who have otherwise led normal lives with no significant challenges before the pandemic. For those from socio-economically disadvantaged families and those with pre-existing educational or mental health challenges, these impacts have been accentuated.

Children who received daily free school meals before lockdown are now experiencing a renewed problem2. The Childrens Society has published an extensive report regarding the implications for children and young people from various vulnerable groups 2. Even though younger people are a low risk group for the virus itself, children from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups are experiencing the pandemic differently from their peers because of disproportionate social, economic and psychological impacts on

their communities3. School closures, the greater likelihood of loss of a loved one and lack of proper access to online learning affects this group significantly 3.

**There is an overall increase in stress and arguments within families.**

Increased rates of domestic violence have been reported from various countries4 and it is entirely conceivable that at least a proportion of this abuse is witnessed, or its physical and emotional impact borne by children in varying degrees. There are concerns that the lack of visibility to external agencies has increased the risk of familial abuse of children but that this may be under-reported4. Any of these scenarios can lead to mental health presentations of complex post-trauma syndromes.

Children with special educational needs such as specific or global learning difficulties are likely to have a setback in their progress and run the potential risk of further widening of the gap between their actual and expected attainment. Anecdotal reports describe presentations of children and young people with increased general anxiety, illness fears specific to COVID-19, obsessive-compulsive symptoms and in some areas, an increase in emergency presentations. Experience of sadness, bereavement reactions to COVID-related deaths, sleep difficulties, eating disorder-type symptoms and self-harm or suicidal behaviours increased during the UK lockdown as per data released from Kooth5 (Figure 3). Longer-term increase in the prevalence of mental health conditions amongst youth is expected if there are sustained adverse reactions to the economic downturn resulting from the pandemic.

**The silver lining:**

As is the case with most scenarios, there is also a silver lining. Some children and youth are thriving at home. This is particularly evident in those who feel anxious in social situations. Children who are oversensitive to noise and other sensory stimuli are calmer at home removed from the noisy classroom environment. Some children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) are finding it easier to learn at home, free from the distractions of the classroom. In some of these cases, the overall dose of medication required to function adequately has reduced. The freedom from the pressure of a daily routine has been beneficial for the emotional health and productivity of those with a highly creative mind. Several families have spent quality time baking, playing board games and watching family-oriented television programmes with their children and this has brought families closer. Schools, pharmacies and voluntary agencies have been reaching out to vulnerable families to offer practical support and a safe connection with the external world.

**Management approach:**

The key strategies for coping with the situation involve accessing

someone to talk to, accessing only reliable sources of information, limiting overexposure to the news, engaging in activities to keep oneself occupied, using distraction methods and maintaining a structure and routine to stay physically fit. Parents are advised to adapt and access support on similar lines because parental well-being impacts children positively. Parents, professionals and commissioners need to be aware that additional and early specialist treatments are likely to be needed for children with pre-existing mental health issues where COVID-19-related stress has contributed to an exacerbation.

An overarching holistic approach that addresses lifestyle, emotional well-being and educational progress is crucial for managing the emotional and mental health of children and youth across various geo-socio-economic strata. Managing the far-reaching impact on this group is the key to unlocking the potential for a healthier community in the coming decade and beyond.

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