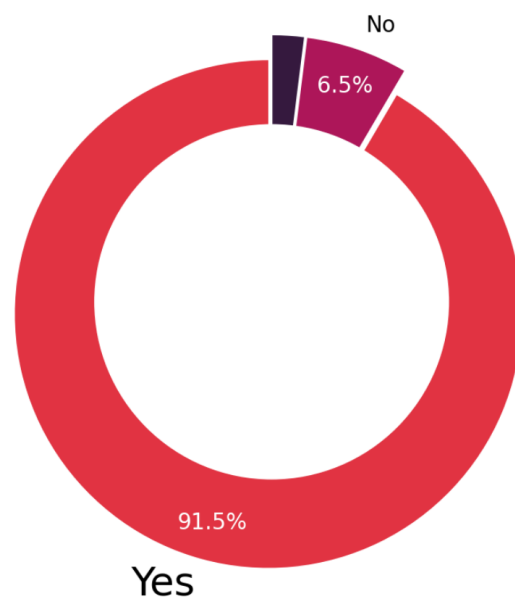


PERSPECTIVES FROM PLAY THERAPISTS IN IRELAND:

The Relationship between children's emotional & mental well-being in the years following the covid pandemic.

Is client anxiety related to the pandemic?



Data Collection 2023:

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I. Introduction

The impact of the COVID pandemic on children's mental health was of concern to play therapists as early as 2020. This was based on our understanding of children's neurodevelopmental and developmental needs. Three years later the people of Greystones, Co. Wicklow, reacted with the launch of the **It Takes A Village** community initiative. They highlighted the need for a play therapist to work across all eight primary schools to ameliorate anxiety levels in primary school children¹. This was a valuable forum where two local TDs were present to discuss how play therapy can help. In my training as a neuroscientist and a play therapist, I decided to invigorate this pursuit by collecting perspectives from play therapists all over Ireland.

II. Research Objectives

This research was created to determine whether play therapists in Ireland are seeing similar or increasing levels of anxiety post pandemic. Their experience is mined in order to determine qualitatively what age ranges are most affected and what symptoms children are presenting with. Referral pathways to treatment are examined to uncover insights into access routes to services.

¹ <https://www.greystonesguide.ie/local-schools-combine-for-child-wellbeing-project>

III. Survey Methods

A survey was created and disseminated via social media channels, through the Irish Association of Play Therapists and Psychotherapists (IAPTP) and through emails from the Children's Therapy Centre.

a. Data Collection Method

A series of ordinal Likert-type questions were devised to capture perspectives among play therapists regarding the levels of presenting anxiety and other related symptoms. Client age ranges and referral pathways to accessing services were also queried. Users were presented with several free text input columns within which to respond to queries around symptomology, referral pathways and other concerns.

b. Data Analysis

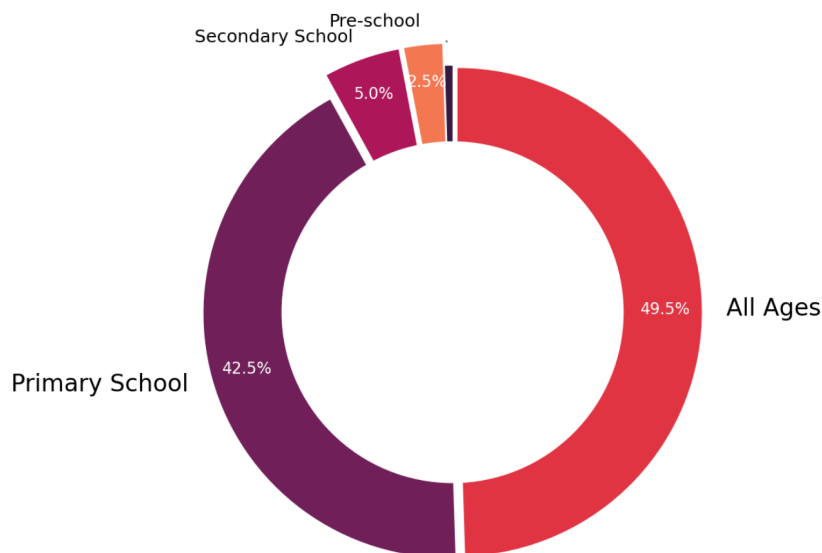
The raw survey data was processed and formatted with ordinal data quantified. Content analysis was conducted across text responses to identify presence and frequency of terms. Thematic analysis was applied to text responses under the heading 'any other thoughts?'. The resulting qualitative insights are presented in this descriptive analysis report with additional exploratory analysis dependent on supplementary data point collection.

IV. Survey Results

a. Ordinal Responses

Proportional analysis returned a very strong response from play therapists that the presenting anxiety of children and adolescents is related to the pandemic. 92% believe the anxiety they are seeing is as a result of the pandemic. When queried on the age ranges presenting with anxiety, 50% of play therapists reported seeing anxiety across all age groups, with 43% noting prevalence in primary school students. Primary school presentations are probably higher taking into account that groups encapsulation within the 'all age ranges' group.

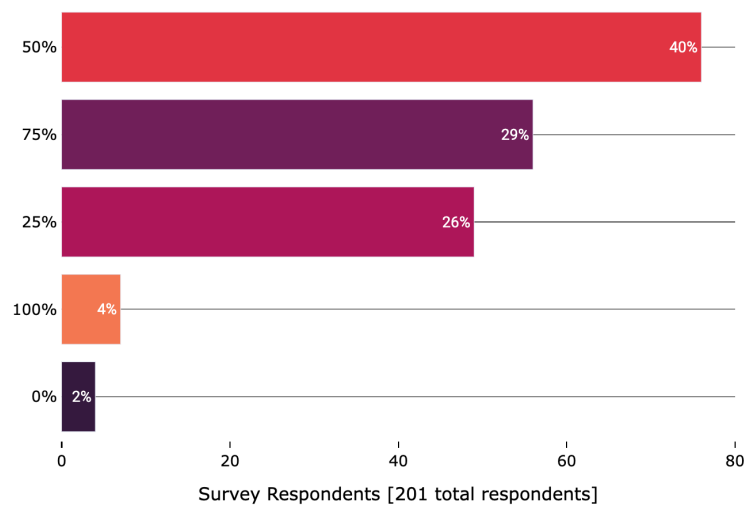
Proportions of Age Ranges experiencing Anxiety



When queried on the percentage of their overall work they perceived to be a result of the pandemic, 40% believed *half* their work fell within this category. 29% responded saying 75% of their work related to anxiety post pandemic. 7 play therapists, 4%, believed 100%

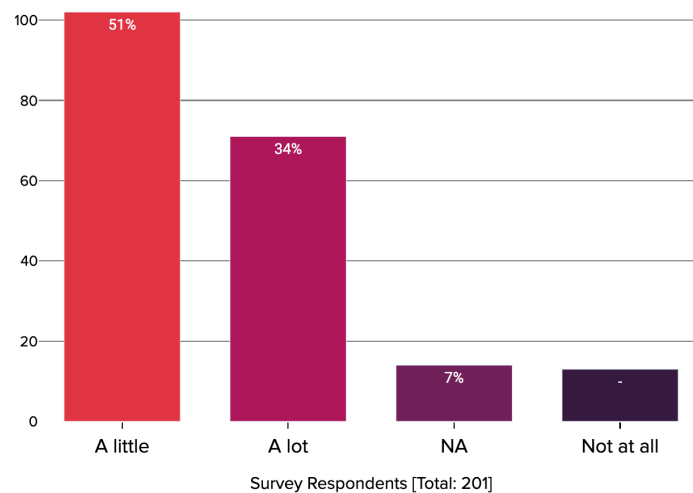
of their work related to post-pandemic anxiety. 8 of 201 respondents did not respond to this question.

Percentage of work related to Anxiety since the pandemic



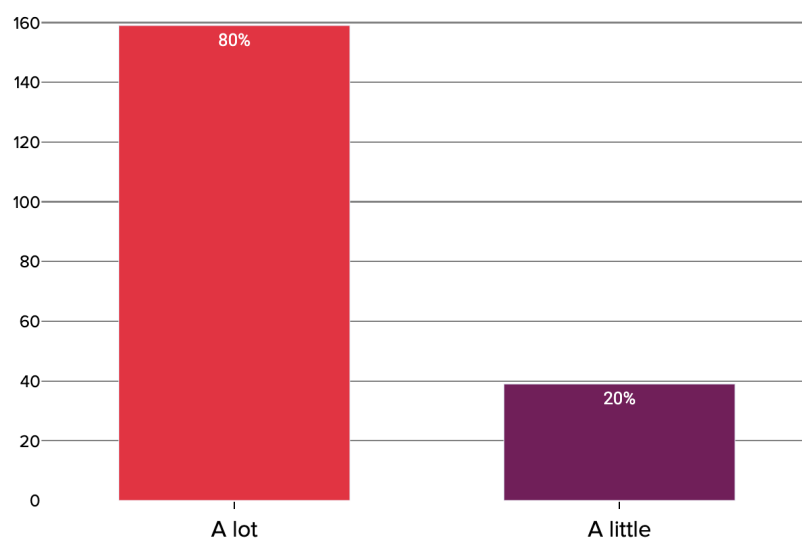
There was affirmation of the hypothesis that the pandemic had affected the parent-child relationship. 51% of play therapists felt the parent-child relationship had been affected 'a little' while 34% of play therapists felt the relationship had been affected 'a lot'.

Has the relationship between parents and their children deteriorated due to pandemic effects?



Recognising children's neurodevelopment needs, play therapists were almost in unison in their response to the effects these issues were having on child education. 134 of 168 respondents acknowledged emotional, mental and cognitive difficulties arising from the pandemic effects and the resultant impact on schooling.

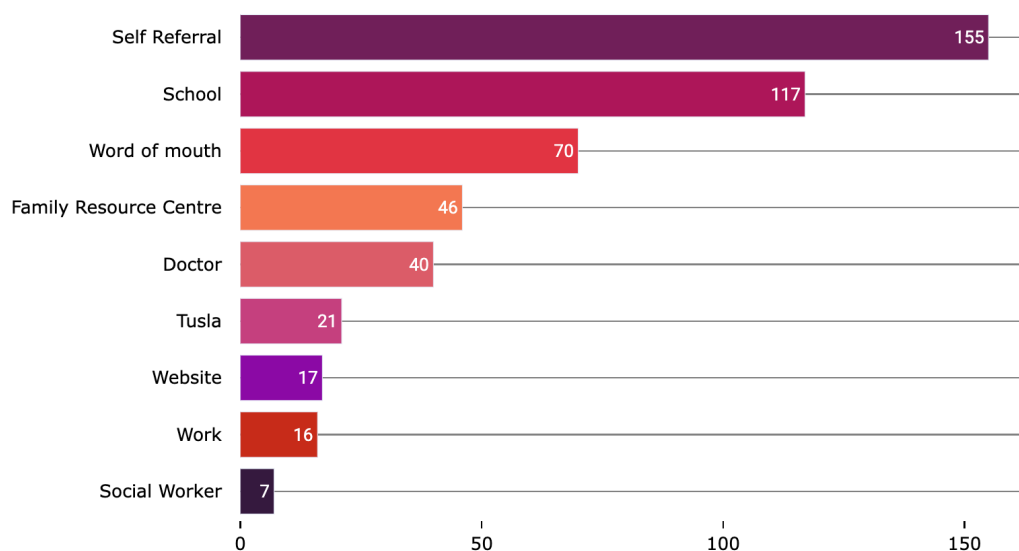
Do you feel children are having emotional, mental and cognitive difficulties in school due to the effects of the pandemic?



b. Text Content Analysis

Term frequency analysis was applied when seeking to calculate the referral pathways to play therapist services. Self-referral was the most common pathway to treatment with 155 out of 201 respondents referencing this pathway, while referral via schools was the second most common referral pathway. Multiple pathways were input by some respondents so these figures are not absolute yet show a clear trend among common access points to services. Social Workers, Tusla and GP's are the least common points of entry to treatment.

How are you getting referrals?



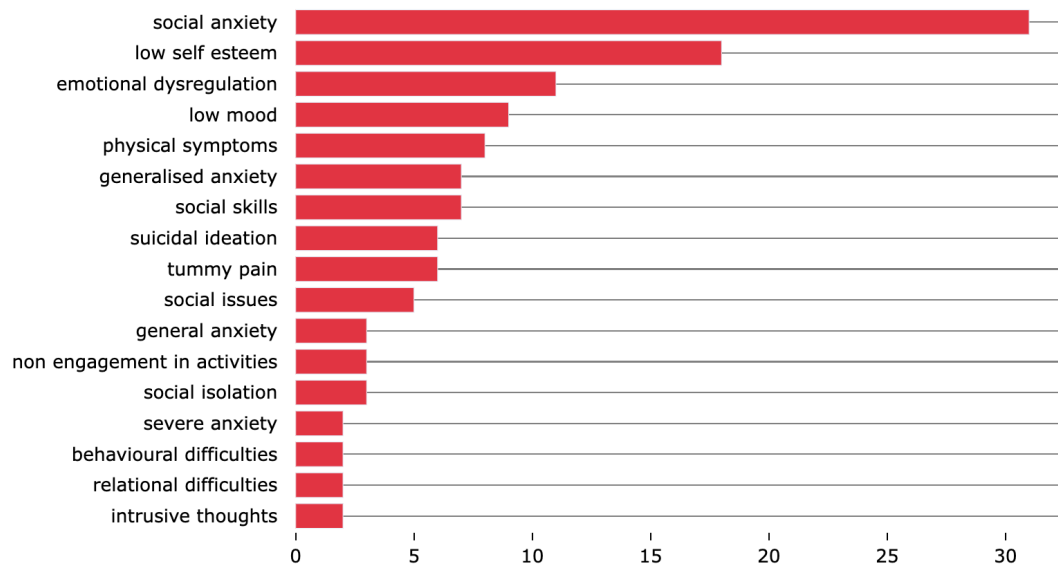
To conduct analysis on presenting symptoms, language pattern matching analysis, based on patterns of adjective - noun phrases, was implemented for phrase extraction. Social anxiety was the most common symptom with low self-esteem, emotional dysregulation and low mood common (58%, 35%, 29%)². Generalised anxiety presented with similar frequency to poor social skills and suicidal ideation (23% , 23% , 19%). Non-engagement in activities of previous interest and social isolation accounted for 10% of the top 17 most commonly presenting symptoms. Intrusive thoughts, behavioural and relational difficulties accounted for 7% of the most common symptoms.

When asked for any additional thoughts on the aftermath of the pandemic 116 out of 201 respondents entered feedback. There were strong sentiments of the need for greater support within schools, inclusive of teacher training and support. Early intervention was highlighted as necessary, with suggestions of a tiered approach to supports. There was an assessment also of the need for parental support around co-regulation. 'Crisis', 'pressures' 'surge' and 'struggling' were key terms used by play therapists in response to this survey

² Percentages calculated relative to the top 17 most common presenting symptoms.

and highlight an overarching sentiment of challenges for children and services in the aftermath of the pandemic.

Most Common Presenting Symptoms



c. Conclusions

201 play therapists responded to the survey and provided insight into our children's emotional and mental health. The messages were consistent and persuasive pointing to trends of increased anxiety as a result of the pandemic. Increases were most notable among primary school age students with consequential impacts on education acknowledged. Patterns of symptoms ranging from low self-esteem and emotional dysregulation, to suicidal ideation highlight the need for additional supports for children both within and outside schools. The responses suggest the impact of the pandemic is only beginning to become apparent with children, schools and families overwrought.

Self-referral is the most common pathway to play therapy services with further information required to assess regional levels of service provision. Quantitative age data was unavailable but together with gender, location and sector-type data could provide targeted insights to feed towards responses addressing childhood mental health in the wake of the Covid pandemic. Further data collection is recommended.

Appendix

A. Survey

a. Questionnaire

Do you work with children as a play therapist?

Are you seeing clients who are suffering from anxiety or anxiety-related disorders?

As a play therapist do you envision such struggles for your clients related to the pandemic?

The age range for such clients that are experiencing anxiety.

Give a rough estimate as to what percentages of your current client work is related to anxiety since the pandemic.

How are you getting referrals?

What symptoms do these clients present with?

With your knowledge of attachment and co-regulation, how has the relationship between parents and their children deteriorated due to the effects of the pandemic?

With your understanding of children's neurodevelopment and needs do you feel that children are having a difficult time emotionally, mentally and cognitively in school due to the effects of the pandemic?

Any other thoughts?