

Youth Brief

Supporting the Mental Health of Children, Youth and Families During and Beyond the COVID-19 Pandemic in Ontario

20 November 2021



HEALTH FORUM

EVIDENCE >> INSIGHT >> ACTION

McMaster Health Forum

The McMaster Health Forum is based at McMaster University (Hamilton, Ontario). Our goal is to help respond to the most important health and social issues of our time. We do this based on the best available research evidence, as well as the experiences and ideas from the public, researchers, professionals and leaders. We aim to strengthen health and social systems, and get the right support and care to the people who need them.

A youth panel

A youth panel is a way to seek the input of youth on important issues. Each panel brings together approximately 14-16 participants. Participants share their ideas and experiences regarding an issue, learn from research evidence, and from the views of others. The panel can be used to understand the values that youth feel should inform future decisions about an issue, as well as to reveal new understandings and get ideas about how it should be addressed.



Feel



Imagine



Do



Share

The issue

Supporting the mental health of children, youth and families during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic in Ontario

Since March 2020, the world has been focused on stopping the COVID-19 pandemic.

COVID-19 is a virus that can be easily transmitted between individuals. It can spread from an infected person's mouth or nose in small liquid particles when they cough, sneeze, speak, sing or breathe.

Most people that catch COVID-19 will experience mild to moderate symptoms and get better without needing any special medicines or to go to the hospital. However, some will become seriously ill and require medical attention.

The Ontario government took various actions to prevent or control the spread of COVID-19:

- wearing masks in public spaces
- physical distancing and "stay-at-home" orders
- closing schools and non-essential workplaces
- shifting to virtual health and social care for children, youth and families
- requiring proof of vaccination to access certain businesses and settings

The pandemic and the actions taken to stop the pandemic have affected everyone, including children, youth and families. Some have experienced new or worse mental health concerns since the beginning of the pandemic.

64% of those aged 15 to 24 reported a negative impact of the pandemic on their mental health

52% of children and youth aged 12 to 17 did not have the same perceptions of their mental health as their parent's

Parent's top concerns about their children include:

- fewer opportunities to socialize with friends (71%)
- amount of screen time (64%)
- loneliness or isolation (54%)
- general mental health (46%)

24.5%

of Ontario children and youth (12 to 17) feel that their current mental health is somewhat worse or much worse now compared to before the pandemic

Did you know?

What is mental health?

Mental health can mean different things. On the one hand, you can have good mental health. When you have good mental health, you can be happy, get along well with others, and cope better with stress.

On the other hand, you can have poor mental health, and you might have a harder time feeling good about yourself. But remember that everyone will have a bad day, or even a bad week, at times. It's normal to feel low, stressed, or anxious when we experience conflict, disappointment, loss, or other upsetting situations (like a pandemic). However, if those feelings do not go away and/or if they get in the way of day-to-day functioning, it may be more serious. Even if you are diagnosed with a mental illness, mental illnesses are treatable.

The issue

Many factors can affect your mental health

Your mental health can be influenced by many things at home, at school, in your community, or more broadly in society:

- **Risk factors** can increase the chance of developing poor mental health, as well as increase the severity and duration of mental health problems (for example: being or feeling isolated, having stressful experiences, having parents who are in conflict, feeling pressured to fit in or to be successful, living in poverty)
- **Protective factors** can improve (and protect) mental health (for example: feeling good about yourself, having good social skills and problem-solving skills, having good friends, being able to be physicaly active, having good family support, living in a safe community)

Mental health can be improved. This can be done by helping individuals and their families to develop the skills and capacity to be “mentally healthy.” It can also be improved by trying to reinforce the factors that can protect your mental health, while minimizing the impact of factors that can put you at risk.

What do you know about the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on mental health?

What is the issue?	What do I know about the issue?	What questions do I have about the issue?

Warmup

Children, youth and families had various experiences during the pandemic...



Some have been anxious about getting the virus



Some have been stressed by remote schooling



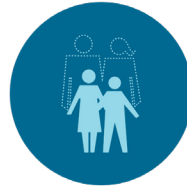
Some were happy to stay home and learn at their own pace



Some were struggling with virtual schooling and care



Some felt lonely and isolated



Some didn't see their parents or loved ones as much because they were essential workers



Some experienced grief and loss



Some were relieved not to experience bullying at school



Some had a hard time spending all day in an overcrowded home



Some were sad not being able to play with friends



Some with disabilities or special education needs have been having trouble getting the support they need



Some had trouble sleeping during the pandemic

Do you identify with any of these, and why?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

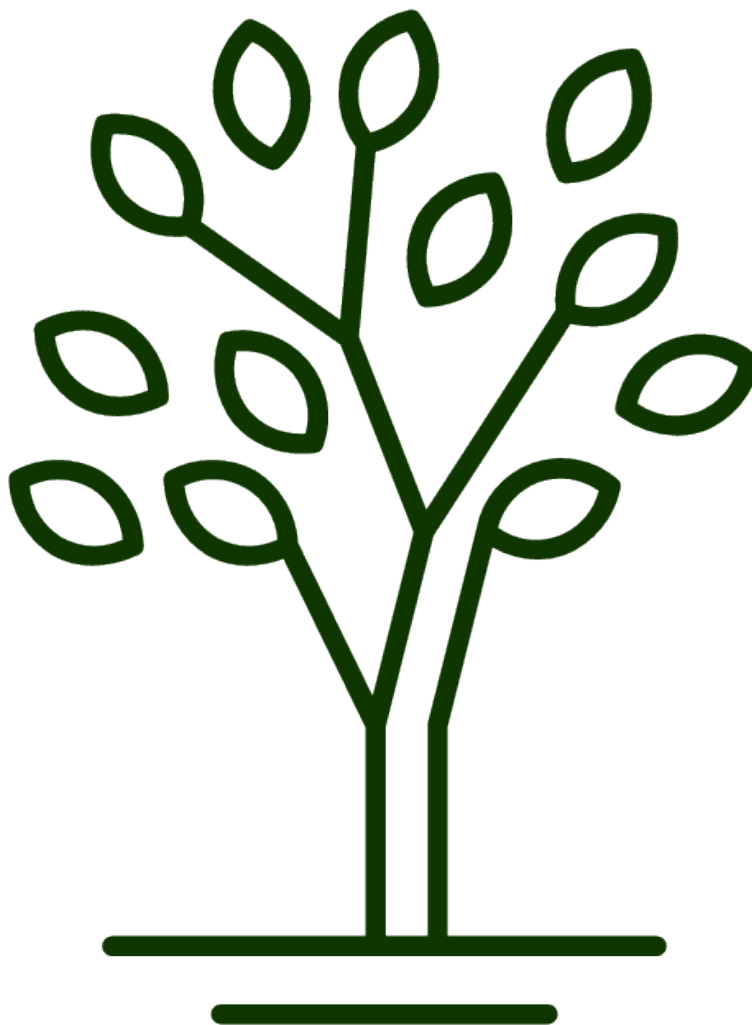
Feel

In what ways do you think COVID-19 impacted the mental health of people around you?

- your friends
- your schoolmates
- your family members

Why do you think so many children, youth and families have experienced mental health problems during the pandemic?

Write up to 6 reasons why they have experienced mental health problems during the COVID-19 pandemic



Imagine

How might we improve the mental health of children, youth and families during the pandemic?

Write up to 6 ideas to improve the mental health of children, youth and families.

<div></div>		<div></div>
<div></div>		<div></div>
<div></div>		<div></div>

Sometimes seeking help on our own can be difficult. We may be afraid to talk about our feelings, or we may not know who to talk to.

- How would you feel if someone asked about how you're doing and offered help (even if you haven't asked for it)?

.....

.....

- Who would you like to ask about it (for example, your teacher, someone working at school, a doctor, a nurse, a social worker)?

.....

.....

- How would you like to be contacted (for example, a weekly virtual check-in during school hours, by email, by social media, by phone)?

.....

.....



Imagine



Imagine that there is a new pandemic in the future.

- Who should prepare you (for example, your parents, your teacher, your health professional)?

- What are the types of support you would like to be offered?

- What types of support should be provided to those you are the most worried about?

- What changes should we make (for example, at home, at school, in the community)?

During a pandemic, governments must be able to make rapid changes to respond to the needs of children, youth and families.



- Are there processes like this virtual panel that would have helped governments understand your experiences, the impact of their decisions, and find new solutions?

- What are other ways that governments could get your feedback (for example, via social media, online or telephone surveys, classroom activities, group discussions)?

- How can we make sure those we are the most worried about are able to express their needs and ideas?

Do

Of everything that I have heard about ways to support the mental health of children, youth and families:



I like _____



I wish _____



I wonder _____

Share

If you were talking to leaders at school or in your community about mental health, what would you say to them.

How to find support

Here's how to find mental health services in your community:

If this is an emergency or you or someone you know is in immediate danger, please call 911 or go to your nearest hospital or emergency department.

If you or someone you know is in crisis, call a helpline.

1. visit Kids Help Phone Resources Around Me (<https://kidshelpphone.ca/resources-around-me>)
2. type in your location
3. select the topic "Counselling and Mental Health Support"
4. select "Find Resources"
5. choose from the counselling and mental health support services from the drop-down list or interactive map to select the resources that are right for you

When to ask for support

If you're concerned about your mental health, speak up and ask for help. Here are some examples when you should speak up and ask for support:

- I'm getting significantly lower marks in school
- I'm avoiding friends and family
- I'm having frequent outbursts of anger
- I've been having changes in my sleeping or eating habits
- I'm drinking a lot and/or using drugs
- I am not doing the things I used to enjoy
- I'm worrying constantly
- I'm experiencing frequent mood swings
- I'm obsessed with my weight
- I'm lacking energy or motivation
- I'm feeling very down

Acknowledgements

Authors

François-Pierre Gauvin, PhD, Senior Scientific Lead, Citizen Engagement and Evidence Curation, McMaster Health Forum

Steven Lott, Senior Lead, Communications, McMaster Health Forum

Saif Alam, B.Sc. Candidate, Honours Integrated Science Program, McMaster University

Kaelan A. Moat, PhD, Managing Director, McMaster Health Forum

John N. Lavis, MD PhD, Director, McMaster Health Forum, and Professor, McMaster University

Funding

This brief and the youth panel it was prepared to inform were funded by the Ontario Ministry of Health. The McMaster Health Forum receives both financial and in-kind support from McMaster University. The views expressed in the youth brief are the views of the authors and should not be taken to represent the views of the Ontario Ministry of Health.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no professional or commercial interests relevant to the brief. The funder played no role in the identification, selection, assessment, synthesis, or presentation of the research evidence profiled in the brief.

Merit review

The brief was reviewed by a small number of citizens, other stakeholders, policymakers and researchers in order to ensure its relevance and rigour.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Steering Committee members and merit reviewers for providing feedback on previous drafts of this brief. The views expressed in this brief should not be taken to represent the views of these individuals.

Citation

Gauvin FP, Lott S, Alam S, Moat KA, Lavis JN. Youth brief: Supporting the mental health of children, youth and families during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic in Ontario. Hamilton: McMaster Health Forum, 20 November 2021.