

YOUNG Mi MINDS



Coronavirus: Impact on young people with mental health needs

Survey 3: Autumn 2020 - return to school

Introduction

Teachers and school staff deserve enormous credit for the work they have done to reopen schools. The logistics of trying to keep large groups of young people safe, of communicating with families, of starting lessons again, and of establishing new routines are extraordinarily complex, especially with guidelines and safety rules changing at short notice.

Even with all this planning, our research suggests that many young people with pre-existing mental health problems have found the first few weeks back in secondary school challenging. A large proportion of those who took part in our survey told us that they have not been able to access the support they need to help them re-adjust.

This is not a criticism of schools. Under huge pressure and with additional costs, many schools simply do not have the resources to provide the level of pastoral support that is now required.

Our previous research shows that the pandemic has had a significant impact on the mental health of many young people: some have been adversely affected by traumatic experiences including bereavement, social isolation, a loss of routine, uncertainty about their futures, or a breakdown in formal and informal support structures. Young people already facing social inequalities may be particularly at risk.

With a likely rise in needs, it is deeply concerning that more young people (23%) said that their school has had to reduce the mental health support that was available previously than those who said that their school has increased it (9%).

While Government guidance has stressed the importance of promoting wellbeing, it has stressed the importance of catching up academically even more. We have heard from children who were asked to sit exams on their first ever day in secondary school and from young people being warned repeatedly about GCSEs while struggling with difficult situations at home. This type of pressure is counter-productive. Young people cannot learn effectively if they are not in a good place emotionally. Making wellbeing a priority is not something you do instead of aiming for academic excellence – it is an essential pre-requisite.

While we welcome existing Government initiatives, including the £8 million Wellbeing in Education Return scheme, these are not enough to meet the needs of young people. In the long term, we need investment in mental health support in schools, building on the plans outlined in the NHS Long Term Plan, and ensuring all schools can take a whole-school approach to mental health. But, right now, we need a Resilience Fund to enable schools to make mental health a priority this academic year.

This would allow each school to provide the additional support that is necessary to support their particular cohort of students – whether that's commissioning a counsellor, working with local charities, bringing in extra staff to provide pastoral support, buying in digital services, or prioritising staff wellbeing, so that teachers are themselves in a good place to provide support to students. There will be many more challenges ahead for children, young people and schools over the coming months. We need to make sure that all young people who need support can get it, and we need to take the pressure off schools. This year, more than any other, we need to ensure that wellbeing is at the heart of our education system.

Emma Thomas, Chief Executive, YoungMinds

This report outlines the results of the third survey we have carried out with young people with a history of mental health needs during the coronavirus pandemic. The first survey was conducted with 2,111 young people in March 2020; the second survey was conducted with 2,036 young people in June and July 2020. Both of these surveys were with young people with a history of mental health needs aged 13 – 25.

This third survey focused specifically on young people with a history of mental health needs who have returned to secondary school or sixth-form college – often for the first time in six months. It was conducted from Friday 15th September to Wednesday 30th September 2020 (usually between the second and fourth weeks of term) with 2,011 young people aged 11 – 18 who have looked for mental health support at some point in their lives. See Methodology section for more details.

Key findings

All participants had a history of mental health needs, and have looked for some form of mental health support previously.

58% of respondents described their mental health as poor prior to schools returning; this has risen to **69%** now that they are back at school.

When asked how they think the return to school so far has affected their mental health, **61%** said that it has had a negative effect. **27%** said it has had a positive effect.

Only **15%** agreed that there was enough information and support available for their mental health at their school, while **58%** disagreed.

Respondents highlighted seeing friends, seeing teachers and returning to a routine as being positive for their mental health; negative factors included renewed academic pressure, concerns about the virus, social distancing measures and reduced mental health support.

Almost a quarter of respondents (**23%**) said that there was less mental health support in their school than before the pandemic, while only **9%** agreed that there was more mental health support.

Only just over a quarter (**27%**) had had a one-to-one conversation with a teacher or other member of staff in which they were asked about their wellbeing in either the Summer term or so far in the Autumn term.

Fewer than two-thirds of respondents (**60%**) said that there was a school counsellor available to support students in their school.

Mental health and returning to school

How would you describe your mental health before the return to school?

6% Very good
14% Quite good
22% Fair
35% Quite poor
23% Very poor

How would you describe your mental health now that you are back at school?

2% Very good
9% Quite good
19% Fair
31% Quite poor
38% Very poor

58% of respondents described their mental health as poor prior to returning to school; this has risen to 69% now that they are back at school.

When asked how they think the return to school has affected their mental health so far, 61% said that it has had a negative effect. 27% said it had had a positive effect. 7% said that it had had neither a positive nor a negative effect.

We asked respondents about the impact of different parts of school life on their mental health:

Seeing classmates

58% said that seeing classmates has had a positive effect, 30% said it has had a negative effect, 12% said it has had no effect.

Routine

47% said that being back in the routine of going to school has had a positive effect on their mental health, 30% said that it has had a negative effect and 19% said it has had no effect.

Lessons

36% said that returning to lessons in the classroom has had a positive effect on their mental health, 43% said that it has had a negative effect and 17% said it had no impact.

Travelling to school

17% said that travelling to school has had a positive effect on their mental health, 36% said that it has been negative and 43% said it has had no impact.

Teachers

46% said that seeing teachers has had a positive effect, 24% said it has had a negative effect, 30% said that it has had no effect.

Extra-curricular activities

22% said that other activities at school (sports, arts, clubs) have had a positive effect, 10% said they have had a negative effect, 33% said that they have had no effect.

Social distancing measures

8% said that social distancing has had a positive effect, 51% said that it has had a negative effect, 36% said it has had no effect.

While it is welcome that schools have re-opened and that young people are able to return to education, our survey indicates that the transition back to school has been very challenging for many young people with existing mental health needs.

Some respondents highlighted the positive aspects of returning to school: seeing friends, returning to a routine and being able to reconnect with teachers and other adults who they trust.

“Going back has made me feel more productive and comfortable, as it’s going back into a routine.”

“My mental health was at its worst during lockdown, since returning to school it has got a lot better as I am around my friends.”

However, more reported feeling **anxious, stressed or nervous** about settling back into school again after many months away. Some felt as though their mental health had started to improve during the course of the lockdown, only to deteriorate when returning to school.

A few mentioned that returning had exacerbated existing mental health conditions and negative coping mechanisms, such as self-harm and eating disorders.

“Overwhelmed, confused, it’s a good thing but it also feels like too much and it’s a massive adjustment in such an uncertain time.”

“I relapsed on the second week back after eight months of being self-harm free. Everything was overwhelming.”

“Going back to school has increased my anxiety levels a lot. After lockdown, I find myself getting nervous about things I could do quite easily before, like walking to class on my own.”

The negative impact on mental health was for a variety of reasons:

School work

Many respondents reported feeling overwhelmed as a direct result of heavy academic workloads since restarting school. Some who had been excited said that this feeling disappeared when they realised how much work they had to do. Young people mentioned reminders about exams being around the corner; feeling pressured to do extra well in general school work in case exams were cancelled again; uncertainty around their future exams and education; and feeling as though they had to go back to normal quickly despite having had six months off.

“I’m glad to be back in a routine but having to treat every assessment as my GCSEs due to the chance of returning to lockdown is very stressful.”

“I felt an enormous amount of pressure to get back into the routine straight away and be back to normal. I also felt huge amounts of pressure to be doing well in all my subjects and to be happy when I’m actually very stressed.”

“Having pre-existing anxiety I feel that there is a lack of support or sympathy. The school is focussed on results and returning to normal, but have not taken into account the mindset of their students that have been isolated for so long. Travelling and socialising is exhausting, but it’s the continued workload that is most distressing.”

"I think schools need to give us less homework and understand for 5 months we have been at home isolating and that it will take time for us to get back to normal and adjust to school life again."

The pandemic

Some young people who responded noted they felt anxious about restarting school due to being around a lot of people for the first time in months. Some mentioned not feeling safe at school, or expressed concerns about social distancing guidelines. There were also a few respondents who worried about being on public transport, either because of concerns about their own health or fears of passing the virus on to others.

"I live with my nan and grandad and have to get the bus and be in a bubble with 400 people. It is not safe."

"I feel worried that I am going to catch coronavirus and the government is doing nothing. We are forced to stay in classrooms with no social distancing all day."

Poor relationships with others

Some respondents specifically mentioned that they felt 'judged' at school, while others mentioned bullying and others making fun of them, and problems with relationships with friends as reasons they weren't happy to be back.

"I feel bad because I have few friends and I'm so nervous all the time. A few people at school are bullying me."

"People are saying things. My mental health is down. Being in the LGBTQ community, I get bullied a lot and nothing gets said."

Mental health support at school

What types of mental health support and information are available at school?

Young people in our survey said they were aware of the following types of mental health support in their school:

- 60% a school counsellor
- 54% support from teachers
- 42% access to information about where to get further support if they are struggling with their mental health
- 32% lessons about wellbeing
- 21% mental health support teams
- 17% peer-support

How has mental health support changed in schools?

9% of young people agreed that there is **more mental health support** available in their school than before the lockdown

58% said that there is the **same level of mental health support** available

23% agreed that there is **less mental health support** available

Wellbeing catch-ups

When asked if they have had a one-to-one catch up with a member of staff since returning to school (either in the Summer term or in the Autumn term so far), **38%** said they have had, **59%** said they haven't.

Of those who have had a catch up with a member of staff, **70%** were asked about their wellbeing, **23%** were not.

This means that, at the time they answered the survey, only **27%** of respondents had had a one-to-one catch up with someone at school in which they have been asked about their wellbeing.

Teachers and school staff

15% of young people agreed that their school has offered enough information and support for their mental health, **58% disagreed**

14% of young people agreed that their teachers have been more understanding of their mental health needs since lockdown, **49% disagreed**

27% of respondents said that they had teachers and staff that they could talk to about how they are feeling. **42% of young people said they do not**

Many young people who took part in our survey acknowledged the pressure that schools and teachers are under, and some reported that teachers have been more **supportive and understanding** since they returned to school. This included teachers being more vocal about mental health needs and access to support, as well as offering one to one sessions or lessons on mental health.

Some respondents have noticed more posters and signposting to support around the school whilst a few young people have been able to arrange a **phased return to school with an adjusted timetable**. Other positives included short breaks and 'time out cards' to notify the teacher when they are struggling and need to leave the classroom.

However, many respondents felt that the support available at their schools was inadequate. When asked to explain how mental health support in their school has changed, many young people stated that there was **little mental health provision** in their school before lockdown and this has not changed since they returned. Almost a quarter of respondents said that mental health support within their school had been reduced since before the pandemic.

Due to new social distancing restrictions, and classes operating in year bubbles, a number of young people have lost access to key members of staff (tutors, pastoral staff etc) who were previously available to support them.

In some cases, counsellors who were working in schools before the pandemic have not returned to work in the school. In other cases, limited physical movement in schools has meant that young people are no longer allowed to travel to the counsellor's or nurse's office for support.

"I used to have sessions weekly with a school counsellor which stopped due to lockdown and have not started again, even though I need them just as much."

Young people have also noticed an **increase in students requiring support and counsellors being overwhelmed**. Some have decided not to seek support to avoid becoming a burden or did not see the value of joining the long waiting lists.

A number of young people that had transitioned from school to college said that they were unsure about how to access mental health support at their new institution and that they did not feel confident talking to their new teachers in the same way that they had in the past.

Others believed that the teachers were less available than they had been before. This may be due to teachers having less time to check in with young people or social distancing measures reducing the contact time with teachers.

'It feels as if no one cares or if I do say anything about my mental health they'd just blame hormones or come out with a robotic answer.'

"The pastoral care teachers are now more busy and take less time to check in with pupils."

"I used to have one to one sessions with my teacher about my mental health, but am now unable to have these sessions due to mixing of the year groups"

"I don't know the teachers at college as well as I knew my old school teachers and so I no longer have them to talk to and confide in"

Some respondents also noticed a **decrease in mental health lessons and sessions**, with their school trying to spend as little time as possible in class. This also impacted after- school clubs, which have been cancelled in some cases, and lunch and break times being shortened. Young people reported that this has negatively affected their coping strategies, with less time to see and talk to friends or teachers during break and lunch time. Some respondents saw mental health lessons as tokenistic.

‘There was a poster about depression in the maths corridor but they took it down and replaced with an Isaac Newton poster’

A small number of young people shared their desire to **support and raise awareness of mental health in their schools** through various activities (running mental health clubs, delivering a presentation, raising it with the school council etc), but said that they had faced challenges in receiving support for this from the school. .

What would be helpful for young people’s mental health?

When asked what kind of information and support would be helpful in their school both for them and other young people:

87% said space to take some time if things get too much

59% said extra help with school work

54% said mental health support from teachers,

51% said lessons on wellbeing and mental health,

47% said school counsellors

43% said information around the school or college on where to get support

24% said after school clubs

Young people also talked about having **less pressure on them at school** and more understanding and consideration from the school and teachers in regard to their mental health. Many wanted a more relaxed approach to exams and extra time for homework. Some also suggested that regular check-ins would be helpful, since they find it hard to come out and say they are struggling.

Respondents also talked about being able to get support from a **variety of different avenues**. Suggestions included peer support groups, texts to parents, boxes where you can anonymously flag things with teachers and clubs within school rather than only after school. Respondents also mentioned they would like universal support, rather than support only being available to those deemed most in need.

60% of young people said that there are friends in their lives that they can talk to about how they are feeling. **24%** of young people reported that they do not have friends in their lives that they can talk to about the way they are feeling.

Future worries and concerns

We asked all respondents what their top three concerns were about the coming months. The most common responses to this question related to:

1. A second wave of the pandemic or future lockdowns to stop the spread of the virus
2. Exams and pressures related to school and exams
3. Concerns about their mental health getting worse

Worries about the second wave and the introduction of further lockdowns related to:

- Not being able to see friends or family
- Having to re-adjust to another routine or schedule again
- Schools and colleges needing to close again meaning that learning would need to take place online
- Not being able to celebrate special occasions (such as Christmas or birthdays) with people
- Impact on own and family's work
- Catching the virus and passing onto others, including vulnerable family members.

Many young people expressed concerns related to their education and exams. The most reported worries related to this were:

- Anxiety around taking exams and uncertainty about what will happen to GCSEs and A-Levels next year
- Preparing for mock exams and what impact that will have on their grades
- Concerns about how they would catch up on missed work or an increase in the workload since being back at school
- Pressure to do well in exams or fears that they won't do well in exams
- Anxiety around applying to university over the next year

Many young people also reported their concern that their mental health would get worse over the coming months:

- Increased levels of anxiety
- Not feeling like they will be able to cope if there is a second wave or new lockdown measures introduced
- Concern about whether they will be able to access mental health support
- Worrying about a friend's mental health

Further worries that young people identified were:

- Not being able to enjoy adulthood
- Appearance or body related concerns
- Bullying or pressure from peers
- Having to wear face masks for a long time

Conclusion

The COVID-19 crisis has undoubtedly had a significant impact on the mental health of many children and young people across the country. Our previous research, and that of others, has showed that traumatic experiences at home, social isolation, the loss of routine, fears about the pandemic and disruption to education have all increased pressure on young people. In many cases, young people with mental health needs have also struggled to access support over the last few months, for a variety of reasons.

Conversely, as safety restrictions eased during the summer, some young people have adapted well during the lockdown period, including some who have a protective home environment and a difficult relationship with their school. Many young people have shown considerable resilience during the pandemic.

It is too early to draw definitive conclusions about the mental health impact of returning to school – young people’s feelings and experiences are likely to vary considerably, and to change over time as they readjust. Recent evidence from Ofsted suggests that many young people are settling in well and happy to see friends again, while others are more tired, upset, agitated, subdued and anxious than they were previously.¹

However, our survey suggests that young people with pre-existing mental health problems have, for the most part, found the immediate return to school challenging. This is predominantly for three reasons: a rapid return to academic pressure; concerns about safety and social distancing measures; and difficult relationships with peers, including bullying.

Worryingly, there does not appear to have been a ‘soft landing’ for these young people. Time and again, respondents told us that not enough allowances were being made for what they had been through over the previous few months. Most said that the mental health support available was inadequate.

There is still time for the Government to address this. Firstly, we need the message to come through loud and clear that this is an exceptional year. While it is crucial to address academic inequalities and help young people catch up with learning that they may have missed, placing extra pressure on young people who are struggling with their mental health right now is counter-productive. The Government needs to take the pressure off schools – for example by not publishing league tables for this academic year – and ensure that they have time to re-adjust.

Secondly, schools need extra funding to be able to provide wellbeing and mental health support. Of course, this must happen alongside improved access to NHS mental health services, but – given that thresholds for specialist treatment are often high – it is important that schools can deliver support on-site. This could, for example, be through commissioning in-school counselling services, working with local charities, providing extra pastoral support through increased hours for relevant staff or commissioning digital services.

¹ Ofsted: COVID-19 series – briefing on schools, September 2020: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/924670/Schools_briefing_COVID-19_series_Sept-20202.pdf

The Government has recently announced a £1 billion catch-up fund for the 2020-2021 academic year to help tackle the impact of lost teaching time, including a £650 million catch-up premium. However, most school leaders are not planning to spend this funding on wellbeing or mental health support². Similarly, the £8 million Wellbeing in Education Return Programme, which provides welcome support to groups of schools, does not have the scale required to address the widespread mental health challenges faced by individual students.

We are therefore calling for the **urgent introduction of a ringfenced Resilience Fund** for schools to use to ensure young people are given the mental health and wellbeing support they need during this academic year. This would sit separately, but complementary to, the catch-up premium, ensuring existing funding can be effectively focused on academic catch-up while separately addressing wellbeing issues that might prevent full engagement with learning.

An effective Resilience Fund will provide additional funding for schools to develop bespoke mental health support packages for their students. No two schools are the same. Each face their own challenges and sit within different local contexts, meaning the Resilience Fund must not prescribe solutions to schools but allow them to be flexible and adaptable to their students' needs.

In the longer term, the Government should follow through on its plans to improve mental health support in schools through the NHS Long Term Plan, and also ensure that all schools have the resources they need to take a whole-school approach to mental health.

² Ofsted: COVID-19 Series – briefing on schools, September 2020; and NFER: The challenges facing schools and pupils in September 2020: [nfer.ac.uk/media/4119/schools_responses_to_covid_19_the_challenges_facing_schools_and_pupils_in_september_2020.pdf](https://www.nfer.ac.uk/media/4119/schools_responses_to_covid_19_the_challenges_facing_schools_and_pupils_in_september_2020.pdf)

Methodology

This report outlines the results of the third survey that we have carried out during the coronavirus pandemic with young people with a history of mental health needs - defined as young people up to the age of 25 who answered 'yes' to the question 'Have you ever looked for support for your mental health?' Previous surveys were conducted in [March 2020](#) and [June 2020](#).

This third survey was conducted between Friday 15th September to Wednesday 30th September 2020, usually between the second and fourth weeks of term. This was after many children and young people returned to school for the first time since March 2020. The survey was completed online and distributed through YoungMinds newsletters and social media.

Of the young people that responded to the survey;

- 81% are continuing at their previous school or college
- 16% are starting at a new school or college
- 2% were at school or college but have decided to continue to study at home

Among the respondents, 6% reported being aged 10-12 years; 54% reported to be 14-15 years and 40% reported to be aged 16-18. The majority of respondents identified as female (74%), and 82% told us that they were White British. 83% of the young people that responded currently live in England, 8.5% in Scotland, 4.7% in Wales and 3.3% in Northern Ireland. 6% of the respondents said that they had been advised to shield during the pandemic and 5.8% told us that they had a long-term illness or disability that impacts on their ability to carry out day to day tasks.

Based on this, and the sampling method, the data cannot be considered to be representative. Additionally, as the survey was completed online, some young people without appropriate access to technology are less likely to have completed it. However, the results provide a valuable snapshot of children and young people's experiences of returning to school in a fast-changing situation.



A yellow circular logo with a white border. Inside the circle, the text reads: 'YM | Parents Helpline', '0808 802 5544', 'youngminds.org.uk', and 'Mon-Fri 9.30am-4pm'. The 'YM' is in a large, bold, sans-serif font.

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