

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 75
Ymateb gan: Kate Fallon, Ysgrifennydd Cyffredinol,
Cymdeithas y Seicolegwyr Addysg (AEP)

COV 75
Response from: Kate Fallon, General Secretary, Association of
Educational Psychologists (AEP)

The Impact of Covid-19 on children and young people (CYP) in Wales

The outbreak of Covid-19 has had a considerable impact on the emotional health and wellbeing of the CYP in Wales as schools have closed and the lockdown has imposed considerable restrictions on normal day to day activities.

Mental health for many CYP relies on everyday social contact with familiar adults and with other young people of similar age and schools and other educational settings are the main environments that provide this. Under lockdown and the social isolation that has been imposed, people are anxious about the effect that the virus is having on their lives. This anxiety, which is exacerbated by the unclear and mixed messages on social media outlets, is having a detrimental effect on CYP. There is also uncertainty about when life will return to some degree of normality.

Parents and families will vary on their ability to cope and this will depend on several factors:-

- Level of emotional resilience in individuals
- The emotional wellbeing and stability of the family dynamics and interactions
- The physical environment - the effect of poor housing conditions will be exacerbated under lockdown
- Financial insecurity leading to increased stress within the household
- Bereavement - particularly of close family members and friends
- Anxiety and worries amongst CYP about their own health
- Lack of access to resources such as breakfast clubs, free school meals etc. which will impact upon CYP's nutritional needs
- For many CYP living in abusive households, there is no longer the safety net of going to school which provided some measure of relief and security
- The lockdown means that it is much more difficult for teachers and social workers to monitor what is happening and thus safeguarding CYP is more problematic

Educational difficulties have included:

- Difficulties in accessing on-line work provided by the school
- Normal differentiation of the curriculum may well not be happening and for children with SEN this will cause difficulties
- Although vulnerable CYP and those whose parents are key workers are offered places at school, many have been unable to attend because of transport difficulties
- There have been reported difficulties in identifying and contacting some vulnerable CYP
- Worries about exam results as formal exams have been cancelled. CYP are anxious about how their progress and 'grades' will be decided.
- For some CYP if schools do not re-open soon they will be denied the 'rites of passage' that would normally occur at transition stages

- CYP will have been out of school for some time and for many there will need to be a period of adjustment as they return to school
- For some children being at home will have been a positive experience and there may be a reluctance to return to school. This may lead to an increase in school refusal.

CYP will be returning to a different educational environment to the one that they left. There may well be a reduced day or 'split shifts' in order to accommodate some degree of social distancing. This will have to be managed by school staff and whole school wellbeing measures will need to be implemented as schools re-open.

Effect of the Covid-19 on the work of Education Psychologists (EP)

The AEP undertook a survey of Educational Psychology Services in Wales in order to determine the effect that the Covid-19 pandemic was having on the delivery of EP services. Indeed the current situation has led to increased pressures on services as EPs come to terms with the challenges of working in the current environment of 'lockdown' and the resultant social isolation.

The survey focussed on the following issues:- providing statutory advice, home working, child care, well being, Trainee Educational Psychologists and Children and Young People (CYP) who are potentially vulnerable. As a result of the responses received, it has become apparent that the current situation raises important issues regarding working practices and, the need to ensure safety, maintain data security, uphold professional standards and use technology appropriately. There are also concerns about the increased work pressures that EPs are experiencing and the effect on their emotional health and well-being.

Providing Statutory Advice

There have been difficulties in providing statutory advice particularly where it has been impossible to undertake a full assessment of the CYP because of lockdown. There is also confusion about whether statutory time limits apply as these often cannot be adhered to.

Childcare

Many EPs have children who are now at home and they are faced with the difficulties of trying to work from home and looking after their own children. Some LAs are flexible and understanding of the difficulties this creates but others are not.

Working from home

For some EPs there have been difficulties working from home if they do not have the right equipment and secure access to the internet. Many have reported difficulties in these areas with difficulties in accessing crucial files, not being able to access the authority's VPN and difficulties with video conferencing.

Wellbeing

EPs have expressed problems with social isolation and a lack of contact with work colleagues. Risk assessments should be undertaken for those members with additional needs and other potentially challenging circumstances. Given that many of the concerns which could adversely affect wellbeing related to working arrangements, it is reasonable to expect that employers should provide appropriate technology, flexibility where it is needed,

and guidelines for maintaining professional standards and writing statutory advice, in the current circumstances.

Trainee Educational Psychologists (TEPs)

Lockdown has affected the training experiences of TEPs who are unable to undertake normal placement activities. Cardiff University has been proactive in addressing these issues and supporting students.

How EPs are supporting vulnerable CYP:

- Many EP Services are sending out support packs by email to schools and parents around the issues of anxiety, emotional health and wellbeing, home educating and the new home/school relationship.
- Email and telephone support lines have been set up to provide ongoing support to schools and parents. EPs are also working alongside the 'hubs' and most services have provided a named EP for each hub.
- EPs are following up on new Early Years referrals by phone and email to referrers and parents as they cannot meet them face-to-face at present. Initial information collection is taking place with advice being provided relevant to the referral request.
- Some EP Services have set up a weekly helpline for SENCOs and teachers with parents of vulnerable children able to contact their EP by phone/email. In some cases, EPs are contacting parents weekly to provide support. There is also contact with Social Workers and Care Workers as needed, by phone or email.
- Those looked after children (LAC) on the vulnerable groups list who are not attending a hub will have weekly phone contact from the most appropriate person. However, it may be difficult to ensure that all LAC are receiving support at this difficult time as there can be problems with accessing contact information etc.
- For those at the point of transition there is discussion with schools, families, regarding possible scenarios and how transition can be meaningful and effective. There is a focus on managing anxiety and worry, including worries about exams. There are concerns about how the process of transition will be managed within Local Authorities and how this will be organised, particularly if the majority of schools return in September. Issues under consideration are whether there will be a return to current schools and delayed transition, or whether all transition pupils will start at their new schools. One service reported that it has developed an EPS Emerging Needs and Priorities plan and with respect to transition and are developing appropriate support materials. The Welsh Government have stated that any return to schools will be phased with priority give those with SEN and those who are vulnerable. There has also been mention that priority may be given to those attending Welsh medium schools for whom Welsh is a second language.

Summary

Educational Psychologists have valuable skills which can, and should, be used to support local authorities and their services at a strategic level. All educational psychology services are endeavouring to be able to provide remote consultation and advice to schools and to other professionals to help them to meet the needs of potentially vulnerable pupils, those who are looked after, on the "at risk" register or who are at the point of transition.