

Teen programs need to focus on wellbeing, not just academics

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The authors of new research say supporting children and young people's mental health is as important as supporting their academic progress, and that particular attention should be paid to the fact that some young

people have struggled more than others.

Findings from their study, published in the *Journal of Affective Disorders*, focused on the connections between loneliness, social contact, parental relationships, and the mental [health](#) of adolescents aged 11-16 during the first full UK lockdown from March to May 2020.

Their analysis drew on self-reported data from 894 young people who each completed a survey throughout to gauge their experiences of lockdown and its effects on their emotions, relationships, and feelings.

The team from the universities of Bath, Bristol, Oxford, Leicester, Reading and UCL identified that it was the type of [social contact](#) with friends and family that most shaped young people's mental health outcomes. For example, whereas regular voice and video calls with friends had positive impacts for individuals, more indirect communications, such as increased texting / messaging, including via social media, either made no difference or had a negative impact.

The study found a strong association between perceived closeness with parents and positive impacts on psychological distress. This, say the authors, is different from proximity with parents, and instead is about emotional connection. For example, parents may have been working away from the home during lockdown but what mattered was the closeness of their connection with children when they returned. Unsurprising and consistent with previous findings, young people who were lonelier also had greater mental health difficulties at the outset of lockdown.

With their results, in the context of a further disrupted year and with the prospect of summer holiday catch-ups, the researchers suggest that schools and other community support organizations need to address the differential experiences of young people to ensure those who have

struggled get appropriate support. This can help avoid some of the potential long-term and negative impacts of loneliness in childhood, they say.

They argue that summer holiday programs must prioritize wellbeing support, including social interaction either in-person or digitally. This means making time for socializing is crucial. In addition, policymakers need to acknowledge the growing demand for [mental health services](#) that will be required and urgently increase funding in child and adolescent mental health services.

First author, Dr. Kate Cooper from the Department of Psychology at the University of Bath, explained that "we need to fundamentally increase mental health service provision for young people who are struggling following this exceptionally challenging period. Our research found that young people who were closer to their parents, and who had more contact with their friends and family by voice and video calls had better mental health after a month in lockdown—but of course not all young people had this support."

"Schools have been working incredibly hard to meet student needs throughout the pandemic, but it's important that when we think about catch-up programs this summer these are not just orientated towards academic support. That is of course important, but it's children's wellbeing and mental health that provide the foundation for learning, and so it would be counterproductive to provide catch-up programs which do not prioritize mental health and social connections."

Dr. Maria Loades, clinical psychologist also from Bath's Department of Psychology, added that "we need to do all we can to support young people's wellbeing, and to ensure that they are encouraged to seek support if they are struggling with their mental health, as early as possible. The pandemic has been tough for [young people](#) and parents,

and the full legacy of this on mental health and social connection is yet to be fully understood."

Research from Dr. Loades released last June, shortly after the first wave of COVID-19, highlighted the potential long-term impact of children's loneliness on their mental health as a result of lockdown.

More information: Kate Cooper et al, Loneliness, social relationships, and mental health in adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic, *Journal of Affective Disorders* (2021). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jad.2021.04.016](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2021.04.016)

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