

Report 03: Changes in pre-school children's emotional and behavioural difficulties through lockdown

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The Co-SPYCE Study

Background

COVID-19 has caused major disruptions to families' lives, through social distancing, school closures and lock-down. This is also a rapidly changing situation where different pressures will arise for children, young people and their families over time. While research has provided valuable information about how parents can support their children's mental health in general, we know little about what is most effective in the current, changing context.

The Co-SPYCE project is tracking the mental health of pre-school aged children throughout the COVID-19 crisis. This is through an online survey completed monthly by parents/carers throughout the pandemic. The study has full ethical and data protection approval and is fully GDPR compliant.

The findings will help identify what protects pre-school children from deteriorating mental health over time, and at particular stress points. Findings will be shared directly with health and education services to inform the development of effective support for young children and families.

Recruitment

The study sample has been recruited through a variety of means, including through social media, distribution through partner organisations, networks, charities and the media. The self-selecting nature of recruitment means that this will not be a nationally representative sample. See Appendix A for the demographic information.

For the long term, we are aiming to have good stratification across a wide range of socio-demographic factors (e.g., income, ethnicity, pre-existing mental/physical health difficulties) to investigate the experiences for different groups that may be particularly vulnerable during and after the pandemic.

We are keen to recruit as many families as possible to the study. Parents/carers can sign up and take part at any point: cospyce.org/survey

Further information

For further information or to request specific analyses, please contact the research team at cospyce@soton.ac.uk. The study is supported through UKRI Covid-19 funding and a UKRI Future Leaders Fellowship awarded to Helen Dodd.

Focus of this report

Participants

To date, over 3000 parents/carers have taken part in the Co-SPYCE survey at baseline. Roughly 1000 parents/carers have taken part in the first follow up survey so far and we continue to collect data at baseline and on a monthly basis.

972 participants who completed the baseline survey within the time window that we are currently looking at completed the survey again at follow up and completed all items on the measure reported here (Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire; SDQ).

Data analysed

This report provides longitudinal data from 972 parents/carers who took part in both the baseline questionnaire and the first follow up questionnaire. These participants completed¹ the baseline questionnaire between 17/04/2020 and 20/06/2020. Each participant completed the follow up questionnaire approximately one month after having completed their baseline questionnaires.

In this report, we examined changes in pre-schoolers' emotional, behavioural and restless/attentional difficulties over a one-month period as lockdown has progressed.

This was examined for the following specific groups:

1. The whole sample
2. Children by gender
3. High- and low-income households
4. Parent working status (employed or not employed)
5. Family ethnicity (White British or other ethnicities)

Measurement of difficulties

This report uses the Strengths & Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) to measure emotional, behavioural and restless/attentional difficulties. This is a well validated questionnaire with excellent psychometric properties.

- Emotional difficulties (emotional symptoms subscale): items relate to the child being worried, afraid, unhappy, clingy and having physical symptoms of anxiety (e.g. whether the child is "Often unhappy, down-hearted or tearful", or has "many worries, often seems worried").
- Behavioural difficulties (conduct problems subscale): items relate to the child doing what they are asked, having tantrums, fighting, lying or stealing things (e.g. whether

¹ 'Completion' of the baseline survey is based on participants having completed items up to and including the pre-defined main outcome measure (the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire – parent reporting on child).

the child “often lies, or cheats”, or is “generally obedient, usually does what adults request).

- Restless/attentional difficulties (hyperactivity/inattention subscale): items relate to the child being restless, fidgety, distractible, impulsive and having a good attention span (e.g. whether the child “sees tasks through to the end, good attention span”, or is “restless, overactive, cannot stay still for long”).

Each subscale consists of 5 items, are summed to compute a total score, with a maximum of 10 indicating the most severe difficulties.

Key findings

- Parents/carers reported that their children’s emotional problems did not increase or decrease significantly over the one-month period.
- Parent/carers reported a reduction in their child’s restless/attentional difficulties over the one-month period.
- Parents/carers of boys, but not girls, reported a reduction in their child’s behavioural difficulties over the one-month period.
- Employed parents/carers, but not those who are unemployed, reported a reduction in their child’s behavioural and restless/attentional difficulties over the one-month period.
- At a group level, the changes reported were subtle and suggest that young children’s emotional, behavioural and attentional problems were relatively stable during the one-month period.

Findings

1. The Whole Sample (ages 2-5 years)

Reminder: This sample is not nationally representative. Parents/carers and their children were typically from high-income, white British households, and parents/carers were typically working full- or part-time. Further demographic information about participants can be found at the end of the report.

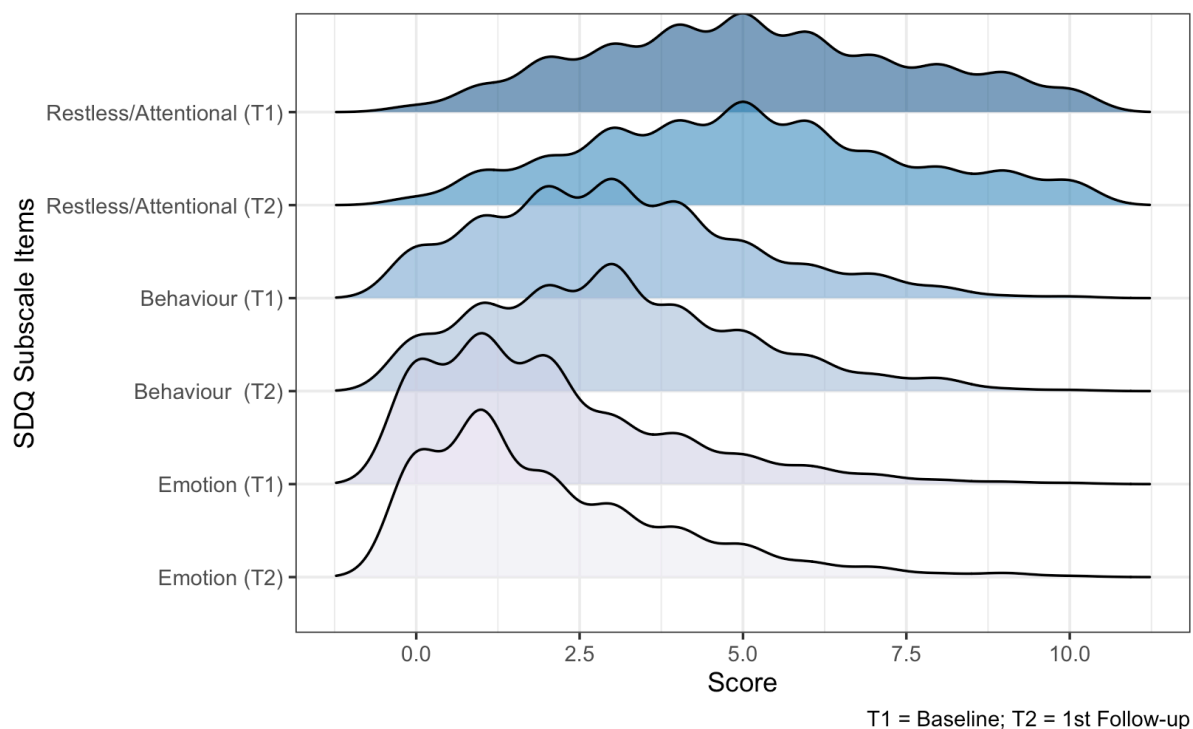


Figure 2. Histogram of SDQ emotion, behaviour and restlessness/attention scores at baseline and 1-month follow up

Parents/carers reports of children's emotional and behavioural difficulties did not change (to a statistically significant extent) over a one-month period as lockdown progressed. Parent/carer reported that their children's restless/attentional difficulties showed a small but statistically significant reduction over a one-month period as lockdown progressed.

2. Children by gender

Approximately half the children and young people in the sample were identified as male and half as female. Patterns appeared to be consistent across gender for parent/carer reports of their children's emotion and restless/attentional difficulties. Parents/carers of boys reported a significant reduction in their child's behavioural difficulties over a one-month period in lockdown. Parents/carers of girls reported no statistically significant change in their child's behavioural difficulties across a one-month period in lockdown.

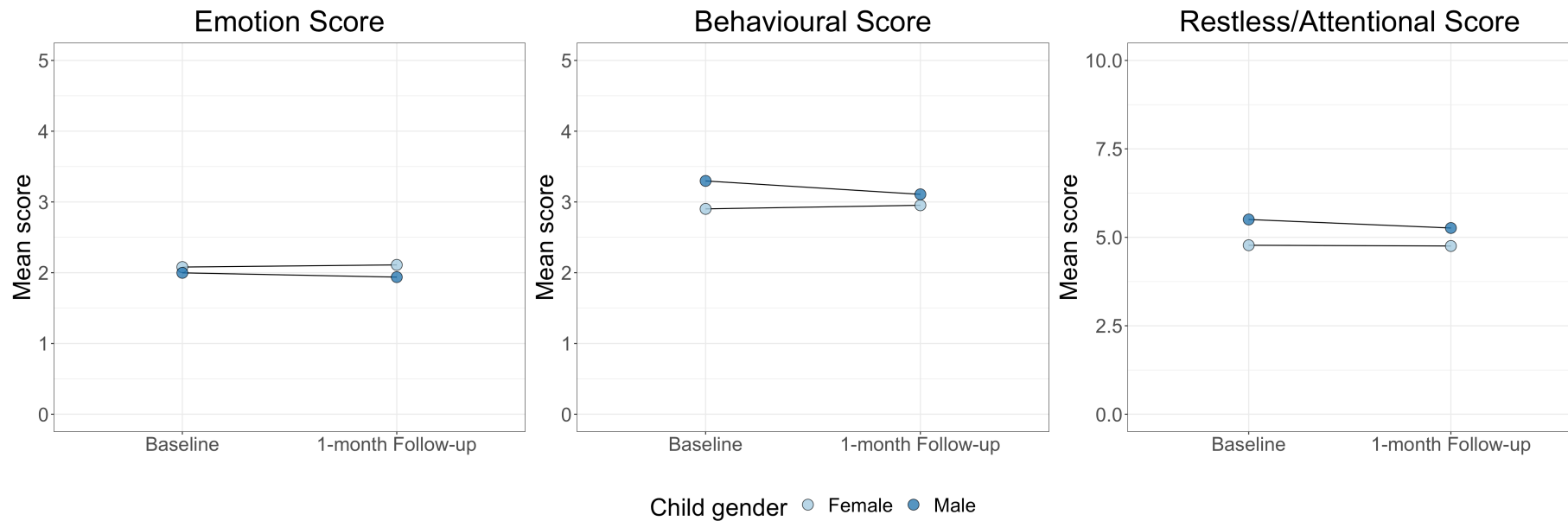


Figure 3. Mean parent/carer reported SDQ subscale scores for male and female children at baseline and 1-month follow up

3. Higher and lower income households

Approximately 14% of the parents/carers in the sample reported that they had a household income below the national average of £30,000. Patterns appeared to be consistent across households with a regular household income above and below the national average of £30,000.

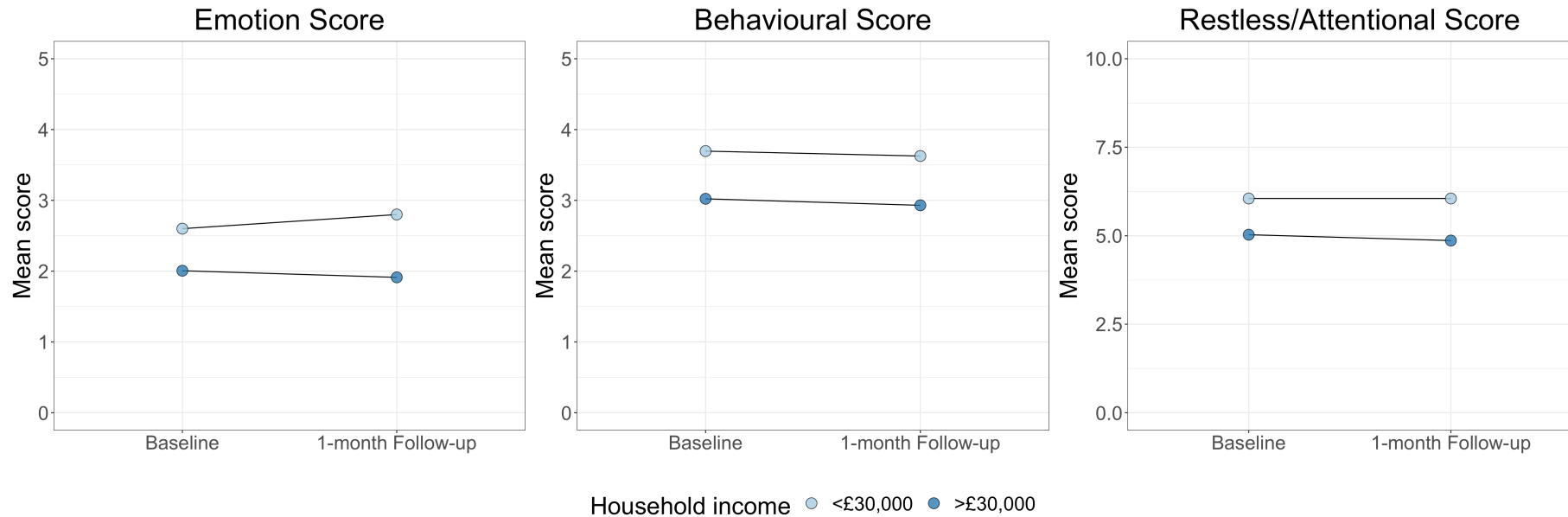


Figure 6. Mean SDQ subscale scores for children from higher- and lower-income households at baseline and 1-month follow up

4. Parent working status (working or not working)

Approximately 15% of the parents/carers in the sample reported that they are currently unemployed (including those who are homemakers/full time parents, in education, unable to work due to disability, seeking work, or retired). Employed parents/carers reported a statistically significant reduction in their child's behavioural and restless/attentional difficulties over a one-month period of lockdown, but

unemployed parents/carers reported no statistically significant change. There were similar patterns in parents/carers reports of their child's emotional difficulties for those who were employed and unemployed.

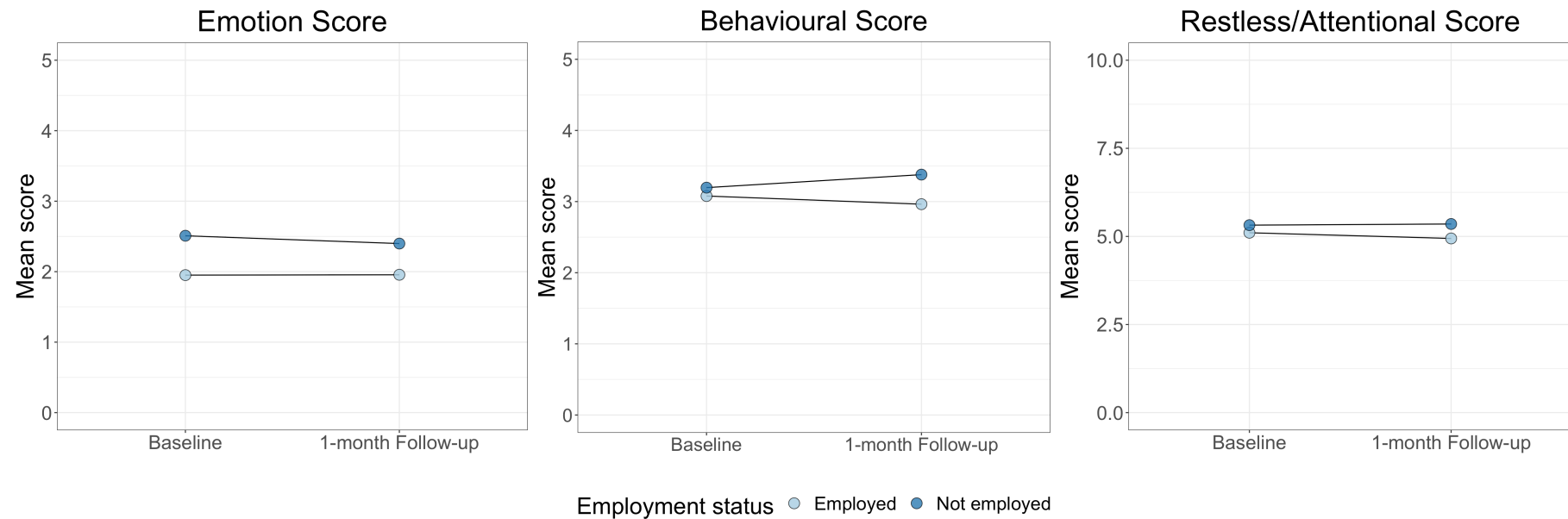


Figure 7. Mean parent/carer reported SDQ subscale score for children of working and non-working parents at baseline and 1-month follow up

5. Family ethnicity

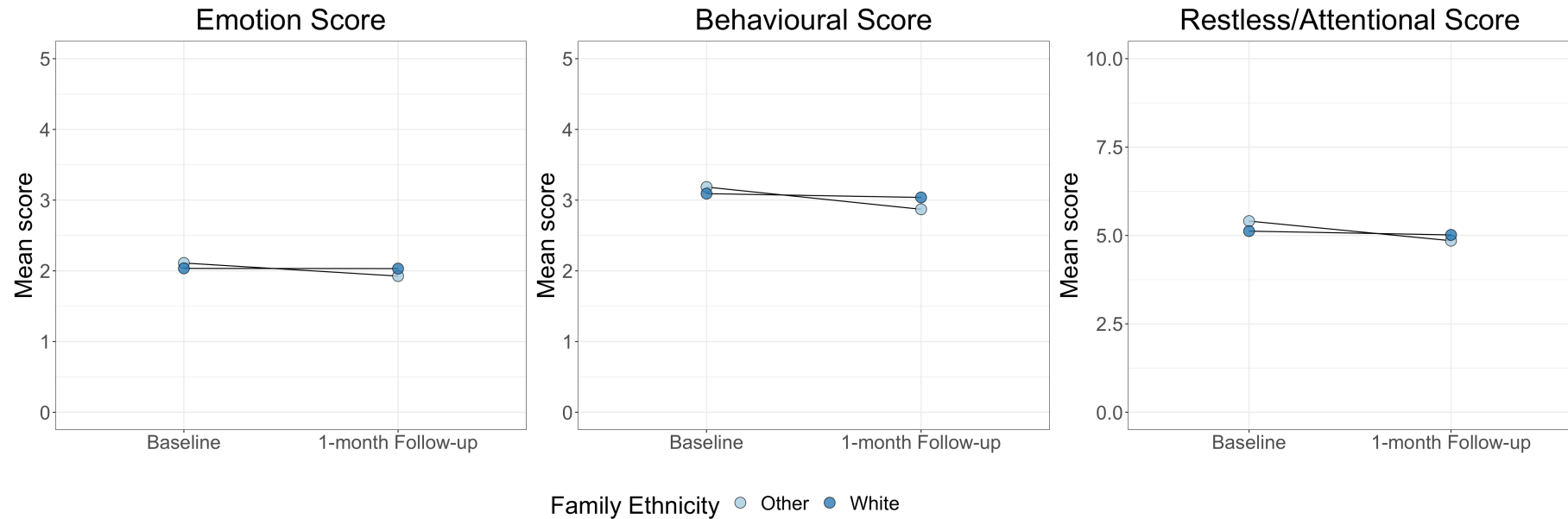


Figure 8. Mean SDQ subscale scores for children of white British parents and parents of other ethnicities at baseline and 1-month follow up

Approximately 9% of the parents/carers in the sample reported that their child's ethnicity was an ethnicity other than white British. Patterns appeared to be consistent across parents/carers of children of white British or other ethnicities.

Appendix A

Demographic information

		Baseline		Follow up 1 (took part)		Follow up 1 (did not take part)	
		n	%	n	%	n	%
Parent Gender	Female	2120	94.5	923	95.0	1197	94.1
	Male	120	5.3	49	5	71	5.6
	Other/Prefer not to say	4	0.2	-	-	4	0.3
Employment status	Employed	1906	84.9	819	84.3	1087	85.5
	Not employed	338	15.1	153	15.7	185	14.5
Household income	< £30,000	308	13.7	115	11.8	193	15.2
	> £30,000	1528	68.1	684	70.4	844	66.4
	Prefer not to say	155	6.9	64	6.6	91	7.2
Child gender	Female	1103	49.2	489	50.3	614	48.3
	Male	1134	50.5	482	49.6	652	51.3
	Prefer not to say	7	0.3	0.1	0.1	6	0.5
Neurodevelopmental conditions	ASD	31	1.4	15	1.5	16	1.3
	ADHD	10	0.4	1	0.1	9	0.7
SEN	Any SEN	75	3.3	33	3.4	42	3.3
Parent ethnicity	Asian/Asian British - Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, other	67	3.0	20	2.1	47	4

	Black/Black British - Caribbean, African, other	24	1.1	4	0.4	20	1.6
	Chinese/Chinese British	21	0.9	9	0.9	12	0.9
	Middle Eastern/Middle Eastern British - Arab, Turkish, other	8	0.4	1	0.1	7	0.6
	Mixed race - other	38	1.7	10	1.0	28	2.2
	Mixed race - White and Black/Black British	18	0.8	4	0.4	14	1.1
	Other ethnic group	17	0.8	6	0.6	11	0.9
	Prefer not to say	8	0.4	-	-	8	0.6
	White - British, Irish, other	2043	91	918	94.4	1125	88.4
SDQ Score	Emotions	2.04 (1.88)		2.03 (1.92)		2.08 (1.88)	
	Behaviour	3.10 (2.00)		3.03 (2.00)		3.13 (2.00)	
	Restlessness/attention	5.14 (2.41)		5.00 (2.40)		5.12 (2.38)	