

COVID-19

UNMASKED

Report 2: Executive Summary

COVID-19 Unmasked is an online study launched in Australia to help understand the mental health impacts of the pandemic on young children (1-5 years) and their families. **Report 2** focuses on changes in mental health outcomes over 3-months. The survey so far includes two time points. The first was completed between May and July 2020, and the second between August and November 2020. During this period, Victoria experienced a second and stricter ('Stage 4') lockdown, including enforced home confinement (apart from 1hr/day of exercise outdoors), travel restrictions, mandatory mask wearing, and closing stores and restaurants. Each state and territory maintained local COVID-19 social restrictions and border closures.

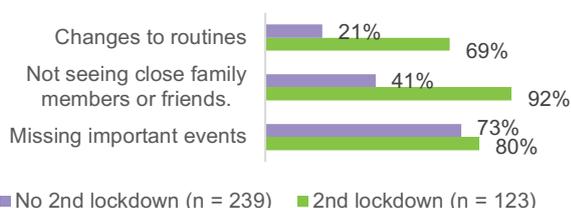
Participants

A total of 373 (37%) caregivers from Survey 1 participated in Survey 2. Most were females (94%). Mean age of the children that caregivers reported on was 3.8 years and 1.9% identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.

COVID-19 Experiences

Only 2 children and 1% of family members were diagnosed with COVID-19 during. However, children and parents, especially those who have experienced a second lockdown, have still been affected in many ways.

Young children were most affected by:



Key Findings

- 88-95%** of children who did not experience a second lockdown were reported to have **good mental health and wellbeing**.
- Children who experienced a second lockdown were typically resilient (69-89%),** but at rates lower than children who did not experience the second lockdown. Positive emotions and the ability to manage emotions decreased over time.
- Very few children in the **no second lockdown** group had 'very high' levels of emotional or behavioural difficulties, as reported by their parents. However, **1 in 4 children were still experiencing 'higher than average' levels of anxiety symptoms.** There was no significant change in anxiety over 3-months.

- Mental health difficulties in children who experienced a second lockdown significantly increased** between Survey 1 and 2. Up to **12% of children who went through a second lockdown experienced 'very high' levels of mental health difficulties** and 21-47% had scores in the 'high' range compared to a normative sample. Anxiety was most common and there was a marked increase in depression symptoms and attachment seeking behaviours.
- At least 1 in 4 parents in the second lockdown group reported they were struggling.** There was a significant increase in mental health difficulties over time, with 23-44% of parents reporting moderate to severe symptoms of depression, anxiety and stress. In comparison, there was no significant change in scores for parents in the no second lockdown group with 15-20% falling within the moderate-to severe range.

Summary & Recommendations

- Many families with young children continue to be affected by the ongoing threat, uncertainty and unpredictability of life during a pandemic. While these stressors and difficulties are likely to be normal and/or transient for most, some children and parents may require higher levels of psychological support. This is especially the case for families living in Victoria.
- For children who continue to demonstrate moderate to high levels of emotional or behavioural difficulties, professional intervention may be needed. If these problems continue to persist over time, interfere with daily activities or if parents are unsure if these behaviours are 'normal', it is advisable to seek professional advice.
- Educators play a crucial role in supporting children during disruptive periods. It's important to encourage a culture of self-care amongst educators, supporting them to manage their own emotions as well helping the children in their care.

