Effects of the COVID -19 pandemic on students and practical tips for educators

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Overview

On May 5, 2023, the World Health Organization (WHO) downgraded the COVID-19 pandemic and announced that it no longer qualified as a public health emergency of international concern. However, recent research has demonstrated there are lingering negative effects of the pandemic on students.

The 2021 Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey, administered by CAMH,[1] found that among students in Grades 7 to 12, 59 per cent felt depressed about the future due to the COVID-19 pandemic, 39 per cent experienced worse mental health due to the COVID-19 pandemic, 47 per cent experienced moderate to severe levels of psychological distress in the past month, 42 per cent wanted to seek help in the past year but did not know where to turn, and 18 per cent seriously contemplated suicide in 2021.

Conversely, there was a 20.3 per cent decrease in bullying during the COVID-19 pandemic among Canadian students in Grades 4-12. 59.8 per cent of students reporting being victimized, in some form, pre-COVID-19, compared to 39.5 per cent post-COVID-19.[2] This outcome is likely due to lockdowns, school closures, and a general decrease in socialization. However, an increase in hours spent online during the pandemic has had a negative impact on how kids treat each other, according to research findings from the U.K.

Research findings

Kaitlynn Mendes, an associate professor in sociology at Western University, and her team conducted a research study on bullying in the U.K. They found that students were less empathetic and more prone to bully and harass each other online after returning to school, following the 2021 lockdown.[3] Mendes and her team held focus groups and

surveyed or interviewed 800 youths aged 13 to 18, as well as parents and teachers, in the U.K. In the study, 96 per cent of British youths between the ages of 13 to 18, teachers, and parents said they used more social media during the pandemic. The British youths surveyed reported experiencing more sexual harassment, misogyny, racism, homophobia, body shaming and even various forms of fraud when spending more time online.

In the context of the study, bullying and harassment included a wide range of practices, such as verbalizing negative comments regarding another person's appearance, body, race, gender, or sexual orientation.

Teachers also noticed a stark difference in the students' behaviour when they returned to school; specifically, they were using more inappropriate language, they displayed increased cruelty towards each other, and there were increased instances of harassment and bullying towards teachers.

While the study did not explore the reasons leading to an increase of harassment and bullying, Mendes opined that it is likely due to a lack of important social cues such as eye contact, facial expressions, human touch, and voice intonations in online interactions, which makes empathizing hard and harassment and abuse much easier.

Next steps

Although the U.K. research was conducted between January and May 2021, since then, teachers have disclosed that students' behaviours have become more negative, and steps need to be taken to rectify this issue.

The 2021 Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey, administered by CAMH, found that 91 per cent of students in grades 7-12 used social media daily, with over 30 per cent spending more than five hours per day on social media. Further, almost one-third of students reported experiencing cyberbullying at least once in the past year. Mendes advised that children, schools, and parents need to work together to discuss ground rules and cyber civics, and to establish a digital code of conduct.

Mendes will start similar research in Canada to investigate the level of bullying that young people are experiencing, and to evaluate whether adequate legislation and policies exist to protect them. The goal is to ensure young people feel safe while using digital technology, and that they are aware of common issues surrounding their online presence.

Practical tips for educators

Bullying is a systemic and pervasive issue affecting people at all levels in the school system, causing significant harm. On a worldwide basis, according to population-based studies, 10 per cent of students are bullied on a regular basis, and another 30 per cent of students are bullied occasionally.[4] According to a 2020 UNICEF report, Canada ranked 23 out of 38 economically advanced countries for lowest bullying rates (Canada's is 20 per cent), and 35 out of 38 for teen suicide rates (9.0 per 100,000).[5]

Since the pandemic may have led to an increase in instances of bullying and harassment, educators need to take an active role implementing bullying prevention and intervention programs. Research has shown that effective bullying prevention programs are evidence-based, whole-school and multi-tiered.[6]

On-going action, supervision, and transparency are needed to ensure a cultural and organizational change in our schools. We provide a list of recommendations to develop and implement an effective multi-tiered system of bullying prevention and intervention:[7]

1. Seek out and listen to student voices in the creation, implementation, and evaluation of bullying prevention initiatives.
2. Share educational resources regarding bullying with parents and seek feedback from them.
3. Examine special education practices from a student-centred learning perspective.
4. Develop core organizational values that embrace a culture of caring and strengthen the leadership skills needed for culture change.
5. Review policies and procedures from equity, anti-racism and anti-oppression perspectives and ensure policies and procedures are followed consistently.

Schools must work with a wide range of community partners, such as youth-serving organizations, community advocacy groups, and health and social service providers, to address bullying and ensure a positive school climate.

For more information on effects of the COVID -19 pandemic on students and practical tips for educators, please reach out to any of the key contacts listed below.

Footnotes

[1] Boak A., Elton-Marshall T., Hamilton H. A. (2022), The well-being of Ontario students: findings from the 2021 Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey (OSDUHS). Toronto, ON: Centre for Addiction and Mental Health.

[2] Vaillancourt, T., Brittain, H., Krygsman, A., Farrell, A. H., Landon, S., & Pepler, D. (2021). School bullying before and during COVID-19: Results from a population-based randomized design. *Aggressive Behavior*, 47, 557– 569 at 561. https://doi.org/10.1002/ab.21986 [“Vaillancourt et al. (2021)”]

[3] Patty Winsa, “Kids can be mean, but did lockdown make them meaner?”, *Toronto Star*, 20 April 2023.

[4] Vaillancourt et al. (2021) at 558.

[5] UNICEF Canada. 2020. Worlds Apart: Canadian Companion to UNICEF Report Card 16: UNICEF Canada, Toronto.

[6] For example, see Rivara F, Le Menestrel S, editors. *Preventing Bullying Through Science, Policy, and Practice*. Washington (DC): National Academies Press (US); 14

September 2016. Chapter 5, “Preventive Interventions.” Available from National Library of Medicine website.

[7] This list is derived from *Building Healthy Relationships and an Inclusive, Caring Learning Environment*, a report created by the trustees of the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board (HWDSB) with the purpose of gathering qualitative and quantitative community feedback, summarizing research, and creating recommendations for HWDSB, the Hamilton community and the government to address bullying.

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