

The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Children's Mental Health: What We Know So Far

Before the coronavirus pandemic, one in five children and adolescents struggled with a mental health or learning disorder. Then the pandemic hit, bringing an upsurge in youth reporting mental health challenges.

Though our understanding of the pandemic's mental health impacts is still evolving, it's clear thus far that despite the challenges of the pandemic, children and young adults are remarkably resilient and able to cope with the ongoing stress and uncertainty in healthy ways.

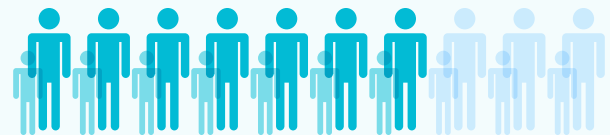
At the same time, certain identifiable groups of young people are more at risk for negative mental health outcomes. These vulnerable groups include:

- Youth with preexisting mental health challenges or who have experienced previous trauma
- Youth with autism
- Youth whose families are experiencing economic hardship or food instability
- Youth who live in urban areas
- BIPOC youth

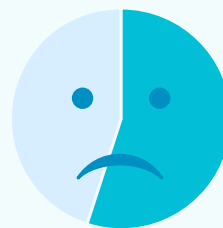
Research from the Child Mind Institute

With support from the Morgan Stanley Alliance for Children's Mental Health, the team at the Child Mind Institute joined forces with the National Institute of Mental Health and New York State's Nathan Kline Institute to create the **CoRoNaVirus Health and Impact Survey**, or CRISIS. In April 2020, the survey was sent to 5,646 adult participants. Half answered on behalf of themselves, and the other half answered on behalf of their kids aged 5–17.

Our initial findings supported the idea that children and adults alike were experiencing higher levels of emotional distress.



About 70% of both children and adults reported some degree of mental discomfort, resulting in loneliness, irritability or fidgetiness.



Children



Adults

55% of children felt more “sad, depressed or unhappy,” versus **25% of adults**.³⁰

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One of the most telling findings is that **children's moods during the pandemic were most closely related to the lifestyle changes they'd experienced**, such as not being able to attend school, see friends or have in-person conversations with extended family members. These findings dovetail with other research that has demonstrated the protective effects of regular, predictable routines for children.

Additionally, our data indicated that a **child's mental health three months before the pandemic began was the factor most closely correlated with their mental health during the pandemic**. In other words, a child's baseline mental health has had more impact on their ability to cope during the pandemic than any particular pandemic experience has.

Our research also **highlights the connection between economic hardship and mental health outcomes**. Children in our study who lived in financially unstable households or who experienced food instability during the pandemic experienced worse mental health outcomes than their more financially secure peers.

Perspectives from our partners

In the summer of 2021, our partners at the Jed Foundation and the Morgan Stanley Alliance for Children's Mental Health surveyed both high school educators and teenagers about their experiences during the pandemic and their concerns about the upcoming school year. In their responses, educators:

- Rated **deficits in learning and academic preparation** as likely to have the most impact on student learning this upcoming year.
- Ranked **student anxiety** over the return to school as the next most impactful issue after academic deficits.
- Said they expected **economic hardship** to be the highest hurdle for those students who experience it, more significant than either learning deficits or anxiety.

Meanwhile, many teens surveyed said that the pandemic had impacted their mental health in some way, with 37% saying it had made their mental health worse.

What's more, non-white teens reported more concern than their white peers about nearly every re-emergence issue, including loss of focus and academic progress, coping with loss and grief, economic struggles or food insecurity, and mental health challenges.

But there is good news, too: 42% of teens overall say that the pandemic has increased the number of conversations they have around mental health. Teens were also optimistic: 67% agreed with the statement, "I am hopeful that I will adapt and rebound from the challenges of the pandemic."

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What's next?

The data suggest that efforts to support young people's mental health moving forward must address the specific stressors consistently reported by vulnerable groups. While mental health resources can make a significant difference, unequal impacts will remain as long as economic and racial inequality persists.

At the same time, a growing body of research has shown that for many people, the distress experienced early in the pandemic has waned over time. Even the teens who said they were struggling right now felt positive about the future. This speaks volumes about resilience, particularly that of young people, and it's a hopeful sign that many children and teenagers will emerge from the pandemic without long-term negative consequences.

Read the full 2021 Children's Mental Health Report at childmind.org/2021report

ABOUT THE CHILD MIND INSTITUTE

The Child Mind Institute is dedicated to transforming the lives of children and families struggling with mental health and learning disorders by giving them the help they need to thrive. We've become the leading independent nonprofit in children's mental health by providing gold-standard evidence-based care, delivering educational resources to millions of families each year, training educators in underserved communities, and developing tomorrow's breakthrough treatments. Together, we truly can transform children's lives.