

Mental health in times of Covid-19

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As a general rule, 20% of social services referrals come from schools, especially where the emphasis is on early intervention. This means that while children have been absent from school, there will be children that have not received the help that they might otherwise have done.

It is also known that mental health disorders increase where families are struggling. This will be particularly applicable at the moment, where families are struggling to cope with the direct effects of the virus, and in the aftermath when unemployment and job and income uncertainty is set to increase.

Disruptions to daily routines and lack of access to safe support services and resources will undoubtedly have impacted on pupil mental health, whether this is making known conditions worse or triggering new ones. School routines have long been important ways for pupils to cope with daily life struggles and the past few months have seen that change dramatically. The uncertainty will have an impact on young people's mental health.

The Department for Education (DfE) guidance on returning to school recognises Covid-19 as a potentially negative experience and a distressing life event, whether through isolation or bereavement. The key role for schools will not have changed; the first one being the requirement for the prevention of mental health disorders, and the second being the identification of the children who may be struggling to cope with the situation. This may involve making a judgement as to whether disruptive or withdrawn behaviour is symptomatic of an issue or just part of being away for such a long time and taking time to adjust back into school routines and expectations.

It will be important to include an element of mental health awareness and planning in the return to school provisions being compiled as part of the requirement for the prevention of mental health disorders. For those children continuing to be educated remotely, their wellbeing will include maintaining engagement and enthusiasm. Record the steps and considerations that go into planning how to do this, e.g. by not setting unrealistic work expectations for students to avoid making them feel that they are not keeping up. A joined-up approach between class teachers and pastoral support could help identify and support children that have returned to learning in school and those continuing to learn online.

Remember that anxiety may be classed as a disability and not giving appropriate consideration to it may have negative repercussions. From a practical point of view, a log of children presenting challenging behaviour is going to be very important. A child that shows no symptoms of issues may claim later that poor behaviour was linked to mental health issues associated with Covid-19. If you have a clear record of behaviour presentation then you will be better placed to deal with any potential claims.

As with other aspects of school life affected by Covid-19, the governing body should consider whether there are any adjustments to be made to any existing policies, including your mental health policy (if you have one) or reviewing those policies with mental health concerns within them. Records of considerations/deliberations and adjustments will all be important records of the school taking appropriate steps to manage any potential issues. This will stand you in good stead in the event of any claims that the school did not seek to reduce, identify or manage the stress of the epidemic.

Our experts have put together the following series of top tips to help you manage mental health your schools. However, if you would like to speak to us with regards to a specific case please [contact us](#) for tailored advice and guidance.

- [Mental health and student behaviour issues – top tips](#)
- [Mental health and exclusions – top tips](#)
- [Mental health and parental complaints – top tips](#)

Contact



Laura Murphy

Associate

Laura.murphy@brownejacobson.com

+44 (0)115 908 4886

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