

Interview: Cathy Creswell

# How kids are coping with lockdown

Families in the UK report that some children are more emotional or disobedient, while others have lower anxiety without the pressures of school, finds **Catherine de Lange**

SINCE lockdown began in the UK, Cathy Creswell at the University of Oxford and her colleagues have been surveying thousands of families to find out how they are affected by the covid-19 pandemic. The Co-SPACE Study has now published its first findings from a longitudinal study that questioned people over several months.



IMAGE COURTESY OF CRESWELL

## What has your survey of families during lockdown shown?

More than 10,000 people have now taken part. Our first report was at the beginning of April, looking at the first 1500 people. What we saw then has remained pretty consistent all the way through, which was that families were certainly feeling under a great deal of stress. Parents were particularly struggling with balancing work and childcare, and the most common concern they were reporting was about their children's emotional wellbeing. We could see that very early on, but we couldn't obviously see the direct impact that lockdown had.

## Now you have data over a longer period, how have young people changed during the lockdown?

From our longitudinal data in June, that was from about 3000 people, so far we are seeing significant increases in behavioural problems, emotional symptoms and attention and impulsivity problems in primary school age children [age 4 to 10].

In secondary school age students [age 11 to 16], based on parent reports, we actually saw a reduction in emotional symptoms over time and no change in behavioural problems. We only have a small subset of teenagers who are self-reporting, but again they weren't reporting an increase in difficulties either.

We need to keep looking at it

## Profile

Cathy Creswell is a psychologist at the University of Oxford who studies anxiety disorders in children and young people.

carefully, but it does fit with what many families have told us, which is that, for many young people of secondary school age, not having the pressures of school does seem to have brought some benefits in terms of their mental health.

## How do you explain the differences you have seen between primary and secondary school children?

Younger children will require

more adult input. The majority of adults in our sample are trying to work and look after children, and we know that they are struggling with that. In our early report, two-thirds of parents said they didn't feel that they were adequately meeting the needs of both their children and their work.

One hypothesis at this point is that it is easier for adolescents to connect with peers electronically, without seeing them face-to-face. Through lockdown, it's been much easier for older young people to be able to keep their social contacts going. For younger children, doing chats on Zoom, that's not how they would normally interact. And it would need adult organisation, and in many cases adults are quite stretched.

## What does anxiety about this situation look like in younger kids?

The emotional symptoms are: being tearful, being clingy, being sad or worried. The behavioural stuff is disobedience or tantrums.

Everyone I speak to about their experience during lockdown says this sounds very familiar. If these

findings do nothing else but help normalise people's experiences, hopefully that is helpful. Just so parents don't feel they are doing a terrible job, or their children are a nightmare, but see that actually it's just a really hard situation.

## What can parents do? Are there any strategies that are known to work?

For managing behaviour in primary school aged children, there are good evidence-based approaches that involve parents developing strategies, skills and confidence to manage their children's behaviour. We need

**"For those in secondary school, not having the pressures of school has mental health benefits"**

to kind of up our game, and put a bit more focus on managing behaviour than we might have in other situations.

For anxiety-related problems, we have good evidence that cognitive behavioural approaches are effective. In our studies, we have found that you can get really good outcomes for children by working directly with parents, where you are giving them skills to manage their children's anxiety in their day-to-day lives, rather than children having to go to appointments (for practical tips, see "Helping children cope", left).

## How representative of the population is your sample?

There is quite a lot of bias in the sample, so we are quite cautious to not make claims about the wider population. In our sample, the numbers of children and young people with pre-existing mental health problems is pretty much what you would expect in the population. We have probably got a slightly higher number of

## Helping children cope

Cathy Creswell is the principal investigator for Emerging Minds, a research network looking at mental health in children. The group offers the following tips for parents of school-aged children who have worries or anxieties about coronavirus:

- ▶ Be curious about their worries. For instance, ask: "What is worrying you about this?", "What are people at school talking about?", "What have you heard about the virus?"
- ▶ Empathise and help them to

feel that their worries are normal. For example: "That is a worrying thought, I can see why you feel that way."

- ▶ Gently correct any misunderstandings they have, using reliable, age-appropriate language. For resources grouped by age, visit the Emerging Minds website: [bit.ly/30cuzb5](http://bit.ly/30cuzb5).
- ▶ Help your children find ways to feel in control.
- ▶ Highlight the good things people are doing for each other, whether that is at a national level or in your own neighbourhood.