

Stepping up and Stepping Forward

Learning Insight 1

Covid-19 has created additional risks to our young people's emotional health and wellbeing; keeping them safe and well is our top priority



What do we know?

Pre-schools, schools, colleges, youth and training organisations have always given a high priority to safeguarding and wellbeing, as is evident in their well-organised and responsive pastoral care systems. Increased online learning during the pandemic highlighted the need for organisations to ensure that digital learning platforms, ICT systems and codes of practice kept learners safe. We know that the loss of familiar structures, routines and friendships impacted negatively on learning and wellbeing. Keeping learners safe is the first priority for all organisations and the importance of emotional health and wellbeing, as a necessary foundation for learning, is well-documented.

What have we learned?

ETI acknowledges that while the Covid-19 pandemic brought additional challenges, many of our children, young people and adult learners demonstrated high levels of resilience and perseverance. Many learners developed confidence and independence through being more self-reliant. Nevertheless, the pandemic and the associated lockdowns created additional anxieties for other learners. Organisations reported to inspectors that some young people experienced challenges including issues within the home, disengagement and high levels of stress. The Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young people's (NICCY) report, [A New and Better Normal](#), details the significant, negative impact of the pandemic on the health and wellbeing of particular children.

One of the major challenges for learners during lockdown was a sense of isolation. There were instances where young people lost touch with their friends and/or school community, or felt overwhelmed by the enormity of the changes in their environment and circumstances. In June 2021, the ETI invited all pupils from year 6 to year 14 to comment on their remote learning experiences during the January - March 2021 lockdown. A total of 28,790 pupils responded to this questionnaire. Both primary and post-primary pupils indicated they missed the opportunities for socialisation, interaction with their friends and the regular face-to-face pastoral events such as assemblies.



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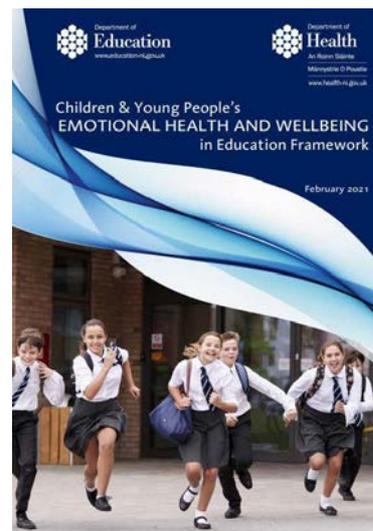
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Organisations welcomed the additional funding provided to help educational settings support the mental and emotional health and wellbeing of children and young people including, for example, the Department of Education's (DE) [Engage Programme](#), which was designed to help young people re-engage in their learning and the DE [Wellbeing](#) fund which provided £5 million to schools and EOTAS Centres to support pupils. While extra funding has enabled schools to provide additional counselling, schools have reported that this does not meet sufficiently the needs of all the pupils being referred or self-referring. Additionally, the need to address the impact of the pandemic on children and young people has been [highlighted](#) by leading medical, social care and mental health experts.

What will help us move forward constructively?

Young people themselves have reported that much still needs to be done to improve [mental health matters](#). They have recommended that teachers should be equipped better to support them; that access to high quality counselling services should be standard practice; and that addressing the negative impact of the pandemic on the emotional wellbeing of young people must be resourced adequately.

At organisational level, safeguarding, care and welfare policies and procedures should be monitored and updated to reflect current guidance and to implement and consolidate emerging effective practice. The joint DE and Department of Health publication, [Children's Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Education framework](#), is a good example of collaborative working between government departments, statutory bodies and agencies, parents, carers, voluntary and community sector organisations and most importantly, the children and young people themselves. It provides a helpful starting point for identifying need and enacting interventions swiftly.



Learners value the help available through their own organisations and the care and attention given to their personal safety by staff. Nearly all of the pupils who responded to the ETI questionnaire indicated that they were taught how to keep themselves safe online. Given the ever-evolving risks to children and young people, particularly in the digital world, it is timely to have a conversation around how we can empower learners to understand, and manage effectively, their safety and wellbeing through an effective preventative curriculum. ETI is committed to working with all stakeholders to explore how the wider aspects of healthy lifestyles are integral to a well-rounded education and can be incorporated into programmes of learning.



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