

Senedd Cymru
Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg

Welsh Parliament
Children, Young People and Education Committee

Ymchwiliad i effaith argyfwng Covid-19
ar blant a phobl ifanc yng Nghymru

Inquiry into the impact of the Covid-19 outbreak on
children and young people in Wales

COV - 23
Ymateb gan: NSPCC Cymru

COV - 23
Response from: NSPCC Wales

Preventing and responding to safeguarding concerns during COVID 19 in Wales.

Introduction

Coronavirus is impacting upon every child across the UK. The NSPCC is still here for the children who need us – and we’re needed more than ever. Childline has experienced unprecedented demand for its services as the pandemic has affected children’s lives: between the 21 January 2020 and 15 April 2020, Childline has delivered 2,789 counselling sessions across the UK to children and young people who were concerned about Coronavirus.

Across the country, family life has changed overnight. Vulnerable children and families are at increased risk during the pandemic. As highlighted in a recent blog on the Ace Hub “our response to the COVID19 pandemic is bringing to the fore the other pre-existing pandemics in our society that we do not have a ‘20 second hand wash’ to break the chain.”¹

In Wales, the NSPCC continues to be here for children and to deliver services. At this time, our key points are:

- Children at risk of abuse and neglect should remain visible during the crisis
- Children are at increased risk of abuse and neglect during the crisis
- Children should be able to access the help and support they need during the crisis

¹ <https://www.aceawarewales.com/blog/2020/3/30/when-washing-your-hands-will-not-break-the-chain-of-infection-what-is-our-response-to-aces-in-covid-19>

1. Children at risk of abuse and neglect should remain visible during the crisis.

We welcome the focus given by Welsh Government to children at risk of abuse and neglect through the work of the cross departmental working group on vulnerable children and the recent publication of guidance for children's services during the COVID 19 pandemic, as well as the recent Welsh Government statement on vulnerable children.

With schools closed to most pupils, many vulnerable children are at risk of remaining unseen. Research shows that it takes on average 7.8 years for children to disclose abuse, and that teachers are professionals they disclose to most often. We are concerned that with the lockdown in place, children who are at risk of, or are experiencing abuse and neglect, risk being hidden from services. This is further evidenced by reports we are hearing of a drop in referrals to children's services. We are particularly concerned about the emerging figures that only a small proportion of vulnerable children are taking their places in schools during the lockdown² - we appreciate that social services and schools are doing all they can to keep in touch with at risk children, but their absence makes them far less visible. Additionally, children who are not known to any services but who are living with abuse and neglect do not appear to be eligible for school places at the moment and so are isolated from school and peer support.

Priorities:

- Understanding the impact of the pandemic on the child protection system, for example early intervention, investigation, conferencing, review and courts. We see the National Independent Safeguarding Board as having a key role in this.
- Referral rates regularly monitored and action taken to ensure that all children at risk come to the attention of services.
- The number of vulnerable children attending school regularly monitored and action taken to ensure that schools are able to offer support to those who are not attending

² <https://gov.wales/attendance-local-authority-settings-during-coronavirus-covid-19-pandemic-20-april-24-april-2020-html>

2. Children are at increased risk of abuse and neglect during the lockdown

Sadly, home isn't safe for every child.

Domestic Abuse

In the first 21 days of the UK lockdown two children (along with 14 women) were murdered in the context of domestic abuse³.

1 in 5 children have been exposed to domestic violence in the UK. In Wales, during 2018/19 specialist services supported 4,263 children impacted by VAWDASV. In its report 'Children Matter' Welsh Women's Aid⁴ estimated that 18,478 in Wales were impacted by DA in the past year, based on the 1 in 5 estimate. By their calculation, 14,224 (77%) children in Wales received no specialist support and so may not be known to other services and be even more invisible during lockdown.

Perpetrators who use coercive and controlling behaviour use a suite of tactics to gain and maintain power and control; isolation from friends, families and other sources of support is a common tactic used to maintain that power and control and the current 'lockdown' across the UK is working as an enabler for that isolation.

Where families have separated, abuse could escalate if the child is isolated with the abuser. There is also anecdotal evidence from specialist services of abusers refusing to return children to the non-abusing parent due to claims of self-isolation.

Welsh Women's Aid members have confirmed they are continuing to support children via phone calls and some face to face video calls but this is a challenge with younger children. They are continuing to maintain relationships with children and young people, but without confidential spaces their usual in-depth work is not possible and they are concerned about starting difficult conversations with vulnerable children who are then alone without support after the call. Where it is safe to do so, more work is

³ <https://kareningalasmith.com/counting-dead-women/>

⁴ <https://www.welshwomensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Children-and-Young-People-participation-report-FINAL.pdf> - page 14 and 15

being done to develop resources for the non-abusing parent which they can use with their child. New referrals are very low as other professionals are not seeing children who may need support. The concern is there will be a sudden spike in demand for already stretch services when the lockdown ends.

Priorities

- We welcome the announcement from the UK Minister for Safeguarding Victoria Atkins of the £3m funding boost for specialist services working with children, particularly the increased support this will provide for services here in Wales. But reiterate the call from NSPCC Cymru/Wales that better resources are needed for dedicated work with all children and young people experiencing and exposed to domestic abuse across Wales, when and where they need it. If as expected, demand for services peaks after the lockdown, the need for this will be even more stark. Services must be supported to prepare for this.
- Headteachers to have discretion over who they offer more support to if they have concerns about families not known to statutory services.

Child Sexual Abuse

The Lucy Faithful Foundation's Stop It Now helpline has seen a 32% decrease in calls since the lockdown and stats from ChildLine indicate a drop-in contacts from 43% to 35% about sexual abuse. This is particularly concerning given the hidden nature of child sexual abuse.

Specialist services working with child survivors of CSA have also raised concerns about the support they are able to offer young children during the lockdown who cannot access video calling independently.

Children who have been sexually abused are also under-represented on child protection plans, we are concerned therefore that they are even more invisible during this time. An estimated 1 in 20 children in the UK have been sexually abused⁵. The vast majority (90%) of children who experience sexual abuse were abused by someone they knew⁶. For children experiencing sexual abuse in the family, they may well be isolating at home with the perpetrator of that abuse. We know that it takes children and young people an average of 7 years to disclose abuse, and that some are never able to tell what has happened to them⁷, so they may not be a concern to other adults⁸. We are very concerned about the impact on children being sexually abused in the home, both the immediate impact of the abuse and the long-term trauma.

Priorities

- Welsh Government and Safeguarding Children Boards to publicise that services to support children are still open for business
- Welsh Government and Safeguarding Children Boards to urge anyone concerned about child sexual abuse to contact the NSPCC Helpline or Stop it Now! Helpline
- Resources to made available for specialist services to continue to support all children and adult survivors now and in the aftermath of lockdown.

Of course, for children who are being sexually abused, the immediate and long-term impact of this will happen regardless of isolation, but our concern is the lack of access to trusted adults and the risk of the abuse increasing.

Online Abuse

We must be prepared for the Coronavirus pandemic to become a three-fold 'perfect storm' for children and young people - with social networks understandably facing a challenge to maintain their current moderation efforts; children spending more time at home and on devices; and abusers seeing the current crisis as an opportunity to abuse and groom children on social networks and gaming sites.

NSPCC research finds that vulnerable children are much more likely to be targeted by online abusers. Children aged 11-17 that display traits of loneliness

⁵ Radford, L. et al. (2011) Child abuse and neglect in the UK today. London: NSPCC.

⁶ Radford, L. et al. (2011) Child abuse and neglect in the UK today. London: NSPCC.

⁷ Allnock, D. and Miller, P. (2013) No one noticed, no one heard: a study of disclosures of childhood abuse. London: NSPCC

⁸ Miller and Allnock 2013 Allnock, D. and Miller, P. (2013) No one noticed, no one heard: a study of disclosures of childhood abuse. London: NSPCC

and use social media for validation are twice as likely (9 per cent vs 4 per cent) to have sent, received or been asked to send sexual messages to an adult. When it's likely lots of children will be feeling lonely or anxious during self-isolation, we have to assume children will be at far greater susceptibility of abuse.

Social media and gaming sites are proving to be a lifeline for parents and their children as they adapt to being at home, but we must also recognise there are heightened risks. It is now more important than ever for parents and carers to be having regular conversation with their children about what they are doing online.

Priorities:

- Parents, carers, and children and young people to be given enhanced information about how to keep safe online
- Monitor the proportion of online sexual offences against children
- Monitor reports from young people about their experiences online during lockdown.

The NSPCC's Net Aware website contains information for parents about different social networks and websites, and how to stay safe online. It has recently added articles about video chat and livestreaming services, and the newly-popular Netflix Party extension.

Across Wales NSPCC Cymru/Wales are offering online safety sessions for children and young people aged between 9 and 13 who are looked after and open to Local Authority Children Services. The sessions will look at life online for a young person and how this may be affecting them. Aspects of the work will cover social media, consent, online space, awareness of potential risk and asking for support and help. Additional support will be provided for carers who need that space to explore their worries and concerns and allow some time to gain guidance and support.

With the delivery of support to young people moving predominantly on line, it will be important to keep reviewing the learning to ensure that their needs are met.

The NSPCC and O2 are working in partnership to offer free 30 minute introductory webinars on keeping families safe online. The webinars highlight the risks children can face online whilst offering practical advice and signposting for help and support. To arrange a webinar, please email parentworkshops@nspcc.org.uk

Perinatal Mental Health and infant mental health

Family support programmes and perinatal mental health services are unique – they play a vital role in safeguarding and promoting the welfare of mums, dads/partners and the healthy development of babies, which means they must be protected.

The prevalence of perinatal mental health problems remains, with up to one in five mums and one in ten dads experiencing mental health problems during pregnancy and after birth – and is likely to intensify for some parents as day-to-day routines are disrupted and in-person support from family and friends is not possible.

At this time, nobody should be left to cope with perinatal mental health problems on their own. If left untreated, perinatal mental health problems can have a devastating impact on mums, dads/partners and babies – both immediately but also long after the COVID-19 situation has passed. It is therefore more critical than ever that all mums and dads/partners still receive consistent care during pregnancy and after birth to enable early identification and support for mental health concerns.

Dedicated health professionals such as midwives, health visitors and perinatal mental health community care teams are rapidly adopting innovative new ways of working and must be enabled to continue this safely. Redeployment of perinatal professionals to support Covid19 should be a **last resort** to ensure all families continue to receive care either virtually or in person.

Priorities

- Welsh Government and Public Health Wales to publicise that services to support perinatal mental health problems are still open for business
- Welsh Government and Public Health Wales to urge any mum or dad/partner concerned about their mental health during the perinatal period to seek support
- Welsh Government to monitor referrals into specialist perinatal mental health teams and address any barriers to women being identified as needing specialist support at this time
- Welsh Government to continue to prioritise perinatal mental health now and in the aftermath of the lockdown, to ensure that mums and their families in Wales can access specialists support when it is needed

Emotional abuse

The NSPCC Helpline has recently seen an increase in calls from adults who are worried about children facing emotional abuse behind closed doors during the lockdown. Across the UK, there has been a rise of 50%, with a fifth of calls since lockdown relating to emotional abuse.

Children are facing threats of violence, being ridiculed, screamed at and verbally abused or manipulated by those who should be protecting them. These figures confirm that there is an increased risk for children vulnerable to abuse and neglect if they are isolated in homes and without the safety net schools offer. Existing abuse can also be intensified by lockdown conditions and many children are left without the safety net of teachers, friends and trusted adults they may usually turn to for support.

That's why it is so important that Welsh Government, children's services, schools and the police do all they can to reach and support these children.

3. Children must be able to access the help they need

Children have been talking to Childline about the issues they struggle with during the COVID 19 crisis.

Counselling sessions about **mental and emotional health** where coronavirus was mentioned have increased as the virus has become more prevalent in the UK.

Young people talk about:

- struggling with increased feelings of depression and anxiety
- having panic attacks more frequently
- having nightmares or finding it difficult to fall asleep
- feeling lonely or isolated.

Young people use the word “trapped” to describe how they feel about being at home, particularly since strict social distancing measures were put in place. Not being able to go to school, visit family or friends or take part in activities outside of the family home is having a negative impact on their mental health.

Some young people tell us they are having suicidal thoughts and feelings and some talk about using self-harm to cope.

We are concerned about reports from young people that they are experiencing a reduction in mental health support.

Young people who have been receiving ongoing support for existing mental health concerns are saying that they are either no longer receiving support or support has been reduced. As a result, some young people feel like their mental health is getting worse.

"I'm going through a lot right now. I feel really anxious about everything. I'm stuck at home and having a horrible time. I feel so upset and lonely. My child and adolescent mental health (CAMHS) appointments have been cancelled because of the Coronavirus. The news has made my mental health worse and now all the schools have been closed there are more arguments at home." (Girl, 16-18)

A small number of counselling sessions have also been from young people receiving ongoing mental health support in hospital. They are distressed because they can no longer receive visitors or have been moved in order to make space for coronavirus patients.

Preparing for post-lockdown

As well as working to ensure children at risk of abuse and neglect are being identified and supported during the lockdown, it is important to start planning for the future when children start to return to school and have more contact with teachers, health workers and other adults. The experience of other countries suggests that, once the stay at home measures are eased, there is potential for a significant increase in police reports, referrals, demand for support services and cases going to court. By modelling and anticipating what strains this may place on the child protection system, Welsh Government can plan how will this be mitigated through, for example, increasing social work capacity and resourcing children's services in general and specialist services. It is vital this work starts now so we avoid the coronavirus crisis having a devastating, secondary impact and we make sure children and young people can access the timely, effective support they may need to recover and rebuild their lives. Key to this will be learning from the impact of the pandemic on the child protection system.