For immediate release

Mental health difficulties in children increased during Lockdown1, but have decreased since

The latest report from the Co-SPACE study highlights that for participating **primary school aged children**:

- **Over the course of the first national lockdown (between March and June), behavioural and restless/attentional difficulties increased**, while most children were not attending school.
- **Behavioural, emotional, and restless/ attentional difficulties have generally decreased from July** (i.e. when home schooling demands typically reduce), throughout the summer holidays, and as children returned to school in September.

Participating parents and carers reported that their children displayed increasing behaviour difficulties from March to June 2020, including temper tantrums, arguments and not doing what they were being asked to do by adults. They also became more fidgety and restless and had greater difficulty paying attention. However, parents and carers reported a decrease in these difficulties from July to October. Since then, children have also been reported to display fewer emotional difficulties, such as feeling unhappy, worried, being clingy and experiencing physical symptoms associated with worry.

Professor Cathy Creswell, Professor of Developmental Clinical Psychology, University of Oxford, and co-lead of the study, said,

"Our findings highlight the challenges that children and families faced during the first lockdown when most children were not able to attend school. We are pleased to see that things have generally improved for study families since the pressures of home learning have reduced, but our findings raise concerns about the impact of the ongoing disruption to schooling that many children are dealing with. We don't yet know the impact of this second lockdown, although children being able to attend school could make all the difference. High rates of mental health difficulties among children in low income families also highlight the

huge challenge faced as more and more families tackle the economic impacts of the pandemic."

Among participating **young people of secondary school age**, parent/carer-reported mental health symptoms have been **more stable** throughout the pandemic.

The study also highlighted that children with **special education needs and/or neurodevelopmental differences and those from lower income household** (< £16,000 p.a.) displayed **consistently elevated behavioural, emotional and restlessness/ attentional difficulties** over the course of the pandemic.

Professor Gordon Harold, Professor of the Psychology of Education and Mental Health, University of Cambridge, said[i]:

"One of the most significant and under-reported impacts on children, adolescents families and society is the adverse effects that school closures have had on young people directly, and society generally. Schools provide an immensely important forum for children and young people and are an essential component of society's infrastructure in promoting positive mental health, providing support and resources for those with additional educational needs and protecting young people and society from poor mental health outcomes and adverse impacts on long-term life chances. This report is a timely reminder of the importance of schools and education and associations with young people's mental health."

More than 12,300 parents have now taken part in the **Co-SPACE (COVID-19 Supporting Parents, Adolescents, and Children in Epidemics)** survey led by experts at the University of Oxford. This research is tracking children and young people's mental health throughout the COVID-19 crisis. Survey results are helping researchers identify what protects children and young people from deteriorating mental health, over time, and at particular stress points, and how this may vary according to child and family characteristics. This will help to identify what advice, support and help parents would find most useful. Crucially, the study is continuing to collect data in order to determine whether this has changed as schools have re-opened and many children returned to the classroom, as well as any impacts from subsequent lockdowns.

This research is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) as part of the UK Research and Innovation's rapid response to COVID-19 and the Westminster Foundation, and supported by the NIHR Oxford Health Biomedical Research Centre, the Oxford and Thames Valley NIHR Applied Research Consortium and the UKRI Emerging Minds Network Plus.

Ends

Notes to editor:

- This and other Co-SPACE reports can be found online at:

  https://cospaceoxford.org/findings/

- Images accompanying this report are accessible here:

  http://cospaceoxford.org/findings/changes-in-children-mental-health-symptoms-from-march-to-october-2020/

- The Co-SPACE (COVID-19 Supporting Parents, Adolescents, and Children in Epidemics) survey is online at http://cospaceoxford.org/take-part/

- The UKRI Emerging Minds webinar series is online at:

  https://emergingminds.org.uk/emerging-minds-covid-19-webinar-series/

- The University Department of Psychiatry's mission is to conduct world-class research, teach psychiatry to medical students, develop future researchers in a graduate programme, teach doctors in training, promote excellence in clinical practice, and develop and provide innovative clinical services. It supports research in four key areas: neurobiology, psychological treatments, developmental psychiatry and social psychiatry. The Department is committed to the translation of scientific discovery into benefits for patients. www.psych.ox.ac.uk

- The University of Oxford's Experimental Psychology Department's mission is to conduct world-leading experimental research to understand the psychological and neural mechanisms relevant to human behaviour. Wherever appropriate, we translate our findings into evidence-based public benefits in mental health and well-being, education, industry, and policy. Key areas of research include Behavioural Neuroscience, Developmental Psychology, Social Psychology, and Psychological and Brain Health.

- Funding for the University of Oxford's coronavirus research is crucial to the development of a vaccine and the subsequent delivery of effective drugs to combat this new virus. Unprecedented speed, scope and ambition is required.

  Please make a gift. Any gift made will help contribute to the fight against coronavirus.

- The NIHR Oxford Health Biomedical Research Centre is a partnership between the Oxford Health NHS Foundation Trust and the University of Oxford. We aim to bring the best science to the complex problems of mental health and dementia. www.oxfordhealthbrc.nihr.ac.uk

- **For further information, please contact: Genevieve Juillet**, Media Relations Manager (Research and Innovation), University of Oxford, gen.juillet@admin.ox.ac.uk, phone 01865 280534.

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[i] Full statement from Professor Gordon Harold:

"Evidence from multiple studies conducted in the UK and internationally over the past few months has highlighted the adverse impacts of Covid-19 on families, parents and young people. Impacts on family finances, resources and other inequalities, health and mental health have been consistently documented. One of the most significant and under-reported impacts on children, adolescents families and society is the adverse effects that school closures have had on young people directly, and society generally. According to a recent report by the Royal Society, the economic costs of school closures to date will cost billions with adverse economic impacts expected to last for up to 65 years. The present report provides important insight into the possible link between school closures during this period and associated mental health outcomes for children and adolescents, with a reported increase in youth behavioural and attention related problems during the initial phase of school closure and a decrease in emotional, behavioural and attention problems during the standard summer school holiday period and recent return to school. Notably, the report highlights the adverse impacts of the school closure period for children and adolescents with special/additional educational needs, neurodevelopmental disorders (e.g. ADHD) and those from low income households. Schools provide an immensely important forum for children and young people and are an essential component of society's infrastructure in promoting positive mental health, providing support and resources for those with additional educational needs and protecting young people and society from poor mental health outcomes and adverse impacts on long-term life chances. This report is a timely reminder of the importance of schools and education and associations with young people's mental health."