



WE DISCOVER, WE GROW

Girlguiding

Girlguiding research briefing:

Early findings on the impact of
Covid-19 on girls and young women

May 2020

Contents

Introduction	01
Overview	02
1. Health and wellbeing	03
2. Education	05
3. Homelife and community involvement	07
4. Information and the media	08
Methodology	09

Introduction

Girlguiding has been tracking girls' and young women's views through our Girls' Attitudes Survey for over a decade, building a clear picture of what it's like growing up as a girl in the UK today. It shows that they face a specific combination of pressures and experiences - many borne out of underlying gender inequalities - that can affect their mental health and wellbeing and ability to fulfil their potential as equal, active citizens.

In May 2020, Girlguiding surveyed almost 7,000 girls and young women aged 4 to 18 across the UK to find out how the coronavirus crisis and lockdown is affecting them, the majority were Girlguiding members. The findings show that girls are facing specific challenges as a result of the pandemic, which like for most people, has radically changed their day to day life and created uncertainties for their future.

Their voices highlight how their health and wellbeing, homelife, and education have been affected, their views on getting trustworthy and relevant information to help them navigate these uncertain times, and how they are playing their part in their communities.

Overview

These early findings offer an insight into girls' and young women's lives under lockdown and their concerns for the future. The findings are mixed, as you might expect. Many girls, especially younger girls, report feeling happy at home and enjoying at least some of their time in lockdown doing fun activities and continuing to learn in new ways. This is despite boredom being the most prevalent feeling expressed across all ages. But there is cause for concern as a picture of distress also emerges, particularly for those aged 15 to 18.

There are signs of girls feeling sad from a very young age with a third (33%) of girls aged 4 to 10 saying they feel sad most of the time. A third (34%) of girls aged 11 to 14 say they feel lonely most of the time. Two in five aged 15 to 18 say they feel stressed (45%) and / or worried (42%) most of the time. Overall, a quarter of girls aged 11 to 14 (24%) and half of girls aged 15 to 18 (51%) report that coronavirus / lockdown has had a negative impact on their mental health.

Young women aged 15 to 18 particularly report feeling worried, stressed and overwhelmed. The factors most affecting them are uncertainty about school and education (76%), feelings of loneliness and isolation (51%), and a lack of freedom and independence (44%). The cancellation of exams has caused anxiety. Social isolation is putting a strain on their relationships at home.

Their worries extend into the future with concern about the longer-term impact of this crisis on the economy and jobs, social life, and their educational opportunities. Nearly all (90%) girls aged 11 to 18 would like more information about what to expect in the future.

The majority of young women (85%) are spending more time on social media during lockdown. Many are staying connected this way with 78% saying they've used new apps and games to communicate with friends and family. But with increased time online, over a quarter of those aged 15 to 18 report feeling increased appearance (26%) and social pressures (28%). 43% aged 15 to 18 say they are more worried about fake news now.

The government is the preferred source of information for the majority (74%) of girls aged 11 to 18. Yet almost half (48%) feel information is aimed at adults and three in five (61%) say they would like more information from the government directly for children and young people.

There are positive elements of life in lockdown for many girls and young women. The improvements to the environment and nature during this crisis, such as less pollution and reduced carbon emissions, is reported as having the most positive impact on how young women aged 15 to 18 feel, with 61% saying this. Also positive for girls aged 11 to 18 are more time with family and for doing activities they like, less academic pressure, doing physical activity, and trying new hobbies. However, notably, this age group report doing less physical activity than before.

In a positive show of community action, most girls across all age groups (96%) have been following the rules to stay home. Nearly all girls have taken part in the weekly clap for carers, 90% of girls aged 4 to 10 have put rainbows or posters in their windows and almost a third of girls aged 15 to 18 (30%) said they have made a donation or fundraised for a charity.

1. Health and wellbeing

The research reveals that the coronavirus crisis is having a significant impact on the wellbeing of girls and young women. Many report feeling worried, stressed, lonely and unhappy about elements of their life under lockdown.

A significant proportion of girls say their mental health has been negatively impacted, increasing with age. Older girls' top worries are uncertainty about their education, loneliness and isolation, and the lack of freedom and independence. Their worries extend into the future with concern about the longer-term impact of this crisis on the economy and jobs, and their educational opportunities.

At the same time, some girls and young women are feeling positive about elements of life in lockdown, including improvements to the environment, and time with family and for their hobbies. Girls are also taking steps to stay active and learn something new.

Physical and mental health

Girls are much more worried about others' physical health than their own. Whilst a quarter of girls aged 11 to 14 (27%) and a third of those aged 15 to 18 (35%) say they are worried about their own physical health and getting sick, four in five girls say they are worried about other people's health and them getting sick (77% and 85% respectively).

'I'm worried as mummy works in the hospital.'

Girl, aged 4 to 10

A quarter of girls aged 11 to 14 (24%) and half of girls aged 15 to 18 (51%) report that the coronavirus and lockdown has had a negative impact on their mental health. Of girls aged 15 to 18, 67% said they felt disconnected and lonely not being able to see their friends. Nearly half (47%) of girls in this age group said social isolation is putting a strain on their relationships at home.

'I feel overwhelmed because it's all over the news and you can't get away from it.'

Young woman, aged 15 to 18

'I feel agitated in such a small space for so many days.'

Young woman, aged 15 to 18

'Being at home all the time [has been difficult] as we often clash and don't get on well leading to stress and tension.'

Young woman, aged 15 to 18

When asked to choose the words that describe how they feel most of the time during lockdown, there is consistency of mixed emotions across all ages. Girls' top five words by age group were:

- Aged 4 to 10: bored (57%), happy (46%), sad (33%), worried (31%), lonely (28%)
- Aged 11 to 14: bored (66%), calm (46%), happy (41%), lonely (34%), relaxed (30%)
- Aged 15 to 18: bored (67%), calm (45%), stressed (45%), worried (42%), happy (39%)

Factors affecting wellbeing

The top factors negatively affecting how girls aged 15 to 18 feel during this time include:

- Uncertainty about school and education (76%)
- Feelings of loneliness and isolation (51%)
- A lack of freedom and independence (44%)
- Worrying about getting sick or others getting sick (42%)
- Worrying about my family's financial situation / jobs (18%)

The top factors positively affecting how they feel include:

- Improvements to the environment and nature such as less pollution and reduced carbon emissions (61%)
- More time with family (52%)
- More time to play and do hobbies (50%)
- Not going to school and less academic pressure (34%)
- More connected through video calls and apps and games (22%) and to their community (11%)

'I'm happy because I'm with my family more, but I'm sad because I miss my friends.'

Girl, aged 4 to 10

'The worst thing is feeling lonely not seeing friends. But it's good that the environment is improving with less cars and planes around.'

Girl, aged 4 to 10

Girls aged 11 to 18 are doing several things to help them through this challenging time, including:

- Keeping in touch with family and friends (90%)
- Trying to relax, have fun and do hobbies (81%)
- Doing physical activity when they can (72%)
- Focusing on schoolwork (58%)
- Not watching, reading or listening to the news too much (47%)

'I'm trying not to look too far ahead as this situation is so unpredictable it's best to take it a day at a time.'

Young woman, aged 15 to 18

'I've been reducing my time on social media.'

Young woman, aged 15 to 18

Coming out of lockdown

As we learn about the government's plans to come out of lockdown, girls and young women face additional worries about the longer-term impact of this crisis. For those aged 15 to 18 these include:

- The impact on the economy and people's jobs (87%)
- That the virus will spread again (87%)
- Another lockdown in the future (74%)

- Being behind at school / college (70%)
- Restrictions on travelling or going on holiday (68%)
- Confusion about what is allowed / the rules (60%)

'I'm nervous for my next steps like finding a job.'

Young woman, aged 15 to 18

2. Education

It's clear that the closure of schools has had a major impact on girls and young women. They miss seeing their friends and learning at school. Younger girls miss their teachers and teaching assistants and playtime with their friends. Whilst just under half say they like learning at home, they also say they're finding it hard to focus on schoolwork during this time. For some, this different way of learning, alongside the uncertainties that remain, is causing them to feel overwhelmed and stressed.

The cancellation of exams has fuelled anxieties of older girls who feel disappointed and worried about it. They face further uncertainties around career prospects with many having had their planned work experience, internship or apprenticeship postponed or cancelled.

The closure of schools

Girls and young women feel a range of emotions in response to their schools being closed. The most prevalent emotions for each age group reported are:

- Aged 4 to 10: sad (64%); lonely (24%); happy (22%)
- Aged 11 to 14: sad (48%); lonely (33%); worried (24%)
- Aged 15 to 18: worried and anxious (58%); sad (40%); relieved (36%)

The closure of schools means girls are missing friends and their wider school community. For the youngest girls aged 4 to 10 this includes:

- Missing their friends (95%)
- Missing their teachers and teaching assistants (79%)
- Missing playtime (59%)

'Sometimes I feel sad because I miss my friends and school, but I understand we have to stay at home to save lives and protect ourselves.'

Girl, aged 4 to 10

'I'm in year 6 so I didn't get to say goodbye to my friends and I'm sad I won't see them again.'

Girl, aged 4 to 10

For girls aged 11 to 18, some say they are missing learning at school, whilst others will miss out on plans they had made or events they had expected, especially for those who are transitioning to secondary school or leaving school or college. They report:

- Missing school trips, events or celebrations (70%)
- Missing learning (50%)
- Missing school sports (29%)

'The place I miss most is school because of the social aspect with friends and some of the teachers.'

Young woman, aged 15 to 18

'I'm really struggling without my clubs. They were moments in the week I could look forward to, especially as I struggled with making friends at school.'

Young woman, aged 15 to 18

'The fact the biggest year of my life has been completely cancelled has been difficult. No GCSEs, no Poland, no holiday, no prom, no leavers day. It's the missing out on the experiences I've worked so hard for for five years.'

Young woman, 15 to 18

Learning from home

Girls and young women have adjusted to a radically different way of learning. For some, this has been positive, with 42% of those aged 4 to 14 saying they like it. For others, it has been more challenging, with 29% saying they don't like it.

'My mum and dad work so they don't have enough time to teach me.'

Girl, aged 4 to 10

For the 11 to 18 age group, a third (33%) say learning at home has resulted in less pressure. However, half (48%) report finding it hard to concentrate on schoolwork at the moment and a third (34%) say they're finding it hard to balance schoolwork and time to relax.

'I have to share a laptop with my mum as we only have one.'

Girl, aged 11 to 14

'I'm worried about getting behind in my work.'

Girl, aged 11 to 14

For the oldest group surveyed aged 15 to 18, over a third (38%) say they feel overwhelmed by the amount of schoolwork they have to do. Over a third (37%) report that their school is giving them the support and help they need to learn at home. A fifth (21%) say they're worried about not getting the support they would usually get at school such as careers advice.

'I've been finding the balance between relaxing and schoolwork really difficult.'

Young woman, aged 15 to 18

The cancellation of exams

The cancellation of exams has fuelled anxieties of older girls aged 15 to 18, who feel worried or anxious (41%) and disappointed (39%) about it. Whilst a third (35%) say they feel okay about their teachers predicting their grades, a third (32%) also say they feel concerned about this.

'I will have a lot more pressure next year.'

Young woman, aged 15 to 18

'I'm worried about the possibility that some teachers won't predict their students' grades correctly and mine may suffer as a result.'

Young woman, aged 15 to 18

'I am gutted that exams were cancelled as my results have now been taken out of my control.'

Young woman, aged 15 to 18

3. Homelife and community involvement

Most girls and young women report doing more activities at home than they were before, such as watching videos, gaming and trying new things. The exception is that girls aged 11 to 18 report doing less physical activity than before. Across all age groups, community life has been important with almost all girls taking some action to support their communities.

Homelife

Most girls and young women are doing more activities at home than they were before lockdown across all age groups, including spending time with family and / or the people they live with (77%), watching TV, shows, films and videos (63%), and playing video games and games online (36%).

The only activity girls say they are doing less of is physical activity. For girls aged 11 to 18, 30% are doing more than before, 30% the same as before, and 41% less than before.

A large minority of girls and young women say they are doing more chores at home (44% aged 11 to 18) and 41% say they're spending more time caring for others during this time.

'I am expected to help out around the house more than my dad and brothers.'

Young woman, aged 15 to 18

Some girls and young women are using time in lockdown to try new hobbies and activities. Of those aged 11 to 18, 43% say they are trying a new activity or hobby more than before and 51% say they're going online to learn something new more now than before.

'I feel that lockdown has allowed me to complete activities that I wouldn't have had the time for before and has brought the community together.'

Young woman, aged 15 to 18

Supporting communities

Despite feeling worried and uncertain, girls and young women are doing a number of things to help others and their communities through this challenging time. In a positive show of community action, nearly all girls have followed the rules to stay home (96% across all age groups from 4 to 18), taken part in the weekly clap for carers (90%) and created visual displays of support for key workers such as putting rainbows or posters in their windows (90% of girls aged 4 to 10).

'I painted stones and left them outside for people to see to make them smile.'

Girl, aged 4 to 10

'I have found that many people in my community are using their newfound free time to be more connected like offering to shop for those who are more likely to be affected by Covid-19.'

Young woman, aged 15 to 18

Almost two thirds (63%) of young women aged 15 to 18 have checked in with an elderly or vulnerable relative or neighbour. Almost a third (30%) have made a donation or fundraised for a charity. A third (33%) say they would like to do more to help, but they don't know how to, suggesting that more could be done to support young people to feel confident in knowing how they could help.

4. Information and the media

It's no surprise that girls and young women are spending more time online, with many connecting to others this way and trying new apps and games to do this. But with increased time online, girls are facing increased pressures from social media around their appearance and what they're doing. The crisis has increased their concern about fake news. Girls and young women want reliable information that's relevant for them directly from the government.

Information about coronavirus

For those aged 11 to 18, there are gaps in getting the information they need:

- 90% want more information about what to expect in the future, such as the re-opening of schools
- 65% would like to know where to get trustworthy information for children and young people
- 61% would like more information directly from the government to children and young people
- 48% feel all the advice and information about coronavirus is for adults

'The government need to help us and tell us what is going on in child-friendly terms.'
Girl, aged 11 to 14

On sources of information about coronavirus, girls and young women aged 11 to 18 rank their preferences as the government (74%), parents or carers (58%), the news (58%), and teachers (45%). Most girls aged 4 to 14 have spoken to a parent or carer (90% across the age range) and their friends about coronavirus (40% for girls aged 4 to 10 and 68% for girls aged 11 to 14).

Some girls (40%) aged 15 to 18 are aware of seeing positive leadership from women during this crisis whilst others feel there has been lack of visibility.

Life online

It's no surprise that girls and young women are spending more time on social media during lockdown, with 85% of girls aged 15 to 18 saying this. Many are keeping connected this way with 78% saying they've used new apps and games to communicate with friends and family. But with increased time online, they're facing increased pressures. The 15 to 18 age group report they feel under more pressure to:

- Be productive and share the things they've achieved on social media (28%)
- Look a certain way on social media, e.g. lose weight or exercise (26%)
- Be online all the time (20%)

The crisis has increased concern about fake news: 43% of young women aged 15 to 18 feel more worried about fake news and what information they can trust.

'I think girls are struggling with pressures to use this time to lose weight and get a 'summer body'.'

Young woman, aged 15 to 18

'I hate all the misinformation.'

Young woman, 15 to 18

Methodology

A total of 6,678 girls and young women completed the online survey that was open from 1 to 5 May 2020. 97% of respondents were Girlguiding members. Parents and carers were asked to support girls to complete the survey from ages 4 to 13. From age 14 and above, girls and young women were encouraged to complete the survey themselves. Questions were tailored for the age groups 4 to 10 (4,261 responses), 11 to 14 (1,538 responses), and 15 to 18 (879 responses).

About Girlguiding

Girlguiding is the leading charity for girls and young women in the UK, with almost half a million members. Thanks to the dedication and support of 100,000 amazing volunteers, we are active in every part of the UK, giving girls and young women a space where they can be themselves, have fun, build brilliant friendships, gain valuable life skills and make a positive difference to their lives and their communities. We build girls' confidence and raise their aspirations. We give them the chance to discover their full potential and encourage them to be a powerful force for good. We give them a space to have fun. We run Rainbows (5-7 years, 4-7 years in Ulster), Brownies (7-10 years), Guides (10-14 years) and Rangers (14-18 years).



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