

The impact of the coronavirus pandemic on child welfare: d/Deaf and disabled children and young people

This briefing uses insight from Childline counselling sessions and NSPCC helpline contacts to highlight the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on d/Deaf, disabled and autistic children and young people.

February 2021

Key findings

- Coronavirus restrictions have caused disruption to young people's routines, which has been difficult for some children to cope with and adjust to.
- Support services have been harder for young people to access during the pandemic, with services either closed or severely reduced. Where services were transferred online, some young people found it difficult to access them, due to their disability.
- Home learning has also presented several challenges for some young people, including accessibility of online lessons and reduced additional support.
- Some young people have experienced delays in being assessed for support during the pandemic.
- After returning to school, some young people found they were no longer receiving the same level of support as they had been given before lockdown.
- The pandemic conditions have put additional stress on families where a child is disabled. Some parents have struggled to cope with the demands of caring for a disabled child with reduced support. Some children have also had to care for a disabled sibling during lockdown.
- Some young people report being unfairly, and in some cases aggressively, challenged for not wearing a face covering, even though they are exempt from doing so.

About this briefing

Throughout this briefing, we're using the term 'disabled children' to refer to children and young people with a range of very different conditions and identities, some of whom may not identify as being disabled. This includes children who:

- are d/Deaf
- are on the autistic spectrum
- have a condition such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)
- have a learning disability
- have a physical disability such as cerebral palsy
- have visual impairment.

In just over half of the Childline counselling sessions with disabled children between 01 April and 31 October 2020, children told us they are on the autism spectrum.

Key themes

Worries about the pandemic

Some young people talked to Childline counsellors about their increased anxieties and worries about the coronavirus pandemic. This included their own health, that of family and friends and the wider world.

"I have been feeling very anxious about dying, my family dying and all the world dying due to COVID. It is worse when I go to bed as I have panic attacks in the middle of the night, but I don't feel I can wake anyone up to help me."

Boy aged 13, Childline

Spending more time alone and without the usual distractions and routines of everyday life meant that young people had more time to focus and worry about the pandemic and the impact it was having on them.

"I feel worried and anxious about the world and the pandemic all the time. I can't distract myself because I no longer have a routine which would normally help. Before the virus I was busy all the time. Having a visual impairment makes it even harder."

Girl aged 17, Childline

Coronavirus restrictions

Some children shared how much they were struggling with the lockdown restrictions, for example being confined to the family home, not being able to see family and friends and social distancing. One girl with Down's syndrome told Childline:

"I am feeling sad as I miss my friends and family, especially my nan who I usually see every day. I really like hugging people and am finding social distancing difficult. I am really worried about whether things with COVID-19 are going to ever get better."

Girl aged 16, Childline

Wearing face coverings can be challenging, particularly for those on the autism spectrum. Some autistic young people told Childline how they struggled with the sensory aspects of wearing a mask and became distressed when wearing one.

"A lot of things have been making me low during this pandemic, with my disability being the cause of a lot of it. Like wearing masks for example. I know it is all about keeping people safe, and everyone has told me I need to try and wear one, but I just cannot cope with it. I want to wear a mask as much as everyone else wants me to, but I can't stand how they feel. I worry that I will have a meltdown in public and be questioned and misunderstood. Some days I just hate being disabled, I just want to do things like everyone else can."

Girl aged 16, Childline

Some young people talked about being challenged for not wearing a mask by members of the public and retail staff, who were not aware they were exempt or did not understand why.

"I am autistic and I am really frustrated at people throwing abuse at us people with hidden disabilities. I am exempt from wearing a mask and I wear a hidden disabilities lanyard, but people still say nasty things and accuse me of trying to avoid wearing a mask. It should be illegal for shop staff to ask for proof of disability and an offence for people with disabilities to be subjected to abuse by the public."

Girl aged 16, Childline

Learning during lockdown

As lessons moved online and children were required to learn from their home, Childline heard from young people who talked about feeling overwhelmed, stressed and worried about keeping up with their studies and failing courses/exams.

“I’m really stressed about the UK being in lockdown and I am struggling to calm down. I have loads of college assessments left to do and I am worried I am going to fail my course if the college doesn’t open again soon. I am autistic so I don’t like a change of routine. Normally I have a teaching assistant at college, but now I am at home, I don’t have anyone to talk to about how I feel. I have had emails from college staff asking if I am ok, but I haven’t replied to them because I don’t want to tell them I am not coping and at the same time I don’t want to lie to them.”

Girl aged 17, Childline

Some disabled children and young people experienced anxiety and frustration with online lessons and tasks which weren’t fully accessible or inclusive. This meant they were less able to keep up with online work.

One young person on the autism spectrum talked about being uncomfortable with taking part in video calls because of her stimming. Stimming, or self-stimulating behaviour, involves a young person making complex body movements such as flapping their arms or hands, flicking fingers, rocking, jumping, spinning, twirling, or banging their head).

“I am feeling very anxious and am struggling a lot. I experience autism and haven’t been able to join in with online lessons since lockdown. The only thing that calms me is stimming, but I can’t do that on a video lesson where everyone can see me.”

Girl, age unknown, Childline

In some cases, young people didn’t have access to the assistive technology that would enable them to take part in online lessons.

“I am d/Deaf and am struggling with online lessons. I am being supported by my ToD (teacher of the d/Deaf) who is writing subtitles but a firewall is preventing access. Last week mum contacted school but we have not had a response yet.”

Girl aged 10, Childline

Being able to remain focussed and motivated at home proved difficult for some. These young people mentioned the challenges they faced with keeping focussed at home, including distractions such as the internet, mobile phone, social media, watching TV or trying to study in a busy and noisy household. Some disabled young people explained that they felt uncomfortable, scared or embarrassed about asking for extra support.

“I am finding it really hard to focus on my work so I often choose to do other things instead of school work. I know I should do my work, but there are certain tasks I am just unable to complete because I don’t understand. I feel like I am being silly when I ask for help because I just don’t get it. I am really behind now and, if I say something, I will probably get into trouble.”

Girl aged 14, Childline

“Because of the coronavirus pandemic, I am having to do my college course online and I am struggling with transitioning. I am autistic and was getting support at college but now I am not getting any support at all.”

Boy aged 18, Childline

Some disabled children and young people were struggling with the uncertainty of not knowing when they might be able to return to school.

“I have disabilities due to a brain injury. I require a lot of help to do things and usually have carers, but they can’t come in because of coronavirus. Since I have not been going to school, mum and dad have not always helped me with things, like getting out of bed. It upsets me as I feel like I am an inconvenience. I go to a special school and really love being there as it makes me feel normal. Everyone helps me and I have lots of friends. I hate the uncertainty of when I will be able to go back.”

Girl aged 12, Childline

Some disabled children were still attending school during lockdown, as they were children of key workers or classed as vulnerable.

Some turned to Childline because they felt they were not able to get the help they needed at school during lockdown. One girl on the autism spectrum was attending school for two hours a day. She told Childline that she had asked her special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCO) for emotional support, as outlined in her support plan, but was told that there was no capacity for this to be provided:

“My relationship with my SENCO has changed since the coronavirus. I feel frustrated that I am not receiving emotional support as outlined in my Education, Health and Care Plan.”

Girl aged 15, Childline

Even if young people were still going to school, things were very different. Some children with disabilities struggle with change in general, and this meant they found it difficult to adapt to new routines.

“I can’t cope with all the changes that have happened recently. I have still been going to school as I am vulnerable and mum is a keyworker, but it still doesn’t help with everything. It just feels really hard to cope with, especially as I have autism. Most of the day is spent doing independent study and it can get very noisy, stressful and overwhelming for me.”

Girl aged 14, Childline

When the coronavirus restrictions were first put in place, the NSPCC helpline also heard from adults who were concerned about disabled children not attending school during lockdown. They were worried children might be at greater risk of harm if they weren’t at school and were confused about whether the child should or shouldn’t be attending.

“My nephew is 12 and is autistic. His school is open and I don’t understand why he is not allowed to attend? The school are saying that only keyworkers children can attend and all he is getting is a call from his teacher once a week for a check in. At first, we thought it was due to staffing levels but now I am not sure? I am confused as I thought vulnerable children should be going to school?”

Aunt, NSPCC helpline

Returning to school

Some parents and carers contacted the NSPCC helpline because they were worried about their child returning to school and being at greater risk of catching coronavirus.

“I am really concerned about sending my daughter with autism back to her special needs school. I feel she needs some routine as she is struggling at home but I am worried about her contracting COVID-19 at school and bringing it back to the home and passing it on to the rest of the family.”

Father, NSPCC helpline

Childline also heard from disabled young people who were concerned about returning to school and catching COVID-19. Anxieties grew as they heard about fellow pupils or teachers being tested positive for coronavirus. Some young people returned to school for a short period, only to find they had to go home and isolate again. This made them anxious:

“We just got an email from school saying we need to self-isolate as someone at school has COVID. I am so scared as I live with my elderly Nan who has health issues.”

Boy aged 13, Childline

“I am feeling so lonely and anxious at the minute. I have only been back at school for a week and I have had to isolate as someone on my bus tested positive for COVID. I haven’t seen my friends since March and now just as I have been able to see them again, I have had to stay at home again.”

Boy aged 16, Childline

Other disabled young people shared their feelings about returning to school. For some, the first day back was very stressful because they didn’t have the same access to support or quiet space.

“I was so excited and nervous to go back to school today but I really struggled. I thought going back would be easier because I could talk to my teacher about how I was feeling, but I couldn’t find the words and pretended to be fine. Maybe it’s because I don’t know how it all works at school anymore. I used to be able to go wherever I wanted to, but I can’t just go and sit anywhere that’s not my classroom and cool off or just go to guidance without making an appointment, and we all have to stick to the routes marked out around school.”

Girl aged 16, Childline

“I’ve had a meltdown every day after school so far. They’ve cut all support for me as I need to be more independent apparently - so I can’t talk to anyone. I also don’t have any quiet space to myself anymore. I just need a place where people give me help if I need it, understand me and accept me for who I am. I feel so alone.”

Girl aged 15, Childline

One girl who is on the autism spectrum contacted Childline after everything at school had become too overwhelming for her. She had not been able to get support from her head of year or mentor, so she felt she had no option but to walk out of school:

“I have just walked out of school. It was too loud and there were too many people there. I went to speak to my head of year but they didn’t listen to me. I usually talk to the school mentor, but they are in a different building and I can’t just go there because of the restrictions.”

Girl aged 12, Childline

For some young people, particularly those on the autism spectrum, not having to attend school or interact socially during lockdown provided a sense of relief. They felt that learning at home provided a calmer environment more conducive for learning, and they struggled with returning to the classroom.

"I go to a school which is for kids with special needs. I am there because of my Asperger's. I am in a class with children who are badly behaved and it is very distracting. I don't feel like I am learning enough and worked better when I was at home. I am worried about failing my exams. I understand it's hard on the teachersWe are also in pods at the moment because of the COVID situation and there aren't enough teachers. The kids seem to be out of control since we came back and not much learning is being done."

Girl aged 13, Childline

Family pressures

Some parents and carers of disabled children contacted the NSPCC helpline because they were struggling without their usual sources of help and support being available. They talked about feeling stressed, exhausted, overwhelmed and at their wits end. They worried about their and their child's mental health.

"My 13-year-old son is autistic and I've noticed his mental health is suffering, he has been having suicidal thoughts. Since lockdown, he has been more aggressive and physically abusive. He tells me that he's angry about not being at school. I feel overwhelmed because I'm expected to home school with no support, plus I have a younger daughter who refuses to do her homework. Home life has been intense and we are all completely exhausted both mentally and physically. Please can you help?"

Mother, NSPCC Helpline

One mother disclosed having thoughts of harming her own child as she was under such pressure:

"I'm honestly at the end of my tether. My son is autistic and he can sometimes fly off the handle over the smallest of things; the other day he punched me in the face simply for changing the channel on the telly! I can't believe I'm saying this, but in that moment, I had an overwhelming urge to hit his head against the doorframe. I mean, I would never do that, obviously, and if I ever felt that strongly again I would ring the police for help."

Mother, NSPCC helpline

Disabled children also talked to Childline about the impact of the lockdown on family life, particularly if their usual support was no longer available.

"I am disabled and I live with my mum who has health issues that make her particularly vulnerable to coronavirus. Mum and I have fallen out and she has gone out for a walk to cool off. It really worries me that she is outside and could catch the virus. Social services have stopped my personal care and mum has had to help me more. Mum finds bathing me difficult because she struggles to bend, and Occupational Health, who might have been able to help us, are closed due to the coronavirus."

Girl aged 18, Childline

Some adults contacted the NSPCC helpline because they had offered to help a family, but the parents or carers had been reluctant to accept. Sometimes this was because parents were worried their child might display challenging or violent behaviour. One concerned neighbour said:

"I offered to take care of her son, if only to give the poor mum a moment of peace. But she wouldn't allow it; she said she wouldn't put anyone in that position as they'd get punched!"

Neighbour, NSPCC helpline

Other adults have told our helpline that lockdown conditions had led to or exacerbated challenging behaviour, particularly among children on the autism spectrum.

"I'm concerned about a young boy who lives down the road from me, who I believe has been diagnosed with autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). He's become well known in the neighbourhood for his 'temper tantrums', including kicking and punching anything in his wake, as well as shouting obscenities at people. I've noticed this kind of behaviour happening more frequently since lockdown."

Neighbour, NSPCC helpline

Some young people with disabled siblings also talked to Childline about how their parents were struggling to cope with increased caring responsibilities during lockdown.

"I am stressed because my parents are struggling to cope with my sister who is disabled. My dad keeps ranting saying how it is tearing the family apart and I am worried they are going to have a breakdown from the stress of caring for her."

Girl aged 17, Childline

Some young people explained that they weren't able to get the support they needed because their parents' or carers' time was taken up with caring for their sibling.

"Since lockdown school has been really stressful. During quarantine, I really struggled doing work and needed more support. I have an autistic older brother who most of the time was my parent's priority. I never get the kind of help he gets and I don't feel I can add to my parents' pressures by asking them for help."

Girl aged 15, Childline

Some disabled children also talked to Childline about their parents being more stressed and less patient during lockdown.

"I am finding lockdown really difficult. Mum shouts at me all the time and gets annoyed with me. I have special needs and normally go to daytime respite care. Because of the virus it's shut and I am really missing it because of the independence and support I get there."

Girl aged 17, Childline

In other cases, relationship difficulties with siblings had emerged as disabled young people spent more time at home with their brothers and sisters.

"I have autism and my little brother doesn't understand what it is and how it affects me. He is making me feel really stressed as he feels I should have grown out of having meltdowns. He feels he is treated unfairly compared to me and that I am an attention seeker. It's not easy to hear him say this when I am trying so hard to cope with things, especially with all the coronavirus stuff going on. I really want to know how to make my brother understand autism especially now we are stuck in the house together all the time."

Girl aged 15, Childline

Abuse

Childline heard from young people who were experiencing more frequent arguments with family members during lockdown, as a result of the stressful conditions. For some this had escalated and become abusive.

"I am struggling to cope with my mum and dad fighting. My dad hit my mum and there has been a lot of shouting. I am normally at a special needs residential school but since lockdown, not only have I not been able to attend, but there has not been any online teaching or support provided. Dad has lost his job which is contributing to his frustration."

Mum is so stressed all the time and is finding things hard with home schooling me, coping with the way things are at home and the way dad is being."

Girl aged 15, Childline

Some young people told Childline they had experienced physical abuse from a parent for the first time during lockdown.

"My dad hit me for the first time ever today and told me and my brother to F off and never come back. Me and my brother, who is 11, are both autistic but my brother is also nonverbal. Our relationship with dad was perfect before lockdown but has gone downhill since he was made redundant. He has become increasingly aggressive. Me and my brother used to go into respite every fortnight but this stopped due lockdown. This has made the situation at home even more stressful."

Girl aged 17, Childline

Getting support

Health services

Access to normal health services was severely disrupted during lockdown and some services were closed. Those services still in operation were running at reduced capacity and with limited face-to-face delivery, to comply with social distancing measures. But for some disabled children, it was difficult to access services remotely.

One girl who has cerebral palsy, speech difficulties and fibromyalgia contacted Childline. During lockdown, her hospital appointments were being conducted by phone. This proved extremely frustrating and difficult for her due to her speech difficulties. She was experiencing suicidal thoughts and feelings because she was unable to get any support.

"People either don't call me or when they do, they don't understand what I am trying to say because of my stammer/speech impediment. I can't go to Accident and Emergency when I am having a flare up, so I just have to try and get through it, but that's extremely difficult. I am feeling so frustrated about my disability and if this is going to continue and get worse, I would rather end it all. No one understands how difficult it is."

Girl aged 17, Childline

Some disabled children experienced difficulties booking appointments. Sometimes this seemed to be because places were oversubscribed. On other occasions, it took a long time for professionals to reply to communications because services were so busy.

"I'm with a paediatric doctor but haven't seen or heard from him in ages, so have sent him an email about how much I'm struggling. I don't think he will email me back though - these people have better things to do than bother with me. What's the point?"

Girl aged 17, Childline

With normal treatment options severely disrupted over lockdown, some young people contacted Childline asking how they could access health services.

"Is there any way I could get a mobility aid like crutches, a walking frame or even a wheelchair during the pandemic? Even if it's not immediately, it would be great to start this process now so that I have what I need for when school starts again. I know that Childline is not the NHS, but I was hoping you could point me in the right direction of who to contact?"

Girl aged 13, Childline

Some young people experienced delays in receiving assessments and/or diagnosis. This left them feeling uncertain. Some even questioned whether their condition was genuine and whether they deserved support.

"My GP was going through the diagnostic process when COVID stopped everything. Unfortunately, my condition is getting worse. I now struggle with mobility, and I am unable to use my legs, mostly due to pain."

Girl aged 13, Childline

"I am waiting for an initial assessment but I can't have one until all this (COVID-19) is over. I've tried looking online for advice, but I haven't even been diagnosed yet."

Girl aged 18, Childline

"It's a lot easier to work out what to do if you know what you're dealing with. It would also be a lot easier to explain to classmates if I had a label for exactly what I'm going through and a doctor to back up what I'm saying."

Girl, secondary school age, Childline

Some young people who required hospital treatment were scared about going to hospital, believing they would be at greater risk of contracting COVID-19.

“I am going into hospital for treatment and my parents are old and vulnerable. I am so worried about catching coronavirus, returning home and them catching it and dying. Please can Childline help me stay somewhere else, only for a month or so, so I can isolate and not give the virus to my parents?”

Girl aged 17, Childline

Others were reluctant to seek urgent care because they wanted to stay safe from the virus. One girl on the autism spectrum contacted Childline after she had self-harmed by cutting herself. When the counsellor explained that she should call 999 if she needed emergency treatment the young person replied:

“No, I am more likely to catch the corona at a hospital.”

Girl aged 17, Childline

Mental health

Over a third of counselling sessions with disabled children and young people since lockdown first began, were about their mental and emotional health. Young people told counsellors there were experiencing negative emotions, and changes in their moods, sleeping and eating patterns. They felt their mental health was deteriorating due to increased anxiety, depression and loneliness.

“I am finding it so hard being at home all the time because of the coronavirus. I am with child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) for depression, anxiety, self-harm and suicidal behaviour. I have worked hard to try and sort things but this pandemic has set me so far back I really feel hopeless. I have been trying to distract myself with positive things like colouring, playing with my dog and sensory time (because I also have autism) but I have relapsed and ended up self-harming a few times.”

Boy aged 17, Childline

For some, the closure of mental health services served as a source of stress, anxiety, and fear. Those who usually received professional mental health support found that not being able to access support in the usual way was having a detrimental impact on their ability to cope. In some cases, young people continued to receive support remotely, but found speaking about their mental health either over the phone or via video link difficult. Others talked about being put on a waiting list for mental health support, but this had been delayed further due to COVID-19.

"I am struggling with depression and feel so alone. Normally I have face to face support from child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) and cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) sessions but because of the current restrictions, my sessions have been by phone and are less frequent. I feel tired and cry all the time. I feel too ashamed to be honest about how depressed I feel and the suicidal feelings I have. I have hidden the fact I am self-harming. I was diagnosed with autism around a year ago and believe this affects my ability to communicate my feelings. I struggle with social situations. I pretend I am fine, but if things carry on this way and I am not able to access the support I need, I am worried how bad things may get for me."

Girl aged 16, Childline

Others spoke of appointments being cancelled or delayed, often with no definitive return date.

"I am struggling a lot at the moment, especially with everything going on with COVID-19. I was getting weekly sessions with my child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) worker as well as seeing my psychiatrist regularly but now, because of lockdown, I can't see them. I go to a specialist school, so I am used to seeing the key workers there for support too. I feel so alone and like I have no support."

Girl aged 15, Childline

Some young people talked about self-harming and/or having suicidal thoughts and feelings. In some cases, the young person felt that progress they had previously made with their mental health had suffered a setback due to the pandemic

"I am disabled. I was born with cerebral palsy and a neurological disorder. I recently came out of hospital after being in there for quite a long period of time. I am struggling to cope with my illnesses and have suicidal thoughts every day. I feel like none of the professionals are helping me with my physical or emotional pain. I am not independent at all and carers come in every day. I hardly hear from my social worker, child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) are not getting back to me and my GP is not helping. I feel they don't care. I do understand there is a global pandemic, but I shouldn't be left suffering."

Girl aged 17, Childline

Conclusion

The concerns raised by and about by disabled children and young people during the coronavirus pandemic are broadly the same as those raised for and by non-disabled young people. However, disabled young people experience extra barriers which have had a negative effect on their education, health and wellbeing during lockdown. This includes education and support being harder to access, with online replacements not being fully accessible or inclusive.

The pandemic conditions have also exacerbated family stresses and left some parents struggling to provide care for their children. For some children, this escalated into abuse.

Methodology

When children, young people and adults contact Childline and the NSPCC helpline, the counsellors and practitioners record what they tell us. Childline only shares a child's information with other services in exceptional circumstances, for example if a child is in a life-threatening situation, or if they are requesting direct help. Our counsellors always attempt to seek consent from a young person before anything is shared.

The insight in this briefing is taken from Childline counselling sessions and helpline contacts where the child told counsellors they were d/Deaf, disabled and/or on the autism spectrum.

All names and potentially identifying details have been changed to protect the identity of children and the individuals contacting Childline and the NSPCC helpline. Quotes are created from real Childline counselling sessions and helpline contacts but are not necessarily direct quotes.

Data tables

Childline offers support to children, young people and adults across the UK. Children and young people can choose to remain anonymous, so we do not always know which part of the UK they live in. Whilst we are able to provide some top-level geographical breakdowns in some contexts, the numbers in this briefing are too small to provide

further breakdowns.

Childline counselling sessions with disabled children		
1 April 2020 – 31 October 2020		
Children on the autism spectrum	2,870	51%
d/Deaf children	119	2%
Children with another disability	2,625	47%
Total	5,614	100%

+ Further support and information



Children and young people can contact **Childline** for information and advice about anything that's worrying them.



Contact our helpline if you're worried about a child, or if you need support for something you experienced as a child
nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/reporting-abuse/



Visit **NSPCC Learning** for more information about safeguarding and child protection during coronavirus

