

Monday 13 July 2020

Barnardo's new report, *Mental Health and Covid-19: In Our Own Words*, was co-produced with young people who carried out their own research with nearly 150 young people and found that the pandemic is having a significant impact on their mental health. The report explores children and young people's experiences of lockdown and makes a number of recommendations about the changes needed to ensure the right support is available in the months and years to come.

"The data in this project has been surprising, saddening and inspiring, changing with each question. It has given an insight into many lives that would have gone unheard otherwise and we know they've now been listened to, even if at the least, by us." - Young Person supported by Barnardo's

1. Children's mental health before Covid-19

- Before the pandemic, **one in eight** five-to-19-year-olds already had a diagnosable mental health condition¹.
- Children from low-income families were **four times** more likely to experience mental health problems than children from higher-income families.²
- Less than **1 in 3** children and young people with a diagnosable mental health condition had access to NHS care and treatment.³
- Children waited an average of **two months** to begin mental health treatment in 2019, double the Government's four week target.⁴

2. Impact of Covid-19

- Covid-19 is an era defining event and has exposed the nation's children to **trauma, adversity and loss** which can have a long-term impact on their mental health.
- A recent YouGov survey of over 4,000 8-24 year olds for Barnardo's found that **one in three** have suffered additional mental health challenges during lockdown.⁵
- For **vulnerable children**, the impact is even more pronounced, with many families under increasing financial and emotional pressures, and a rise in domestic abuse.⁶
- In April, **69%** of Barnardo's frontline staff reported supporting someone with increased mental health issues due to covid-19 including anxiety, sleep dysregulation, stress, and depression.⁷
- Many children we support are also struggling with **isolation and loneliness**. This is especially true for young people living alone, including some care leavers.
- Children are also experiencing loss of **freedom, identity or companionship**.

¹ [NHS Digital 2018](#)

² Morrison Gutman et al, 2015. [Children and young people's mental health: the facts](#).

³ National Audit Office, 2018. [Improving children and young people's mental health services](#).

⁴ Education Policy Institute, 2020. [Access to child and adolescent mental health services in 2019](#).

⁵ Barnardo's, June 2020. [Generation lockdown: a third of children experience increased mental health issues](#).

⁶ Guardian, 2020. [Surge in domestic abuse during covid-19](#).

⁷ Barnardo's Quarterly Practitioner Survey, April 2020.

"The responses highlighted to me that the needs and voices of the most vulnerable children and young people had been forgotten in the pandemic, with many of society's most vulnerable children and young people left with no support at all. If we learn anything from coronavirus it must be to make a change, listen to and prioritise these groups of children and young people."

- Young Person supported by Barnardo's

3. Groups most at risk

- Covid-19 has compounded **existing inequalities**, with vulnerable and marginalised groups facing additional challenges.
- Many children with pre-existing **mental health issues** have reported missing out on support. This is due to '**digital poverty**' (lack of devices or data); or finding it difficult to talk on the phone or online. ('Virtual' provision has worked well for some children and young people, but not for all.)
- **BAME** children are more likely to have experienced **bereavement or serious illness** in the family and to be anxious about the virus. Combined with the fact that BAME children are already more likely to be living in poverty, face racism and are less likely to access support, the impact on their mental health is significant.
 - NHS online mental health support has seen a **26.6%** increase in BAME children contacting them with suicidal thoughts.⁸
- **Young carers** are likely to have been under additional pressure, taking on more caring responsibilities, feeling anxious about their loved ones, and being especially isolated from friends.

"Been a reminder that I've not got the same support as others like a Mum and Dad, whereas other people at my university are getting collected by family. I'm here alone." - Young Person supported by Barnardo's (Care leaver)

4. What needs to change?

"Moving forward we would like to see an increase in the amount of mental health support for young people across the country. We would also like to see more education for young people on the support available to young people coming out of lock down including the use of apps and social media in providing information, advice and guidance. The final improvement we would like to see moving forward is the level of support for the young people who have been unable to take exams due to COVID-19 and as a result have missed vital learning time."

- Young person supported by Barnardo's

Too many children and young people have to reach crisis point before they can access support. Those involved in this research told us they wanted support at the earliest possible stage before their needs escalate. They told us they do not feel listened to, and that they thought decision makers needed to learn from children and young people's own experiences of what can benefit their mental health and wellbeing.

Barnardo's is calling on the Government to take the following steps in order to improve children and young people's wellbeing:

Short term

1. Provide a free summer programme of resilience-building and social activities for all children and young people, but targeting the most vulnerable.

⁸ Cambell, D. (2020) Covid-19 affects BAME youth mental health more than white peers – study. The Guardian

2. Provide timely, transparent and clear information for children, young people and families about Covid-19 and address their concerns directly to help reduce anxiety about the virus.
3. Provide additional resources to schools to help them respond to children's mental health needs when they return in September. This should include drawing on expertise from charities and working closely with statutory agencies.

Long term

4. Rebalance the education system so that mental health and wellbeing are on par with academic attainment.⁹
5. Redesign mental health and wellbeing support, in partnership with children and young people - moving away from tiers and thresholds and towards a continuum of care that includes digital services and alternative therapies, and ends the 'cliff edge' at age 18.

In addition, we welcome the Government's commitment to invest in apprenticeships and traineeships through the 'Opportunity Guarantee' — but it is vital that these are accessible to the most disadvantaged young people such as care leavers, who often need additional support to take part. The Government should also consider introducing part-time and more flexible apprenticeships for young people with caring responsibilities or other vulnerabilities.

Questions for the Government:

- What support and activities will be available to vulnerable children during the summer holidays.
- What plans does the Government have to publish clear guidance about Covid-19 specifically for children and young people, or to communicate with them directly.
- What steps is the Government taking to ensure that schools can respond effectively to children and young people's mental health needs when they return in September.
- What recent assessment has the Government made of the link between supporting children's mental health and wellbeing and levels of academic attainment.
- What recent assessment has the Government made of (a) the effectiveness of the 'tiers' system in CAMHS (b) the use of alternative therapeutic approaches for children who have experienced trauma.

About Barnardo's

Barnardo's is the UK's largest national children's charity. In 2018/19, we supported around 300,000 children, young people, parents and carers through more than 1,000 services. In 2018/19, we supported over 40,000 children, young people, parents and carers through our mental health services, including 28,700 children supported through our school-based programmes, aimed at improving social and emotional learning. For more information please contact Emeka Forbes (Public Affairs Officer) at emeka.forbes@barnardos.org.uk or 07531 097 907.

⁹ For more information see our report [Time For a Clean Slate](#)