



Our Time

Helping young people affected by
parental mental illness

Evidence review

Children of parents with a mental illness
during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Introduction

Our Time help children and young people living with a parent who has a mental illness through family and school workshops, training for professionals and advocacy.

This review presents statistics on prevalence of issues that relate to Our Time's work that are specifically relevant to the Covid-19 situation.

Compared to children in the general population, children that have a parent with a mental illness are more likely to develop a mental illness. They often share the genetic pre-disposition and environmental issues that are commonly experienced by their parents and other family members.¹

Specific risk factors include poverty, isolation, trauma, and parent-child separation. Children may face additional caregiving burdens for their parents and siblings and deal with family crises. These children may experience stigma around their parents' illness, sometimes leading to feelings of embarrassment, shame, guilt and anger.²

This report reviews the most recent and relevant data, highlighting the current evolution of the factors that impact Our Time's beneficiary group.

Summary

The number of children affected

The prevalence of children of parents with mental illness (COPMI) is likely to have increased during the pandemic.



2.9 million

Before the pandemic, over 2.9 million children were estimated to be living with at least one parent reporting symptoms of anxiety and depression.³



25 million

During the pandemic, all measures of well-being have reached their lowest levels since national records began in 2011. Almost half of people in Great Britain reported "high" anxiety in March 2020, equating to over 25 million people - this was an increase from around one in five people at the end of 2019. Many parts of the population are over the threshold for psychiatric morbidity.⁴



1 in 5

One in five respondents to the ONS' Opinion and Lifestyle Survey reported that their relationships were being affected by the pandemic.



4 in 10

Four in ten adults (43.5%) with dependent children said homeschooling was putting a strain on their relationships in the household.⁵



Parents +
carers

Parents and carers of children are among the groups reporting even higher levels of stress and anxiety than these population averages.⁶ The rise in poor mental health is also higher for young adults, people of Black, Asian and minority ethnicities (BAME), those with lower household income and people with existing mental and physical health conditions.⁷

Adverse Childhood Experiences

Adverse outcomes associated with COPMI are also likely to be exacerbated by the pandemic and the recession.

Adverse Childhood Experiences

Having a close family member with mental health problems is one of the ten most significant 'Adverse Childhood Experiences' (ACEs). A variety of negative circumstances are known to increase the likelihood of ACEs, including low family income and high levels of parental stress⁸ – both of which are more prevalent as a result of the pandemic. For example:

Over half


Over half of parents and carers reported that work was the main stressor associated with the pandemic.⁹ The impact of parental mental illness on ACE is influenced by whether the family is experiencing other adversities, such as economic hardship. Low family income and parental mental health problems are particularly strong predictors of *physical* health problems for children, in comparison to other ACE categories.¹⁰

66%

The true extent of these adverse impacts will unfold over a child's lifetime – and beyond, noting evidence of intergenerational transmission. Yet some impacts will be felt more immediately. For example, Refuge reported that calls and contacts to their Helpline had risen to a weekly average increase of 66% and visits to their website (where women can request a safe time to be contacted) have seen a 950% rise compared to pre Covid-19.¹¹ Parental mental illness, domestic violence and substance misuse are together described as the 'toxic trio' for children, with significant overlaps in their presence within the family environment. The risk of child maltreatment is significantly influenced by the presence of domestic violence.¹²

363 children

In the first week of April alone, the NSPCC took calls from 363 children suffering physical, sexual or emotional abuse or neglect.¹³

A young girl with brown hair and bangs is sitting on a bus. She is wearing a colorful face mask with a comic book pattern, featuring characters like Batman and Superman. She is also wearing an orange jacket over a white t-shirt. The background shows the interior of a bus with patterned seats and a window looking out onto a blurred outdoor scene.

*For many children
access to teachers
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during the
'lockdown'*

Service access

Access to services to help alleviate these issues is constrained, intensifying the problems faced by COPMI.



One in four adults who would like mental health support, were unable to access services, based on respondents to a recent survey by the charity Mind. An even higher proportion may be receiving less mental health support than they did before the 'lockdown'.¹⁴



One in four children and young people who received mental health support before 'lockdown' are no longer accessing support, based on respondents to Young Minds' survey.¹⁵



Over 80% of parents whose children previously received support from services, reported that they are no longer doing so, based on emerging research by Emerging Minds.¹⁶ This included support for mental health, emotional or behavioural difficulties, support from social services or educational support.



One of the strongest contextual factors that determines the level of adversity faced by a child living with parents with mental illness, is whether other adults (who do not have mental illness) are accessible, including teachers.¹⁷ For many children access to teachers and other adults on whom they rely has been constrained during the 'lockdown'.

The economic costs of parental mental illness



£43 per adult
each day

The decline in well-being experienced by individuals is estimated to be around twice the amount of the impact of becoming unemployed in normal times. The costs of the Covid-19 pandemic and social distancing measures on mental health and well-being are calculated to have an indicative net monetary value to the UK of £2.25 billion per day, equivalent to £43 per adult each day.¹⁸ Given that parents and carers are amongst the group facing higher levels of stress and anxiety, it is likely that the average economic cost is higher for this group. Moreover, this estimate only includes the impacts on adult's individual well-being - the full cost to society will be higher still, including through adverse impacts on children.



£24,000 per child
per year

The Children's Commissioner's Office estimated that the average public expenditure on mental health and well-being was around £24,000 per child.¹⁹



£17 billion
per year

£17 billion per year was spent in England and Wales by the state on the cost of "late" intervention before the pandemic – equivalent to around £287 per person. The largest costs include those relating to child and family adversity, including: £5.3 billion spent on Looked After Children; £5.2 billion associated with cases of domestic violence; and £2.7 billion spent on benefits for young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET).²⁰

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