

What children are saying to Childline about coronavirus

A summary of young people's key concerns about coronavirus raised in Childline counselling sessions

17 April 2020

Background

Our Childline service gives children and young people a safe and confidential space to talk, be listened to and get support.

The Childline website provides children with the information and advice they need to understand their problems, and the tools to express how they are feeling. Childline counsellors provide support online and over the phone to children and young people when they need it the most.

There is specific help on the Childline website for young people who are anxious about coronavirus (information about this is available below). Young people can also use the message boards to get support from peers or write a letter to Ask Sam.

This briefing provides an overview of the main concerns that children and young people have been talking to Childline counsellors about during the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19). Gaining an insight into these worries can help adults think about what support needs to be put in place for young people at this time.

We'll be updating this briefing with new information as the pandemic continues.

Counselling sessions

Between 21 January 2020 and 8 April 2020, Childline delivered over 2,200 counselling sessions¹ to children and young people who expressed concerns about coronavirus.

Around 1,600 of these counselling sessions were delivered during March, when key events such as school closures and social distancing measures were announced.

Children's main concerns

Mental health

In most of the counselling sessions where coronavirus was mentioned, children also talk about their mental and emotional health.

Young people talk about:


- struggling with increased feelings of depression and anxiety
- having panic attacks more frequently
- having nightmares or finding it difficult to fall asleep
- feeling lonely or isolated.

"I am feeling really anxious about catching the coronavirus. I've been spending a lot of time panicking about the risk of the virus spreading in the UK. I can't sleep because I worry and overthink about getting the virus and I feel tired the next day. I feel like I'm stuck in a loop that I can't get out of. Please can you help?"

Girl, 12


Young people use the word "trapped" to describe how they feel about being at home, particularly since strict social distancing measures were put in place. Not being able to go to school, visit family or friends or take part in activities outside of the family home is having a negative impact on their mental health.

Some young people tell us they are having suicidal thoughts and feelings and some talk about using self-harm to cope.




“I don't know what to do. I've been having suicidal thoughts. I can't meet up with anyone because of the Coronavirus and the situation at home is getting worse because I argue with my siblings over the smallest things. I have nothing to do at home and I feel trapped.”

Girl, 12-15




Reduced support

Young people who have been receiving ongoing support for existing mental health concerns are saying that they are either no longer receiving support or support has been reduced. As a result, some young people feel like their mental health is getting worse.



“I'm going through a lot right now. I feel really anxious about everything. I'm stuck at home and having a horrible time. I feel so upset and lonely. My child and adolescent mental health (CAMHS) appointments have been cancelled because of the Coronavirus. The news has made my mental health worse and now all the schools have been closed there are more arguments at home.”

Girl, 16-18



A small number of counselling sessions have been from young people receiving ongoing mental health support in hospital. They are distressed because they can no longer receive visitors or have been moved in order to make space for coronavirus patients.

Family relationships

Young people say that being in constant close proximity with other members of their household has created a difficult and stressful environment. This often results in more arguments.

Other family issues that are affecting young people's wellbeing include:

- witnessing arguments between parents about financial pressures and job loss
- parents who are divorced or separated arguing about visiting rights and where a young person should be staying
- young people having parents in the middle of separating and being concerned that the pandemic will delay the process (making family life under the same roof unbearable)
- young people feeling distressed because they can no longer seek refuge and emotional support by going to see close relatives such as a grandparent
- worries about relatives contracting the virus, particularly grandparents or more vulnerable family members.

"I am scared about the Coronavirus. I get really anxious that my family and I might catch it as a lot of people have died from it already. I'm worried about my mum because she's pregnant and I'm scared something will happen to her and the baby. It's really scary because everyone is talking about it and people are sharing stories every day on social media. I don't know how to cope."

Boy, 12

Doing schoolwork at home

In some cases being schooled at home has been the cause of family arguments. Young people are also:

- finding it hard to have their day organised by their parents or carers
- struggling with their work and not being able to access the usual support offered in the classroom
- finding it difficult to find a quiet space to concentrate

- struggling with motivation
- worrying about their future prospects.

"I am feeling stressed out about the amount of work to do online and having to send it to the teachers. I'm worried about doing it wrong and I'm confused on how to do it. I feel scared and uncertain about everything that is going on with the coronavirus."

Anonymous, 12-15

Bullying

In the earlier days of the pandemic, 20 per cent of counselling sessions where the young person talked about coronavirus, related to bullying. Young people told counsellors they were being bullied about race or ethnicity, experiencing name calling, belittling comments, rumours, cruel jokes and verbal attacks.

Some young people talked about feeling unaccepted. It affected their self-esteem and some young people even talked about being ashamed of their facial features.

"There is so much news on social media about the coronavirus; the bullies are saying I am to blame for everything that has happened. They assume that I am Chinese but I am not. I want to change my race. I constantly judge myself and I feel angry and hate the way I look."

Girl, 17

Young people said they contacted Childline for support because they found it difficult to tell their parents or teachers about the bullying they were experiencing.

"I'm being bullied for being Asian and people are saying that Chinese people deserve the coronavirus. It has been happening subtly but now I get loads of racism thrown at me, it's happening online too. I feel mad and depressed about the whole thing. I don't want to bother the teachers at school as I know they are extremely busy right now. But I don't know what to do."

Boy, 11 and under

Following the school closures in March, fewer young people have been talking to us about bullying.

Abuse

Being at home more due to social distancing measures can make young people more vulnerable to abuse. For children who are experiencing abuse or neglect at home, they are unable to leave the house to get support from the places they usually go to feel safe such as schools, clubs or friends' and close relatives' houses.

The most prevalent forms of abuse that have been talked about in counselling sessions are:

- emotional abuse
- sexual abuse and online sexual abuse
- physical abuse
- neglect.

All names and potentially identifying details have been changed to protect the identity of children and young people. Quotes are created from real helpline contacts but are not necessarily direct quotes from the young person.

¹ After a counselling session, the counsellor creates a “case note” that reflects the main issues discussed by the young person. We did a word search on the counsellors’ case notes to look for any mention of “coronavirus”, “covid-19” or “virus”.

It is likely that many other young people’s concerns are in some way related to the current pandemic and ongoing situation, but they didn’t mention these specific terms, or the counsellor didn’t record them in the case note.

+ More ways to help you protect children



Visit [Childline](#) for information about coronavirus for children and young people.



Sign up to CASPAR to stay up-to-date with safeguarding and child protection legislation and guidance during the COVID-19 pandemic
nspcc.org.uk/caspar



Visit [NSPCC Learning](#) for more information about safeguarding and child protection during coronavirus

