

Impact of COVID-19 on children and young people

Education

Overview

From April to July 2020, the Commission for Children and Young People conducted consultations to develop a point-in-time snapshot of the impact of COVID-19 on children and young people. We heard from 644 children and young people and 172 staff from 70 organisations providing services and supports to children and young people to understand the impact of the pandemic.

This snapshot is about education and training. It aims to share what we have heard and inform improvements in responses to children and young people during and after COVID-19.

Changes to education and training during COVID-19

On 7 April 2020, to contain the spread of infection, the Victorian Government announced that all government primary, secondary and special schools would move to remote and flexible learning. Under these measures, on-site learning was only available for children whose parents could not work from home and vulnerable students without access to a suitable learning environment at home. The Victorian Government also announced schools would distribute technology aids, including laptops, tablets, SIM cards and internet dongles, to students who needed them. Many universities and training institutions also shifted to online learning, with technological and other supports varying depending on the provider.

Following a brief return to onsite learning in May and June, Stage 3 restrictions were reinstated in Metropolitan Melbourne and Mitchell Shire on 8 July. The Commission's

consultations were conducted with children and young people through the first period of Stage 3 restrictions between April and July, including during the staggered return to on-site learning. With the return to remote learning in Term 3 and further restrictions announced in early August, the reflections of children and young people continue to be relevant.

In addition to the supports for students to learn remotely, the Victorian Government's COVID-19 response has included \$28.5 million in funding, announced in August, to help students struggling with mental health and assist vulnerable students who have disengaged to remain connected to their education.

Our consultations

Who we heard from

644
children and young people

417
aged under 18

176*
aged 18 or over
*51 respondents did not specify.

172
staff
from over **70 organisations** working with **children and young people**

42*
identify as **Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander**
*71 respondents did not specify.

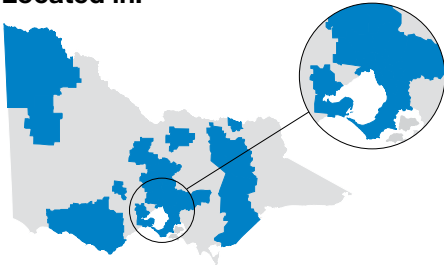
122*
speak a **language other than English**
*64 respondents did not specify.

87*
have lived experience of **disability**
*89 respondents did not specify.

Organisations included:

- Aboriginal services
- Multicultural and refugee youth services
- Child Protection
- Disability services
- Family services
- Family violence services
- Youth Justice
- Maternal and Child Health
- Mental health services
- Youth services
- Education & training
- Housing and homelessness

Located in:



- metropolitan Melbourne and regional & rural Victoria
- In local government areas indicated in blue.

Housing situation:

- family home
- living independently
- informal arrangement (e.g. with friends)
- supported accommodation
- residential care
- foster care

How we heard from them

63 individual phone and online consultations with children and young people

36 online group consultations involving **286** children and young people

295 online survey responses from children and young people

172 phone and online consultations with staff

When we heard from them

April 2020 to July 2020

What they spoke about

- Family, friends and community
- Safety
- Education and training
- Income and employment
- Housing
- Mental health
- Justice system
- Health
- Information and having a say

The Commission's Youth Advisory Group (4 young people) guided the Commission in designing, implementing and evaluating the consultation program.

What were children and young people's experiences during remote and flexible learning?

What we heard

"I've found working in isolation has been very productive for myself, as I'm less distracted, and I can complete all of my work in a smaller time frame."

(High school student, rural)

"I think that I have difficulties concentrating, difficulty connecting online. I don't feel like I'm learning, more like watching a webinar and zoning out. When people turn off their cameras then I don't know what I should be doing."

(High school student, flexible learning centre, aged 17, metro)

"We got iPads for learning at home and I thought there was no motivation for me – I did like a week or two of classes then I couldn't do any more than that, cos I didn't have the motivation to get up and do the work. At school, I love learning and learning new things, but at home it's hard for me."

(High school student, flexible learning centre, aged 16, metro)

"...you know my social network is all my friends pretty much... I've been spending all my days at home watching movies and things which wasn't good initially, kind of quite isolated."

(VCAL student, aged 18, rural)

"I missed ... activities like music performance and the creative energy that comes with being at school."

(High school student, metro)

"I was going to start uni last month, this had to be deferred to next month. I'm not studying online – have chosen not to, don't want to study online."

(Young person, aged 23, metro)

"...just started going back to my TAFE course for my cert 3 and yeh it's a struggle for me online, it's really tough."

(TAFE student, aged 19, Aboriginal, metro)

"...and the thing is with COVID and home-schooling you can't make new friends while you're in lockdown, that you haven't seen before. But with COVID you can't see them. It feels pretty weird like talking to someone you haven't seen before... We are all just waiting to go back."

(High school student, aged 13, Aboriginal, metro)

Students finishing high school

"There is so much uncertainty with ATAR and like Year 11 scores used for uni entry there is a lot of uncertainty for what will happen to them next year. It's a big deal. You need as much engagement as you can at this period as a student. Online is a lot more disengaging than in person. I dunno about other unis or schools, but one of my classes we were doing two or three weeks squashed into one

week and it's massive amounts of stress with less of an outlet because you are isolated."

(VCE student, rural)

"Before it all happened I was doing my first term of my senior year VCAL so it is meant to be a big year for me, I'd made new friends and was meeting new people, so it was a big shock when it got cut off... I live by myself so that has been really hard. You know my social network is all my friends pretty much."

(VCAL student, regional)

"The fact that we are being expected to act like we are having a normal year when it's completely abnormal is really upsetting. We are expected to still study and not burn out by semester break. There are so many people burning out, whether it be mental health or class work. There were so many people (myself included) burnt out by the last week of term and wanting a break but teachers aren't listening. 'There isn't breaks in VCE' was what we were being told."

(VCE student, metro)

Primary school aged children

"It was weird, confusing and hard doing stuff online."

(Primary school student, rural)

"It was really distracting and boring. I was just sitting on the laptop going 'oh yes, uh huh'. It only kept me busy for about an hour. I couldn't just ask mum if we could go to the park because the parks were closed. But at least we have a big yard. I was on the trampoline a lot!"

(Primary school student, aged 9, metro)

"I found it very distracting especially in the first week. I could hardly do even one activity without going outside. Once we got more in the habit of doing it, it was still really distracting. There's nothing forcing you to do it. At school they help you more. Your parents aren't the same as your teachers."

(Primary school student, aged 9, metro)

"I also felt a bit stressed. The teachers would put things on google classrooms and there was so much. I feel more comfortable around people. It was hard for me to get used to coping at home. My 2 brothers kept messing around so I had to close my door. It was hard for me to work in my space."

(Primary school student, aged 9, metro)


"For my school at home my work is hard because sometimes our teachers send the work via computers. The teachers aren't there to help with it or talk to you."


(Primary school student, regional)


What were children and young people's experiences during remote and flexible learning? *continued*


What children and young people said about remote and flexible learning


Generally, children and young people reported both positive and negative experiences of remote and flexible learning. This was often influenced by their environment and supports at home, their usual experiences at school, as well as whether they had particular learning support needs.


 Some children and young people appreciated greater flexibility and fewer distractions, although most needed some time to adjust to new ways of working. Services told us that some children and young people reported feeling safer and more settled at home, particularly if they experienced bullying at school.


 Many children and young people felt distracted and struggled to maintain motivation and learn away from their peers and teachers. Many told us that they needed more structure and face-to-face explanation and support with their learning.

 Some children and young people reported confusion during the shift to remote learning and felt frustrated by a lack of clear information about changing administrative and academic requirements.

 Many children and young people reported feeling lonely and isolated and said they missed their social networks at school.


 Some university students made the decision to defer studies rather than study online, including because online study was not suitable given their experience of disability.


 Young people completing high school felt particularly anxious about how their assessments would be affected by studying remotely and the uncertainty of what that might mean for their access to further education, training and employment opportunities.


 Children in primary school said they often found it difficult to understand the tasks they were being given and to stay engaged without getting distracted. They also missed seeing and playing with their friends.


What services said about remote and flexible learning

Services and organisations working with children and young people similarly reported mixed impacts of remote learning.

 People working with children and young people living in care, with sensory needs and mental health issues reported that some children and young people found learning from home less stressful than being at school. For example, children and young people who had experienced bullying or social anxiety said they preferred online learning. Some children and young people in care, who continued to attend school, also found it easier to engage due to lower numbers of on-site students and less bullying.

 Others providing supports to children and young people who were already less engaged with school reported many of these children and young people completely disengaged from school during lockdown.

 Those working with children and young people with disability reported limited access to appropriate online learning, and that supports were not tailored to students' individual needs or were unavailable.

 People working with children and young people from migrant or refugee backgrounds told us that online learning could be difficult because some parents had limited capacity to assist their children. This was also reported for many households with lower levels of parental education.

Did children and young people have the computer setup and connectivity they needed?

What we heard

"I had my own iPad and stuff I could use, so I could zoom with that, and yeah had no issues with that at all actually."

(TAFE student, aged 18, rural, supported accommodation)

"They were giving us computers – I got a new laptop and that really helped. I was using the school one but having my own made it feel a bit more natural. That was really good, I was really happy with that."

(High school student, aged 16, metro)

"My uni is in Melbourne, I stay there when classes are in person but I'm regional the rest of the time. I'm struggling with internet connection. To be honest it's a disadvantage to those doing the course in Melbourne and because all of our classes are live. I can't go back and re-watch it. If I miss ten minutes it's gone."

(University student, regional)

"My school was meant to receive wifi dongles to hand out to students. I don't know if that ever happened but I didn't get one."

(High school student, rural)

"Everyone started working from home, students had to learn from home and there were moments when the internet just wasn't working. Particularly in rural areas – the internet isn't that great. [You should] prioritise fixing internet blackspots."

(Young person, aged 23, rural)

"It's been terrible, because I don't have a computer yet. I have been waiting for a new one for some time, but still haven't received it yet. I had to use the resi laptop, so it made it very hard."

(High school student, metro, residential care, CALD)

"The wifi and because I was homeless I couldn't have consistent wifi and at the refuge there was no wifi and 4G can only go for so much. If they gave those wifi things to the disadvantaged it would solve so many problems."

(University student, metro, supported accommodation, CALD)

"Online working, I didn't have a device to work on and I had to wait a couple of weeks to get my laptop, so I wasn't able to do my schoolwork for that time and it was difficult. A teacher kept calling us every 2 weeks then when we explained what's happening they gave me a device to do the work on. I kept up with my work though."

(High school student, rural, CALD)

What children and young people said about computer setup and connectivity

Again, we heard mixed experiences of access to a reliable home computer setup to enable online learning. When the pandemic hit, services told us that many disadvantaged families could only access the internet through mobile phones. Some children and young people also lacked privacy or a quiet space, particularly in smaller homes with lots of people learning or working from home.



Children and young people who could not afford or access computer equipment such as laptops appreciated receiving them where this happened. Many other students had ready access to equipment and an internet connection at home.



However, a significant number of children and young people experienced ongoing barriers to education due to a lack of access to reliable internet or computer equipment needed for school. Some reported having difficulties paying for internet access, while others said they lacked connectivity due to the internet coverage where they lived.



Connectivity issues were evenly split between those based in regional and rural areas and those in metro areas. In regional and rural areas, the connectivity was often related to poor coverage, while in metro areas it related to the cost of internet being difficult to manage.

Did children and young people have the computer setup and connectivity they needed? continued

What services said about computer setup and connectivity



Some services reported active and regular engagement with children and young people to ensure that they had the supports they needed to learn remotely.



There was a general concern among those providing services to children and young people about the lack of access to equipment and the internet, particularly for children and young people who were more vulnerable. Some reported households where one laptop was shared between several children. Services also reported that some families struggled to gain access to equipment and they had to supply this equipment themselves.

Did children and young people feel supported by family, teachers, staff and counsellors?

What we heard

“Mainly what kept me going was having the teachers calling me, making sure that I was getting online or coming into school, making sure I was staying on track – that was the main thing that kept me going.”

(High school student, aged 14, metro)

“I notice that most teachers are more focused on curriculum over wellbeing and promoting other things and I think generally that’s a problem but now ever more so....”

(Young person, aged over 18, rural)

“Teachers especially, they have been extremely organised. Teachers have kept it all on track, taught us as if we were all at school.”

(High school student, aged 15, rural, foster care)

“My main support network was through my school. I connected with the school’s counselling services towards the beginning of isolation. I’ve had a lot of experience with mental ill health and been in and out of care. And when things were going downhill I definitely needed to get in touch, and my school supports were fantastic.”

(University student, aged 22, metro)

“I was angry because my parents were mostly focused on my sister and doing her schooling so if I needed help I had to wait.”

(Primary school student, rural)

“I can do my school work, but my brother has a learning disability, and I’m having to help my brother. Now I’m back at school but my brother is still at home and I have to go home at the end of the school day and help him. He’s not getting support. He hasn’t done the work.”

(High school student, aged 15, rural)

“The delay in getting answers to simple questions was annoying. You would email and it would take ages, I didn’t do a lot of work because of this.”

(High school student, aged 17)

“At school, the supervising teachers were not subject specific teachers... Some teachers only got online at certain times so weren’t accessible to help if you had a problem.”

(High school student, aged 15, rural)

“I don’t feel like the teachers actually realised how hard it was for some of us with mental disorders and abusive households during a pandemic and just decided to overload us with work.”

(Young person, aged 17)

“I know my teachers tried their best, so I can’t be too harsh on them, but ultimately it fell short and a lot of the study material we were meant to cover wasn’t fully or adequately addressed.”

(Young person, aged 18)

“More teachers woulda been good. There’s a rule that a teacher only gets 2 mins in the classroom with the students and it’s not enough when you can’t be in the room with them. More teachers rather than just one teacher to wait on – just more support in general would have helped me heaps, and I know others as well. You feel kinda lost cos you don’t have someone there to help ya.”

(High school student, aged 13, Aboriginal, metro)

“My biggest thing was not knowing how to use a computer and that, I think more one on one time with the kids that were struggling, maybe a day where you can sit down with that student who is struggling and give them that opportunity to catch up. That would have benefited me heaps and others I reckon.”

(TAFE student, aged 19, Aboriginal, metro)

Did children and young people feel supported by family, teachers, staff and counsellors? continued

What children and young people said about support from teachers, staff and counsellors

Children and young people were more likely to report positive interactions when teachers and support staff were regularly communicating with them and took the time to ask them how they were and what they needed in the context of their living arrangements and circumstances.



Over half of all children and young people reported that they were receiving the support they needed from teachers, staff and counsellors including additional supports and regular check-ins.



Many others reported experiencing teachers as inaccessible, lacking in specialist knowledge or too rigidly focused on curriculum requirements without adequate recognition of how the changed learning environment and pandemic was affecting students.



Some children and young people reported that they were unsure who to approach if they had concerns, or talked about being referred to the wellbeing service at school but never hearing back from them.



Some children and young people commented on the additional challenge of having to supervise or support younger siblings and not being able to get support from parents.

What services said about support from teachers, staff and counsellors

Services and organisations working with children and young people described a range of barriers children and young people faced in accessing the level of educational support they needed.



Service-providers said children and young people requiring additional or targeted support, particularly children and young people with disability, were less likely to be accommodated and often reported struggling with online learning.



Remote learning made it harder for school staff to monitor children and young people's safety and wellbeing. School and kindergarten can be a protective factor for vulnerable children (see our separate snapshot on safety for more).



There was some confusion about who was eligible for on-site learning, and some services reported cases where schools had refused or discouraged attendance despite the child or young person being in out-of-home care, receiving a family violence service or otherwise experiencing significant vulnerability. Other educators were more proactive in encouraging children to attend where appropriate.



The ability of parents and caregivers to provide at home educational support varied significantly and was a challenge for vulnerable families or where parents needed to attend to multiple children's needs. Older children were more likely to be able to adapt than younger children who needed more hands-on help.

How did children and young people feel about returning to on-site learning?

Very young students (Prep, Years 1 and 2), older students (Year 10 doing VCE and Years 11 and 12) and students at special schools returned to on-site learning on 26 May, with the remaining students returning on 9 June with additional precautions around distancing, staggered pick-ups and cleaning. Since that time, the additional outbreaks of COVID-19 in Melbourne have led to a return to remote learning.

While some young people were keen to return to school and were worried about what a second lockdown would mean for them, others were concerned about social distancing and worried that they might be exposed to the virus if they returned to school.

What we heard

“The online learning experience has really made me appreciate being at school.”

(High school student, aged 17, metro)

“I was really happy to go back to school, even if it was only for two weeks.”

(High school student, aged 14, regional)

“At school it’s hard to keep 200 kids separated. But they aren’t doing anything about social distancing. They say to sanitize but they know no one is doing it I know it’s hard but I feel like they could try or something... so it’s completely different to outside of school where we are told to distance from everyone.”

(High school student, rural)

“Going back to school was stressful. I wish we went back after the holidays cos it’s still scary to be outside.”

(High school student, aged 14)

“It feels like school went back too early and I was shocked that we didn’t even need to social distance when my school is so big.”

(High school student, aged 17)

“It’s really good when I’m at school, I’m enjoying it. I have friends to talk with and I do a lot of fun things when I’m at school - better than at home when I’m all alone....”

(High school student, aged 19, metro, CALD)

“[Schoolwork is] going really good. Ever since I’ve come back to school it’s been way better.”

(High school student, aged 17 metro)

“I reckon school at home was a lot easier because I didn’t have people in my class distracting me. Coming back to school has been good though because I get to see all my friends.”

(High school student, aged 14, metro)

“I preferred being at home because I was more in my own headspace without other things happening around me. It’s better at school though because it’s more concentrated on you, you get more help than at home.”

(High school student, aged 15, metro)

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