

POLICY BRIEF #3

Young people's experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic

MOTHERS' and YOUNG PEOPLE'S study

strong and well

Translating evidence from the Mothers' and Young People's Study to inform policy and practice

The Mothers' and Young People's Study

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in rapid and unprecedented changes to the lives of young people across the world. In Australia, the shutdown of non-essential services, school closures, stay at home orders, and other physical and social distancing measures created considerable challenges.

The implications of these challenges for young people's short and longer-term health and wellbeing are still unfolding.¹⁻³

To investigate the impact of the pandemic on the wellbeing of young people and families, we invited young people and their mothers participating in the Mothers' and Young People's Study to complete an online survey. The Mothers' and Young People's Study is an Australian longitudinal study designed to investigate the health and wellbeing of over 1500 first-time mothers and their firstborn children.

A total of 267 young people (aged 14-17 years) took part in the study between June and September 2020 (during Victoria's second lockdown). This lockdown lasted over 100 days and included statewide shutdown of non-essential services, school closures and stay at home orders; and restricted travel (5km) and night curfew (8pm) for people living in Melbourne.

We asked young people to tell us about:

- their experiences of school, remote learning, family relationships, friendships and daily activities during the pandemic
- what helped them to stay strong and resilient.

Staying strong and resilient during the pandemic

While the pandemic created lots of challenges for young people and their families, many young people felt that there were also positive things that came out of the pandemic.



More than 4 in 5 young people (87%) reported doing more activities as a family and/or that they had more quality time together as a family.



Most young people (91%) reported that people were looking out for each other more.

"I feel that I have recognised that my family, specifically my parents will always have my back and support all my decisions and actions I make."

"I feel as though we have all been finding new ways to keep ourselves from getting bored and therefore have devised a few routines and found new hobbies."

Impact of school disruption

School closures and remote learning were a source of stress for many, but not all young people. Over half of young people reported that it was easier to concentrate at home than at school, but this did not necessarily mean that remote learning was without stress.



4 in 5 young people (85%) reported an increase in school related stress.



3 in 4 young people (72%) reported feeling overwhelmed and that they needed more support from teachers.



4 in 5 young people (87%) thought the pandemic had a negative impact on their school performance.

“Studying during the pandemic is extremely difficult, living in an open household with five other people is extremely tough... The variation between classes is extreme, some want to call every lesson, some rarely do. This variation is overwhelming.”

“I’ve become more... lazy, with work. I’ve been sleeping in more because I’ve been staying up later, and quite a few tasks are overdue. I want to go back to school to get things back on track.”

Impact on family life

Increased stress and tension within the family and home environment were common.

Over half of young people reported their house felt crowded.



3 in 4 young people (74%) reported more stress at home.

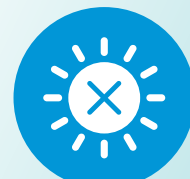


2 in 3 young people (68%) reported more conflict between family members.

“There are lots of arguments and this makes me feel really stressed and frustrated. I have found that it is easier to avoid my family, so I don’t make anything worse by getting upset.”



FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS



LITTLE TIME OUTSIDE



SCREEN TIME



Experiences reported by young people



SCHOOL STRESS



FATIGUE



FRIENDSHIP DIFFICULTIES

Friendships and daily activities

Almost all young people experienced less contact with friends.



1 in 3 young people (30%) perceived a decrease in quality of their relationships with friends.



1 in 2 young people (49%) reported feeling lonelier than before the pandemic.

The majority of young people did not engage in regular exercise or spend time outdoors:



2 in 5 young people (38%) were exercising 2 or fewer days per week.

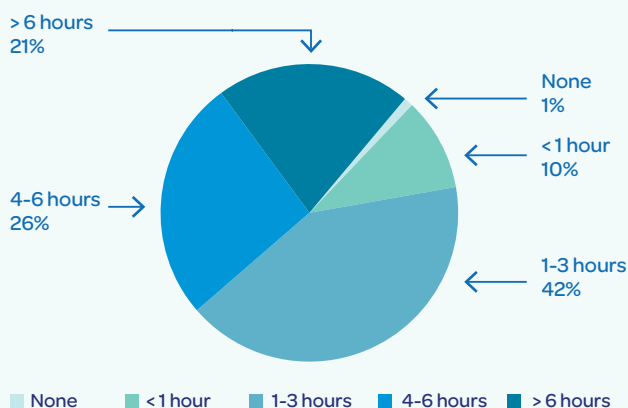


1 in 4 young people (28%) spent time outdoors 2 or fewer days per week.



1 in 2 young people (47%) spent 4 or more hours online alone per day (e.g. accessing YouTube, Instagram or TikTok). (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 Time per day spent online alone



Impact on wellbeing

Most young people experienced increased worry, fatigue and irritability as they navigated pandemic challenges.



1 in 2 young people (50%) reported feeling more irritable, and more than **1 in 2 (52%)** reported feeling more tired and fatigued.



3 in 5 young people (59%) reported more difficulties in concentration and focusing.

"The stress of school was very intense, for the weekends I couldn't leave my bed because I hated being round the house and every action was very tiring. I stopped doing what I loved doing, for example, I would walk my dog for an hour to clear my head and get out, I stopped because it was too tiring and my mental health deteriorated because of it."

"I believe the pandemic strengthened the fear of entering a future where everything appears to get progressively worse - unemployment, housing unavailability, environmental degradation. That feeling of catastrophe did contribute to my anxiety significantly."

Key findings

The pandemic had substantial impacts on young people's family life, school, friendships, daily activities and emotional wellbeing.

Our results reflect how young people were feeling about these changes in the midst of the second wave of the pandemic in Victoria.

The findings highlight the stressors for young people and their families, as well as the positives that came out of the pandemic. The positives included more quality time with family, and the ability to focus on school work without having to deal with pressures of the school environment. However, many young people found the changes to their lives overwhelming and difficult to navigate.

Looking forward

The findings have important implications for the recovery phase of the pandemic. Some of the issues experienced by young people in the context of the pandemic could be mitigated by stronger policy responses and more targeted investment in the health and wellbeing of young people.

Schools are a critical source of information and support for parents and young people. It is important that schools are adequately resourced and supported to create and share resources with families, and to prioritise support for young people's social and emotional wellbeing.

In particular, it is important that schools are supported to:

- promote social connections and a sense of belonging in the school environment, and
- raise awareness of common mental health difficulties and avenues for seeking support.

It is also important that young people have options for seeking support outside of the school and home environment. Access to health care, including affordable mental health care, needs to be given greater policy priority.⁴

Quality time with family was a major source of resilience for young people. Families also have important roles to play in:

- encouraging the re-establishment or maintenance of positive routines for young people and for families as a whole
- monitoring the amount of time young people spend online on social media platforms
- encouraging resumption of physical exercise and outdoor activities.

MOTHERS' and YOUNG PEOPLE'S study

Contact

For further information about the Mothers' and Young People's Study see: strongerfutures.org.au/mothers-and-young-peoples-study or contact:

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References

Available on request.

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