

COVID-19 survey: Lockdowns are socially and emotionally challenging, but children are resilient

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Children in Aotearoa New Zealand have displayed strength in the face of adversity according to the world's largest survey looking at the impact of

Covid-19 restrictions on children's health, wellbeing and education. The survey, conducted by this country's largest longitudinal study *Growing Up in New Zealand*, was carried out during Covid-19 restrictions in May 2020, in conjunction with the Ministry of Social Development and the Ministry of Education.

Growing Up in New Zealand research director, University of Auckland Professor Boyd Swinburn says nearly 2,500 10 and 11-year-old children participated in the survey which makes this one of the largest studies globally to look at the impact of Covid-19 lockdown restrictions on children. "What came through loud and clear was the remarkable resilience and adaptability of New Zealand children to adjust to the restricted lifestyle, social isolation and uncertainty that Covid-19 restrictions imposed on them in 2020.

"However, it is clear that lockdowns are socially and emotionally challenging for some children and there is more that can be done to support them to weather the storm of any future restrictions. In particular, there should be a focus on better access to virtual mental health support and equitable access to devices for online learning," he says.

Growing Up in New Zealand today released the two *Life During Lockdown* reports, one focused on health and [wellbeing](#) and the other focused on education.

The reports offer a unique insight into the impact of Covid-19 restrictions on children's lives because the study could draw on baseline data gathered from children when they were eight years of age.

Education

Growing up in New Zealand education domain leader, University of

Auckland Senior Lecturer, Dr. Kane Meissel says unsurprisingly lockdown resulted in increased screentime for most children, but two-thirds of children continued to feel connected to their school or kura.

Key findings from the Education Report include:

- Nearly three-quarters of children reported a decrease in school satisfaction during the Covid-19 restriction compared with school satisfaction scores at eight-years of age.
- More than two-thirds of children used devices every day for school or homework, with the average time spent in front of screens on weekdays being nearly five hours.
- YouTube was the most popular app used by children and there was a high use of apps with 13+ restrictions, even though the children were aged 10 and 11.
- More than 80% of children reported that people in their bubble were involved in their schoolwork several times a week or more.
- Engagement with a range of activities, both school-related and non-academic, were key to boosting children's enjoyment of virtual schooling.
- Most children stayed in virtual contact with others, with 86% saying they were moderately or more connected to those outside their bubbles.

Dr. Meissel says the findings have implications for any future lockdowns and the way in which virtual home learning is delivered.

"Involvement in activities, such as baking, chores, and outdoor pursuits, whether school-related or otherwise, were important predictors of school satisfaction. This demonstrates the importance of this kind of learning, together with family connectedness, in enhancing children's wellbeing," he says.

However, Dr. Meissel says the research shows that education in lockdown was not a homogeneous experience, with lockdown learning exacerbating existing socio-economic and digital divides. "Strategies are needed to ensure equitable access to devices and online schooling options for those who may be missing out. Furthermore, schools need to be supported to tailor approaches to address the gaps which may have opened up for children who did not have a positive school or home experience in lockdown," he says.

Health and Wellbeing

The research found that children's physical health was generally very good at the time of the survey, with eight in ten reporting very good to excellent health, but mental wellbeing was more fragile.

Key findings from the Wellbeing Report include:

- Nearly 80% of children reported having a good time with their family in lockdown.
- Children living in a larger bubble (six or more people) during Alert Level 4 were more likely to experience better health and wellbeing.
- Around 40% of children displayed symptoms of depression and anxiety. These children were more likely to be:
 - Girls
 - Those worried about their family's financial situation
 - Those who had fewer positive experiences in Alert Level 4
 - Those with existing wellbeing and developmental concerns.
- Māori and Pacific children recorded lower depression and anxiety scores, which researchers attributed to greater family connection.

- Children classified as obese at eight were more likely to record poorer physical and mental wellbeing during the Covid-19 [lockdown](#).

Growing Up in New Zealand Foundation Director, Professor Susan Morton, says greater efforts are needed to ensure that all children and whānau have suitable access to digital devices to enable them to engage with services to support their wellbeing during these challenging times. "The observed changes in mental health we've identified may be age-related or they could be attributable to the impact of Covid-19 restrictions. Whichever it is, these findings highlight the need to prioritize children's mental health and wellbeing in a pandemic environment and to provide appropriate support to families/whānau and their [children](#)," Professor Morton says.

More information: Reports: www.growingup.co.nz/growing-reports

Provided by University of Auckland

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