

Summary

INC360 is a Community Interest Company using immersive technology and education to tackle childhood and youth loneliness and to promote positive mental health and wellbeing.

The purpose of this research project was to better understand the services currently available to children and young people and what children, parents and professionals want to see in the service INC360 provides. This was done through talking with children and adults to learn their perspectives.

Findings

The impact of Covid-19 and Lockdowns:

- Extended use of technology for communication
- Concerns over children forgetting how to socialise with peers
- Attempts to get children out of the house through outdoors activities such as outdoor swimming, walks and hikes

Mental Health and Wellbeing:

- Children picked up family members' anxieties during Covid-19
- Some parents were active in talking to children about how they feel
- Parents often don't feel confident or know how to bring up mental health with children
- Discussion is often around feelings rather than labels (e.g., anxiety, depression)

Available Services Support:

- Some people were aware of services available
- Others were unsure what support was available
- Parents would seek support online, through social media, and by word of mouth
- There is a mix of services available, but few offered support to children under 6 years

What Participants Want to See from INC360:

- More support services
- A menu option, allowing children more choice of what videos to view
- Exciting and creative immersive videos, e.g., deep-sea and space explorations, travelling to new places, and learning about other cultures

INC360 is in an ideal position to be able to utilise technology, which children enjoy and are excited about, to teach and develop important skills for positive mental health. The interactive and fun workshops provide a great opportunity to help children learn and practice socialising skills.

Booklets or information packs designed for parents and teachers would be a great way of providing adults with useful information to help build their confidence in talking to children about mental health. It would also allow for information about support services to be known about and more easily available.

INC360 is uniquely able to provide useful mental health information to children and adults in an engaging manner, using themes and technologies that children enjoy and have told us they would like to participate in.



Introduction

The research project aims to help prevent childhood loneliness and mental health issues from developing by providing workshops that combine education, imagination and immersive videos. At some point during their childhood children may experience some form of isolation, whether due to long-term illness, being a young carer or experiencing mental health challenges or other issues outside of the child's or family's control. The sessions incorporate relatable scenarios and practical solutions discussed as a group to promote communication.

The workshop content can be tailored to those accessing the services to ensure inclusivity, as far as possible. The skills developed in the workshops are designed to protect children from mental health challenges, helping children rationalise and find solutions when times get tough. INC360 wants to enable all children to be able to participate in community-based activities that their peers enjoy, through immersive video headsets. The 360-degree immersive video allows the viewer to feel completely immersed in another world. INC360 believes that **everyone has the right to feel included.**

To ensure that we are meeting the children's expectations and providing experiences they want to view through immersive video headsets, we interviewed children of different ages to better understand how we can tailor this service to meet their needs. The fieldwork side of the research started in January and ended in May 2021. In accordance with Covid-19 restrictions, focus groups took place online. They provided us with fantastic insights into what children would love to see and enjoy. The focus groups were very relaxed and casual, with the children talking openly about what they would enjoy watching on the VR headsets and coming up with their own creative ideas for the immersive videos.

At the same time, we spoke to parents, teachers, and professionals with experience of children's mental health to learn about some of the challenges children face today. This revealed some interesting new themes and provided us with information as to how children have been coping during Covid-19 and the three lockdowns. By speaking with these parents, teachers, and mental health professionals, we were able to gather a wide range of perspectives on the same social issues. This has allowed us to think creatively as to how we could potentially develop a holistic approach to helping tackle childhood mental health challenges through the services INC360 provides. We intend to weave these issues and creative responses throughout the interactive workshops, helping to offer some essential skills training to alleviate children's struggles with mental health whilst promoting positive wellbeing.

Findings

Throughout the interviews and focus groups with children and adults, we tried to ask similar, age-appropriate questions to allow us to gain a wider understanding of each theme from all our participant's perspectives. Each participant group offered us a deeper comprehension of their experiences and of what they found important. Themes explored were: The impact of Covid-19 and lockdowns; mental health and wellbeing; support services available; and what support participants want to see from INC360.

Theme 1: The Impact of Covid-19 and Lockdowns

Parents and teachers repeatedly mentioned how children had become more dependent on electronic devices during Covid-19, primarily as this was a way for them to stay connected to friends and family. The children we spoke with confirmed this concern, excitedly informing us of what video games they have been playing with their friends. This brought with it an additional challenge, which some teachers discussed, of children's new difficulty of sharing. The teachers stated that because children had become used to having a computing device to themselves at home, they struggled when they had to share a device with classmates, once they returned to school.

Parents were also concerned about children's lack of socialising in person during the lockdowns resulting in children *'losing skills'* and relying much more heavily on the virtual world for communication. This was perhaps advantageous to some children with disabilities who found the online world much easier to navigate and socialise in. However, there were still worries from parents that social skills were being lost and forgotten, with children unable to practice these skills with peers. One parent said, *'he's completely out of practice at speaking normally to other people outside of the family and he tends not to'*.

Indeed, the biggest thing that both children and adults suggested children had missed was being able to socialise with peers, give hugs, and play with other children. One parent, when asked what they think children have missed out on said *'...social interaction is probably the biggest thing and not being able to play with their friends... having that independence and freedom...'*

Theme 2: Mental Health and Wellbeing

Participants referred to how children's mental health was undoubtedly impacted by Covid-19 and subsequent lockdowns and restrictions. Parents, teachers, and mental health professionals talked about how parents' own mental health challenges were also having an impact on children, to varying degrees, with children picking up on their parent's stress and anxiety of Covid-19 and its consequences. Indeed, one teacher interview stated that *'...sometimes parents don't filter out their own feelings and their own anxieties and sometimes talk to their children like the best friend'*. Teachers were open about how they are seeing many parents struggling and that these anxieties can now be seen in their children.

Many of the parents interviewed said that they discussed mental health and wellbeing with their children, while the teachers we spoke to stated that whether mental health was discussed at home was very much based on individual families. Some parents took a very active approach, reading their children books on mental health and openly discussing how they are feeling, encouraging them to voice their emotions, as can be seen from one parent's comments: *'[I] might say at the end of each night...what's [been your] favourite part of today. How's that made you feel? Just kind of getting him aware of his feelings, really.'* The parents who did this believed they could see this approach being positive for their children, some of whom were then able to be more understanding of children at school who were struggling and having behaviour issues.

When parents did not speak to their children about mental health, teachers and mental health professionals believed this was because the parent was not adequately informed or aware of how to talk to their children about mental health or because they were already struggling: *'...I think it is just that [parents] have a lot on their plate. You know, "I'm trying to stay afloat best I can, don't add anything else to it", kind of thing.'* Indeed, when working in a

professional capacity with parents around children's mental health, one participant found that *'parents were always really really keen and eager to take on as much of that information as possible and go and put it into practice.'* One participant suggested that, *'There's potentially something about that professional reassurance, which is kind of, like, "Oh, okay, this is what I would say," makes them more confident to go and put it into practice...'*

Theme 3: Available Services Support

Questions to adult participants regarding support available for children's mental health and wellbeing received mixed responses: some people were very aware of charities and services and how to contact them (mainly due to prior personal experience), while others were very unsure of what services were available. Those who had researched and used services had very positive experiences of the charities and services used, referring to them as *'fantastic'*. Parents who were unaware of charities and services said that they would use an online search engine, social media, or word of mouth to locate suitable services. Both parents and teachers interviewed talked about visiting their GP to help with referrals and identifying and locating suitable support services. One parent was frustrated at the lack of services for younger children, with most being for children aged 6 and over: *'...I've been looking for some support for my son and everything I found is for over 6s, so for [a] three-year-old there's nothing really.'*

Schools seemed keen to ensure that they had adequate support in place for children and frequently referred families to various support services. Some schools have ELSAs (Emotional Literacy Support Assistants) in-house to support children. It did seem, however, that services offered by schools are dependent on the area and school the child attended. Some schools have in-house staff trained in mental health and can assess and advise on children's needs, while others have an Area Inclusion Partnership in place, which provides mental health support to children within that area's cluster of schools. However, despite the support services schools and teachers discussed with us, few parents were aware of any such scheme in their own children's schools. When parents were asked whether they felt schools should be doing more to support their children's mental health, one parent said, *'I think so, yeah, definitely, like our school hasn't done anything of that nature during this year.'*

The charities and services discussed by parents, teachers, and medical professionals included: COOMS, Silver Cloud, CAMHS, Area Inclusion Partnership, MIND, STARS, ELSAs, Marketplace for counselling, Noah's Ark, NSPCC.

Theme 4: What Participants Want to See from INC360

All participants agreed that more support services for children's mental health and wellbeing would be beneficial. They wanted these services to better educate and inform adults and parents, helping them to be more open with their children about mental health as well as being able to support them. Teachers and professionals were keen for the VR workshops provided by INC360 to be tailored to the children they are working with. Some of the tailoring suggestions were around the child's age and developmental abilities. One mental health professional stated *'...the bit I found most exciting was how tailored it could be to an individual school's needs, or an individual, or a small group of [people]. So, having that really bespoke intervention for young people based on what their needs are, it's going to be so beneficial...'*

The participants offered many ideas as to what adventures to include in the immersive videos, with children coming up with interesting and creative ideas, from visiting historical sites in the past, learning about cultural practices through visiting other countries, to experiencing the daily life of an animal by following their movements. Some of the



more popular suggestions, from both children and adults alike, were underwater and deep-sea explorations, space adventures, and attending fun local events, such as sports events. Some of the teachers suggested that their pupils may appreciate a multichoice menu, allowing them to decide what adventure they go on: *'It would be nice if there was almost like a little menu and they could choose.'*

One parent we spoke to suggested involving older children in helping to offer mental health advice and acting in the capacity of a role model for the younger children attending the workshops. This concept works well for Brownies and Guides and can be seen on children's TV programmes, such as CBBC Newsround, so may prove to be an effective way of educating children and helping them

develop important mental health skills *'Because I think again it might just make it a little more relatable. I think to us as adults, we don't always take a step back and think about how the children may feel.'*

Recommendations and Conclusions

The research showed that there is concern around how to start up conversations about mental health with children. Providing informative booklets and resources to parents and teachers would help them feel more confident and provide guidance on how to discuss this important topic. One mental health professional interviewed discussed the importance of children having lessons continued and repeated, allowing the child to process the lessons learnt into their long-term memory, giving them a greater chance of being able to retain the information and recall it. With parents and teachers having access to important mental health information via the booklets and resources, they would be more likely to be able to continue the valuable lessons learned in the workshop at home or at school, improving the children's retention of the information given.

Along with the information provided to parents and teachers, a list of support services available for the children in the workshop, tailored to their age, current mental health and learning challenges, and the types of service offered, should also be provided. With parents repeatedly mentioning that they were unsure or struggled to find suitable services, this would help provide them with a simple way of locating and contacting a support service right for their child. Indeed, it may also help schools better understand what services are available for children when they need to recommend services to parents. While some school staff appeared very knowledgeable as to what services were available to them, others were less confident. INC360's services resource list will offer a simple way of helping parents and teachers understand where children and their families can access support.

INC360's approach to helping children with their mental health and wellbeing, utilising immersive video technology, is unique and one which children clearly responded to well. The workshops provide an ideal situation not only to encourage the children's communication about mental health, but also to provide parents and teachers with important information on how to look after and communicate with their children about mental health.

The creative ideas for the immersive videos reflect the focus group children's enthusiastic suggestions for the INC360 workshops. Poignantly, the children discussed how they could visit places or events that they could not experience ordinarily, whether due to Covid-19, financial restrictions, or lack of advancement in time-travelling technology. INC360 provides children with the opportunity to have new and exciting experiences, visit a new place, event, or have an adventure that they normally could not access, in a fun and interactive way, whilst simultaneously learning and developing skills to maintain good mental health and wellbeing.