

Maximising well-being post COVID-19

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KEY INSIGHTS

Much has changed in New Zealand since the New Zealand Government imposed a nation-wide lockdown in response to the COVID-19 pandemic on 26 March 2020. Research³ undertaken by social researchers from Manaaki Whenua – Landcare Research and the Ministry of Business, Innovation & Employment provides insights into how people navigated their COVID-19 response and what that means for their, and New Zealand's, continued well-being.

Education

A key feature of New Zealand's COVID-19 response was the decision to have children continue their education from home during lockdown:

We've got kids at three different schools, so they were each quite different actually. One primary school, there's a lot of structured daily check-in, and then they had instruction sessions during the day as well as opportunities to do stuff at home and project work. Secondary school was still structured in the same way as a normal school day where you'd log into that class and be there doing things and continuing on with that. Then my partner's kids are at starter school, and so they were very much doing more project work and less digital learning, digital platform stuff (MWB89).

For some parents and children this worked well, but for others it was a struggle. Experiences were impacted by the availability of technology, different processes run by different schools, through to differences in home situations:

So, my high school child, she's in Year 9 at a local high school and luckily, she's a very sort of self-motivated person. So, her school didn't do lessons online per se, so they weren't on a school timetable where she had to be in maths at 10:30 and English at 12 or whatever. The teachers sent them work and then periodically if there was something that needed explaining they would have a Zoom class get together. They had projects to work on and things like that. She actually found that quite good, she quite enjoyed being able to pick the times that she did things. Because she sort of kept up to date with things, it wasn't very stressful for her to go back to school, I think the only thing she really missed was her friends (MWB64).

The most stressful thing I found was the schoolwork...my middle daughter, she's...on the autism spectrum...so a lot of the online learning she really struggled with and I requested

³ A background and methodology report is available from StrongeD@landcareresearch.co.nz

books and things, but they couldn't be sent, and in the end we just basically just gave up really because it was just too much (MWB91).

Parents and teachers noted the disruptions caused by having to study from home resulted in anxiety for some (although not all) students, particularly senior students:

...the educational side of things, it's been so disruptive, and it's not the same learning online no matter how much we like to kid ourselves. It's much harder for them. For those ones in years 11, 12 and 13, it's not great (MWB4).

Most of the students that I was leaving work for, I teach high school kids, so some did heaps of work and some did absolutely nothing. So...sometimes I had to reply to a couple of emails from, especially my seniors who were feeling quite a bit of anxiety around exams and assessment work and how we did that (MWB101).

...with the young people I work with, there's a bit more stress or uncertainties just around school stuff and just COVID in general. [Schoolwork was]...kind of a bit of a mix but mostly [the students were] either being super stressed out and carried away with their work or just not caring or doing anything (MWB36).

But it was also a stressful time for teachers. Teaching is a profession known for work-life balance issues, and the requirement for teachers to develop work plans and support their students remotely, while managing their own children's schooling from home, on top of dealing with the uncertainties that came with the pandemic, meant a lot of long days and stress:

When you're teaching, you are at school and you work all the way through, and then you go home and you do more work, or on the weekends you do more work, or on the school holidays you do more work. Which is one of the reasons why I left teaching, was that the work-life balance was so bad (MWB45).

I work full-time now and so what I do is I work until the end of the school day and I leave here, and I go do my parent thing and then usually I'll do an hour or two at night just to catch up on those odds and ends of emails and bits of marking that I need to catch up on for the next day....That's kind of a relatively normal process... (MWB101).

I think I'm seeing that in the teachers of my older daughter, and in fact all three of my sisters are teachers and I think they're feeling it. They put a lot of work in over lockdown and then after lockdown to be prepared for another lockdown, and I think they are very, very tense at the moment and very stressed (MWB31).

A key theme from our research was that the COVID experience has been a time of reflection for people. This included reflections on the education system. Participants reflected on how inequality is impacting on the ability of some children to get a good education. Further, participants questioned whether our education system was adequately preparing children for the life skills required to be resilient in a post-COVID world:

...education just needs such a massive kick in the pants, that's way behind where it should be, and I'd like to see some really massive change there as well. Because I don't believe that we're producing – lots of people aren't getting a fair chance at education that will help [them] to be what they should be in the world (MWB81).