HOME LEARNING AND COVID-19

CSI Response for Students & Parents/Caregivers

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All over Australia, students are studying and learning at home instead of in schools. For families with school-aged children, home is not just home anymore but also a school. Parents, students and teachers are coming to grips with this new paradigm as they adjust to their home-learning environment. This fact sheet focuses on our vulnerable young people and gives some guidance on:

RELATIONSHIPS | ADAPTATION | UNCERTAINTY

Education is a basic human right for every child;[1,2] along with being properly cared for in a family setting with access to good food and safe housing.[3]

Schools provide a haven for students not just for learning but also in meeting other critical human needs such as building social relationships, accessing supportive and trusting networks of peers and adults and providing food for children living in disadvantage.[4] COVID-19 has resulted in a fundamental shift in learning, teaching and social spaces.

State Education Departments across Australia have outlined several tips, advice and resources to support children's learning from home and these have been highly valuable for both students and their carers.[5] However, for those **young people in vulnerable contexts**, the home-learning environment can be an extra burden as they might be facing already very difficult conditions due to the crisis, such as parents losing jobs, increased risk of homelessness, increased risk of living in an abusive household and lack of adequate support from parents or caregivers.

Issues presented in this factsheet are with respect to (1) Relationships (2) Adapting to space in a home learning environment; (2) Remote learning (4) Uncertainty. Students' age, socio-economic conditions, geographic location, level of schooling and type of school they attend are important factors to be considered while reading the issues and recommendations.

1. Relationships

Issue: Spending the whole day over several weeks or months at home with parents / caregivers, siblings or extended family can take a toll on students, their mental health and ultimately impact their learning. While some children and family members can thrive and positively benefit in this environment of being together, it is not true for all family units. Schools are social spaces where students develop confidence and an increased sense of belonging as a result of their relationships with peers and teachers. Research indicates young people in households that suffer from existing issues such as abusive parents, drug and alcohol problems, and domestic violence are more vulnerable to depression, anxiety and trauma[6]. For these young people who are already in disruptive and dysfunctional households, where their voices are being ignored or not heard, being confined to home for long periods as a result of the current crisis, can cause further distress to their mental health and well-being and hugely impact students' ability to cope with their studies and learning.

What can be done:

» Allowing space and time for everyone to cope with this current crisis is necessary both at the individual level and at the family unit level.

» Provide a safe and caring environment for young people to talk through issues (about the crisis and how it affects their schoolwork, learning and relationships) is important, while respecting their need for privacy.

» Young people should have dedicated time for social chats and online conversations with trusted friends and teachers.

» Awareness of sources of support organisations and children's advocacy and peak body groups, who can be contacted and where professional help can be sought, such as here.

» Teachers can try and find ways to help if they are able to pick up signals from students' behavior during their regular interaction.

2. Adapting to space in a home-learning environment

Issue: With home being the 'new school', adjustments and negotiations need to be made by household members as to how this will work. Schools are devising lesson plans and timetables, in order for students to virtually attend classes for different subjects in the same form, time and manner as would occur in schools. Assuming students have their own room, access to a device and online connectivity, they would need to be 'ready' to try and adopt the same routine and structure every morning. For students who do not have access to their own space such as a bedroom or place of study, this can create additional burden and tension within the household while trying to maintain physical distancing. If there are other siblings or extended family members, it adds to the complexity of the issue. Adaptation to home learning can be a real struggle for families and young people, particularly those who are in difficult circumstances. Teachers may not be fully aware of the home learning environment and the associated challenges faced by some of their students. Student disengagement and disinterest from learning is just one consequence from this issue, affecting their well-being, both in the short-term and beyond.

What can be done: Everyone who is involved with students and their learning need to come together to try and address some of these issues. Solutions should be contextualised based on student requirements and concerns.

» Trying and setting up a dedicated home learning space with limited distraction. Where families are already struggling with limited space, this is hard to achieve and there are no easy solutions. Options will depend on the age of the young person and could include sitting in the car, or somewhere safe outside the house if there is space and good internet connectivity. Use of headphones is also thought to be beneficial in creating 'space' for oneself.

» Raising concerns and issues with teachers with whom students have a close and comfortable relationship. Teachers can work with students, parents / carers and with the school leadership to come up with potential alternatives for those unable to participate through online modes. These can include sending study materials by post, seeking help from friends and where possible, permitting the student to come to school to have lessons.

3. Remote Learning

Issue: The shift to remote learning works well for those who have good quality digital access and connectivity at home. Moreover, if students are used to working well independently with technology in schools and in their schoolwork, they are likely to have less issues with moving to fully remote learning at home. However, not all schools use technology and not all students have access to affordable and seamless connectivity at home. Research shows over 2.5 million Australians are not online and affordable access to the internet remains a key concern, particularly for low-income households.[7,8] Students from disadvantaged backgrounds already facing underlying issues, tend to fare worse with online learning, as compared to students from wealthier backgrounds.[9] They can struggle trying to keep pace with schoolwork and can easily fall behind in their learning causing further divide in education outcomes in our society.

What can be done:

» Teachers would need to identify this issue and work with students and parents to consider other relevant modes of teaching students, for instance, through phone, sending materials by post or intensive individualized tutoring later when conditions are back to normal.

» For-purpose organisations can assist by providing good quality tablet devices to students at low or no cost.

» Schools and the leadership team should harness targeted support from technology companies and internet service providers to provide reliable, affordable and accessible seamless digital connectivity, particularly for affected students such as those who live in remote and regional areas and those most in need.

» Consider 'donating' some of our data to other young Australians who cannot afford the cost or do not have regular internet access for online learning.[10]

4. Anxiety and Uncertainty

Issue: Young people can't learn unless they feel safe and the current crisis has created fear of the unknown and uncertainty in all our minds. We do not know how long this will last and when we will be able to get back to our normal lives. Students' are dealing with so many changes and unknowns during this period. A new learning environment, absence of a routine school day, absence of social contact with teachers and friends and the wider school network, pressure to learn and keep pace with the virtual classes, not knowing how things will evolve for them in their learning journey, what shape will assignments and exams take and the fear of how all of this will impact their learning and future are just some of the factors that can cause anxiety and uncertainty among young people. A recent research suggests young people are seriously concerned about COVID-19 and its impact on their studies.[11] This can have some deep consequences to their mental and emotional state and affect their learning and schoolwork, beyond 2020.

What can be done

» Express concerns and queries freely and openly with teachers or school counsellors. At the same time, recognise and respect that teachers and schools may also not always have the answers to everything.

» Open and honest conversations, with family and friends and accepting that it is okay to feel uncertain and vulnerable at this time, but that it will pass.

» Follow your State Education Department's links to keep up to date with current happenings around exam changes and other student related information.

» Keep a journal to record your feelings, providing an useful reflective exercise and a safe place to let emotions out.

» Seek support from youth mental health organisations such as Reachout and find ways to manage anxiety, for instance through this link.

In Summary

Preparing students for home learning is not just an issue for young people and their family, nor is it just a school issue. It is a collective issue that requires partnership and responsibility to ensure home learning positively benefits ALL students. Teachers can be an excellent source of providing early support and practical tips for students who may be struggling to adapt to home learning, especially if they have already built a rapport over time. Young people should feel included in conversations that impact them[3].

There needs to be a recognition that home learning will not work for every student in the same way as how schools operate and run. Therefore, schools and teachers should consider both the short-term and long-term impact of home learning on students' performance and well-being. Individual students' needs and context matter. Home learning should not be another mechanism by which to perpetuate social and education inequality in our society.

The author believes that social dialogue and inclusive participation are critical to reducing inequalities and in shaping our society.

About CSI

The Centre for Social Impact (CSI) is a national research and education centre dedicated to catalysing social change for a better world. CSI is built on the foundation of three of Australia's leading universities: UNSW Sydney, The University of Western Australia, and Swinburne University of Technology. Our research develops and brings together knowledge to understand current social challenges and opportunities; our postgraduate and undergraduate education develops social impact leaders; and we aim to catalyse change by drawing on these foundations and translating knowledge, creating leaders, developing usable resources, and reaching across traditional divides to facilitate collaborations.

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