

Handling Disclosures: Children & Trauma fact sheet

<p>Trauma During Lockdown</p>	<p>During the 2020 lockdown, many children and young people have had difficult, stressful and even traumatic experiences. They will have short term reactions; they may struggle in various ways for a while, before 'bouncing back' to what feels like normal for them. However, for some children and young people, their experiences will have been overwhelming at the time and will have a negative psychological impact that will last longer.</p>
<p>The Experience of Lockdown</p>	<p>The lockdown meant that people were stuck in their homes together for an extended period of time. This will have put a great deal of pressure on individuals and relationships. They may not have had their usual outlets for stress such as exercise, activities and socialising. This potent cocktail of factors will have led to some home lives that were already difficult, becoming dangerous and traumatic.</p> <p>But even previous 'healthy', and 'well functioning' home lives may have not survived lockdown intact, and some children and young people that you would not have usually worried about, will have had some really difficult and traumatic experiences.</p> <p>For example, Refuge, the UK's largest provider of domestic abuse support experienced a huge increase of calls to its helpline during the lockdown, and then as the restrictions eased, it experienced a huge increase in the number of women needing emergency accommodation.</p>
<p>Possible effect of Lockdown on Children and Young People</p>	<p>With children and young people stuck in their home together with their carers, they may be more at risk of physical abuse, sexual abuse and emotional abuse, and they will certainly have had fewer opportunities to disclose anything that has happened to them to a safe adult outside of their home. And those children who were already identified as being at risk and had the involvement of children's services, may have had fewer visits and check ins from professionals, which will have also increased their risk.</p> <p>All children and young people have also been exposed, over a period of several months, to repeated information from news and social media about the dangers of the Covid 19 virus. And they have had to digest that information without the previous level of social support from their peers and from calm, reasonable, caring teachers and school staff.</p> <p>And of course, there have been a large number of unexpected deaths due to Covid 19. So, many children will have been suddenly and unexpectedly bereaved. They may not have had the chance to say goodbye due to restrictions in the hospital, and the usual opportunities to mourn together and be supported through their grief may have not been possible.</p>

Warning Signs

There will, of course, be challenges for many children and young people adapting to the new realities of a school environment designed to limit Covid transmission. Many of them will adjust well with a bit of help and support, but others will be more deeply affected by their experiences and will struggle for longer. With changing routines at school, you would expect to see higher levels of excitement or anxiety, problems concentrating, some difficulties in friendships, and progressing with schoolwork.

The children and young people who are so "hyper aroused" and on edge that they lash out at their peers or at staff are the easiest ones to spot (in fact they're difficult to miss). But their overt behaviour is not always seen as being the result of their difficult and traumatic experiences.

The ones that are harder to spot at school will be the ones who keep more inside. For example:

- the ones who can't concentrate in class, because they are so preoccupied concentrating on other things, things that their brain has classed as more unpredictable and therefore potentially dangerous. Who are those students whispering or shouting – what are they about to do? A noise in the corridor could that be someone about to burst in? This impacts on the pupil's ability to focus and absorb information.
- Children who have been traumatised are extremely good at noticing things that might be threats, and their bodies react automatically as if these were potential dangers, without them having conscious control over or even knowledge of the reaction. [Some really fascinating research showed that the parts of the brain associated with fear response were activated in children who had experienced domestic violence and maltreatment, when they looked at a screen and a picture of an angry face was flashed up for such a short period of time that they did not even know that a picture had appeared].
- Some children will have become incredibly anxious as a result of their experiences. They may be more worried about more things.
- Children and young people who were previously confident and even fearless may become timid and nervous.
- Those that were already prone to worry, may have their worries multiplied and become paralysed with anxiety.
- Following their lockdown experiences, some will become very low in mood.
- Sometimes they can be difficult to notice in a busy classroom or a bustling playground, because they don't stand out. They may be very quiet and appear to be pre-occupied, and they probably will not disrupt the lesson. But if you were able to see what was happening in their minds, you might be more concerned about them than the ones who are impossible to ignore. They may believe that they have no friends, that others hate them, that they are worthless, and that life is hopeless. They may be having intrusive images of things that happened during lockdown, and the more they try to push these out of their minds, the more they may return (one boy once described it as being like a

	<p>boomerang, the harder he tried to push the images away, the harder they came back into his mind).</p>
<p>What can you do as a teacher or other member of teaching staff?</p>	<p>As a teacher or other member of teaching staff, you may not be a therapist, but you are superbly placed to be therapeutic.</p> <p>You are ideally placed to notice changes in children and see if they are gradually improving, staying the same or deteriorating.</p> <p>So, the first thing that you can do is to keep an eye out for children that are struggling in the ways described above.</p> <p>The next thing that you might be able to do, is provide them with an opportunity to speak openly. Just having a safe adult who is looking out for them can make a real difference. If you do notice one of your pupils struggling, just asking them how they are could make a difference.</p> <p>Some children will not be truthful about their difficulties to their parents or carers, but they will speak more openly to other familiar adults that they know and trust. You are not expected to solve or fix the problems that they might tell you about (unless the problems are about their understanding of quadratic equations and you are their maths teacher). Simply listening and being curious can have a tremendous impact.</p> <p>Don't dismiss their concerns too quickly – if they are worried about something that they really don't need to be, then listen, and be curious. Allow them to explain what they are thinking and feeling, and rather than telling them not to think that (which doesn't usually work), normalise (e.g. "yes, a lot of other children and young people are more worried than usual"), and explore (e.g. "tell me more about that, how come you are so worried?").</p>
<p>How the child might communicate with the teacher</p>	<p>Given the increased amount of traumatic experiences described above, and the decreased opportunities children and young people have had to disclose to others, there is a reasonable chance that more children will disclose more traumatic events and of a more extreme nature than in other academic years.</p> <p>Some children will pick very specific moments to tell you about their worries or their experiences. These moments might well suit them much more than they will suit you. When they are with you in a school corridor, they might think that they can drop some concerning information with you and leave it with you. That might well make them feel a lot better to have got it off their chest, but it leaves you with decisions to make about what to do.</p>
<p>Safeguarding</p>	<p>Your school will have its own safeguarding procedure to follow depending on how concerning the information is. Remember, the safety of the child and other children is the most important matter and if a child is in immediate danger, then simply call the police on 999.</p> <p>Always make sure you know who your school's Safeguarding Lead is and remind yourself of the school's procedures regarding disclosure. If you have any concerns at any point, refer back to your Safeguarding Lead or your line manager.</p>
<p>Additional Help</p>	<p>There is, of course, a limit to what you could and should offer as a teacher or member of school staff. So, it's helpful to know what the next steps are for those children and young people that are struggling and need some additional help. This will depend on what is available in your</p>

	<p>particular school and local area. Many schools have a specific mental health provision on site, some have access to such services, and for others a referral to CAMHS is necessary. The level of involvement of parents for signposting on to other services varies from area to area.</p>
<p>And, importantly, Self-Care</p>	<p>You are no use to your pupils if you are so exhausted that you are not thinking straight. And some of you will have had similar experiences to your pupils, either during your own lockdown, or during your own childhood. In order to be really useful, both emotionally and academically, it's crucial that you start by looking after yourself.</p> <p>That will mean different things for different people. Some will benefit from regular meditation or mindfulness (e.g. www.headspace.org), some look after themselves by regular exercise or spending time in the outdoors, and others have hobbies or recreational activities that help to protect them from burnout. Pausing and working out what strategies work for you is a crucial step.</p> <p>There are some ideas that might be useful here https://www.mentallyhealthyschools.org.uk/</p>

David Trickey

Consultant Clinical Psychologist

Anna Freud Centre

**For further information or support contact:
hello@nipinthebud.org • Call 020 8144 3053 • www.nipinthebud.org**

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