

The worst of the pandemic seems over but the kids are not okay, study finds

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Young people around the world—including Australia—will feel the fallout of the COVID pandemic for years to come, say the University of the Sunshine Coast researchers behind a new global resource to support

them.

The team has created the International Framework for School Health Promotion, published recently in the *Journal of School Health*, as a tool for educators, parents and policymakers to address the escalating [health](#) and well-being needs of [young people](#) during and after COVID-19.

"It might seem like the [pandemic](#) is in our rear vision mirror, but it continues to be 'the gift that keeps on giving' and our kids are not okay," said lead author and chief investigator Dr. Joseph Scott.

The UniSC Health and Physical Education researcher said the worldwide restrictions to limit the spread of the COVID-19 virus precipitated a growing and long-term educational and health crisis among children and adolescents.

"This problem is not just going to go away on its own," Dr. Scott said.
"There is a critical and urgent need for targeted action," Dr. Scott said.

"Globally, falling physical activity levels, increasing sedentary behaviors and too much screen time were significant issues before the global outbreak of coronavirus. The pandemic has exacerbated these existing physical and [mental health](#) risks," he said.

"As children gradually returned to the classroom after the extended periods at home, it became clear that many were not only behind educationally but also had higher levels of distress, poor sleeping and eating habits, and had done little exercise for months on end."

Schools and parents are a key 'piece of the puzzle'

Despite many existing school health promotion resources, Dr. Scott said there was a lack of tailored guidance to specifically aid schools in

navigating physical and mental health needs for young people during and after the pandemic.

Dr. Scott, UniSC Clinical Psychologist Dr. Alex Metse and Dr. Lynette Vernon from Edith Cowan University, developed the global framework by examining emerging literature to find gaps and advance understanding and practices in school health promotion.

"School principals and teachers and parents around the world who are scrambling to support the escalating health and well-being needs of young people are an important piece of the puzzle," Dr. Scott said.

"Schools and teachers remain well-positioned to address these needs, however they require targeted guidance and support to evaluate and reorient existing health promotion programs. This framework is a first step in the right direction."

Dr. Vernon, whose research focus is young people, technology and well-being said the pandemic had upset the delicate balance of screen time, turning it into a "double-edged sword."

"Now, with our heightened reliance on technology, the challenge of managing screen time has become even more complex and pressing. It's crucial for us to remember that our children's mental and [physical health](#) hinges on maintaining this balance," she said.

"It's a necessary tool for education and communication, but also a potential disruptor of vital offline, face-to-face interactions.

"As we traverse this digital landscape, prioritizing real-world connections is essential not only for the richness of our relationships but also for our children's mental and physical well-being."

Dr. Metse, an expert on sleep and mental health, said given that adequate physical activity and optimal sleep and nutrition were strongly linked with mental and physical health, schools needed to explore ways their programs could cultivate environments to promote healthy lifestyle habits in children.

"Sleep is essential for physical, cognitive and emotional development. We know many people's sleep, including young people, were negatively impacted by the pandemic. Schools are a key setting to help rectify the residual impact of the pandemic on sleep."

The framework's four key strategies are:

- Schools serve as health promoters: The framework is designed to be used as a tool for educators to evaluate existing [school programs](#) and strengthen connections with parents and community to bolster internal and external support for young people.
- Provision of support for [school](#) leaders and teachers: Teachers and principals face additional pressures from the pandemic. Collaboration is needed between various government and community sectors to support them to deal with its complex systematic impacts.
- School health programs address multiple health risk behaviors: It recommends schools and teachers prioritize curriculum and education on physical activity, sleep, nutrition and mental health.
- Focus on social and emotional learning: A key emphasis is placed on empowering children and adolescents to improve their own physical and mental health and well-being.

More information: Joseph J. Scott et al, The International Framework for School Health Promotion: Supporting Young People Through and

After the COVID-19 Pandemic, *Journal of School Health* (2023). DOI: [10.1111/josh.13369](https://doi.org/10.1111/josh.13369)

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