



Joint Oireachtas Sub-committee on Mental Health

Discussion on the Impact of Covid-19 on the Mental Health of Children

Mr John Church, Chief Executive, ISPCC Childline

Opening Statement

20 October 2021

Introduction

Chair, members of the sub-committee and colleagues, I thank the members for inviting ISPCC to be here today to discuss the impact of Covid-19 on the mental health of children.

I will be pleased to address any questions you might have as the session proceeds.

Opening Remarks

Through our Childline services, children tell us first-hand about the experiences of their daily lives.

In our operational year of October 2019 to September 2020:

- Our Listening Service answered over 240,000 contacts from children and young people.
- Our Therapeutic Support Service – which works with children and families on a one-to-one basis for up to six months – worked with 458 children.

The mental health impact of Covid-19 featured heavily across these services.

Services Observations

When restrictions were first introduced in Ireland, children were among the first to be impacted. Cut off from school, extended family members, friends and the sports and activities which can play a vital role in their lives, they reached out to Childline for support.

In the first week of school closures, Childline experienced an instant increase in demand across its online, phone and text-based services.

While demand for our phone and text services sustained thereafter, children continued to seek support in increasing numbers online. They may have felt as though their conversation could be overheard at home.

In the initial period of Covid-19 restrictions, our listening services saw an increase in contacts around mental and emotional wellbeing, suicide, and self-harm.

Many children told us how their feelings of anxiety stemmed from every aspect of their lives. They picked up on what their parents were going through and what was being reflected through the news and on social media. Tensions which had been simmering under the surface in homes arose and, in some cases, children experienced Adverse Childhood Experiences for the first time.

Between the closure of schools in March 2020 and the usual end of the primary school term in late June of that year, the Childline website experienced an increase in users of over 100%.

Between March 2020 and July 2020, our listening services answered over 2,500 contacts from children seeking support around their mental and emotional wellbeing. In addition, we answered over 600 contacts from children who spoke with us about suicide.

The impact of intense Covid-19 restrictions re-introduced in December 2020 was felt acutely by children around Christmas time. They spoke with us about issues including loss, anxiety, and suicide ideation.

One call we received came from a young girl who was living in care but felt that nobody was thinking about her. While her challenges had begun long before the global pandemic struck, the sense of isolation, fear and anxiety which had stirred up inside her over the months of tight restrictions had brought her to a place where she felt she could not go on. She urgently needed to talk.

Since October 2020, the Childline Listening Service has answered over 5,500 contacts in total from children seeking support around their mental and emotional wellbeing. They tell us how they feel anxious, unhappy, lonely and more.

The Childline Therapeutic Support Service, which offers more directed therapeutic support to children, young people, and their families, is now seeing significant stress and anxiety around school and peer interactions.

Children have become more withdrawn, they're out of the mode of socialising and perhaps they have changed too and they're not quite sure where they fit in anymore.

There are increased levels of anxiety, with more children feeling as though they can't leave their bedroom or their house and as though they can't go back to school or to so-called 'normal'.

Our e-Therapeutic Support model now allows us to support these children and young people online.

Reimagining Children and Young People's Mental Health Care Post-COVID-19

The ISPCC pre-COVID was already on a new strategic journey to re-imagine a new digitally delivered Childline service and to connect with children in the way they communicate now versus 34 years ago when Childline was first set up. We had set up a pilot to engage with children via online intervention using our successful Therapeutic Support Service model that we employ face-to-face in the community. This pilot was accelerated due to the first lockdown, forcing us to engage via online methods which made our research richer as we engaged with over 460 children online.

The model of e-Therapeutic Support allows us to engage with young people online, offering the same levels of therapeutic interventions as face-to-face sessions, with a focus on goal orientation to match the young person's strengths and needs at the time of our work together.

We were fortunate to have our e-Therapeutic Support programme evaluated through a pilot review and the results confirmed that where a young person wishes to engage therapeutically online, the impact of this work matches that of a face-to-face engagement.

We are confident from the evaluation of the pilot that we have a robust proof of concept that highlights the potential in this service model and the role such a model can play in supporting children and young people post-covid.

Closing Remarks

Mental wellbeing and anxiety continue to be among the topics spoken about most frequently by those who turn to our services for support.

In the year since October 2020, we have been answering around 26 contacts each week from children and young people who tell us they feel actively suicidal, have suicidal thoughts and feelings, or have previously attempted suicide.

In that same period, we've answered 923 contacts from young people speaking about self-harm.

We anticipate children will continue to experience acute challenges related to the impact of Covid-19 on their mental health for some time to come.

We must ensure they can access the support they need when they need it.

I thank the members for their attention, and I look forward to engaging with you.

[ENDS]