

Emotional and psycho-social health of children in Lithuanian schools

Children's lives have changed dramatically around the world over 2020, including in Lithuania. Their daily routine collapsed and they had to learn how to adapt to a very different day-to-day life. Prolonged distance learning for children has not only reduced educational opportunities, but also social ties and face-to-face communication. It would inevitably have a negative impact on mental health and wellbeing, as well.

In Lithuania, distance education has lasted long enough – for 5-7 months without interruption. Researchers are already ringing the alarm bells and urge the return of children to schools as soon as possible. And in the event of a worsening epidemiological situation, to have schools closed for 2 months at most. Such requirements are based on research carried out in the world and in Lithuania.

In the summer of 2020, researchers from the Centre for Psychotraumatology of Vilnius University conducted a survey on Lithuanians' mental health "My wellbeing". The survey was conducted in eleven different countries and was aimed at finding out how the onset of the coronavirus crisis affected the wellbeing of Lithuanians. A survey of teenagers aged 13 to 18 found that as many as 4 out of 5 respondents experienced learning difficulties as a result of the pandemic, more than half said they experienced difficulties in communicating with their peers, and about 1 in 4 respondents reported experiencing family problems.

Around 1 in 7 teenagers experienced severe psychological difficulties before the pandemic, whereas during the pandemic it was already 1 in 5 teenagers. As many as 19.3% of the respondents indicated that they had nobody to turn to for help. "Thus, a large proportion of Lithuanian teenagers feel compelled to solve the problems they face on their own," says psychologist Ieva Daniūnaitė, a member of the Centre for Psychotraumatology of Vilnius University.

Researchers led by Prof. Dr Roma Jusienė from the Institute of Psychology of Vilnius University carried out a project "Remote Education of Children during the Covid-19 Pandemic: Threats and Opportunities in the Ecosystemic Approach" between June 2020 and December 2020. They are currently carrying out a study "Long-term Impact of Screen Exposure on Children's Health", which is expected to end in 2022. The results of the survey and the study suggest that returning to schools had improved the situation. In the winter of 2021, the situation deteriorated again and even fell below the poor results of the previous spring.

The latest data show that:

For children aged 6-14, the average duration of exposure to screens is 7 hours on a weekday and 5 hours on days off.

On weekdays, children aged 6-14 are exposed to screens for more than 3.5 hours on average for learning purposes and almost 3.5 hours for entertainment or leisure time.

Currently, half of the children aged 6-14 (51%) have emotional and behavioral problems to a greater or lesser extent.

The percentage of children with major emotional and behavioral problems doubled over the winter (from 8% to 17%), even exceeding the percentage during the previous spring lockdown (15%).

The compulsive use of the internet (indicating the risk of internet addiction) has increased significantly (from 34.4 points to 41.4 points).

There has been a significant increase in children's vision problems, complaints of somatic symptoms and pain (e.g. headaches, backaches); between spring 2020 and December 2020, there has been a one-and-a-half times increase in the percentage of overweight children.

Children's poorer emotional wellbeing, the risk of being overweight and somatic symptoms are linked to the longer duration of using technologies.

Problematic internet usage is often linked to other addictions, and the problem is particularly acute in families at social risk.

So, we are no longer witnessing short-term but long-term consequences instead. You can find out more about the study at <https://lt.mediavaikai.lt>.

The health care system alone is incapable of successfully addressing post-Covid health problems. The psychological wellbeing of children and adolescents also depends on the situation in the family, which can also be unstable and vulnerable during the pandemic. Therefore, in these difficult times, the role of school is particularly important. The school and its specialists can be a significant source of stability, social contacts and help for pupils. The experience and role of the health promoting schools are particularly important when pupils return to schools.

Daiva Zeromskiene, National SHE Network coordinator in Lithuania, 27.05.2021