



Centre for  
Society and  
Mental Health



Emerging  
Minds

# Youth Mental Health and Covid-19: 2021 Policy Lab Briefing Summary



Economic  
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## CSMH Policy Briefing B001-S

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## Introduction

COVID-19 has been challenging for the mental health of children and young people in the United Kingdom (UK). There has been significant upheaval in their school, family, and social lives, and many continue to have concerns about impacts on their mental health, their education, and their futures.

Earlier this year, a policy lab was held as the culminating event of ["Youth Mental Health and Covid-19: What do we know and what should we do?"](#) - a jointly run conference exploring the impacts of COVID-19 and related responses on the mental health of young people in disadvantaged, marginalised, and vulnerable groups.

The Lab was designed to identify the most pressing challenges for children and young people's mental health and what we can do to "build back fairer" over the short, medium, and long-term. Over two days, participants from policy, academia, civil society and schools, as well as young people, including those with lived experience of mental health issues, and parents and carers, discussed these key topics.

This summary presents the key points of discussion and recommendations emerging from the lab.

## Key Challenges

During the policy lab, a range of challenges affecting UK children and young people in the short- and long-term were identified and reflected upon. Three key themes emerged in these discussions:

- **The pandemic has directly challenged the mental health of children and young people in a variety of ways** - specifically the impacts of isolation, academic pressures, and transitions to online learning. Readapting to the school environment, peer groups, routine, and structure may bring further challenges for some, particularly as not all children and young people have been affected equally and there may be important longer-term consequences as a result
- **Existing means of providing effective support have been disrupted by the pandemic** - as children and young people experienced this range of challenges to their mental health, the provision of effective support also became more difficult, both in terms of access and the kinds of services that could be delivered
- **Children and young people are also affected by the challenges and losses that their families, communities, and wider society experienced** – there is concern about how the distress experienced by parents and carers was impacting on young people’s mental health, as well as exposure to much of the trauma and loss experienced by the general population during the pandemic

## Recommended Actions

Potential solutions to the identified challenges were discussed, producing the following recommended actions that might be taken in three different settings: schools, mental health services, and the wider policy and practice environment.

### School-based interventions

1. Empower and equip school staff to normalise discussions about mental health, providing them with reliable screening tools to help identify children whose needs may be unknown, alongside appropriate training and support
2. Option for some children to have a gradual return to conventional schooling, with a hybrid model of at-home and school-based learning
3. Assess the effectiveness of new digital tools introduced during lockdown, such as recorded lessons and online discussion groups, and retain the tools which improved children’s experience of education
4. Bridge the digital divide by providing students with access to the internet and information technology required for their education
5. Implement a ‘whole-school approach’ to children and young people’s mental health by bringing together stakeholders including teachers, school governing bodies, parents and carers, local public health teams,

## Recommended Actions

school nurses and all those in the wider school community who are responsible for protecting and promoting children's mental health

6. Invest sufficient resources in special education, support care and mental health funding, to implement these policy interventions

### Support services – based interventions

7. Strengthen the provision of early intervention from services such as mental health support teams
8. Assess the impact of changes to the provision of services brought on by the pandemic, such as the shift to online rather than face-to-face services, and retain the changes that have increased the effectiveness of these services
9. Develop open access mental health services for young people up to the age of 25
10. Provide extra support at transition points in young people's lives, particularly for the more vulnerable, such as moving from Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) to adult mental health services

### Policy and community-based interventions

11. Maintain or increase financial support to families experiencing hardships due to or exacerbated by the pandemic

12. Provide COVID-19-related mental health resources for those who have experienced trauma or loss

13. Improve links between schools and families as mental health issues in one setting can affect children in the other

14. Introduce reforms to the benefit system and universal credit and explore the feasibility of implementing a guaranteed income scheme

## Concluding thoughts

The COVID-19 pandemic, with its associated upheaval to school, family and social life, has exacerbated and created new challenges for children and young people's mental health. There is an urgent need to address these issues. However, it is also critical to recognise and preserve the positive consequences of the changes experienced as families, schools, and wider society begin adapting to a post-pandemic future. It is clear that there is tremendous scope to improve both access to and the quality of mental health support available to young people, but in order to be successful, the views of all relevant stakeholders, including children, young people and parents and carers themselves, must be meaningfully considered and appropriate resources provided. While the pandemic has burdened the mental health of many children and young people and exposed and widened inequalities that impact heavily on health, social, and economic outcomes, it also presents us with an opportunity to take bold steps in protecting and promoting their wellbeing into the future.



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