***Coping with Covid:***

***Parents and Carers’ Sessions to support the wellbeing of Children and Young People***

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**Outline of Work**

This paper details the development, implementation and evaluation of three online parent sessions delivered by East Renfrewshire Educational Psychology Service in March 2021. The aim of these was to build capacity amongst parents and carers to support children and young people’s wellbeing during the second period of lockdown. Views obtained from participants prior to the sessions highlighted their views about the impact of Covid on their children’s emotional, behavioural and physical skills, and on their relationships and ability to access learning. This informed the content of the sessions which focused on raising awareness of the impact of Covid on children and young people and on strategies and resources to meet their needs. Online evaluations were completed by participants immediately following the sessions, and interviews were carried out with two participants. Analyses indicated that the sessions had provided participants with reassurance and useful information and strategies. The report includes a reflection on the limitations of the sessions, in addition to considering future online sessions.

**Introduction**

East Renfrewshire Educational Psychology service has played a lead role in developing the authority’s universal framework for supporting the mental wellbeing of children and young people, Healthier Minds (<https://blogs.glowscotland.org.uk/er/healthierminds>). This includes documents and a website which contain resources and signposting about all aspects of mental wellbeing and which provide strategies for education staff, parents, professionals and children and young people to enable them to address wellbeing concerns.

Throughout the pandemic, the Healthier Minds website has been regularly updated by the Educational Psychology Service to take into account the current context and the challenges faced by Covid. Recent research highlights the significant and adverse impact of the current pandemic on children and young people. For example, Gupta and Jawanda’s (2020) review highlighted the global impact on children and young people, particularly in relation to their mental wellbeing. Their review identified the effect on children’s education, their anxiety for the future, an increase in health issues and aggressive behaviour, as well as addiction to social media and the internet, and poorer support for children with disabilities. Pieh et al., (2021) also found that around 30% of secondary aged young people felt stressed after a term of learning from home. The emerging research has also underlined the significant challenges faced by children and young people with Additional Support Needs (ASN). In one study, children and young people with ASD, aged 3 – 29, displayed challenging behaviours, social withdrawal, hyperactivity, self-injury, and poor sleep (Mutluer, Doenyas & Genc, 2020).

The adverse impact on children and young people has led to increased anxiety too, for parents and carers. Flynn et al., highlighted the stress on parents as they aim to support their children at home and engage them in home schooling (Flynn et al, 2021). In another study, low income parents were shown to be more likely to face financial difficulties during the pandemic, whilst parents with high income were more likely to experience stress about structuring a home learning environment for their children (Chen et al, 2021).

The challenges faced by parents suggest a potential need for parents to discuss their concerns and explore ways of supporting their child. Within East Renfrewshire and in the context of Covid, it was agreed that online parent sessions could be a pragmatic way of offering this support. Although no studies were found which evaluate single sessions online, existing research demonstrates the effectiveness of online training programmes to support parents with children’s behaviour and emotions (Espelage et al, 2021; Thongseiratch et al, 2020; White et al; 2019 ).

**Needs Analysis**

In the first instance, a needs analysis was conducted to establish how parents/carers had coped with supporting their children and young people through the second lockdown of Covid-19. A Microsoft Form was sent out to parents/carers in February of this year via schools. Parents were asked to contribute comments about how their children had coped and to submit any questions that they had about how to support their child. Within the form, parents could also sign up to attend one of three sessions; two age-specific sessions (0-9 and 9+ years) and a session for parents of children with ASN.

The detailed feedback gathered in the needs analysis was arranged into main themes, generated from the comments and questions submitted, and used to inform the subsequent parents’ sessions. The following themes were identified using Braun and Clarke’s (2013) method of Thematic Analysis. These are highlighted in the table below.

*Table 1: Themes extracted from parents’ needs analysis: how parents perceive the impact of Covid on their child*

|  |
| --- |
| 1. **Emotional, Behavioural and Physical Impact**
 |
| **Negatives -** | **Positives +** |
| * Increased anxiety
* Low mood
* Increased emotional sensitivity and distressed behaviours
* Negative impact on sleep and energy levels
* Impact on physical health
* Loss and Bereavement
 | * Reduced anxiety
 |
| 1. **Relationships**
 |
| * Missing friends
* Increased isolation
* Decrease in social skills
* Anxiety about not seeing family members
* More intense relationships with parents and siblings
 | * Closer relationships with parents and siblings
 |
| 1. **Home/Learn Working**
 |
| * Technology too challenging
* Reduced ability to learn
* Lack of divide between home and school
* Reduced motivation and engagement
* Missed interaction
* Increased screen time
 | * Opportunity to learn new skills and hobbies
* More accessible environment
* No longer overwhelmed by the environment
 |
| 1. **Return to School**
 |
| * Fear and Anxiety
* Pressure on ‘catching up’/learning loss
* No transition planning
* Possible sensory overload
 | * Excitement about the return to school and seeing friends
 |

**Structure of Session and Participants**

The online sessions were carried out in March and were well attended, although were attended by fewer parents than had completed the initial Microsoft Form.

*Table 2. Number of parents and carers who registered for session versus number who attended.*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Session** | **Signed Up** | **Attended** |
| **0-9 Years** | 121 | 73 |
| **9+ Years** | 149 | 89 |
| **Additional Support Needs** | 42 | 22 |
| **Total** | 312 | 184 |

Each session lasted an hour and included a presentation delivered by two members of the Educational Psychology Service, followed by a ‘Q&A’ session during which parents’ questions were answered by a panel, comprised of educational psychologists and multi-agency professionals. This included representatives from: Social Work; the Quality Improvement Team; Teachers, The Young Carer’s Centre; Enable; CAMHS and the Healthier Minds Service (the authority’s multi-agency service offering targeted mental wellbeing support to young people.)

**Content of Sessions**

The purpose of the sessions was to offer reassurance to parents/carers by providing information about the impact of coronavirus on children’s feelings and behaviours, and to explore strategies and resources to help them support their children and themselves during the pandemic. Each session covered the same broad themes, although specific content was guided by responses to the survey and contained examples relevant to the age and stage of the children at whom the session was targeted.

The main content included the following:

* The impact of Covid on wellbeing and behaviour
* Discussion about the ‘fight, flight, freeze’ response to explain the collective trauma experienced as a result of coronavirus, and the feelings of anxiety and hypervigilance in response to continual uncertainty
* A focus on normalising the range of emotions experienced as a result of the pandemic
* Discussion about loss; - the significant loss of relationships and connections; the loss of stability and routine; the loss of direct support from agencies, particularly to children with complex ASN. The sessions also focused on the impact of bereavement experienced by families during the pandemic.
* Reference to the positive aspects of the current situation. For example, increased creativity and hope for the future.
* The positive impact of reduced social demands and sensory stimuli on some children with ASN.
* The importance of self-care for parents/carers

**Strategies for Parents, Carers and Staff to help Children**

In each session, participants were signposted to the Healthier Minds website for resources and guidance. Practical tips and strategies were also discussed, specific to the needs of the children and young people at whom the session was targeted and in response to the questions submitted. These included the following:

* + Support to help children and young people to develop coping strategies
	+ Discussion about how to listen actively to children and validate their feelings
	+ Exploration of the language to use to discuss coronavirus, based on the needs of individual children and young people
* The introduction of routine and structure (visuals and social stories were explored in the ASN session), and a focus on the basics (sleep, exercise, etc.)
* The creation of a safe, nurturing base at home and the use of activities and relaxation exercises to support relaxation and self-regulation
* Exploration of ways of maintaining connection

**Evaluation**

Immediately following each session, an evaluation survey was sent to all participants. This included three Likert-style statements to evaluate how useful the session had been, and how it had contributed to their understanding of the impact of Covid. This was followed by two open-ended questions for participants to offer further views and to obtain suggestions for future topics.

61 responses were received in total. 12 parents were also contacted to gather further information and two parents took part in follow-up interviews.

The table below details the overall evaluation scores:

*Table 3. Parent Sessions Evaluation Scores:*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Statement | Average Rating |
| **0-9 years** | **9+ years** | **ASN** | **All Sessions** |
| The Healthier Minds parent session was useful. | 4.2 | 4.1 | 4.1 | 4.2 |
| I learned helpful information about the impact of the Covid pandemic on children. | 4.1 | 3.9 | 4 | 4 |
| The session provided reassurance about my child's responses to the pandemic. | 4.2 | 4.3 | 4.1 | 4.3 |
| *Number of responses* | *18* | *36* | *7* | *61* |
| *Number attending the sessions*  | *73* | *89* | *22* | *184* |

The key messages extracted from the qualitative comments were that the sessions had provided them with reassurance that the feelings they were experiencing were normal, and that the challenges they and their children were facing were shared by others.

*‘It was reassuring to find out how my child is coping through all these changes is to be expected and as parents how we are responding to them is correct and to continue with love, patience and understanding, with lots of open and honest conversations. If I’m worried about any long lasting impacts I now know where to go for help. ‘*

(Parent/carer 0-9 years Session)

Participants also commented that the strategies offered them further reassurance that they were doing the right thing and, as well as offering new tips and ideas:

*‘I have already used one tip tonight, my son started getting very cross with his sister and did his red face…, so I told them to pick up a balloon...and I told them we would all throw the balloon into the air and breath in as it went up and out as it came down. …. his mood instantly calm.’*

(Parent/carer 0-9 year’s session)

Comments also indicated that the participants valued input the following areas: loss and bereavement; building resilience and coping skills; emotion regulation; separation anxiety; self-care; modelling behaviours; validating and listening to children; ways of balancing work and family life and sleep strategies.

*‘It was reassuring to be reminded that everyone is having a difficult time and you just need to do your best and deal with the issues that crop up with your children the best you can. Also to be kind to yourself, enact self-care so you are in a better place to help your children, and to listen and validate their feelings, you don't always have to have the answers.’* (Parent/Carer 9 years + session)

Comments from the age 9+ session indicated that many parents/carers were familiar with the content already but that they appreciated the reminder.

*‘Everything that was said tonight made perfect sense and most of this I logically knew however it was great to hear this to help my children and also for my own methods to deal with family and work in this pandemic’.* (Parent / Carer 9 years + session)

**Future topics**

Parents were asked if they would wish to attend future sessions and if there were topics that they would find useful in terms of supporting their child. The suggested subjects varied according to the age group and needs of their children. Parents/carers of older children requested sessions which included information about specific topics such as dealing with panic attacks, teenage refusal behaviours, and anxieties around the impact of Covid on future opportunities for those in S4-S6. In contrast, parents/carers’ attending the younger age group (0-9 years) suggested broader topics including emotion regulation, social anxiety, self-care, online safety and social skills development. Like parents/carers of older children, those who attended the ASN parent session requested further sessions on specific topics: e.g. understanding what support was available for children upon their return to school.

During a follow-up interview with two parents, one parent commented that she had now accessed the Healthier Minds website. She had found the information useful and reassuring and forwarded the link to another parent. Another parent described how she had taken detailed notes during the session and had used these to review and adapt the strategies she was using.

**Limitations**

The number of those who attended the sessions was lower than had signed up (184 participants attended, compared to 312 who signed up). However, the large number of those who both attended and signed up demonstrated the interest in the sessions and the need for parents to explore ways of supporting their children during his period. As anticipated, there were fewer parents who signed up and attended the ASN session. However, as reflected in the emerging research (Mutluer et al., 2020), this group of parents has faced significant challenges during the pandemic. It was hypothesised that online sessions may not be as useful or accessible for this group, given their caring responsibilities and their lack of current face-to-face support.

The large number of parents who completed the survey helped to identify the prevalent concerns of parents and would be shared with schools by the educational psychology team to inform transition planning back to school. However, it was acknowledged that those who attended were more likely to be parents who had noted the adverse impact of Covid on their child. For this reason, the final themes extracted from their survey may not be reflective of all parents’ views. In addition, although the online evaluations enabled the participants’ views to be obtained immediately, only 61 evaluations were received and only two parents took part in a follow up interview. There has, as yet, been no longer term evaluation to ascertain the impact of the sessions on the support participants subsequently provided for their child.

**Conclusion**

The number of parents who participated in the sessions demonstrated the interest in the topic. The sessions also offered a means of offering universal support for children and young people’s mental wellbeing during the pandemic. Although the constraints of Covid minimised face-to-face interaction, the use of online sessions provided a pragmatic way of reaching a maximum number of parents. It also enabled an immediate evaluation and an opportunity to deliver key messages and respond to questions alongside multi-agency colleagues.

The parents’ views about the adverse impact of Covid on their children’s wellbeing are consistent with the emerging research. These findings can be used to continue to support parents, but also to inform the work of EPs in schools in the forthcoming academic year. The service has delivered a similar session focusing on staff wellbeing and will consider how to conduct and evaluate future parents’ sessions, based on identified need. One of the next steps will also be to consider how to offer meaningful and targeted support for parents of children with more complex ASN, as they continue to deal with the many challenges posed by the pandemic.

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