

# Impact of COVID-19 on children and young people

## Safety

### 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 a range of services

and supports to children and young people to understand the impact of the pandemic.

This snapshot is about safety. It aims to share what we heard and inform improvements to how services respond to children and young people during and after COVID-19.

### Changes impacting safety during COVID-19

On 16 March 2020, the Victorian Government declared a State of Emergency to prevent the spread of COVID-19. So far, during the pandemic, different levels of restrictions have been put in place that inhibit people's movement. This has included state-wide measures, such as the 30 March 'stay at home' restrictions, and area-specific measures, including the 7 July 'stay at home' restrictions for Melbourne and Mitchell Shire. More recently, the Victorian Government introduced Stage 4 restrictions in Melbourne on 2 August, and re-introduced Stage 3 restrictions in regional and rural Victoria on 5 August.

The restrictions to contain the pandemic have meant children and young people have been less visible to people outside their immediate household, including schools and other services, extended family and their wider communities. Restrictions to stop the spread of COVID-19 also changed the way services to children and young people are provided. Many services, including Child Protection, child and family services, health and other support services dramatically reduced or stopped face-to-face contact and changed to remote service delivery.

The Victorian Government's COVID-19 response has included support to keep children and families safe. This includes \$77.5 million funding for staff, resources and services aimed at vulnerable children and families announced on 23 April 2020. This funding included \$46 million to family services to implement a new intensive family preservation and reunification response and flexible funding for family services. It also included \$15 million for residential care services to support mobile response teams, extra contingency units and additional cleaning. The funding also comprised \$11 million for financial support for carers and \$4 million to support young people currently in care and due to turn 18 years old before the end of the year to remain in care or support transition to independence. An additional \$36.9 million funding was sourced to address demand in the children and families system and approximately \$20 million for family violence initiatives announced in August.

This snapshot describes what the Commission heard during and after the first period of stage 3 restrictions between April and July.

# 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.*

**42\***  
identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander

*\*71 respondents did not specify.*

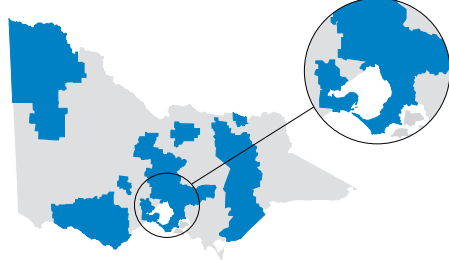
**122\***  
speak a language other than English

*\*64 respondents did not specify.*

**87\***  
have lived experience of disability

*\*89 respondents did not specify.*

### 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

**172**

### staff

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

### 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

## 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.

# Summary

Children and young people's feelings about safety often related to their health and the need to keep themselves and their families safe from infection. Some children and young people also spoke about conflict, tension or violence within the family during lockdown and the fact their usual safety strategies were not available. For some young people living outside the family home, especially those in transitional or unstable housing, the lockdown made life more unsafe.

People working to support children and young people through the lockdown period raised children's safety from harm as a significant concern, largely due to there being fewer 'eyes on kids' because home visits and face-to-face contact were broadly suspended. For many service providers working with vulnerable families and children, the risk of harm at home and the absence of in-person support often felt more urgent than the risk of COVID-19.

## Keeping safe from infection

### What we heard

**"I have felt pretty safe, carry hand sanitizer around with me all the time. I try to be considerate of other people, particularly where it may be more dangerous for them."**

*(High school student, aged 15, regional, foster care)*

**"I have always felt safe as a young person with good health. I was only worried for my grandparents and other older family members such as family who have had cancer and mum who works at the hospital, as I knew they wouldn't recover as well as I would if they were to contract coronavirus."**

*(High school student, aged 15, regional)*

**"The [shopping centre] is two kilometres away from us where COVID has happened and people still go there. It's like people don't realise COVID is happening. Like I need to go to Kmart to get a drying rack but I'm too scared to go. Like I could get sick ... and I could kill someone and that's on me."**

*(University student, aged 18, metro, supported accommodation)*

**"The madness of it all, the punch ons over toilet paper and that, I didn't feel unsafe, I am very tall so I'm not worried about my safety but watching people lose their shit over toilet paper was scary."**

*(Young person working full time, aged 22, metro)*

### What children and young people said about keeping safe from infection

Many children and young people spoke of feeling safe in their homes but were concerned about the spread of the virus and its long-term consequences. Many expressed concern about other people not following the rules, especially when leaving home to go to school or use public transport. A major concern was making others sick, particularly older or at-risk relatives.



A large proportion of children and young people reported that despite concerns and challenges, they felt safe during the COVID-19 lockdown period because they were in safe accommodation and had the supports they needed. This included some children and young people living in supported accommodation and residential care.



Most children and young people expressed a fear of contracting COVID-19, particularly those with underlying health conditions, but many said they were more worried about the threat of COVID-19 to vulnerable family members, especially those they lived with and grandparents.



Many children and young people were worried about making sure that they maintained physical distancing in public, including on public transport, while shopping and at school.



Many children and young people also expressed concern that others were not taking the rules seriously enough and were worried that the easing of restrictions may cause people to forget what they needed to do to reduce the risk of infection.



A smaller number of children and young people, particularly young people with disability or with caring responsibilities, were anxious about shortages of food and the sense of panic in the community at different times.

# Information about COVID-19

## What we heard

**“[Information is] very confusing because someone says something and someone says another thing and I have to put it all together.”**

*(Primary school student, aged 10, regional)*

**“... I check with the health department, most of it is simple English so it's easy enough to read. But it lacks details and key points....”**

*(University student, aged 21, regional)*

**“I think there could have been more on social media, even if it's a sponsored post on Facebook or whatever. Most of what I've seen is on the news or paper but not many young people read the papers... it's accessible to adults, but if you are looking at early teens they won't get the information from the same sources.”**

*(Young person, aged over 18, regional)*

**“What's important now is that we don't slip into complacency. The government needs to continue to give people information about what's happening. A lot of people have fatigue about COVID, so the messaging going forward is really important.”**

*(High school student, aged 17, metro)*

**“I'd love if it was more clear... at least if there was some place where there was concrete rules it would have made it a lot better. Like I would still have hated it but would have at least understood it.”**

*(High School student, aged 17, rural)*

**“The most important thing is about information, info about everything.... If there's any kind of information about the futures for young people [that] will help.”**

*(High school graduate, aged over 18, regional)*

## What children and young people said about information on COVID-19

While many children and young people had been provided with useful resources about keeping safe from infection, others found information confusing and not always provided in ways that were accessible to them.



Some children and young people reported being able to access good information about how to protect themselves, often via social media. Young people also pointed out that social media is their preferred source of information over newspapers or television.



Many children and young people also stressed the importance of government and agencies doing more to provide them with access to relevant child- and youth-friendly information about how to stay safe, lockdown rules and their future post-COVID-19. A large number of children and young people were concerned about the lack of availability of accurate information, and about the lack of information clearly targeted towards their age group.

# The impact on personal safety

## What we heard

**“At the start, members of my family were also experiencing high levels of anxiety, so there was a fair bit of conflict in the home. We have done family therapy so had insight. But what about the people that don’t have that. If we don’t have a place of safety and we feel trapped, that can be really toxic.”**

*(University student, regional)*

**“Safety is totally an issue, people with issues with family. It’s much trickier now they’ve been at home in places where family violence is occurring and alcohol around – not bad enough to leave, but where before they could go to a friend’s house as a safe space, now with COVID they couldn’t go out and there’s been lots of tension affecting mental health.”**

*(VICAL student, aged 17, metro)*

**“I’m worried about the rates of domestic abuse going up. I know a lot of queer kids are getting outed while at home with homophobic parents. It’s been scary for me, moderating our chats and making sure we are as safe as possible.... I chose not to continue therapy over COVID, some friends have continued via telehealth and they have parents listening in, they feel anxious about it, it is pretty scary.”**

*(High school student, aged 17, regional)*

**“There was a bad spot with a family member that got violent for a long period of time.”**

*(High school student, aged 17)*

**“I had an IVO hearing scheduled [against a violent partner] – waited in line for half an hour to be told it has been pushed back. There is an interim order in place but even though I have another court date, I think it will be adjourned. I contacted the Orange Door for a referral. There is normally a two week wait for FV matters – I was told this had been pushed out to eight weeks. I have been waiting three months – I’m still on the waitlist at [service].”**

*(VICAL/VET student, aged 21, metro)*

**“It’s different for everyone, there’s not much room since we live in small houses, we get sick of each other very quickly. There’s lot of yelling, a lot of arguments.”**

*(High school student, aged 16, metro)*

## What children and young people said about personal safety

While many of the children and young people we spoke with reported that the COVID-19 restrictions had provided a chance to reconnect with their families, for some children and young people this period increased their exposure to family violence, abuse or conflict. Restrictions meant families were forced to remain at home, often under heightened stress. Many of the usual strategies young people used to manage risk, such as getting out of the house, going to school or going to stay with friends or extended family, were not available.



Many young people talked about additional pressure on families resulting from COVID-19 restrictions.



Some young people talked about increased levels of conflict in the home and feeling confined and insufficiently supported. Others described friends or peers living in violent or abusive situations.



Most children and young people reported feeling safe in the online environments they were using because of the lockdown, including remote education, telehealth and social media.



A few children, particularly primary school-aged children, said they were worried about being vulnerable to bullying and hacking while they were online.

## The impact on personal safety continued

### What services working with children and young people said about risks to personal safety

Overwhelmingly, service providers cited limited face-to-face contact as the key barrier to making sure children and young people were safe. They said that in-person service contact is essential to monitor vulnerable children and young people and comprehensively assess their safety. Many expressed concern about harm to children and young people being missed due to limited contact and the inability to speak privately with children and young people or family members.



Many people working with vulnerable children and their families said they were worried about the decision at the beginning of the first lockdown period to limit face-to-face visits and services to a small proportion of cases. They said this limited the ability to properly identify and assess risk, and that babies and infants were especially at risk.



Service providers said school closures and pauses to other activities, such as team sports or religious services, increased the risk of missing signs of abuse and family violence. They were concerned that with fewer children attending activities, other adults like teachers and coaches were less able to identify problems or receive disclosures from children and young people.



Service providers said that children and young people may not have access to the usual informal coping and risk management strategies to manage their own safety. Many may not be able to, or feel comfortable making disclosures on the phone, particularly if they lacked privacy at home.



Some services were confused about how risks to families were being managed and expressed concern about Child Protection's guidance about remote service delivery. Some organisations said they felt that the focus on remote service delivery inappropriately shifted risk to community-based organisations to manage.

### What services working with children and young people did to help reduce risk to safety

The Commission heard a range of strategies that organisations used to adapt to a changed service environment, to keep themselves and the children and young people they worked with safe. Service providers shared several examples of innovation and creativity to find new ways of checking in on families.



Most services switched to phone-based service delivery and some took steps to provide phones and phone credit to vulnerable children and young people to enable them to stay in touch. Some workers increased their contact with families or the frequency of care team meetings. Some services, including some schools, asked children and young people to turn video cameras on during interactions to enable a better assessment of safety and wellbeing.



Some services reported receiving additional training about COVID-19 to improve their ability to support children and young people during this difficult time. Some also developed a range of resources for children, young people and carers on COVID-19.



Some service providers reported being provided with special training during the lockdown period, including suicide prevention, mental health, harm minimisation, and cyber safety and security.



Creative and proactive engagement with children and young people was sometimes used to overcome barriers to delivering regular face-to-face service delivery. This included dropping off care packages or food and using this as an opportunity to sight children and young people in the home and talk to parents from a safe distance.



Some services reported improved collaboration and goodwill across sectors, including homelessness and mental health sectors, with money invested to support rapid partnerships and joined-up service delivery.

# Experiences of children and young people in supported accommodation, residential care and the youth justice system

For children and young people living in unstable accommodation, lockdown presented very significant challenges. While some children and young people reported being well supported by services and support workers, others found that crowded or unstable housing situations became more challenging and less safe as a result of the stay-at-home requirements.

## What we heard

***“The case workers [in supported accommodation] have a whole process, when every visitor comes in they have to take their temperature. We have to ask the visitor 5 questions about COVID. And we have the front door always locked.”***

*(TAFE student, aged 19, supported accommodation, metro)*

***“My support workers ... are fantastic, I can't speak highly enough of them, they ring me regularly and we have team meetings. They reach out to me regularly.”***

*(TAFE student, aged 18, metro)*

***“I didn't feel safe at one point because we had a young person here who was showing all the symptoms quite severely. .... He went to the hospital and had a mask and that but he didn't get tested because he didn't meet the criteria at that stage. So he came back here and he was still hanging around and stuff and he wasn't told to go to his room. People were too passive. I was uncomfortable and I actually convinced him to go to the doctor [not] staff.”***

*(TAFE student, aged 23, in supported accommodation, metro)*

***“Just before COVID happened I had to run away from family violence that included me taking nothing but a backpack and 300 dollars. Everything was fine I went to a crisis accommodation ... and they started to help me. Then COVID hit. It was a 6 week program... and because I had finished my six week stay, and because of COVID I had to move to a motel and I had to share with junkies as that was the only thing they offered me. I had to call around to friends during lockdown and beg for accommodation... Then they started treating me like a slave and I had to pay board and it was awful. And all the crisis accommodation was so far away, so there was no option for me but to stay homeless and suffer.”***

*(University student, aged 18, metro in supported accommodation)*

# Experiences of children and young people in supported accommodation, residential care and the youth justice system continued

## What services did to support children and young people in residential care and the youth justice system

Children and young people in residential care or engaged in the youth justice system are often some of the most vulnerable in the community and often have complex and intersecting support needs.



Some residential care providers tried strategies to support stay-at-home orders such as improving recreational activities, for example purchasing trampolines for units.



Some services reported increases in young people going missing from residential care units either because isolating in a residential care unit felt 'untenable' or because they missed family and friends. Some services reported greater challenges in locating young people who had left residential care units due to reductions in outreach services. Others reported increased risks of sexual exploitation associated with young people going missing from care.



Some service providers expressed concern about the potential for increased offending due to non-compliance with restrictions. They discussed that non-compliance could be due to a lack of understanding or because it was not safe for young people to stay at home. They also talked about the potential over-policing of marginalised young people.



Youth Justice continued face-to-face contact with young people on orders in the community, with physical distancing, where considered necessary and with certain approvals. In some areas, staff supervision and check-ins to discuss contact with young people increased, as did their involvement in care team meetings.

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COMMISSION FOR CHILDREN  
AND YOUNG PEOPLE



# Impact of COVID-19 on children and young people

## Mental health

### Overview

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supports to children and young people to understand the impact of the pandemic.

This snapshot focuses on mental health. It aims to share what we have heard and inform improvements in responses to children and young people during and after COVID-19.

### Changes during COVID-19

On 16 March 2020, the Victorian Government declared a State of Emergency to prevent the spread of COVID-19. So far, during the pandemic, different levels of restrictions have been put in place that inhibit people's movement. This has included state-wide measures, including the 30 March 'stay at home' restrictions, and area-specific measures, such as the 7 July 'stay at home' restrictions for Melbourne and Mitchell Shire. More recently, the Victorian Government introduced Stage 4 restrictions in Melbourne on 2 August, and re-introduced Stage 3 restrictions in regional and rural Victoria on 5 August.

The Victorian Government's COVID-19 response has included additional funding for mental health services. This has included \$59.4 million of surge funding for the mental health system announced in April, \$19.5 million in funding for additional mental health resources, staff and programs announced in May, and \$59.7 million in new funding to further strengthen surge capacity of mental health services announced in August. Components of these packages involve specific supports for children and young people including funding for Orygen Youth Health to deliver a new online platform that provides online therapy and peer support

for young people, and funding for Kids Helpline to expand online and phone counselling capacity. They also include funding for Melbourne-based headspace centres to do more proactive outreach throughout the pandemic and 15 additional beds for young people with existing mental health issues.

The Victorian Government's response has also included \$28.5 million in funding, announced in August, to help students struggling with mental health and assist vulnerable students who have experienced disengagement to remain connected to their education. This includes establishing local governance and collaboration networks involving health services, regional education offices, local government youth services and headspace. Networks will support risk assessment and responses to these risks and improve pathways to care across the continuum from early intervention to specialist services.

This snapshot describes what the Commission heard during and after the first period of stage 3 restrictions between April and July.

# Our consultations

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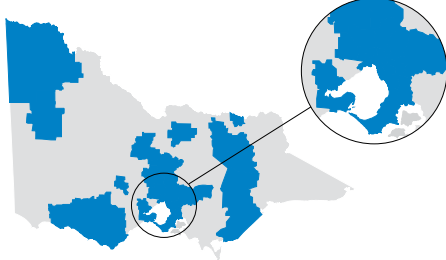
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## What they spoke about

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- Justice system
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- 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.

# Summary

Children and young people had mixed experiences during the pandemic. Some children and young people reported feeling unaffected or said there were some positive impacts associated with the restrictions, as they had the chance to slow down, self-reflect or avoid situations they find stressful. However, most children and young people the Commission heard from reported negative impacts on their mental health and wellbeing, and this was reinforced in consultations with service providers. Children and young people described experiences of loneliness and isolation, disruption to routines and coping mechanisms, worry for loved ones and increased stress associated with remote learning, precarious employment or unstable housing.

Children and young people also reported mixed views about changes in service delivery. Some reported adapting easily to telehealth or online services and strong support from service providers where they had existing relationships with mental health professionals, but most reported a preference for face-to-face services. Children and young people who had not previously accessed help for mental health concerns said they were unlikely to seek help for the first time by phone or online. Some spoke about cost being a barrier to accessing timely mental health supports,

leading in some cases to young people rationing their Medicare funded sessions by spacing them out. Service providers reported efforts to adapt to a changed environment but also acknowledged the limits to virtual services. Reductions in services and community-based programs was also identified as an issue, contributing to long wait times and increased pressure on more intensive services.

# How has the pandemic impacted the mental health of children and young people?

Most children and young people told us their mental health had been negatively impacted by the pandemic, although some also reported feeling relatively unaffected or even positive impacts to their mental health and wellbeing. Children and young people told us factors that negatively affected their mental health and wellbeing included isolation and loneliness, fear for impacted family or friends, distressing and negative news filtering through social media, and worry for the future due to uncertainty or disruptions to education, employment and other plans.



Some children and young people reported coping well with restrictions and changes and even had some positive experiences associated with having more time to reflect or spend with family, or a reduction in anxiety triggers, such as crowds or public transport. A similar number reported feeling relatively unaffected, with limited change to their lives and routines. Many reported friends, music, exercise, hobbies, study and work as things that helped them cope and stay resilient.

## What we heard from young people

***“It made me re-evaluate everything. I decided I want to live while I can. I want to travel. I’ve started saving. Not being able to has made me want to so it’s changed completely my plans for the next few years. I want to do stuff more suited to me. It’s been really good for me to work out my future. I needed that time alone to work it all out.”***

*(High school student, regional)*

***“What the virus has done is forced us to slow down our lives, some of us have unhealthy fast-paced lives, going from one commitment to another. So I’ve found a positive is that I’ve had more time to relax and stay home with my family and do the things we love.”***

*(High school student, aged 15, metro)*



Most children and young people felt the pandemic had a negative impact on their mental health and wellbeing. Key issues reported included a lack of social contact, loss of routine, precarious employment or housing and general uncertainty about the future. Some young people reported feeling worried about friends or family members or expressed fears for their own health, particularly where they felt at risk of contracting the virus.



Some young people reported that the pandemic exacerbated their existing mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression. Many service providers also reported seeing increases in these experiences and acknowledged disruptions to some services or programs contributed to or exacerbated these issues.



Some children and young people discussed the issue of suicide; they spoke about being affected by peer suicide in their communities during the pandemic or about being worried about their friends expressing suicidal thoughts. Some services talked to us about the concerning number of youth suicides in their areas since the pandemic began. Young people expressed disappointment and sadness about not being able to attend friends’ funerals.



Some young people – particularly from African-Australian communities and Aboriginal young people – reported being heavily affected by international events associated with the Black Lives Matter movement. Some also reported feeling targeted and harassed by police in the enforcement of lockdown restrictions.

# How has the pandemic impacted the mental health of children and young people? continued

## What we heard from young people

***“I have seen and talked to friends who have more severe mental health who are also concerned, worried about how they will maintain their mental health and go back to society and function at a level that is healthy. From a personal perspective and friends’, everyone is really struggling with motivation to look after themselves, the days rolling into weeks, the weeks rolling into months.”***

*(University student, regional)*

***“The main thing I was worried about was my mental health. And getting my schoolwork done which impacted my mental health. Then worrying about friends and family. That all just made me really depressed and upset and made my anxiety get worse.”***

*(High school student, regional)*

***“Not being able to see friends and family was very difficult. My mental health took a turn for the worse, particularly around unemployment. It halted job seeking and there was no ability to get work.”***

*(Young person, aged 21, metro)*

***“Initially, kind of scary, played on some anxieties, but as we settled into the lock-down, started to feel a lot better. As I started to feel better, but now I’m starting to feel a little more anxious about restrictions being lifted and worried about what might happen again.”***

*(University student, aged 24, metro)*

***“Before COVID, I had been on my own and in a toxic relationship. I had to recreate myself as a person. I was doing ok and then COVID happened and now I’m back to square one.”***

*(Young person with disability, aged 20 years, metro)*

***“The biggest challenge, in the past I have had quite severe anxiety and before COVID I was managing it, but since COVID I’m worried about it worsening. I was seeing people at least once a week, being outside my house, but I have seen and talked to friends who have more severe mental health who are also concerned, worried about how they will maintain their mental health and go back to society and function at a level that is healthy.”***

*(University student, regional)*

***“Biggest thing loss of employment and isolation. It’s been quite hard and difficult to afford bills and groceries. As a young person it’s quite challenging already. But the isolation has really impacted my mental health. Psych, psychiatrist, dietician, everyone else I see – haven’t been able to see my care team. Felt quite lonely and I ended up having to have an inpatient treatment in hospital as I made an attempt [of suicide].”***

*(University student, aged 21, regional)*

# How have children and young people engaged with mental health supports?

Reduced ability to offer face-to-face services has decreased service availability and forced services to adapt to online or telephone-based services. While changed services worked well for some, many young people reported that this limited their ability to engage effectively. Some said it stopped them accessing services they relied on at a time they needed them the most.



Many services adapted quickly to the pandemic by transitioning to online mental health supports (including telehealth and online support groups) and developed strategies to try and encourage safe engagement, for example, sharing strategies to protect privacy at home.



Some children and young people talked about being able to access effective supports for mental health through psychologists, school counsellors or other case workers, although many also stated a preference for face-to-face services. Service providers noted some young people expressed greater interest in phone-based or online services compared to face-to-face services and noted they may be more flexible and accessible to some young people, for example, in regional areas where there were limited local service providers.



A significant number of children and young people reported inadequate access to mental health services, including the unavailability of programs, long wait lists and the lack of services tailored to young people.



Some struggled with the shift to virtual services or were not comfortable engaging with telehealth or online supports, particularly if they were engaging with services for the first time or if the consultation counted towards limited government-subsidised sessions, deciding to hold off until face-to-face services resume. Some participants reported friends choosing not to access mental health services because they were daunted by having to use telehealth.



A lack of privacy or online access in the home was also a concern for children and young people as it impacted their ability to meaningfully access these supports.



After an initial drop in demand for mental health services, some services reported seeing a surge in demand to address serious or escalating mental health issues, including from primary school-aged children. We heard that disruptions to service delivery placed increased pressure on already long waiting lists and a reduction in community-based services was placing increased pressure on in-patient services.



Some services reported increases in drug and alcohol abuse for young people they worked with. They also talked about closures or reduced capacity of withdrawal and rehabilitation facilities limiting treatment options.

# How have children and young people engaged with mental health supports? continued

## What we heard from young people

**“Telehealth is a different experience. I thrive with face-to-face supports. But it has been great to check in and the psych has adapted strategies for this period to time.”**

*(Young person, aged 24, metro)*

**“During COVID, I have had to see my psychologist via telehealth and I haven’t responded particularly well to that, much prefer face-to-face appointments. The other issue about this is that the sessions still come out of the provided 10 sessions you get per year from Medicare, even though they are not face to face appointments.”**

*(University student, aged 24, metro)*

**“I tried to ask for help from counselling services but they seem busy. I booked three weeks ago, and I need to wait for three weeks before getting the counselling service.”**

*(Young person, aged 25, regional)*

**“It’s [telehealth and mental health] good for young people that have issues with transport but still important for young people to have face-to-face support for mental health... This is the gold standard.”**

*(Young person, regional)*

**“At the start I didn’t want to see my psychologist cos it was online and I didn’t have experience with Zoom – I felt a lot of anxiety come up. I have heard people say, ‘I’ll wait til this is all over and then see someone’. I have to maintain my mental health though – it’s really important. It can be confronting when it’s something new.”**

*(University student, regional)*

**“We don’t have access to services – you can’t go somewhere (for mental health) because waiting lists are too long.”**

*(High school student, regional)*

**“I tried to ask for help from counselling services but they seem busy. I booked three weeks ago, and I need to wait for three weeks before getting the counselling service.”**

*(Young person, working full-time, regional)*

**“It’s kind of a grey space of sort of being viewed as an adult, sort of being viewed as a teenager there are unique challenges around finances, living situations and the services don’t really know enough about how to approach this age group in regards to things like – counselling, AOD, grief services.”**

*(Young person, aged 22 years, metro)*

**“There is a gap in the system for support for young adults. There’s heaps of support for children and adults available. There is a gap in peer knowledge. I would find it amazing if there was information on how to support my friends.”**

*(Young person, aged 23 years, metro)*

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# 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.*

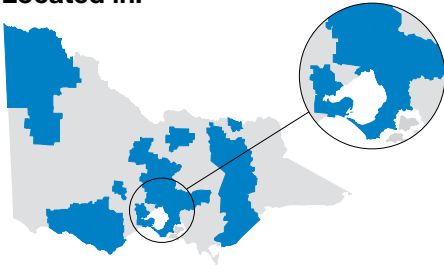
**122\***  
speak a **language other than English**  
*\*64 respondents did not specify.*

**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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