

EFFECTS OF COVID-19 ON CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN SWITZERLAND

The COVID-19 pandemic and its concomitant circumstances are having a far-reaching impact on the health, well-being and development of young people in Switzerland. Even if the medium- and long-term consequences cannot yet be fully gauged, it is already apparent that children and young people in Switzerland are also under severe strain and that pre-existing problems and inequalities are being accentuated. Action is needed, otherwise this pandemic will affect the lives of an entire generation, exacerbate social inequalities and cause high social costs that will be felt for decades. The protection, needs and rights of children and young people in Switzerland must be included in political deliberations about this crisis and taken into account in measures to combat the pandemic.

The pandemic is having a severe effect on children and young people

The impact of COVID-19 on children and young people is massive. This is because the measures being used to combat the pandemic are having a major impact on their lives: relationships with their peers, family life, school, job prospects, future prospects and leisure activities. All these things are now already leaving their mark.

The counsellors at Pro Juventute's counselling service 147.ch are also seeing an immense need for support, with the service being more in demand than ever before. Many more young people are opening up about their fears, reporting of conflicts with their parents and siblings, domestic violence and loneliness. The pandemic and its concomitant circumstances are a major problem for many young people.

But what do we know today about the impact of the pandemic on the lives and future of children and young people in Switzerland? A snapshot of the current findings from scientific studies and surveys, data from counselling services and situation reports from individual institutions provides initial indications.

Psychological stress has increased significantly

- The psychological stress caused by the pandemic is far worse in young people than in any other age groups. Severe depressive symptoms are also increasingly coming to the fore as the pandemic continues.¹ It is placing particularly high demands on the mental resilience of children and young people, and requires coping strategies that they often still lack.
- They are suffering predominantly under the social restrictions because interaction with their peers is not just a pastime for children and young people. It is essential for their personal development and identity building.
- Children and young people from already stressed families are particularly at risk of suffering from the negative consequences of increased psychological stress.² Social isolation, precarious living conditions or pre-existing mental illness are risk factors and are being exacerbated by the current situation.
- Children whose parents are suffering from anxiety and high psychological stress are also affected by the same issues.³ The more the parents have to deal with the consequences of the pandemic themselves, the more negative the impact on the well-being of their children.



IT'S A FACT

that COVID-19 is leaving a mark. This is plain to see at „Beratung + Hilfe 147“.

- Young people are extremely worried about their friendships and are feeling lonely. Enquiries on the topic of "loneliness" increased by 37% in 2020 compared to the previous year, and on the topic of "losing friends" by as much as 93%.
- The situation is placing enormous psychological stress on young people. Counselling on the topic of "mental illness" increased by 40% when the second wave of COVID-19 began (Oct –Dec). 29% more young people sought help in acute crisis situations in 2020 than in the previous year.
- Young people sought more advice throughout the year because of intrafamily conflict and domestic violence. During the first lockdown in particular (March–May), enquiries on the topics of "conflict with parents" (+ 60%), "conflict with siblings" (+ 100%) and "domestic violence" (+ 70%) increased significantly.



IT'S A FACT

that the psychological stress on many children and young people has increased significantly.

- The psychological impact of COVID-19 has been much harder on young people than on other age groups; and the stress is increasing the longer the pandemic lasts¹. Psychiatric services and facilities for children and young people report that they are at capacity.
- Contact restrictions are causing feelings of loneliness and powerlessness, and are eroding their self-esteem because young people define themselves through social exchange and recognition – in their circle of friends, at school and at work.
- The pandemic is affecting the well-being of children and young people, but especially those who were already suffering before it appeared³. They are most at risk of suffering long-term negative psychological harm.

¹De Quervain, D. et al. (2020). The Swiss Corona Stress Study: Second Pandemic Wave, November 2020. Basel: University of Basel. / Stocker, D. et al. (2020). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of the Swiss population and psychiatric-psychotherapeutic care in Switzerland (first partial report). Bern: FOPH.

²Ravens-Sieberer, U. et al. (2021). Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on quality of life and mental health in children and adolescents in Germany. European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry. / Brakemeier, E.-L. et al. (2020). The COVID-19 pandemic as a mental health challenge. Position paper. Journal of Clinical Psychology and Psychotherapy.

³Stocker, D. et al. (2020). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of the Swiss population and psychiatric-psychotherapeutic care in Switzerland (first partial report). Bern: FOPH.



COVID-19 is having a negative effect on family life

- Some good also came out of the restrictions in the first lockdown for many families, such as more family time and one-on-one time for parents with their children. However, this was primarily the case in families where the conditions were favourable and there were sufficient resources.
- For families with children in need of care, the COVID-19 pandemic is associated with a heavy additional burden, especially when schools are closed.⁴ How well this is handled depends on the parents' time, emotional and material resources and their professional and life situations.
- In households that switch to working from home, the parents' work capacity is significantly reduced when they are required to take on additional caregiving responsibilities and distance learning.⁵ A lack of flexibility on the part of employers and a lack of support from the environment then place considerable strain on the family system.
- The situation and living environment of families in already stressed, socially or economically precarious circumstances are far more likely to deteriorate to the extent that intrafamily tension and conflict increases to the point of violence.⁶

Not everyone masters school and work equally well

- School closures and distance learning are having an impact on the learning success and progress of children and young people. While some students are coping well, others are being left behind.⁷
- Overall, younger children coped worse with distance learning, while older students were more able to maintain their learning progress and compensate for limitations in distance learning.
- For the most part, digital natives coped well with distance learning and were able to make use of prior knowledge from their everyday digital lives. However, there is a risk that children and young people who lack the technical infrastructure or support facilities to do so at home will be left behind.
- This shows that children from socially disadvantaged families or those with less education have a far higher risk of being even more left behind in terms of their learning. Substandard technical equipment, the spatial situation and parents with less time and fewer emotional resources are having an effect.⁸ Existing inequalities in education and career prospects are being exacerbated by the crisis.
- An apprenticeship crisis is not apparent to date. However, days in quarantine and temporary company closures are hindering learning progress and jeopardising the completion of apprenticeships.⁹ Young people who have completed their apprenticeships are also having a harder time finding a job. The length of time that they remain without work is threatening to increase as the crisis continues.



IT'S A FACT

that COVID-19 is placing strain on families and increasing the risk of conflict

- Families with children reached their limits, especially during the lockdown. About half of the workforce were confronted with increased caregiving responsibilities during the lockdown⁴, women more than men.⁵
- The pandemic has had a negative impact on the family environment. Families that are already under strain are less able to cope with the restrictions. Living together more closely, lack of alternative options or existential fears are increasing the risk of conflict and even domestic violence. The longer the pandemic lasts, the worse the situation is becoming.⁶



IT'S A FACT

that educational inequalities are growing and job prospects are deteriorating.

- Some students are coping well, while others are not. The sudden distance learning has exacerbated the existing gaps. Children and young people from socio-economically disadvantaged parental homes are at risk of becoming "educational losers" and inequality is increasing.⁸
- The pandemic is making life difficult for apprentices: 43% of them are not receiving any on-the-job training in quarantine and are missing out on teaching material⁹
- The situation is coming to a head for young people in the final year of their apprenticeship: it has become more difficult to enter the job market⁹ In January 2021, over 17,000 young people in Switzerland were unemployed, over 5,000 more than a year ago.¹⁰

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⁴Bütikofer, S. et al. (2020). Swiss families during the COVID-19 pandemic. Special evaluation of the SRG COVID-19 Monitor on family and caregiving structures during the crisis.

⁵Fischer, T. & Fritschi, G. (2020). Working conditions during the COVID-19 crisis. Special survey on the Good Work Barometer. Bern: BFH/Travail.Suisse.

⁶Tettamanti, M. & Darwiche, J. (2020). Family vulnerability during the lockdown: What are the paths of resilience? LIVES Impact Special Issue, Policy Brief COVID-19 Crisis.

⁷Tomasik, M.J. et al. (2020). Educational Gains of In-Person vs. Distance Learning in Primary and Secondary Schools: A Natural Experiment During the COVID-19 Pandemic School Closures in Switzerland. International Journal of Psychology, Sept. 2020. / Huber, S.G. et al. (2020). COVID-19 and the current challenges in schools and education. Initial findings of the School Barometer in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. Münster/NY: Waxmann.

⁸Huber, S.G., Helm, C. (2020). Learning in times of the COVID-19 pandemic. The role of family features for the learning of students: In: Fickermann, D. & Edelstein, B. (eds.): „I'm starting to miss school ...". Münster/New York: Waxmann.

⁹Bölli, T. et al. (2021). Results LehrstellenPuls January 2021, publ. 04.02.2021. Zurich: ETH Zurich.

¹⁰SECO (2021). Die Lage auf dem Arbeitsmarkt, Januar 2021

