

For immediate release

Children and Adolescents' Mental Health: One Year On

Summary of Co-SPACE Study Findings

- Co-SPACE children and young people experienced highest levels of mental health issues in June 2020 and February 2021, when restrictions were most stringent.
- Overall, primary school children have had greater changes in levels of mental health difficulties throughout the pandemic compared to secondary school aged children.
- Average mental health difficulties among primary and secondary school aged children have decreased again since schools reopened and restrictions started easing.

Parents and carers reported that behavioural, emotional and attentional difficulties in their children changed considerably throughout the past year, increasing in times of national lockdown and decreasing as restrictions eased and schools reopened, according to the latest [Co-SPACE](#) (COVID-19 Supporting Parents, Adolescents, and Children in Epidemics) [study](#), led by experts at the University of Oxford.

Polly Waite, Associate Professor of Clinical Psychology at the University of Oxford and co-lead of the study said:

"These findings make it clear that children and young people's mental health has been negatively affected over the course of the pandemic. Moving forward, it will be crucial to prioritise their wellbeing, and in particular, identify those who continue to experience significant difficulties and require further urgent support. At Oxford University, we are delighted that our research is helping to support families through the pandemic, via the [SPARKLE](#) project (in collaboration with researchers from KCL) and the [Co-CAT](#) project."

This pattern of change over the year has been similar in boys and girls, yet more pronounced in primary school aged (4-10 years old), than secondary school aged (11-17 years old), children. Adolescent self-reported levels of behavioural, emotional and attentional difficulties were highest during the national lockdowns (April 2020, May 2020, and January 2021) when restrictions were most stringent and schools were closed to the majority of students. Yet, in line with parental reports, participating adolescents' self-reported mental health difficulties were on average relatively stable throughout the year.

Claire Cattell, a mother of a seven-year old, said:

"My daughter has always struggled with transitions causing anxiety. The sad thing about the effect of the pandemic is that we were making great progress with her anxieties when all of

this hit, but I have sadly seen her regress quite significantly. The worst periods were definitely May-July 2020 and December - February 2021. There were nights she wasn't asleep until gone midnight and this had a knock on effect to the next day when her behaviour was really difficult. We had a few months where her tantrums were huge and very distressing for me. As an only child she has struggled socially in the pandemic too and when schools resumed the craziness of a school morning was very overwhelming. We are making progress and she will be ok but managing her mental health has been a full time job this last year."

The study also highlighted that children with SEN/ND and those from lower income (< £16,000 p.a.) households have been particularly vulnerable throughout the pandemic. Their parents or carers reported continuously elevated mental health symptoms with higher levels of behavioural, emotional, and attentional difficulties.

Clare Stafford, Vice-Chair, CYPMHC & CEO of Charlie Waller Trust said:

"The study consistently highlights the unequal impacts of the pandemic on specific groups of children and young people, such as those with special educational needs and disabilities and children living in families on low income. It is now more important than ever that these groups are properly supported to prevent these inequalities from being further entrenched."

"We must create safe school environments for children and young people who have been through traumatic experiences and offer help to those who are struggling most. This must mean a strong move away from the current emphasis on punitive approaches to behaviour and discipline in schools. A whole school and college approach in every education setting across the country will be vital in helping to create a culture where mental health and wellbeing is supported."

More than 12,500 parents and 1,300 adolescents have now taken part in the **Co-SPACE (COVID-19 Supporting Parents, Adolescents, and Children in Epidemics) [survey](#)**. 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 how these needs change as the pandemic progresses.

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.

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Notes to editor:

- This Co-SPACE report and images accompanying this report are accessible here: <https://cospaceoxford.org/findings/report-10-changes-in-childrens-mental-health-throughout-one-year-of-the-covid-19-pandemic/>
- Other Co-SPACE reports can be found online at: <https://cospaceoxford.org/findings/>
- 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 are 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
- **Oxford University** has been placed number 1 in the Times Higher Education World University Rankings for the fifth year running, and at the heart of this success is our ground-breaking research and innovation. Oxford is world-famous for research excellence and home to some of the most talented people from across the globe. Our

work helps the lives of millions, solving real-world problems through a huge network of partnerships and collaborations. The breadth and interdisciplinary nature of our research sparks imaginative and inventive insights and solutions.

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