



JAMES VEYSE/HUTTERSTOCK

children or young people with special educational needs. These are obviously groups that we are concerned about at the moment and we were keen to track them.

What have you found in groups with special educational needs and pre-existing mental health issues?

Amongst these groups, we have seen a reduction in reported mental health symptoms over time. Again, this is consistent with what we are hearing from lots of families, which is that being able to do things at their own pace and not having the same pressures of school means many young people have been doing well.

The important thing to say is that their mental health symptoms are still elevated, they

are still higher than the groups who don't have those difficulties. There is also a lot of variability, but overall there has been a bit of an improvement over time. Many families have told us that they are really concerned about how this may change as things start to get back to normal.

Could the easing of restrictions make things more difficult?

Absolutely. For young children, this has been quite a big chunk of their lives and there has been this message that interacting with other people is potentially dangerous, so it will be really important for us to be thinking about how we support children to overcome that, in a way that still fits with whatever

the guidance is at the time.

Another thing that we are hearing from quite a lot of families at the moment, those with younger children, but also children

"Parents shouldn't feel they are doing a terrible job or their children are a nightmare. It's just hard"

who might have particular issues, for example those with autism, is that ambiguity in the rules is more challenging. These things can then cause frustration, which can lead to other difficulties.

What have you learned about the pressures of school and how that plays into anxiety in young people?

This situation has certainly raised

Understanding how people are helping others can ease children's anxiety

a lot of questions about schools and how we approach schooling as a culture. It will be important to see what happens as children start going back to school.

We know that mental health problems in teenagers in the UK are high, particularly among girls and particularly as they move into the later school years. And we know that levels of school stress are extremely high among UK school students. So I think it does give us a good opportunity to understand that a bit more and be able to think about whether it has to be like that, or whether there are different approaches to education.

How long term or serious are these anxiety problems in children?

So far, when looking at change over time, we have just been looking at anxiety symptoms. For most people, they are within the normal range. But the measures that we use allow us to look at the probability of someone meeting a diagnostic criteria.

Studies with adults during lockdown suggest increases in cases of anxiety disorders. This has been particularly the case among adults who are married or in civil partnerships, according to data from the Office for National Statistics. This may be due to juggling work with home schooling. This is quite striking and fits with stress levels reported in our study. We are going to look at whether these criteria are increasingly being met by school children in our next report. ■

The Co-SPACE study is still recruiting families of school-aged children living in the UK. Visit bit.ly/co-space for more information