

The Covid-19 pandemic is having a profound impact on the way we live our lives, and Samaritans Cymru is concerned about how it will affect the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in Wales. Early intervention and reaching high-risk groups is vital to mitigate the risks associated with Covid-19. The pandemic has added an increasing sense of urgency to the need for all schools to adopt a structured and effective approach to emotional health and wellbeing, so that all children get the support they need. The pandemic has also highlighted the need for support services, such as services that support those who self-harm, to adapt and become widely available to everyone that needs help.

While we don't yet have a full picture of how children have been impacted by the pandemic, lockdown measures are likely to affect children from the most deprived communities most. For some children, the lockdown will expose them to adverse experiences, with an increased risk of children going hungry, being neglected and being exposed to domestic violence.¹ Children in the most deprived areas could be experiencing lockdown and social distancing measures in poor quality and overcrowded housing, which could have a lasting impact on their physical and mental health. For those without internet or electronic devices, the ability to continue learning has become even more difficult. Without access to online learning resources, it's likely that those already starting on an unequal footing will continue to fall behind. We are concerned about the impact of the pandemic on young people who have been or who are at risk of being excluded from school or who are vulnerable and are for other reasons not on the school register. These young people are especially at risk of lifelong disadvantage and we have highlighted the issues in a previous [report](#). As we move out of the restrictions it is important that these young people are not forgotten, that we understand what their situation and needs are and take action to support and include them.

In Wales, schools must prepare for an increase in children with mental health needs, including those of children who have experienced trauma and adversity during the months in lockdown. We believe it's essential that trauma informed approaches are rolled out in all schools in Wales. As part of this, teachers must receive proper guidance and training to increase their understanding of trauma-informed approaches and enable them to support all children and young people returning to school. Addressing trauma in schools presents an opportunity to intervene in the cycle of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). Schools, local

¹ <https://www.bmj.com/content/369/bmj.m2061>

health services, local authorities, public services and the wider public sector must invest and work to reduce ACEs, their impact on individuals and, most significantly, understand the benefits of intervening in the cycle of ACEs.

While children living in deprived household are likely to be disproportionately affected by lockdown measures, most young people have seen their lives change drastically in the last few months. Many have had their education interrupted and are anxious about their prospects.² School can also be a child's only source of support and community and opportunity to interact with their own peer group. A survey by the Mental Health Foundation found the most affected group were young people aged 18 to 24, with 44% saying they felt lonely.³ Loneliness and isolation is a well-evidenced risk factor for extreme emotional distress including suicidal thoughts.

These findings indicate that the pandemic is likely to increase the risk of children and young people experiencing emotional distress, and we continue to call for the Welsh Government to ensure all schools have in place a structured and effective approach to emotional health and wellbeing. This should include a proactive suicide prevention plan, which ensures that children know when and where to seek help and all teachers receive basic mental health awareness training. There should also be an effective suicide response plan which is in place for when a suspected or attempted suicide occurs, and which is informed by expertise in this area. We also continue to call for the Welsh Government to include mental and emotional health in the delivery of the curriculum on a statutory basis, so that every child in every school takes part in lessons on emotional wellbeing. It's more important than ever to build the emotional literacy and resilience of children and young people. Mental health education could enable children and young people better to understand their emotions and emotional distress and develop coping strategies. Crucially, it can enable them to know when they need to ask for help.

Finally, the Welsh Government and NHS Wales should work together to bolster quality self-harm support provided online, by scaling up and fast tracking the development of existing support apps. We are concerned that many young people who self-harm may have been left without their usual coping mechanisms and are struggling to access external support. In the medium term, NHS Wales should provide comprehensive online therapies to deal directly with self-harming behaviour as well as underlying distress.

Evidence suggests that the pandemic could have a significant impact the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people. However, an increase in suicides is not inevitable and mitigating this risk early should be approached with urgency. Here at Samaritans we believe prevention and early intervention is needed to reduce suicide risk.

Please do get in touch if you have any questions.

² [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpsy/article/PIIS2215-0366\(20\)30171-1/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpsy/article/PIIS2215-0366(20)30171-1/fulltext)

³ Survey by the Mental Health Foundation. Total sample size was 2221 UK adults aged 18+. Fieldwork to gather the new data was undertaken between 2nd - 3rd April 2020. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all UK adults (aged 18+).