

"Children's behaviour has changed. Some are very noisy, others are very quiet. The atmosphere at work doesn't feel 'normal' – ie. I feel there is an underlying stress for everyone..." Nursery worker

The pandemic's effect on the mental health and wellbeing of the under 5s as reported by nursery staff

At the end of 2020, we surveyed nursery workers to find out more about the mental health needs of the children in their care. 905 early years staff responded.

As part of our survey, we included a question which asked whether they had noticed signs that the children in their care had had their mental health and wellbeing affected by the pandemic or lockdowns.

42% responded to say that they had noticed signs that this was the case. 282 nursery staff then provided us with more information about these signs via an 'open text box'. Some common themes emerged, as did some other observations.

Whilst the numbers involved here don't make these findings noteworthy from a statistical perspective, this feedback does represent the point of view of those nursery workers who responded, and therefore offers us a bit of insight as to the personal experiences of a range of nursery staff during the pandemic.

12% of nursery workers also said that they were aware that a child they worked with had lost a family member to the coronavirus pandemic.

(If you would like to read more about the other findings from our survey they are detailed in our report [Their Challenges are our Challenges.](#))

The 7 common themes:

'Signs' that were mentioned most regularly included:

1) Greater separation anxiety and newfound issues in forming relationships with staff

A large amount of the comments mentioned greater difficulties experienced by children with leaving parents and carers at the start of the day, and with settling in generally. Nursery staff said that longer periods of settling and support were required. Children were "*anxious when leaving parents at the gate*". It was mentioned that the increased anxiety of parents and carers was being picked up by children during this process.

Some noticed a tendency for children to cling much more to certain staff as well as parents or carers, or to become upset when a member of staff would leave the room. Some needed to be kept close to a key worker, while holding hands. Alternatively, some children were finding it harder now to form attachments to staff. There was also a fear of strangers, *"Some babies are getting very upset when a member of staff they do not know enters the area they are in"*.

Greater reliance on comforters was mentioned, as was a fear of being left alone: *"Some children kept repeating 'I love you' almost like they thought we had gone and weren't going to return again"*.

Because of the restrictions, 'settling in' regimes did not involve the attendance of parents and carers in the same way as they did pre-Covid. The impact of these changes were mentioned, as were the children's fears over staff wearing alarming looking safety PPE: *"Children have to enter the setting without their parent ever having been inside. Staff wear masks or visors when greeting parents."* Also, *"In the entrance hall, face masks need to be worn, many children have found this distressing."*

2) Children having become more emotional, experiencing more unpleasant emotions, and a newfound difficulty with managing their emotions

Many mentioned that children who had been stable emotionally pre-pandemic had become more emotional, or were experiencing difficult emotions at nursery, and/or had developed a newfound difficulty in managing these emotions.

'Anxiety' was mentioned a high number of times. Some children were also said to be: sad, fretful, fearful, upset, distressed, unsettled, quieter than before, less confident than before, less resilient, unsure, insecure, withdrawn, shy, or prone to displaying erratic behaviour. *"Children who were previously happy and confident are now quiet, moody and withdrawn or their behaviour has deteriorated."* One respondent experienced *"long periods of crying"*.

An increase in angry and aggressive behaviour was also mentioned a number of times - as were meltdowns and tantrums.

3) Children now exhibiting more challenging behaviour

Changes to behaviour, and an upturn in disruptive or challenging behaviour, was mentioned quite frequently.

Some children also seemed less willing to listen to adults, less patient in having their needs met, more demanding than before, less co-operative and more reluctant to share space with others.

Some reported new difficulties with sharing and taking turns (*"often leading to disputes/hurting each other"*). Also, *"A lot of the children are screaming at another child if their toy is taken from them and not using their words, a lot of children seem frustrated and are not able to express this, expressing self physically, verbally and screaming."*

4) Children experiencing greater issues with socialising

There was often mention of newfound difficulties with socialising, interacting, connecting with other children, playing with peers, or joining a group, for example, *"They are not able to cope in a group and will actively refuse to participate"*. Also, *"Difficulties with integrating into the group at times"* and *"When the children returned they shied away from each other. They played in a solitary way initially, even the children who had formed good peer/peer relationships. Also some children seemed afraid to be around others, withdrew and didn't want contact."*

The ability to play, in general, had also been affected in some children.

5) Children developing an obsession with cleaning hands, a fear of germs, and a fear of the virus's danger and damaging effects

A significant number of respondents reported incidents of children who had become 'obsessed' with washing their hands.

There was also a general anxiety over touching things, a fear of germs, and an overriding obsession with cleanliness.

Some children displayed a fear of people touching them, fears around food and eating, a fear of being close to adults, anxiety about playing with other children *"because they're not meant to go near them"*.

"A child was playing a game and got 'tagged' by another child, he broke down crying that no one should touch him because of 'the germs'."

"Worry about keeping safe, hands clean etc. Worry about catching the virus if they touch others."

Some asked lots of questions about the pandemic. *"Some have become a bit obsessed with hand washing, some were nervous of new or unusual adults, one put his hand over his mouth every time he came close to an adult initially, lots now talk about germs a lot!"*

The fear of the virus and the damage it could cause to loved ones was also mentioned: *"They are worried that they may become ill from the virus, that they can't see it, and that people around them may become ill"*. One respondent mentioned an incident when a child's parent had come down with the virus, and the child had *"believed they would die"*.

Access to misinformation or frightening pandemic-related news stories were a problem according to some: *"Anxiety from our over 3's who have maybe listened to too much TV and heard about the number of deaths". Also, "Children listen to parents talk and the TV about the pandemic and therefore you hear them repeat sentences about what's happening" and "Confused over what is said to them and sharing misinformation with other children. Trying to remove the virus from their tummy."*

6) Children being upset over restrictions around seeing family and friends

A number of respondents mentioned that children were anxious or upset over not being able to see friends, family or grandparents outside of nursery.

Some also struggled when there were rule changes in this regard, for example, *"I can see my grandma, now I can't see my grandma again."*

7) Children experiencing a range of developmental impacts

A number of respondents believed that the lengthy time out of nursery had had a negative impact on certain areas of children's development. Some had not progressed as expected, and others had regressed.

As one nursery worker put it, children who had previously made progress *"regressed socially/emotionally/educationally after spending 6 months with no extra stimulation than their home life."*

A regression in toilet training was mentioned by a number of respondents. *"Lots have been wetting themselves"*. It was mentioned that children who had been toilet trained before lockdown had returned to the nursery wearing nappies.

A number of respondents mentioned issues around speech and communication issues. It was noted that more children seem to be experiencing newfound speech and language difficulties, or delayed speech. Some reported that some children had less speech ability than before lockdown.

It was noted that these speech difficulties had emotional impacts on the children who experienced them: *"Communication and language skills are lower than usual, this leads to children feeling frustrated that they aren't making themselves understood. This knocks their confidence."* Also, *"Most of the children's speech has deteriorated when it should have been improving. As a result we are not able to understand them so much and they get frustrated."*

It was mentioned that some showed greater dependency on adult interaction and attention, and had less of an ability to be independent than they did before lockdown.

It was also mentioned that some children now appeared to be less able to concentrate or focus.

In addition to the above signs of the impact of the pandemic, additional areas of concern included:

- Difficulty with following the newly established nursery routines. Difficulty with the idea of 'keeping to a routine' generally, following the lockdown period. *"Children are struggling with routines that they were previously ok with."* Other children would also now get overly upset if a routine they were involved in was changed unexpectedly.
- Some children struggled with learning to follow their nursery's new policy of rules and boundaries, and needed support with doing so.
- Difficulty in adapting to changes to the nursery and its previous provisions: *"They are finding it hard to adapt to the disappearance of previous resources that have been reduced/removed due to cleaning issues."*
- Children were struggling to recognise that they can't swap between bubbles, or adapt to the fact that they couldn't be in a group with certain friends or staff who they were with beforehand.
- Children were hesitant to approach new activities.
- Children were upset due to the disappointment of missing out on having a birthday party, for example, *"Saying, I hate this virus"*.
- Children were displaying an increased dependency on tech, ie. I pads.
- Children were struggling with other transitions – not just the return to nursery after lockdown - ie. one respondent said a child had found the transition from nursery to primary school "a very difficult process".
- Children were affected by disrupted sleep patterns or nightmares.

Issues that parents and carers had reported to nursery staff include:

- That children were struggling at home, or were quickly getting cross and frustrated and upset.
- That children were displaying anxiety at home about bedtimes, sleeping alone, experiencing disordered sleep, night terrors.

Furthermore, in their responses to this question, nursery workers make a number of observations about vulnerable children and their family situations.

These include the following:

- Some respondents mentioned that they noticed that previously vulnerable children were particularly impacted and their problems had exacerbated: *"Increase in negative emotions from children who have experienced domestic violence and social care involvement during the*

pandemic." Also, "Children who live with neglectful families and those who are experiencing poverty and domestic violence have been affected by Covid as these problems were magnified." There were a number of references to domestic abuse and its effect on children in the classroom, along with concerns relating to safeguarding.

- An increase in family breakdown, and the impact of overhearing arguments at home was mentioned.
- The effects of the pandemic on parents (as opposed to children) were mentioned, ie. those whose mental health had been affected by domestic abuse, financial issues, substance abuse etc. For example, "neglect due to parents unable to cope themselves".
- It was mentioned that some children were suffering from a lack of attention due to their parents or carers working throughout the day from home. (To counter this, one respondent said: "We have seen a positive impact through parents spending more time with their children".)
- There were concerns for children who had been confined indoors in very small spaces, or who had no access to outdoor space.

Finally, one respondent summarises: "Those children who were confident and happy to leave parents are now not. They have struggled to settle. As the dynamics of family lives continue to change, the stresses can be seen - late payment of invoices, cancellations of lunches/quality of lunch for children. Difficult behaviour from children who have had no garden space, limited family time and lack of money has meant months in their house where parents have given them unlimited screen time and lack of rules and boundaries."

Our [Common Difficulties](#) page offers general advice on a number of topics that were mentioned, such as [Anxiety](#), [Aggression](#), [Separation Anxiety](#) and [Bereavement](#), to name but a few.

These notes should be viewed alongside the press release detailing the findings of the '[Their challenges are our challenges](#)' report, which was released on February 11 2021.