

The toll of the Covid-19 pandemic on children's wellbeing and mental health. How can we support children in 'new times'?

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The toll of the Covid-19 pandemic on children's wellbeing and mental health. How can we support children in 'new times'?

Picture this: it's March 2020; you're in lockdown; you can only go out once per day for provisions or exercise; and your time is taken up juggling lengthy zoom meetings and home schooling. For many of us, this will be an uncomfortable memory. But in the first few days and weeks of lockdown, we presumed this predicament would be short lived, and it was a novel experience. The weather was good, and some of us had the flexibility within our jobs to spend more quality time with family, going for long walks, watching television together and playing games.

As a parent, I experienced first-hand lockdowns with a child. My son was overjoyed when the first lockdown began. No school or SATs tests. What more could a ten-year-old want? But, as time passed, the cracks began to show. Lockdown and restrictions led to the closure of parks and playgrounds. Playdates were on hold. Although schools were open to key workers' children and vulnerable children, these were small in number. Most children were unable to play and interact with friends. When schools returned after each lockdown, some restrictions remained in place, for example social distancing and 'bubbles'. Some children could no longer play with friends in other classes or year groups, which led to further disruption to children's friendships and wellbeing.

Some children and families were placed under considerable [psychological stress](#) and [financial pressure](#). Juggling conflicting demands, including work and home schooling, was tough on parents emotionally, especially women who were more disproportionately [affected](#). Many parents felt stressed and their ability to parent was affected, impacting upon children. I certainly had several instances in the second lockdown where I felt overwhelmed with the range of demands placed upon me through work and home. This scenario may ring true for you too. Even before the onset of Covid-19 children's mental health issues were increasing. Sadly, Covid-19 exacerbated those issues and increased the number of children needing support. But to provide that support, we need to understand more clearly what the impact of Covid-19 on children's wellbeing and mental health was, and how we can support children in these new times. To find out, I conducted a [study](#) focusing on the emerging research on Covid-19 and its impact on children. This work helped to build a picture of both the positive and negative effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on children's wellbeing and how we might support children and families going forward.

Fortunately, I found that despite the negative impact to children's wellbeing, there are actions that can address the impact and encourage resilience in children. Here are some of them:

1. Listen to children's Covid-19 experiences, noting any suggestions of how we can help or support.
2. Be mindful that children need time to reconnect with friends and peers in and out of school. They need time to play and have fun.
3. Set aside some time (this can be as little as ten minutes per day) to do something with your child: play a game, read a book together, bake some buns. Positive interactions like these help children feel secure and thrive.
4. Seek out support from schools (schools have long term plans in place to cater for wellbeing and mental health) or professional health services if needed.
5. Ensure children attend school. Covid-19 has showed us just how important being at school is for children. Not only do schools provide opportunities for academic learning; they also play a huge role in children's social and emotional learning and development.
6. Don't get caught up in the learning 'catch-up' frenzy. Children will feel under pressure if they believe they are behind. Support and encourage wherever you can and seek support from your child's class teacher or school if you are concerned.

As the pandemic continues in the background of our daily lives, research on childhood such as my own highlights the importance of awareness of the impact on children's wellbeing and mental health. Be mindful of this impact but remember that there are steps that we can take to help mitigate the toll on our children as we go forward in these 'new times'.

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