

What do Hong Kong children need to get through the 5th Coronavirus wave?

Professor Stefan Kühner

Associate Professor, Department of Sociology and Social Policy, Lingnan University

Since the first Coronavirus cluster was reported in December 2019, few families with children in Hong Kong have managed to avoid the impact of economic lockdowns, travel restrictions, and school closures on their everyday lives. Despite a common perception that children have been barely affected by the global Covid-19 pandemic, the potential consequences of the public health measures on children's well-being are particularly concerning due to their lifelong and irreversible character. Amongst others, children's advocacy groups worldwide have highlighted the possible adverse and longstanding effects of threats to children's mental health, an exacerbated learning crisis, and increased child poverty.

The normative framework of the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) enshrines opportunities for children to express their life experiences and share their views on growing up in different social environments. As part of an ongoing study funded by the *Faculty of Social Sciences* at Lingnan University, researchers have worked with selected primary and secondary schools to distribute an online survey among students aged between 10 and 12 years. This age range is commonly characterised as "middle childhood" and was chosen as it is widely understood as a stage when children start to spend more time away from their family and more time in school, with friends, and engaging in other activities in the community. Being forced to spend more time in lockdown and away from school may, therefore, risks interfering with the normal development not only of children's academic ability but also of their identity and ability to form their own experiences of the world around them.

Specifically, the Covid-19 survey examines how Hong Kong children cope with the changing circumstances across different life domains, including their school life, time use, and relationship with family and friends during the Coronavirus pandemic. Although strictly preliminary and not fully representative of the Hong Kong child population at this point, the findings based on roughly 182 responses collected between October 2021 and January 2022 give some insights on how children in Hong Kong – beyond the immediate requirement to be shielded from possible infection – may be better supported to weather the storm of the recent outbreak of the Omicron subvariant of the Coronavirus disease.

Although none of the child respondents directly experienced an infection with the Coronavirus within their immediate family, almost half of the children (45.2%) reported that there were times when they had to be in their home all day because of the Coronavirus and had to be very careful because somebody in their immediate family was considered at high risk of getting very ill if they got infected with the Coronavirus (47.6%). More than one-third of children (37.6%) either "agreed a lot" or "totally agreed" that their relationships with friends were negatively affected during the Coronavirus, while more than half (55.0%) stated that they became closer to some members of their family. While most children received sufficient information about the Coronavirus through the daily news, social media, and family members, four out of ten (40.3%) children did not feel "fully protected" from the Coronavirus in Hong Kong. More than half (52.7%) "agreed a lot" or "agreed totally" that they are "very afraid" about the Coronavirus.

Besides, around one-third of children (34.0%) were not satisfied with the changes in their student life because of the Coronavirus situation. More than one-third of children (36.1%) did not have their own room to study at home, and around one out of ten (10.2%) reported not possessing the necessary video equipment, such as cameras and microphones, for video classes. Moreover, more than half (53.0%) of children reported frequent problems with their Internet connection at home during online teaching. More than one-third of students did not fully agree that they could manage their learning time effectively (36.9%) and did not fully agree that they knew how to get help when they struggled to understand their online classes (40.3%). Indeed, close to half of the surveyed children (47.3%) did not agree that they successfully managed to continue learning from home. At the same time, around 3 out of 4 children (75.2%) “agreed a lot” or “agreed fully” that it was *their* responsibility as a student to learn what they need to know from online classes. It may not be surprising that many children in Hong Kong continue to describe their lives as very “stressful” under these circumstances.

It has been widely reported that Hong Kong families with children have faced additional financial pressures since the beginning of the Coronavirus pandemic. According to our findings, only around 4 out of 5 children (79.7%) reported that they “always” had enough food to eat during this period. No less than two out of ten children (22.4%) stated that they are “very worried” about the financial situation of their family since the Coronavirus outbreak – i.e., on a scale from 0 (“not at all worried”) to 10 (“very worried”). When asked how happy they are with their overall life during the Coronavirus period, around 2 out of 10 children (18.9%) reported that they are “not happy at all” – again measured on a scale from 0 (“not happy at all”) to 10 (“completely happy”).

It is worth stressing again that the above data were collected *before* the onset of the 5th Coronavirus wave in Hong Kong. The timing of data collection raises concerns that some of the pressures that Hong Kong children have faced may only be bound to worsen in the weeks and months to come. It also suggests that listening carefully to the voices of Hong Kong children should become more, rather than less, important in designing an effective strategy to deal with the indirect social impacts since the arrival of the Omicron variant in Hong Kong. Boosting employment opportunities for parents, providing effective after school services for children, and cash and in-kind support for e-learning at home (including IT equipment, IT literacy, etc.) remains a top priority for the Hong Kong government amidst the 5th wave of the Coronavirus pandemic.