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ADOLESCENTS' LOCKDOWN-INDUCED COPING EXPERIENCES (ALICE) STUDY

YOUNG PEOPLE'S MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING IN THE NORTH WEST DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: EVIDENCE BRIEFING

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INTRODUCTION

The ALICE study is a research project aiming to explore what risk and protective factors are associated with early adolescent mental health during Covid-19. Early adolescence (11-14 years old) is a critical period of development, where young people are developing social skills and forming relationships outside the family. During lockdown and tier restrictions due to Covid-19, usual developmental experiences in school and with family are interrupted, during a period of uncertainty. We wanted to find out how young people experience and manage their wellbeing during lockdown.

In total, 294 young people took part in the study, between 9th September 2020 and 22nd December 2020. Most participants were aged 11 (34.4%), 12 (31%), or 13 (26.5%) years old. More males took part (52.4%), with 45.6% identifying as female, 1.4% as other, and 0.7% preferring not to say. In terms of ethnicity, the majority of young people identified as White (76.9%), followed by 8.8% Asian or Asian British, 7.5% Mixed Ethnicity, 2% Chinese or Chinese British, 2% other ethnic group, 1.7% preferring not to say, and 1% Black or Black British. Half of those who took part stated having no religion (51.4%), followed by Christian (32.7%), Muslim (8.2%), and Hindu (1.4%) as the dominant religious groups. Most young people identified as heterosexual (79.9%), with 10.2% preferring not to say how they identified, and 9.5% identifying as gay, bisexual, transgender, or belonging to LGBTQIA+.

We also asked about young people’s home life. Most said they did not receive ‘free school meals’ (83%), lived in a semi-detached (42.2%), terraced (31%), or detached house (15.6%), lived with a 2-parent family (83.3%) and did not move between mum and dad’s house (86.1%), and did not have any caring responsibilities (87.8%). Most lived with 1 sibling (46.9%), followed by 2-siblings (19.4%) or were lone children (18.7%).

Most did not have anyone at home who were ‘shielding’ or considered ‘high risk’ (71.8%), and almost half (44.2 %) had a keyworker in their home (e.g., providing essential work during lockdown such as nurse, supermarket worker, delivery driver), while 47.3% did not.

SURVEY RESULTS

Young people completed an online survey that asked questions about themselves and their experiences of lockdown (see references for details). They then completed some questions focusing on four different outcomes: overall wellbeing, optimism, and mental health. The mental health questions were split into internalising difficulties (e.g., anxiety and

depression) and externalising difficulties (e.g., behavioural problems).

We investigated whether any factors related to the young people and their home life were associated with their wellbeing, optimism, or mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic.

1. YOUNG PEOPLE FACTORS

GENDER

Girls were significantly more likely to experience internalising difficulties than boys, and boys had significantly higher levels of overall wellbeing and optimism than girls.

| | MALE | FEMALE |
|----------------|------------------|------------------|
| | <i>Mean Rank</i> | <i>Mean Rank</i> |
| OPTIMISM* | 132.98 | 105.57 |
| WELLBEING* | 140.7 | 112.54 |
| INTERNALISING* | 106.06 | 159.02 |
| EXTERNALISING* | 127.64 | 133.83 |

*p<.05

ETHNICITY

Caucasian participants had significantly lower levels of externalising difficulties and higher overall wellbeing than non-Caucasian participants. No other differences were found.

| | CAUCASIAN | NON-CAUCASIAN |
|----------------|-----------|---------------|
| OPTIMISM* | 123.16 | 107.44 |
| WELLBEING* | 131.13 | 105.85 |
| INTERNALISING* | 124.75 | 142.87 |
| EXTERNALISING* | 122.45 | 151.67 |

MEDICAL OR HEALTH NEEDS AND DISABILITIES

Young people who reported previously receiving help for mental health difficulties (anxiety or depression) had significantly lower levels of optimism and overall wellbeing, and were more likely to experience internalising and externalising difficulties than those who did not.

Having a special educational need or disability (SEND) significantly affected overall wellbeing and internalising and externalising difficulties, but not optimism.

Having a long-term medical need did not affect any of the outcomes.

| | NONE | COMMUNICATION** | COGNITION** | S&P** | SPLD** | SEMH** |
|----------------|-------|-----------------|-------------|-------|--------|--------|
| OPTIMISM | 13 | 13 | 15 | 13 | 14 | 11 |
| WELLBEING* | 22.35 | 22.35 | 22.35 | 23.21 | 18.59 | 17.71 |
| INTERNALISING* | 6 | 10 | 9 | 12 | 7 | 12.5 |
| EXTERNALISING* | 2 | 3 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 4.5 |

** Categories of need: communication and interaction; cognition and learning; sensory and/or physical needs; specific learning difficulties; social, emotional and mental health difficulties

HELP-SEEKING INTENTIONS

Young people were asked to report on the likelihood of them seeking help for a personal or emotional problem, and who they would go to for help. Young people who were more likely to seek help had significantly higher levels of optimism and lower levels of internalising difficulties.

Young people who reported having a wide range of people they would go to for help had significantly higher levels of wellbeing and lower levels of internalising and externalising difficulties.

2. FAMILY AND HOUSEHOLD FACTORS

RECEIPT OF FREE SCHOOL MEALS

10% of young people reported receiving free school meals (FSM). Those who received FSM had significantly higher levels of externalising difficulties, but there were no other differences in their mental health or wellbeing.

| | FSM | NON-FSM |
|----------------|--------|---------|
| OPTIMISM | 116.14 | 115.99 |
| WELLBEING | 104.98 | 122.61 |
| INTERNALISING | 143.67 | 121.42 |
| EXTERNALISING* | 171.28 | 118.00 |

FAMILY MEMBERS

Young people who had a key worker in their family had significantly higher wellbeing than those who did not. Those who did not know whether they had a key worker at home had the worst wellbeing.

| | KEY WORKER AT HOME | NO KEY WORKER AT HOME | DON'T KNOW |
|----------------|--------------------|-----------------------|------------|
| OPTIMISM | 14 | 13 | 12 |
| WELLBEING* | 23.21 | 22.35 | 21.78 |
| INTERNALISING* | 6 | 7 | 10 |
| EXTERNALISING | 2 | 3 | 3 |

However, young people having someone at home who was shielding or high risk did not significantly affect their mental health or wellbeing.

HOUSEHOLD DIFFICULTIES

Having a higher number of household difficulties (lost job, money worries, evicted, trouble accessing food, trouble accessing medication, hospitalisation for any reason, or bereavement) was significantly related to lower levels of optimism and overall wellbeing, and higher levels of internalising and externalising difficulties.

3. COVID-19 FACTORS

FEAR OF COVID

Reporting high levels of fear of COVID-19 was significantly related with lower levels of optimism and overall wellbeing, and higher levels of internalising and externalising difficulties.

KNOWLEDGE OF COVID-19

Young people who felt they had higher levels of knowledge about COVID-19, and who thought their families had high levels of knowledge, were both significantly more likely to report following the Government guidance. However, knowledge about COVID-19 was not related to mental health or wellbeing.

OPINIONS OF LOCKDOWN

Young people who reported having a positive experience during lockdown were more optimistic, had better overall wellbeing, and had lower levels of internalising and externalising difficulties

TIMING – THE FIRST INTRODUCTION OF TIER 3 IN LIVERPOOL (14TH OCTOBER 2020)

Young people who completed the survey after the introduction of tier 3 measures in Liverpool had significantly lower levels of optimism, but there were no other differences in their mental health or wellbeing.

WHAT DID YOUNG PEOPLE TELL US?

Interviews with young people revealed both positive and negative aspects of lockdown. Four key themes regarding their perceptions of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown on their wellbeing: Change, Embracing Lockdown, Feelings of Loss, and Stress, Worry and Challenge.

CHANGE: “LIFE FEELS WEIRD”

Several young people described life as feeling “weird” during lockdown. They identified several key changes in their life, mostly relating to either their lifestyle or school.

Lifestyle changes included changes to their daily routine, including their sleeping and eating habits, changes to their relationships (both getting closer to their family and drifting from their friends) and changes to their physical activity.

“I definitely played a lot less with [my friends]. I don’t know why it was I just wasn’t really enthusiastic enough to play with them. They didn’t really play with each other as well”

“Well, I’ve got to spend more time with my family, and with my sister and stuff. Because usually we just like, would say bye in the morning, then when we come back, we’d just go on our phones and stuff, and not really speak to each other but we’ve had more time together and stuff so that’s good”

“I’d wake up like, my sleep pattern was very bad. I could wake up at 7pm and go to sleep at like 9am, like it was so bad”

School changes focused on things that were different about working from home, changes to the style of their lessons, and changes associated with the period going back to school in September 2020 with the introduction of new restrictions.

“Well, we’d just go to school and come back and we’d just stay in our uniform, and we wouldn’t have to worry about Coronavirus but now we need to be extra careful”

“It’s a bit weird because you have to wear like masks in the corridors and stuff. And you stay in the same classroom all day. You don’t really get to walk around as much in school and stuff”

EMBRACING LOCKDOWN

Some young people described the positives of lockdown, and made a conscious effort to engage in self-care and make the most of the situation.

Young people said they enjoyed having more free time, which provided them with opportunities to relax, learn new skills, and pick up new hobbies. Others enjoyed having more time to spend with their family, and used technology to keep in touch with their friends and wider family members.

“We got to spend lots more time with each other. We got to do cooking, like baking cakes and all that, so that was quite nice and we would spend time in the garden when it was sunny, so that was nice”

“Well, I got to spend more time at home with my family and stuff, and there was more time to relax”

“I guess I’ve come to see how lucky I am to have all these friends”

Young people also actively adopted self-care strategies to boost their wellbeing and identified the things that helped them to cope.

“Doing art things like that really...that made me more happier”

“If I did feel frustrated, I think I’d just probably forget schoolwork for that day because I could catch it up on another day. I’d probably just listen to music or something, just to try and cheer me up or like read a book because I know that just watching TV would just not help that much”

FEELINGS OF LOSS

Lots of young people experienced feelings of loss in several different ways. For some, it was the loss of routine and their independence that was challenging.

“It was quite frustrating because I just wanted to go out but I couldn’t”

Some described how losing their hobbies or the opportunity to engage in new experiences was particularly difficult for them.

“I used to go to Guides every single Wednesday and in lockdown, we would just have a zoom call and then it was the summer holidays and it’s just not been the same really... it does make me feel upset”

For others, it was the sense of loneliness or missing people.

“It was very strange not going into school, I couldn’t really go and see my friends, because we weren’t allowed to go out to do other things, and it was hard not being able to see your friends because it was very sudden”

The loss of face-to-face support from teachers was also noted by lots of young people.

“I didn’t really like it because I’d rather be at school. Because I’d be able to ask the teacher and all that type of stuff. And, when you’re online you’re not able to like, do that. I kind of like being in school more”

“So you just message [the teachers] saying I didn’t really understand that bit and they would get back to me, but I found that bit really hard, because with some types of work like Spanish, I felt it was better with help from the teachers, because it’s languages and you need to hear it, so it makes sense”

STRESS, WORRY, AND CHALLENGE

Young people described certain elements of the COVID-19 pandemic that made them find it difficult, or that made them feel stressed or worried. They described experiencing a range of emotions in response to this, including anger and frustration, nervousness and sadness, and boredom and confusion.

“It does make me feel upset because I guess I just want to go back to normal like without COVID and all that. So it’s just a bit upsetting to be honest”

Some annoyance was directed at the Government’s handling of the lockdown and the restrictions that had been put in place, whilst some focused on the media portrayal of the pandemic.

“I was feeling quite angry because I couldn’t go and see my friends, because my dad was working, that made me quite sad, because they would go and see each other. I feel like the government could have handled it better, so they could have said wear masks earlier, and I guess just... just like, staying at home a lot, like, I would get quite annoyed at things”

“Sometimes when I see stuff on the news, reporting like there’s been how many deaths there’s been, I get a bit worried”

Some were worried specifically about COVID-19, including their family members catching it.

“I’m worried that someone in my family is gonna get really sick and then end up having to go to hospital for a while or, the worst thing happening”

A major challenge for most young people was managing their school work from home, and most said that they would prefer to be in school. Technology was a particular factor in this.

“At the start, it was really hard because I didn’t really know how like Google Classroom was working so I was working on my mum’s old Kindle, because that’s the only thing that would be working, and I couldn’t take photos on it so I had to say to my teachers, I’ve done it on paper. And then I started using my tablet, which, that was a lot better. So it was hard to try and, you know, stay positive about it. But I guess there was nothing else we could do”

“it was a bit like stressful with the work and stuff because we had quite a lot of work to do, and it was like quite hard to keep like concentrated and stuff when I’m at home because I could easily just go on my phone or like go to my dog or stuff”

“It was really hard because, because the teachers they...some of them weren’t as supportive, I guess as others. So I would submit some work and some teachers would get back straight away, and some of them would leave it until quite a while. I guess that had knocked my confidence a bit because I didn’t know if I was doing it right or wrong. So that was quite hard”

However, some enjoyed being able to work on their own schedule, and enjoyed having more free time.

“We didn’t have to wake up at a certain time to do it. We could do it any time that we wanted, so that was absolutely amazing. The work was actually kind of fun to do on like your laptop and all that instead of like a loud, noisy classroom”

REFERENCES – LIST OF MEASURES

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CARING FOR YOUR WELLBEING DURING COVID-19

We asked young people what advice they had for others managing lockdown and returning to school. Here is what they told us, entirely in their own words...

MAKE THE MOST OF LOCKDOWN. HAVE FUN DURING IT AND DO STUFF THAT YOU LIKE.

People are finding vaccines every day. So you should wait it out, follow the guidelines, and it should go away.

Make sure you’re organised. I didnt have a schedule in lockdown but I think it would have been much better if I did.

DONT WORRY ABOUT IT TOO MUCH. THERES NOTHING YOU CAN REALLY DO, APART FROM BE CAREFUL. TRY TO STAY FOCUSED.

Try to make it more exciting for yourself, it’s a new experience, try and enjoy it.

Find TV shows or games. You’ve got family that you can play games with. Keep yourself entertained. The second that you start losing stuff to do, it will get really boring.

KEEP IN TOUCH WITH YOUR FRIENDS SO YOU DON’T GET LONELY.

If you’re having a bad day, set your mind on something like tidying a room, going out, or doing exercise. Just go out and be active.



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