

Report 04: Changes in pre-school children's emotional and behavioural difficulties through lockdown in North West England

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The Co-SPYCE Study

Background

COVID-19 has caused major disruptions to families' lives, through social distancing, school closures and lock-down. This is also a rapidly changing situation where different pressures will arise for children, young people and their families over time. While research has provided valuable information about how parents can support their children's mental health in general, we know little about what is most effective in the current, changing context.

The Co-SPYCE project is tracking the mental health of pre-school aged children throughout the COVID-19 crisis. This is through an online survey completed monthly by parents/carers throughout the pandemic. The study has full ethical and data protection approval and is fully GDPR compliant.

The findings will help identify what protects pre-school children from deteriorating mental health over time, and at particular stress points. Findings will be shared directly with health and education services to inform the development of effective support for young children and families.

Recruitment

The study sample has been recruited through a variety of means, including through social media, distribution through partner organisations, networks, charities and the media. The self-selecting nature of recruitment means that this will not be a nationally representative sample. See Appendix A for the demographic information.

For the long term, we are aiming to have good stratification across a wide range of socio-demographic factors (e.g., income, ethnicity, pre-existing mental/physical health difficulties) to investigate the experiences for different groups that may be particularly vulnerable during and after the pandemic.

We are keen to recruit as many families as possible to the study. Parents/carers can sign up and take part at any point: cospyce.org/survey

Further information

For further information or to request specific analyses, please contact the research team at cospyce@soton.ac.uk. The study is supported through UKRI Covid-19 funding and a UKRI Future Leaders Fellowship awarded to Helen Dodd.

Focus of this report

Participants

To date, over 3500 parents/carers have taken part in the Co-SPYCE survey at baseline. Roughly 1000 parents/carers have taken part in the first follow up survey so far and we continue to collect data at baseline and on a monthly basis.

221 participants, living in North West England, who completed the baseline survey within the time window that we are currently looking at completed the survey again at follow up and completed all items on the measure reported here (Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire; SDQ).

Data analysed

This report provides longitudinal data from 221 parents/carers, living in North West England, who took part in both the baseline questionnaire and the first follow up questionnaire. These participants completed¹ the baseline questionnaire between 17/04/2020 and 01/07/2020. Each participant completed the follow up questionnaire approximately one month after having completed their baseline questionnaires.

In this report, we examined changes in pre-schoolers' emotional, behavioural and restless/attentional difficulties over a one-month period as lockdown has progressed.

This was examined for the following specific groups:

1. The whole sample
2. Children by gender
3. High- and low-income households
4. Parent working status (employed or not employed)
5. Family ethnicity (White British or other ethnicities)

Measurement of difficulties

This report uses the Strengths & Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) to measure emotional, behavioural and restless/attentional difficulties. This is a well validated questionnaire with excellent psychometric properties.

- Emotional difficulties (emotional symptoms subscale): items relate to the child being worried, afraid, unhappy, clingy and having physical symptoms of anxiety (e.g. whether the child is "Often unhappy, down-hearted or tearful", or has "many worries, often seems worried").
- Behavioural difficulties (conduct problems subscale): items relate to the child doing what they are asked, having tantrums, fighting, lying or stealing things (e.g. whether

¹ 'Completion' of the baseline survey is based on participants having completed items up to and including the pre-defined main outcome measure (the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire – parent reporting on child).

the child “often lies, or cheats”, or is “generally obedient, usually does what adults request).

- Restless/attentional difficulties (hyperactivity/inattention subscale): items relate to the child being restless, fidgety, distractible, impulsive and having a good attention span (e.g. whether the child “sees tasks through to the end, good attention span”, or is “restless, overactive, cannot stay still for long”).

Each subscale consists of 5 items, are summed to compute a total score, with a maximum of 10 indicating the most severe difficulties.

Key findings

- Parents/carers reported that their children’s emotional, behavioural and restless/attentional problems did not increase or decrease significantly over the one-month period.
- The levels of behavioural and attentional difficulties were consistently higher for children in lower income households compared to those in higher income households.
- The levels of behavioural and attentional difficulties were consistently higher for boys than girls.
- The levels of emotional difficulties were consistently higher for children whose parents reported to be unemployed compared to those who were employed.
- At a group level, the changes reported were subtle and suggest that young children’s emotional, behavioural and attentional problems were relatively stable during the one-month period.

Findings

1. The Whole Sample (ages 2-5 years)

Please note: This sample is not nationally representative. Parents/carers and their children were typically from high-income, white British households, and parents/carers were typically working full- or part-time. Further demographic information about participants can be found at the end of the report.

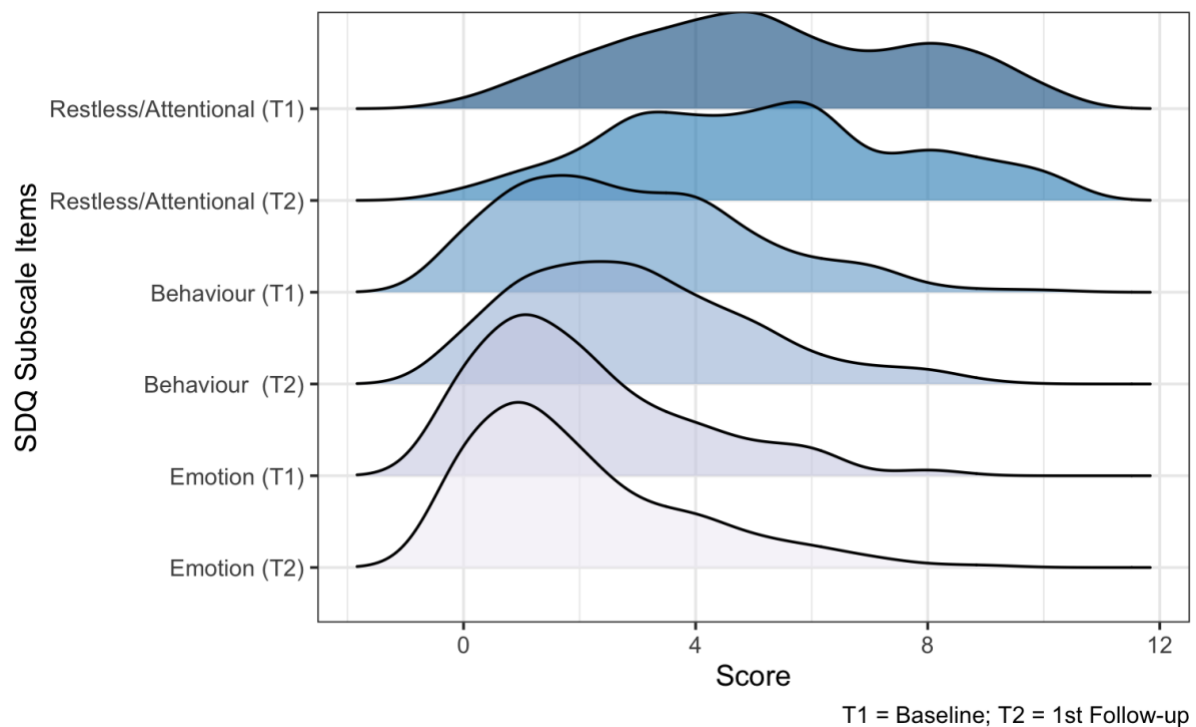


Figure 2. Histogram of SDQ emotion, behaviour and restlessness/attention scores at baseline and 1-month follow up

Parents/carers reports of children's emotional, restless/attentional difficulties and behavioural difficulties did not change (to a statistically significant extent) over a one-month period as lockdown progressed.

2. Children by gender

Approximately half the children and young people in the sample were identified as male and half as female. Although the difference was small, parents/carers reported significantly higher levels of behavioural and attentional difficulties for boys compared to girls. However, the patterns of change between baseline and follow up appeared to be consistent across gender for all three.



Figure 3. Mean parent/carer reported SDQ subscale scores for male and female children at baseline and 1-month follow up

3. Higher and lower income households

Approximately 17% of the parents/carers in the sample reported that they had a household income below the national average of £30,000. Parents/carers from lower income households reported significantly higher levels of behavioural and attentional difficulties, compared to those in higher income households, although the difference was small. The patterns of change between baseline and follow up appeared to be consistent across both income groups for all three.

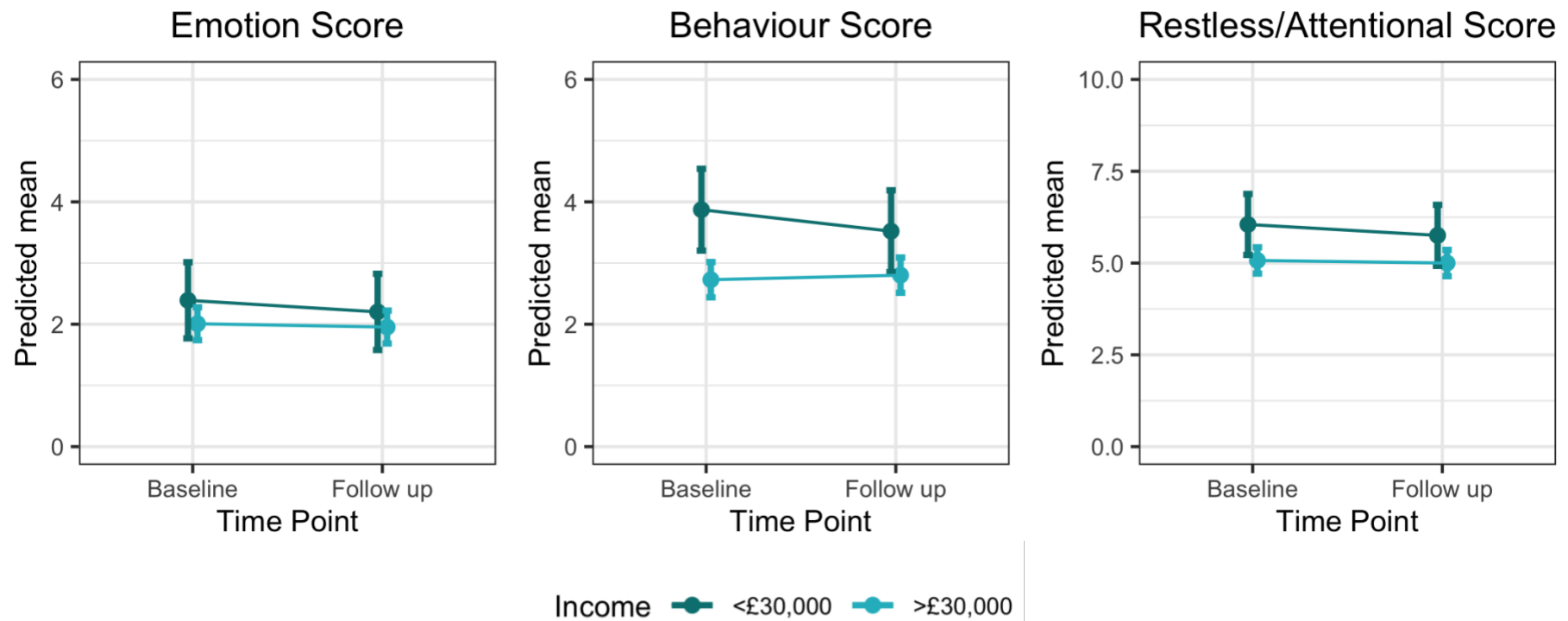


Figure 6. Mean SDQ subscale scores for children from higher- and lower-income households at baseline and 1-month follow up

4. Parent working status (working or not working)

Approximately 15% of the parents/carers in the sample reported that they are currently unemployed (including those who are homemakers/full time parents, in education, unable to work due to disability, seeking work, or retired). There were similar patterns in parents/carers reports of their child's emotional difficulties for those who were employed and unemployed. Although the difference was small, parents/carers who were unemployed reported higher levels of emotional difficulties in their children, compared to those who were employed.

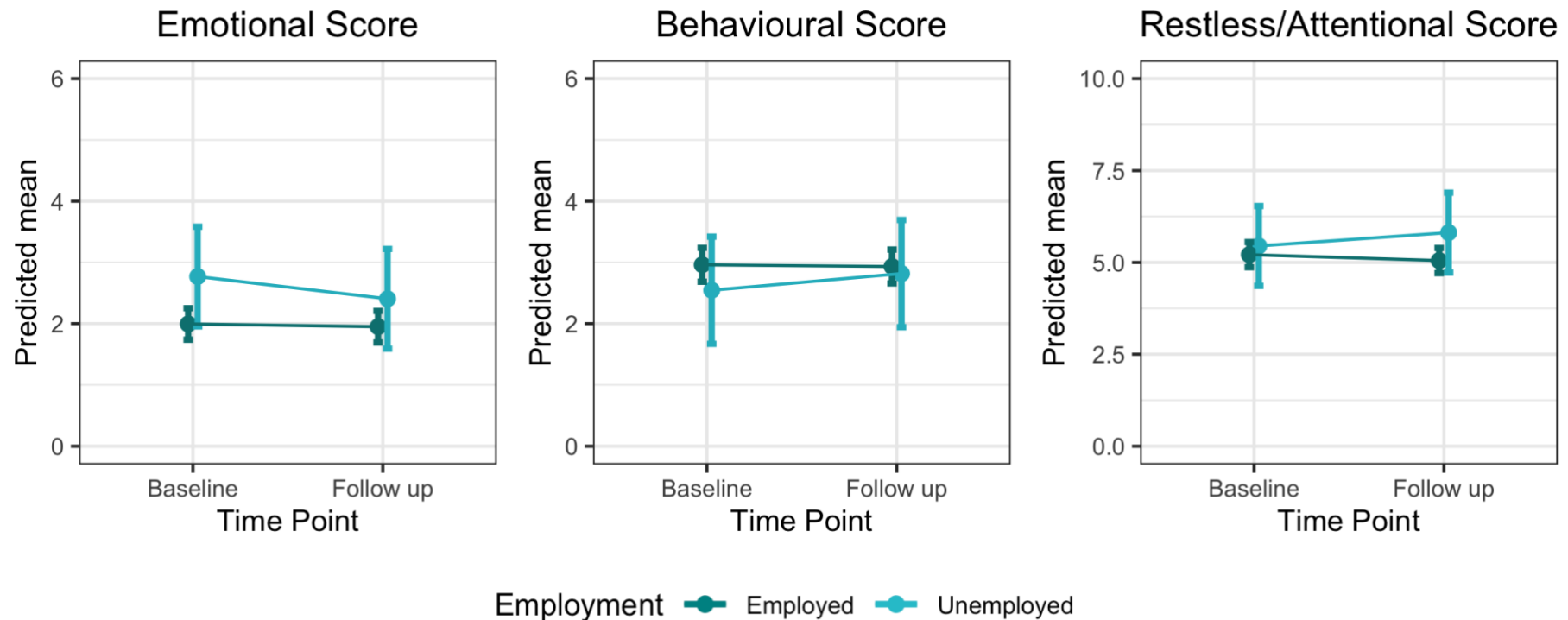


Figure 7. Mean parent/carer reported SDQ subscale score for children of working and non-working parents at baseline and 1-month follow up

5. Family ethnicity

Approximately 4% of the parents/carers in the sample reported that their child's ethnicity was an ethnicity other than white British. Patterns appeared to be consistent across parents/carers of children of white British or other ethnicities.

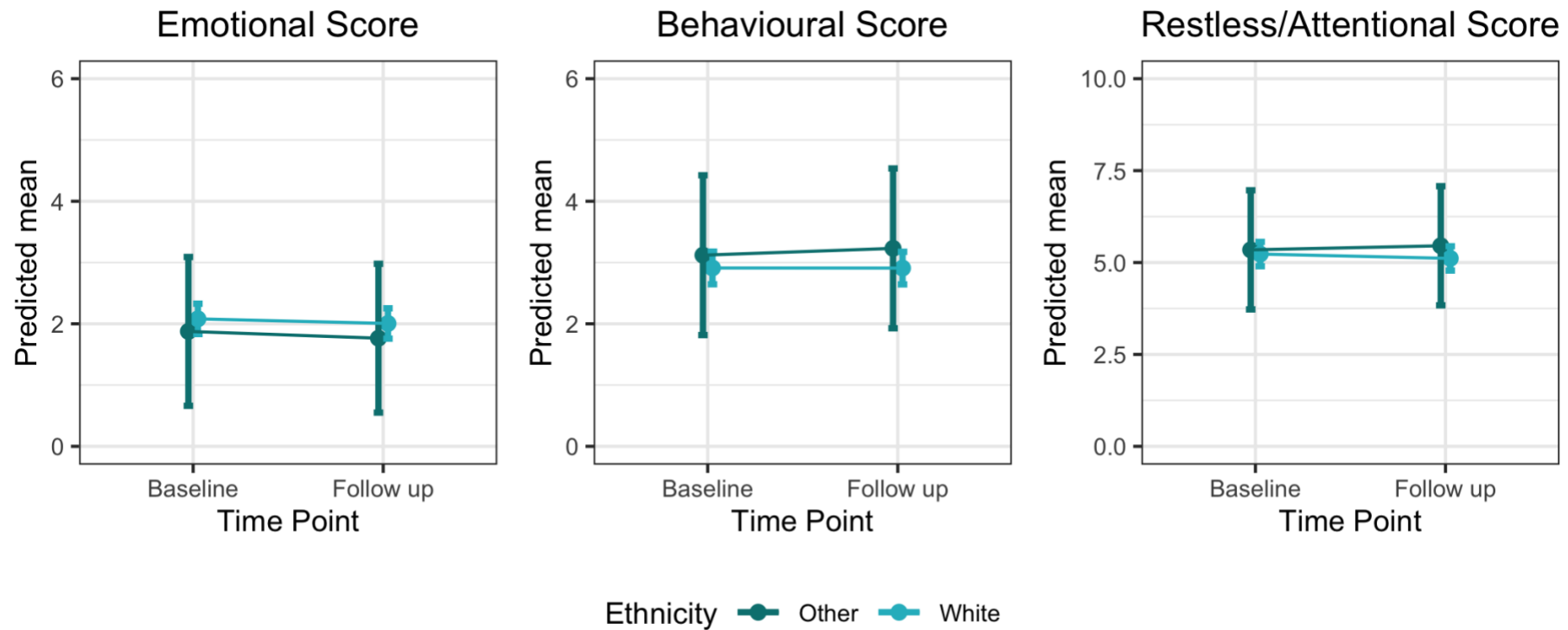


Figure 8. Mean SDQ subscale scores for children of white British parents and parents of other ethnicities at baseline and 1-month follow up

Appendix A

Demographic information

		Baseline		1 st Follow-up (took part)		1 st Follow-up (did not take part)	
		n	%	n	%	n	%
Parent Gender	Female	510	95.1	209	94.6	304	95.6
	Male	26	4.9	12	5.4	14	4.4
	Other/Prefer not to say	-	-	-	-	-	-
Employment status	Employed	464	86.6	199	90	265	84.1
	Not employed	72	13.4	22	10	50	15.9
Household income	< £30,000	108	20.1	37	16.7	71	22.5
	> £30,000	362	67.5	153	69.2	209	66.3
	Prefer not to say	36	6.7	17	7.7	19	6
Child gender	Female	256	47.8	110	49.8	146	46.3
	Male	280	52.2	111	50.2	169	53.7
	Prefer not to say	-	-	-	-	-	-
Neurodevelopmental conditions	ASD	9	1.7	4	1.8	5	1.6
	ADHD	5	0.9	1	0.5	4	1.3
SEN	Any SEN	18	3.4	9	4.1	9	2.9
Parent ethnicity	Asian/Asian British - Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, other	11	2	5	2.3	6	1.9

	Black/Black British - Caribbean, African, other	5	0.9	-	-	5	1.6
	Chinese/Chinese British	4	0.7	2	0.9	2	0.6
	Middle Eastern/Middle Eastern British - Arab, Turkish, other	3	0.6	-	-	3	0.9
	Mixed race - other	5	0.9	2	0.9	3	0.9
	Mixed race - White and Black/Black British	4	0.7	-	-	4	1.3
	Other ethnic group	1	0.2	-	-	1	0.3
	Prefer not to say	1	0.2	-	-	1	0.3
	White - British, Irish, other	502	93.7	212	95.9	290	92.1
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
SDQ Score	Emotions	2.04	1.76	2.03	1.84	2.01	1.72
	Behaviour	2.96	2.00	2.92	2.02	2.99	1.95
	Restlessness/attention	5.14	2.44	5.18	2.49	5.08	3.40