

The impact of COVID -19 on our children and young people

by Liz Fordham



In the field of medicine, mental health is considered the Cinderella of disciplines; and child and adolescent mental health, the Cinderella of Cinderellas. And yet, despite headlines indicating that the coronavirus has mainly targeted older people, our children and young people have, arguably, been equally on the receiving end of a bitter blow from the hands of the COVID pandemic because the impact on them has been felt not only in the immediate, but also far into their futures*.

Our children and young people may not have died, in the tragic way that over 50,000 people have lost their lives, but for many, their wellbeing as well as their hopes and plans for the future, have, nonetheless, been severely impacted. Indeed, a recent survey of 19,000 students reported a 46% increase in alcohol consumption by children in school year 13 during the lockdown period with over 50% expressing a significant increase in their worries about school achievement and prospects for the future.

There was a sudden and traumatic upheaval in their lives, as one young person put it, "one day I was training for a marathon, the next, there wasn't even a race!". Added to this was considerable fear and tragic loss, both in terms of the

people they knew and loved, as well as, come the summer months, qualifications and university places that they had worked all their young lives to achieve.

The degree of social isolation that kept many youngsters away from friends and social connection for long periods of time during the spring and summer months, as well as the confines of the 'rule of 6' has also had a detrimental effect on the wellbeing of our children and young people; at a time when, our teens in particular, should be moving away from the family nest and bonding with their peers, they found themselves forced to spend prolonged periods of time indoors and with family. All of this without even beginning to consider the significant rise in child abuse that has been headlining our media recently.

It would be wrong to suggest that it was all bad, however. For some youngsters, the pandemic has given them the opportunity to break negative patterns of behaviour and toxic friendship groups. For our younger children in particular, they were able to spend less time at school and more time with parents who might otherwise have been away at work, and lots of children and families enjoyed a renewed sense of community and belonging.

What is clear is that, whilst we may have all been in the same storm, our children and young people were definitely not in the same boat. As counsellors, I would argue that one of our primary roles at this time is to help steer our children and young people to a place of balance, so that they are able to learn from this experience rather than simply burn.



How, then do we do this? My approach and the framework that we adopt at Making Me, is to SEE, HEAR and HOLD our children and young people. What does this look like in practice?

Seeing and hearing is done by entering their world – something we are trained to do from the very beginning on any counselling course. Taking the time to see their sadness and disappointment, to hear their worries and concerns, rather than dismissing them as less important than, say, the death of a loved one, is fundamental to establishing a safe foundation from which our young clients can begin

to explore their experience of this pandemic. As always when working with children and young people we enter their world with curiosity rather than fact. Questions such as “I wonder how you felt about the A’ level situation” or “I’m curious how the lockdown was for you” will always open up the chance for further conversation rather than assumptions about how they should think or feel.

Holding involves being the adult in the world of our young clients, which includes setting boundaries around how to respond to the pandemic, as well as teaching them some coping skills that will enable them to proactively manage their mental and emotional wellbeing whilst the situation continues to drag on.

So what does setting boundaries look like in practice? Worry boxes are a great tool to minimise the amount of time a youngster is ‘allowed’ to sit and dwell on things, particularly if they are encouraged to leave their worries in the box and only explore them in session or at a set time with a parent or loved one. Equally, encouraging youngsters to limit their screen time or their exposure to news and current affairs will again help them to have a more positive, healthy mindset.

Coping skills are also key in giving children and young people ownership over their mental and emotional health, but also in giving them a sense of empowerment in the face of so much disempowerment. The list of coping skills is long, but encouraging youngsters to follow these four principles should help them to re-direct their thoughts and develop healthy mind habits:

- Encourage positive ‘how’ thoughts – how can I achieve my grades, how can I see my friends, how can I do my sport – rather than the more negative ‘why’ thoughts – why am I stuck in, why did the Government mess up my grades, why can I never go out to play properly anymore;



- Encourage a focus on FACTS rather than FEELINGS – 88% of worries don’t ever come true;
- Encourage positive behaviours such as exercising or taking up a hobby, rather than spending too much time on screens; and
- Encourage a positive focus on the self, what the child or young person has achieved rather than what they think they have failed at.

Father Richard Rohr, the head of the Centre for Action and Contemplation in New Mexico, talks about the ‘oneing’ of Order – Disorder – Reorder. His call is that, when we find ourselves in a period of ‘disorder’, which he, like many, would argue is where we currently find ourselves, our obligation is not to run and hide and wait for the storm to pass, but rather to find a positive route to a better place of reorder. Whilst much pain has been felt during this pandemic for our children and young people as well as for all sections of society, it seems to me that our Christian calling is to do just that; we need to find a way to model to our children and young people that life will indeed have times of difficulty and pain, but it is often in those times that we experience the most growth provided we choose to look for it. If our children and young people are fortunate enough to be surrounded by people who provide the seeing, hearing and holding that they

need, I believe that, despite the negatives felt by so many, this pandemic situation could be a time of growth and positivity for them, a time for them to find some balance, in order that they might learn from this experience rather than simply burn.

* *The OxWell School Survey, 2020* (<https://www.psych.ox.ac.uk/research/schoolmentalhealth/summary-report>)

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About the author

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