

LIVING THROUGH COVID

GROWING UP IN QUEENSLAND
2021

YOUNG QUEENSLANDERS' PERSPECTIVES OF LIFE
DURING THE PANDEMIC

Queensland
Family & Child
Commission



Copyright

Living through COVID: Growing Up in Queensland

Copyright © The State of Queensland
(Queensland Family and Child Commission) 2021

ISBN 978-0-6488903-7-9

Licence

This report is licensed by the State of Queensland (Queensland Family and Child Commission) under a Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) 4.0 International licence. You are free to copy, communicate, and adapt this report, as long as you attribute this work to the State of Queensland (Queensland Family and Child Commission).

To view a copy of this licence visit

<http://creativecommons.org/licences/by/4.0/>.

Content from this report should be attributed to:

The State of Queensland (Queensland Family and Child Commission) *Living through COVID: Growing Up in Queensland*.



December 2021

Queensland Family and Child Commission

PO Box 15217, Brisbane City East, Qld 4002
63 George Street, Brisbane, Qld 4000 (Australia)

Phone: 07 3900 6000

Fax: 07 3900 6050

Email: info@qfcc.qld.gov.au

www.qfcc.qld.gov.au

Acknowledgement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

The Queensland Family and Child Commission (QFCC) acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the Traditional Custodians of country throughout Australia and their connection to land, sea and community. The QFCC recognises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as two unique peoples, with their own rich and distinct cultures, strengths and knowledge. The QFCC pays its respects to them and their cultures and to Elders past, present and emerging.

Acknowledgement of young people who shared their views

The QFCC thanks the young people who generously shared their experiences of lockdowns as part of the *Growing Up in Queensland: Living through COVID* survey.

Your responses have been read and your voices have been heard. We acknowledge the challenges faced throughout the pandemic and feel privileged to have read about the positive experiences that have resulted from lockdowns.

Your views and experiences will be shared with government and community leaders to better enable them to cater for and communicate with young people throughout the pandemic.

Other acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the support of schools, community organisations, government agencies and the wider Queensland community in spreading the word about this survey. Thank you for recognising the importance of young people having a voice in issues that impact them.

A special thank you to the school communities across Queensland that experienced lockdowns during the Delta strain outbreak. We thank these communities for keeping their students safe during this period.

We appreciate the valuable contribution of the QFCC's Youth Advocates in spreading the word within their vast networks. We are committed to supporting the Youth Advocates as they continue the conversation and advocate for the inclusion of youth voices in decision-making processes.

We extend our gratitude to the Townsville Hospital and Health Service Human Research Ethics Committee for working alongside us to ensure the experiences of young people were collected and handled ethically.

This survey invited participants to indicate their cultural identity. The report includes perspectives from Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and South Sea Islander young people. The QFCC recognises Aboriginal people, Torres Strait Islander people and South Sea Islander people as three unique peoples, with their own rich and distinct cultures, strengths and knowledge.

Some young people's quotes have been edited to correct typographical errors to ensure readability. No content or meaning has been changed.

TERM DEFINITION

COVID-19 The coronavirus first detected in late 2019. The World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic on 11 March 2020.

Non-binary Non-binary generally refers to a gender expression that does not conform to the binary male/female framework. A non-binary person may identify as being neither gender, a gender other than male or female, or both male and female genders.

Remote learning Online and at-home learning during the pandemic

Young people For this project, people aged 13–18 years

Foreword from the

PRINCIPAL COMMISSIONER

The World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic on 11 March 2020. Two weeks later, businesses across Queensland started to close and school students transitioned to remote learning for the first time. It was Queensland's first lockdown, lasting more than four weeks. At the time, it was unfathomable to think five more would follow across the state over the next 18 months.

Adjusting to remote learning was just one of many changes Queensland's young people would endure as the pandemic unfolded. Some missed grandparents and family members as interstate borders closed, weekend sport was cancelled, birthdays came and went without celebrations. Phrases such as social distancing entered their vocabulary, faces were obscured by masks, and news bulletins and conversations were saturated with statistics and stories about COVID-19. Vulnerable children were exposed to a greater risk of harm, as opportunities to detect abuse disappeared during lockdowns and periods of remote learning, the impact of which will emerge over time.

Throughout the pandemic, we have heard from health experts, politicians, business owners, community leaders, commentators, economists, teachers... but the voices of young people have largely remained silent. Decisions about COVID-19 were being made that affected almost every aspect of their lives, yet we were in the dark about their views on how the community was navigating the pandemic.

The Queensland Family and Child Commission (QFCC) wanted to know what young people were saying at the dinner table, in the school yard, in video calls to friends, or quietly to themselves. This was the catalyst for the *Growing Up in Queensland: Living through COVID* survey. This survey builds on the responses children and young people provided about COVID-19 in the QFCC's *Growing Up in Queensland 2020* survey conducted early in the pandemic.

Within four weeks, more than 1500 young Queenslanders embraced the opportunity to tell us about their experiences throughout the pandemic and about how governments and community leaders can best communicate with young people when making decisions. This resounding response tells us this was an important issue for young people. I would like to thank every young Queenslander who participated. I am proud of you for taking the opportunity to speak up and voice your opinion.

While the views captured in this survey are unique to this public health crisis at a particular point in time, we need to consider how the findings can be applied in other contexts that may affect young people. The survey also highlights the need to better involve young people in our decision-making processes in families, governments, communities and businesses.

Young people have a right to be heard; adults have a responsibility to listen. I encourage you to hear what they have to say—in this survey, at home, at school, on the sporting field, in the media and elsewhere. Only then can we create a world where every child is happy, healthy and thriving.



Cheryl Vardon

*Chief Executive and
Principal Commissioner*

Queensland **Family
& Child** Commission

Foreword from the Queensland Family and Child Commission

YOUTH ADVISORY COUNCIL

COVID-19 has brought about many changes for young people, especially around education and employment.

For school students, everything changed—from the manner in which assessments were conducted to learning structures, career possibilities and opportunities, support such as mental health services, and social lives. Isolation and lockdowns have also raised concerns regarding the mental health of young Australians.

Although it was difficult not being able to engage directly with friends and teachers, lockdowns provided opportunities for growth. Technology and changes in the way in which activities such as schooling works have allowed several new and exciting opportunities to arise, many of them beneficial in the long term that wouldn't have been available if it weren't for the current circumstances.

Young people exist within the structures designed by decision makers and can offer valuable insight into the unique experience of a young person in today's society. Today's young people are tomorrow's decision makers. It is vital that young people's voices are amplified and their insights recognised and valued. By working with young people, decision makers can ensure their policies genuinely prioritise the needs, concerns and passions of young people.

Young people can feel under-represented or underappreciated when not listened to. This may prevent them speaking up about topics and ideas that are important to them. In order to make sure all members of our society are included in conversations, decision makers must listen to our young people.

CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Worst things about lockdowns	4
Best things about lockdowns	10
How should decision makers talk to young people about COVID?	16
Summary	25
Where to from here?	26
References	28

INTRODUCTION

Purpose of *Growing Up in Queensland: Living through COVID*

Growing Up in Queensland: Living through COVID explores young people's experiences in Queensland during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The QFCC has a statutory responsibility to listen to the perspectives of Queensland's children and young people. To do this, we conduct a biennial Growing Up in Queensland project that invites children and young people to share their experiences of their communities, their hopes and dreams, and the issues that are important to them. To date, these have been conducted in 2018 and 2020; however, the unique and significant circumstances over the last two years presented an opportunity to hear from young people during 2021.

For nearly two years, Australians have faced unprecedented circumstances. The coronavirus that emerged in late 2019 (COVID-19) has forced much of the world into lockdowns, impacting travel, socialising, schooling and employment.

At various times, restrictions were put in place to stop the spread COVID-19 in the community. Queenslanders were directed to work and study from home, restrict travel to within a 5-kilometre radius, wear face masks in public, socialise only with people they live with, remain 1.5 metres from each other and remain in their homes except for essential purposes. The number of attendees at weddings and funerals was capped and visits to hospitals and nursing homes were restricted.

Information about COVID-19 has been continuous and difficult to avoid. During the pandemic, COVID-19 has featured prominently in media. Television, radio, print and online news have featured daily updates regarding border closures, numbers of COVID-19 cases and deaths, vaccines and changes to restrictions.

In this study, *Growing Up in Queensland: Living through COVID*, we asked young people to share their experiences of life during COVID-19, especially the impact of lockdowns.

Key findings

Young people told us the worst thing about COVID-19 restrictions and lockdowns was the impact on their social relationships. Many young people felt lonely during lockdowns and missed being able to connect with friends and family face to face. They emphasised online interaction with friends was no match for in-person connection.

Substantial changes to schooling presented another challenge for young people throughout this time. During lockdowns, students were instructed to learn from home and attend online classes. Young people told us they found it difficult to adjust to the changes in communication, structure and support from teachers while they were learning from home.

Young people identified lockdowns as having significant impact on their engagement in recreational activities. Being directed to stay home meant many young people were unable to take part in their usual activities, such as playing sport, exercising and non-essential (recreational) shopping.

However, not all impacts of lockdowns were negative. Young people reported developing a greater appreciation of their freedom and their friends. In addition, despite the difficulties experienced with remote learning, many young people told us they enjoyed learning from home. They appreciated being able to wake up later because they did not have to travel to school. They also enjoyed the flexibility associated with remote learning. In particular, they enjoyed being able to work at their own pace and eat during class.

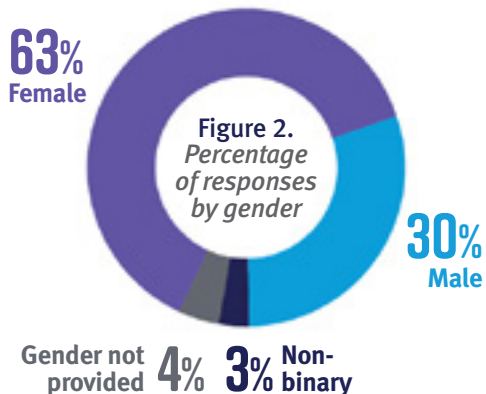
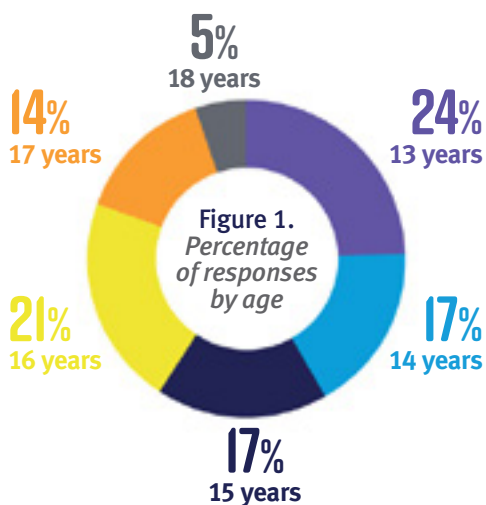
Method

Young people aged 13 to 18 years living in Queensland were invited to complete the online survey during the four-week survey period. They were given the option to submit their survey regardless of the numbers of questions completed.

The survey was promoted to young people via government departments, community organisations, the QFCC Youth Advisory Council, and through social media. Particular attention was given to reaching young people living in Cairns and Brisbane, the two cities most affected by COVID-related school closures.

Who we heard from

The survey received responses from 1542 participants. The survey collected demographic data (age, gender, location, language spoken at home, and Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and/or South Sea Islander status). Participants were also asked if they personally experienced a lockdown (defined as a time when people were not allowed to leave home except for essential reasons and were directed to learn from home) and if they were a student during 2020 or 2021.



Age

The survey was open to young people 13 to 18 years old at the time of responding. Thirteen-year-olds formed the largest group of participants (24 per cent).

Figure 1 shows the breakdown of participants by age.

Gender

Almost two-thirds (63 per cent) of responses were from females. **Figure 2** shows the percentage of responses from males, females and participants who identified as non-binary.

6%

of participants *identified as being* Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and/or South Sea Islander¹

98%

of participants *indicated they were a* school student in 2020 and/or 2021

97%

of participants *reported they had* personally experienced a lockdown

12%

of participants *spoke a language* other than English at home

¹ The Queensland Family and Child Commission recognises Aboriginal people, Torres Strait Islander people and South Sea Islander people as three unique peoples, with their own rich and distinct cultures, strengths and knowledge.

Region

Regional classification was based on that used by the Queensland Department of Education. **Table 1** shows the major locations in each region. Most participants lived in the Metropolitan region (43 per cent) or the South East region (38 per cent).

Figure 3 shows the percentage of participants from each region and the details of lockdown periods.

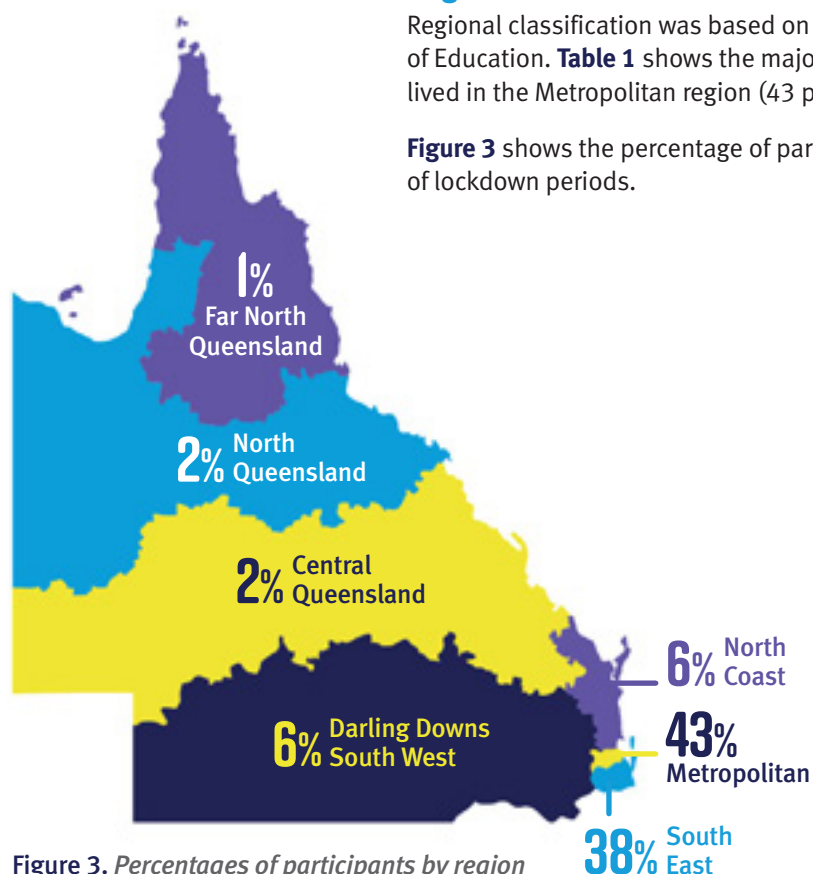


Figure 3. Percentages of participants by region

Table 1. Sample of major locations included in each region

Far North Queensland: Cairns, Innisfail, Torres Strait Islands, Cooktown, Mossman, Hope Vale, Weipa	North Queensland: Charters Towers, Mount Isa, Townsville, Bowen, Doomadgee, Ayr, Ingham
Central Queensland: Rockhampton, Gladstone, Emerald, Mackay, Longreach	North Coast: Sunshine Coast, Bundaberg, Caboolture, Gympie, Hervey Bay, Maryborough, Moreton Bay
Darling Downs South West: Toowoomba, Cherbourg, Dalby, Gatton, Roma, St George, Stanthorpe, Goondiwindi, Kingaroy, Lockyer Valley	Metropolitan: Brisbane, Ipswich
	South East: Gold Coast, Logan, Redland, Scenic Rim

Living through lockdowns

A lockdown is defined as a time when people were allowed to leave home for essential reasons only and students were directed to learn from home.

Table 2. Lockdowns in Queensland: 2020 and 2021

Dates	Details	Duration
March 2020	World Health Organization declares COVID-19 a global pandemic	
30 March – 2 May 2020	Nationwide lockdown	33 days
January 2021 Alpha strain	Greater Brisbane (linked to Hotel Grand Chancellor case + Princess Alexandra Hospital)	3 days
March – April 2021 Alpha strain	Greater Brisbane (linked to Princess Alexandra Hospital)	3 days
June – July 2021 Alpha/Delta strain	South East Queensland ² , Townsville and Palm Island Greater Brisbane/Moreton Bay	3 days 4 days
August 2021 Delta strain	South East Queensland ² (Indooroopilly cluster)	8 days
August 2021 Delta strain	Cairns (linked to Reef pilot)	3 days

² South East Queensland lockdowns impacted 11 local government areas: Brisbane City, Moreton Bay, Gold Coast, Ipswich, Lockyer Valley, Logan City, Noosa Shire, Redland City, Scenic Rim, Somerset and Sunshine Coast.

WORST THINGS ABOUT LOCKDOWNS


The participants who had experienced a lockdown were invited to identify the worst thing about being in a lockdown. Nearly one third (32 per cent) of participants said the worst thing about lockdowns was not being able to see family or friends, a finding echoed in similar studies (Attenborough, 2021).

Just over a quarter (27 per cent) of respondents said remote learning was the worst thing about lockdowns. In particular, participants described experiencing insufficient support, structure, and communication during remote learning. Having trouble with the content, falling behind with the work and receiving poor grades were also identified as educational impacts of lockdowns. Research conducted in 2020 showed that during a standard school term, students in Year 9 who were already identified as socio-educationally disadvantaged were likely to lose 3.3 weeks of numeracy growth during a lockdown, with very little effect being identified for relatively socio-educationally advantaged students (Fahey, 2021).

Thirteen per cent of young people said the worst part of lockdowns was its impact on recreation; specifically, participants described not being able to leave the house, play sport and do non-essential shopping.

Three per cent of participants identified the worst aspect of lockdowns as being a decline in their mental health; for example, many of the participants who described feeling lonely and isolated may have experienced mental health impacts. The impact of loneliness and isolation on mental health is well reported in the literature (Loades, et al., 2020).

Others identified boredom, feelings of isolation, loneliness, and uncertainty as being the worst things about lockdown. It is important to note that the participants who did not identify mental health as the worst part of lockdowns may still have experienced a decline in mental health.



“ I also wish that the timetable was shorter as it was very tiring to sit in one place all day inside, so I think they should have put more time into going outside for some fresh air.

Female, 14 years, South East

“ Make more specific guidelines on how long should be spent on a computer for classes so that we don't have to be on a screen for around 10 hours a day every day.

Non-binary, 17 years, Metropolitan




SOLUTIONS

“ Let teenagers and school age students have a say in how their learning progresses during the time away from school. Online learning just isn't viable for everyone.

Gender not provided, 15 years, Metropolitan

“ I would ensure I consider young people's social lives and perhaps introduce different activities and discounts for young people during periods when we are not in lockdown to ensure they are given the opportunity to have a good social life.

Female, 17 years, Metropolitan



“ I would have liked to have been provided more freedoms when contacting teachers. Education Queensland had restricted communication between teachers and student to emails and blackboard learning through eLearn. This crossed out Zoom, Teams, and other live functions that could have been used for online learning to ease the sudden change in learning.

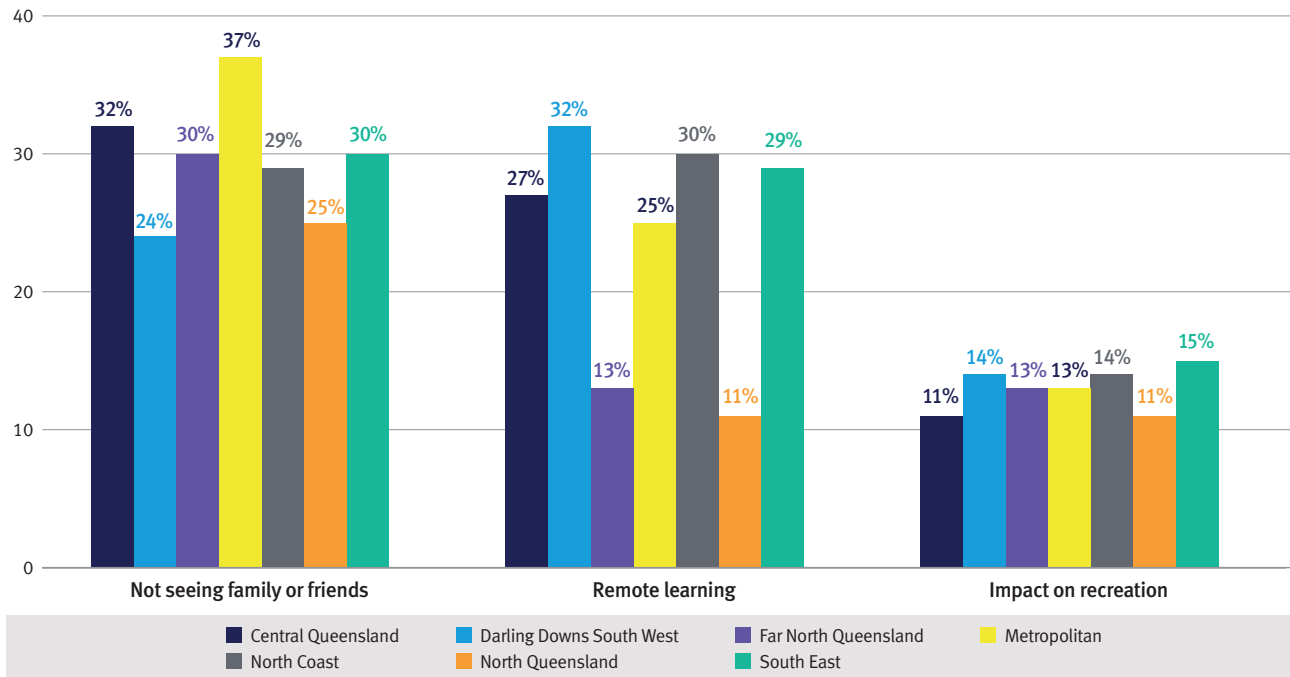
Female, 16 years, North Coast

Regional differences

For each region, the three most commonly identified aspects were the same: not being able to see friends and family, remote learning and the impact of lockdowns on recreation; however, the percentage of participants who identified each of these aspects differed between regions.

Figure 4 shows the percentage of responses by region for the three worst aspects of lockdowns.

Figure 4. Worst aspect of lockdowns: top three responses by region



Gender differences

Both males and females identified not seeing family or friends, remote learning and impact on recreation as the worst aspects of lockdowns; however, the percentage of participants who gave each response differed. Females were more likely to say not being able to see family or friends was the worst thing about lockdowns (37 per cent of females compared with 24 per cent of males). For non-binary participants, having to spend more time with family was one of the top three responses, and the impact on recreation did not feature in the top three responses.

These findings are consistent with those reported by Mission Australia, which found females were much more likely than males to report concerns related to education and isolation during lockdowns

(Greenland & Hall, 2021). Our finding that many non-binary young people did not enjoy spending time with their family during lockdowns is also consistent with other research. *Growing Up in Queensland 2020* found gender-diverse young people were less likely than males and females to report feeling happy when spending time with family (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2021). This may reflect the fact that some families struggle to accept their children who identify as non-binary (Katz-Wise, Rosario, & Tsappis, 2016) and non-binary young people are nearly twice as likely to experience a lack of family support (Strauss, et al., 2017).

Table 3 shows the top three responses for each gender group.



“Not being able to socialise with my friends. It made me feel sad.

Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and/or South Sea Islander, Male, 15 years, Central Queensland

“Not being able to go out and visit friends and my grandparents.

Male, 13 years, Far North Queensland

“Not seeing my friends was really hard. It would get quite lonely, I got sick of being with my siblings all the time and not seeing anyone except for them and my parents.

Female, 13 years, Metropolitan

“Not being able to see people in person, it was a struggle to have to see people through a screen and not have the normal human interactions I was used to.

Female, 14 years, Metropolitan



NOT SEEING FAMILY OR FRIENDS

“The worst thing for me was not being able to see friends but more importantly see family.

Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and/or South Sea Islander, Female, 16 years, Central Queensland



Table 3. Worst aspect of lockdowns: top three responses by gender

MALE

28% Remote learning

24% Not seeing family or friends

19% Impact on recreation

FEMALE

37% Not seeing family or friends

26% Remote learning

12% Impact on recreation

NON-BINARY

40% Remote learning

26% Not seeing family or friends

8% Having to spend more time with family

Differences according to primary language spoken at home

The top three responses were the same for participants who speak English at home and those who speak a language other than English (see **Figure 5**).

Age differences

The top three responses did not differ between participants of different ages; however, the percentage of participants who gave each of the top three responses differed. Participants aged 18 years were substantially less likely than the youngest teens to identify not seeing family or friends as the worst aspect of lockdowns. In addition, participants aged 18 years were less likely than the youngest participants to identify the impact on recreation as the worst part of lockdowns. See **Figure 6** for more details.

Figure 5. Worst aspect of lockdowns: top three responses by English-language status

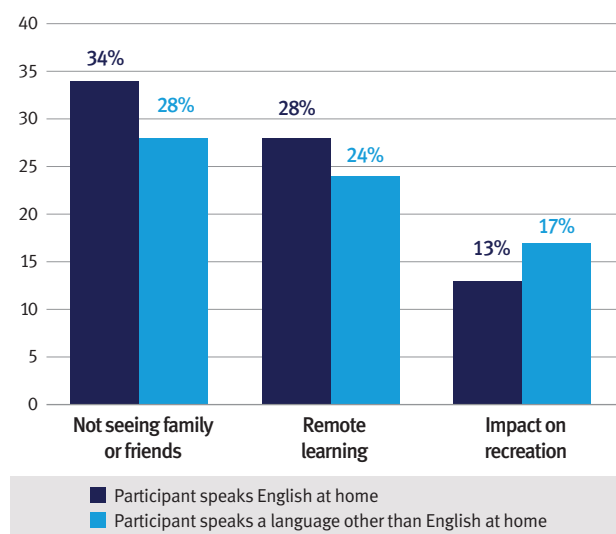
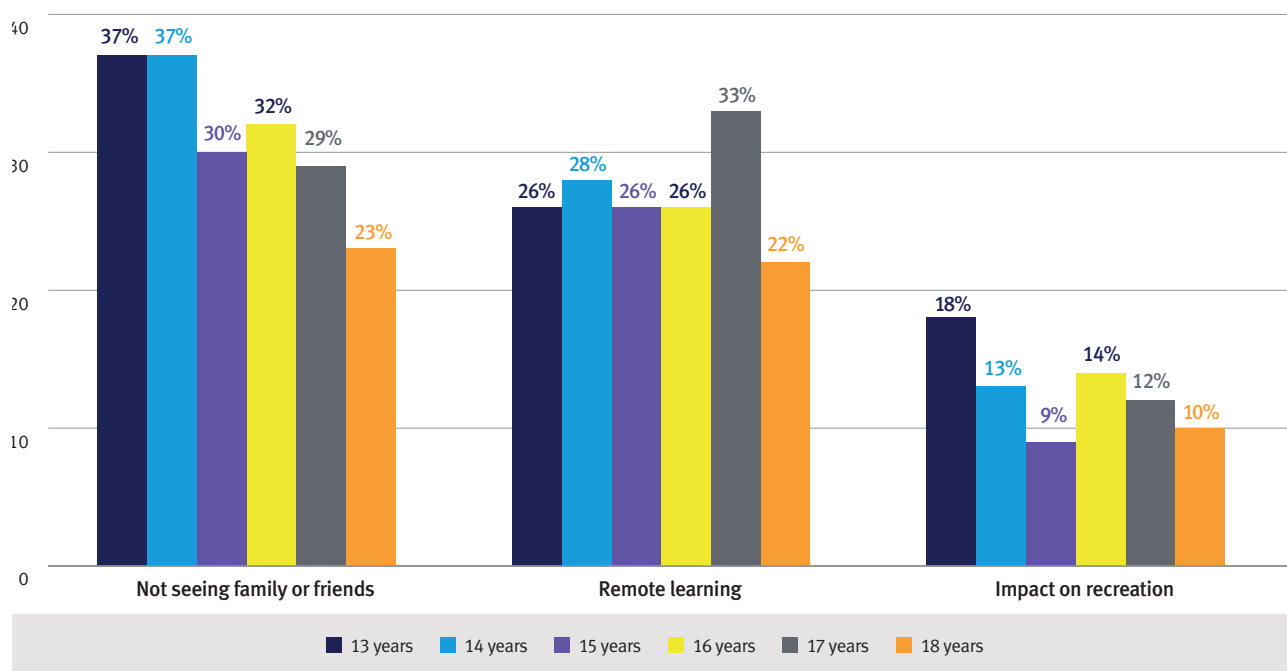


Figure 6. Worst aspect of lockdowns: top three responses by age



Perspectives of Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and South Sea Islander participants

The top three responses were the same from participants who identified as Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and/or South Sea Islander and those who did not. However, Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and/or South Sea Islander participants were less likely than non-Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and/or South Sea Islander participants to identify remote learning as the worst aspect (21 per cent compared with 28 per cent).

“ I found doing schooling from home really difficult during lockdowns, as there was less structure and routine and it made it harder to learn.

Female, 17 years, Metropolitan

“ Not being able to get the help I need for school.

Female, 16 years, North Queensland

“ Not having the regular schedule of a school day made completing school work a struggle and caused me to fall behind on my assessments.

Male, 16 years, Metropolitan

“ The impact it had on learning, i.e. the increase of work and the trouble with IT [Information Technology].

Male, 14 years, Metropolitan

REMOTE LEARNING

“ Trying to learn school subjects and not being able to ask mates for help.

Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and/or South Sea Islander, Male, 16 years, Far North Queensland

“ The worst part of lockdowns for me was the inability to do the basic things I love to do like going to the beach, or going for a hike up in the mountains.

Male, 16 years, South East

“ No team sport.

Female, 14 years, South East

RECREATION

“ I couldn't participate in the local volleyball club.

Male, 17 years, South East

“ Stuck at home with nothing to do.

Female, 14 years, Darling Downs South West

“ Not being able to go to the shops often and not being able to hang out with friends.

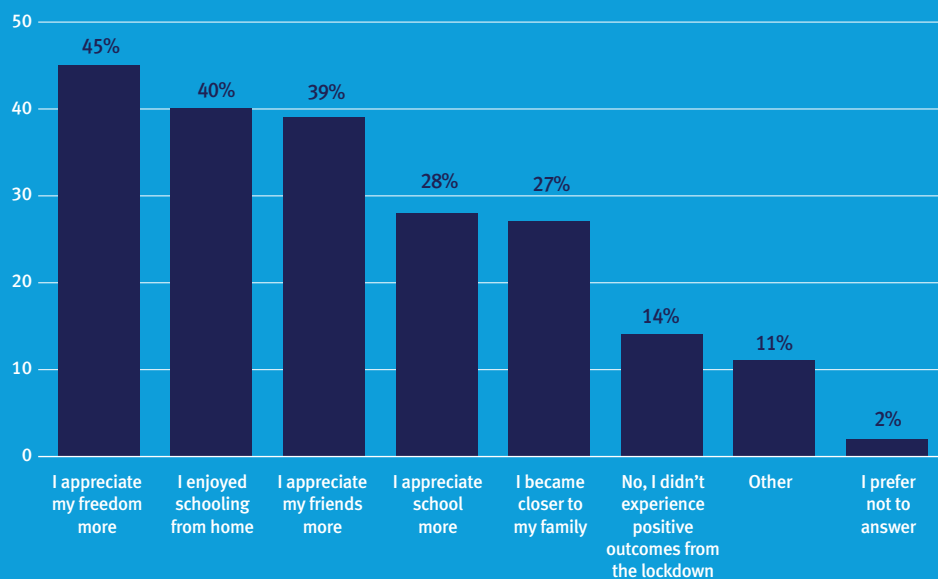
Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and/or South Sea Islander, Female, 13 years, North Queensland

BEST THINGS ABOUT LOCKDOWNS

Lockdowns brought substantial changes to young people’s lives. These changes were restrictive and required adjustment to everyday life. However, change has the potential to prompt positive reflections and bring positive experiences. For this reason, we invited participants to share positive experiences that resulted from lockdowns.

Participants were asked to identify positive features about lockdowns by selecting responses from a list. Participants were able to select more than one response. Most commonly, participants said the lockdowns made them appreciate their freedom more. This response was selected by 45 per cent of participants (see **Figure 7**). Other commonly selected responses included enjoying schooling from home and appreciating friends more.

Figure 7. Positive aspects of lockdowns





“I had more time to focus on me.

Female, 14 years,
Metropolitan

“I reduced my commute time significantly, which gave me back a lot of time, and thus I was less tired.

Non-binary, 16 years, South East



WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE APPRECIATE



“Increased motivation to improve my physical and mental health.

Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander
and/or South Sea Islander,
Gender not provided, 16 years,
South East

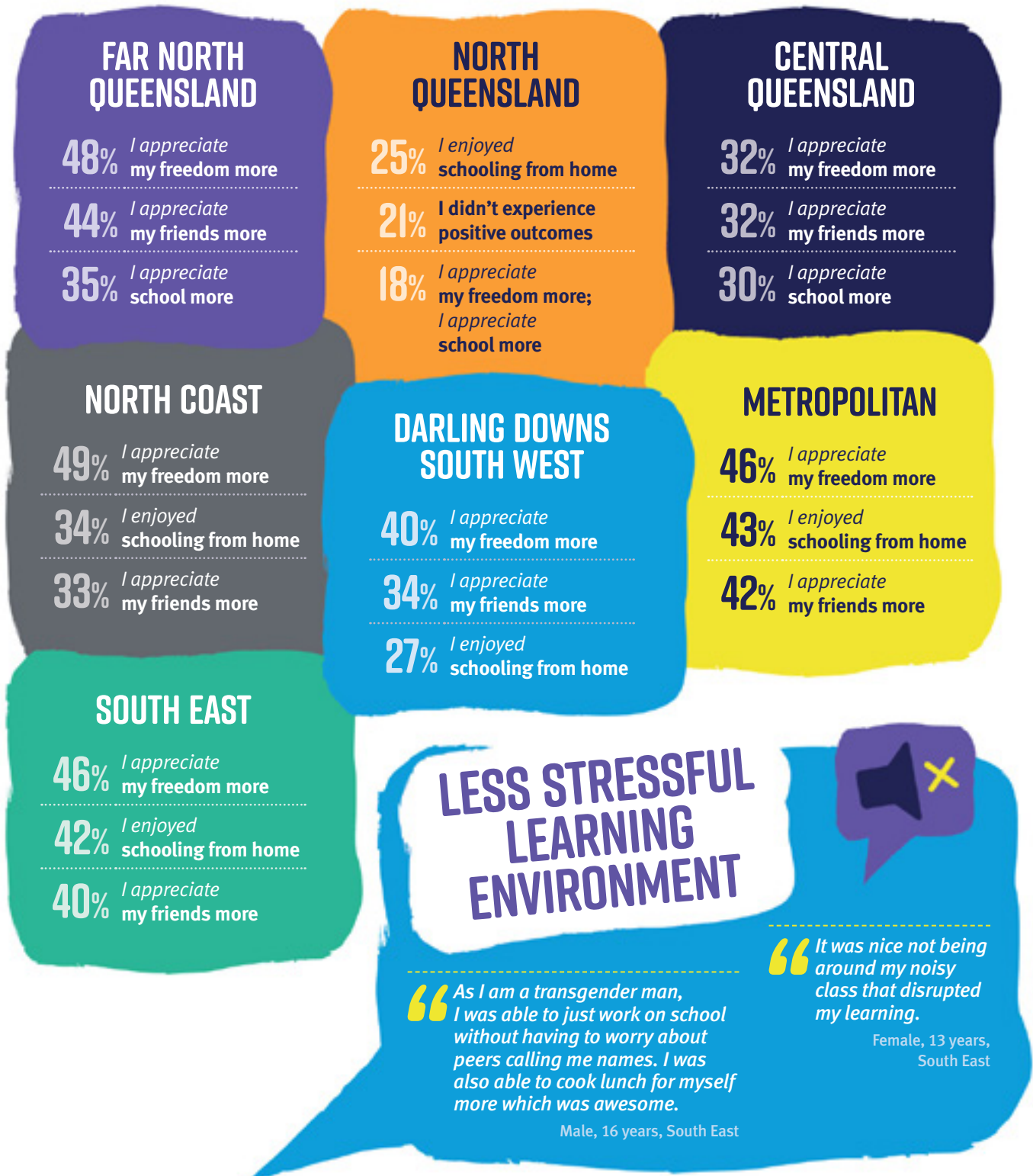
“I enjoyed taking time to be mindful.

Male, 18 years,
Metropolitan

Regional differences

The percentage of participants who selected each response differed between regions. **Figure 8** shows the top three responses for each region and the percentage of participants who selected each of those responses. Regions differed substantially in their total number of participants. Some regions had few participants, so results must be interpreted with caution.

Figure 8. Positive aspects of lockdowns: top three responses by region



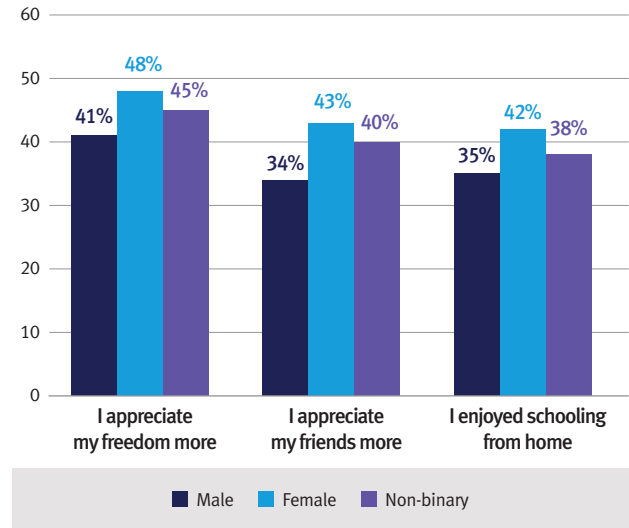
Gender differences

For each gender, the top three responses were the same: appreciating freedom more, appreciating friends more and enjoying learning from home. Across gender, there were differences in the percentage of participants who selected each of the top three responses; for example, males were less likely than females and non-binary participants to say they appreciate their friends more as a result of lockdowns. **Figure 9** shows the percentage of participants of each gender who selected the top three responses.

Differences according to primary language spoken at home

Participants who speak a language other than English at home reported the same top three responses as those who speak English; however, the percentage of participants who gave each response differed between these groups. Participants who speak a language other than English were less likely than English-speaking participants to say they appreciate their friends more (33 per cent compared with 40 per cent).

Figure 9. Positive aspects of lockdowns: top three responses by gender



“ I had more time to focus on my hobbies.

Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and/or South Sea Islander, Female, 16 years, North Queensland

“ I guess I had more time to myself so straight after an online lesson I could jump online and play video games or watch a movie. It just felt more relaxed and not as stressful being in a home environment rather than a school environment.

Male, 14 years, North Queensland

“ Having free time to learn and improve my artistic ability.

Male, 13 years, Darling Downs South West

“ I had more time for physical activity and realised the importance of being outdoors and in nature for my mental health.

Female, 16 years, Metropolitan

“ I rearranged my bedroom all the time during lockdowns.

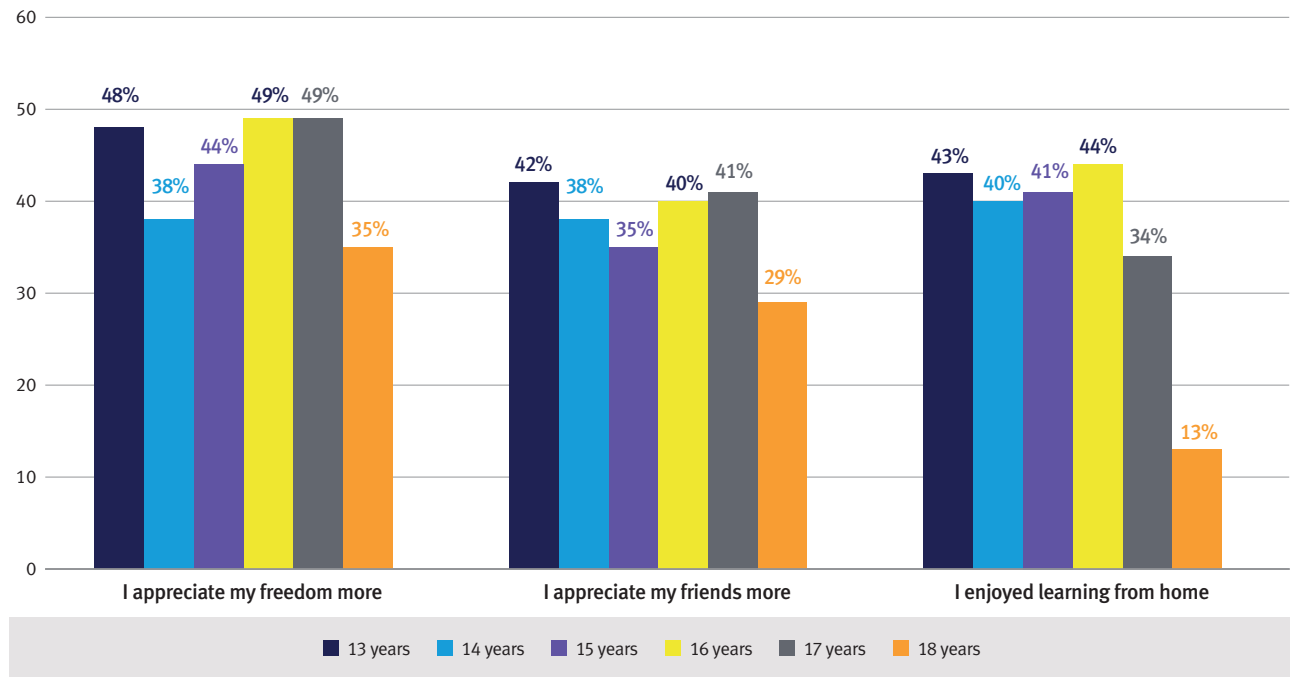
Female, 13 years, North Coast

MORE TIME FOR MYSELF

Age differences

The top three responses did not differ between age groups, but the percentage of participants who gave each response differed; for example, participants aged 18 years were less likely than some other age groups to say they appreciate their freedom more and to say they appreciate their friends more (see **Figure 10**).

Figure 10. Positive aspects of lockdowns: top three responses by age



FLEXIBILITY WITH SCHOOLING

“I get to have choice about where, when and how I learn with more flexibility.”

Female, 16 years, North Coast

“I get to work through my school work at my own pace and then once I’m done I get to have the rest of the day off.”

Female, 13 years, Metropolitan

“More ability to be myself and to focus on school work, leading to better grades and ultimately a better me.”

Male, 15 years, South East

“I personally learn more when self teaching.”

Male, 13 years, South East

IMPROVED LEARNING

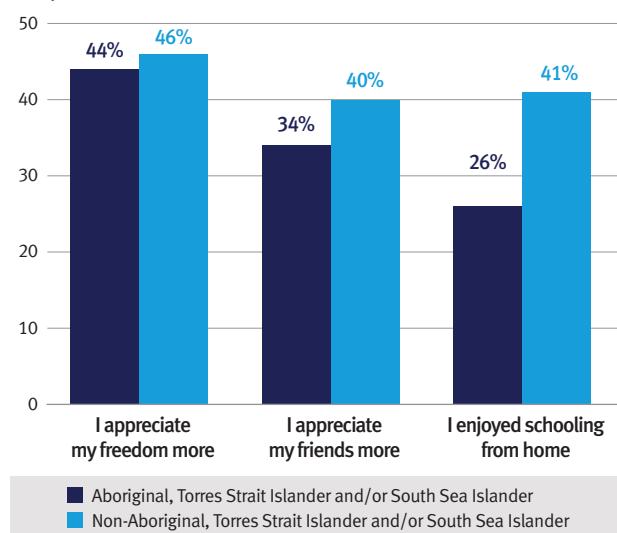
“I developed my knowledge on topics covered in school for a better grade.”

Female, 14 years, South East

Perspectives of Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and South Sea Islander participants

The top three responses were the same for participants who identified as Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and/or South Sea Islander and those who did not; however, the percentage of participants who gave each response differed. In particular, participants who identified as Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and/or South Sea Islander were less likely than participants who did not identify as such to say they appreciate their friends more and they enjoyed schooling from home (see **Figure 11**).

Figure 11. Positive aspects of lockdowns: top three responses by Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and/or South Sea Islander status



“ Sleeping in more, staying late, going to the bathroom whenever and eating whenever!

Gender not provided, 17 years, Metropolitan

“ Stayed at home for longer, more sleep, shorter school hours.

Female, 16 years, South East

FLEXIBLE DAILY SCHEDULE

“ I had a lot more time, as I did not have to travel to and from school, which takes around 2.5 hours.

Female, 14 years, Metropolitan

“ I was able to sleep in for online school, because we didn't have to travel.

Female, 14 years, Metropolitan

ZZZ

Participants were also invited to describe positive features of lockdowns not included in the list. Nearly 200 participants provided extra responses. The most common response, given by nearly one third of participants, was having time for themselves. Other responses included flexibility with schooling, flexible daily schedules and improved learning.

HOW SHOULD

DECISION MAKERS TALK TO YOUNG PEOPLE ABOUT COVID?

Participants were asked to reflect on the way government leaders communicate to the public regarding COVID-19. They were asked whether they would do anything differently if they were a government leader communicating to young people. Approximately 55 per cent of participants provided a response regarding communication. The most common suggestions included tailoring communication specifically to young people (13 per cent), being more reassuring and positive when providing information (12 per cent) and providing clear information (11 per cent). Some participants also stressed the importance of enabling young people to have a say and ask questions. Others said they want leaders to tell the truth rather than minimise negative information.



***“I would have notifications in the COVID-19 check in app, for current COVID-19 news and information (such as lockdown times, hotspots and border closures etc.) This feature could be turned on or off in the COVID check in app, and would allow younger people who spend more time on their phone compared to watching the news, to receive recent information.*”**

Female, 15 years, South East

“ I would address young people specifically and cater my speech around the key issues affecting them such as mental health during lockdowns and organisations that can assist with mental health.

Female, 16 years, Metropolitan

“ Have a different show to properly explain what COVID-19 is and what is happening in the world so the kids understood better. For example a cartoon for young ones and btn [Behind the News] would be a great resource to teach young people about COVID-19.

Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and/or South Sea Islander, Female, 17 years, North Coast



SOLUTIONS/ WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE WANT

“ I would engage with young people on social media.

Male, 16 years, Metropolitan

“ Employ a youth representative that brings a young voice to speak about the issues to connect with the young people better and to communicate from a different perspective.

Non-binary, 17 years, Metropolitan



“ I would provide a page for kids about COVID-19 to give information to young children who may not hear the news or get told by parents.

Male, 13 years, South East

“ I would make sure to alert young people to the spread of misinformation on the virus on social media, and encourage them to obtain information from reliable news sources instead.

Male, 15 years, Metropolitan

“ News updates should also be released through school newsletters, emails and social medias. I wouldn't have heard about it for a while if not for friends.

Male, 16 years, Metropolitan

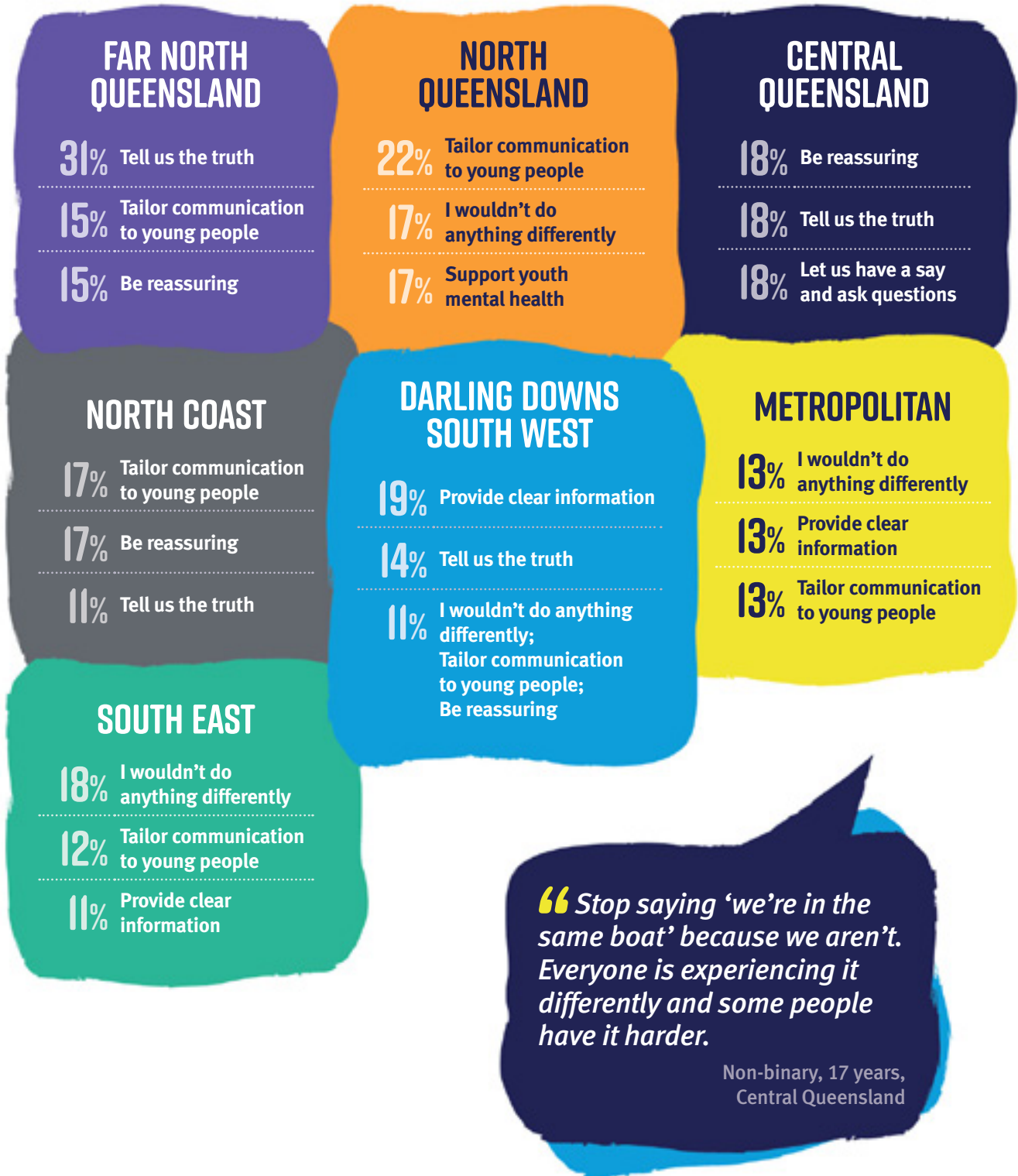
“ Have frequent community and state wide online forums with members of the state government and the health department which would keep kids informed with government decisions and also be an opportunity for kids to ask questions they might of had.

Male, 15 years, Central Queensland

Regional differences

The top three responses differed between regions. **Figure 12** shows the top three responses for each region.

Figure 12. What young people would do differently: top three responses by region



I WOULD TAILOR COMMUNICATION SPECIFICALLY TO YOUNG PEOPLE

“ Make it more accessible, like using simpler language or info graphics and putting it all on Instagram, etc.

Female, 18 years, Darling Downs South West

“ Leaders need to do separate updates for kids. The other updates from the doctors and government are too long and boring. Sit down with kids and tell them the information then have kids do a video for other kids.

Female, 14 years, North Queensland

“ Make it more understandable and use language that isn't too complicated.

Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and/or South Sea Islander, Male, 17 years, Far North Queensland

“ Make a cartoon or show about COVID and put it on the kids channels so they can see what's happening and understand.

Non-binary, 13 years, Metropolitan

Gender differences

Responses differed across gender. **Table 4** shows the top three responses across gender.

Table 4. What young people would do differently: top three responses by gender

MALE	FEMALE	NON-BINARY
18% I wouldn't do anything differently	15% Tailor communication to young people	17% Emphasise the importance of following guidelines
13% Be reassuring	13% I wouldn't do anything differently	14% Tailor communication to young people
11% Provide clear information	12% Be reassuring	11% Be reassuring

Differences according to primary language spoken at home

Responses differed between participants who speak English at home and those who speak a language other than English (see **Table 5**).

Table 5. What young people would do differently: top three responses by primary language spoken at home

SPEAK A LANGUAGE OTHER THAN ENGLISH AT HOME

28% I wouldn't do anything differently

13% Clear information

13% Emphasise the importance of following guidelines

SPEAK ENGLISH AT HOME

13% Tailor communication to young people

13% I wouldn't do anything differently

13% Be reassuring

“ I would try to make the guidelines for masks/lockdowns/vaccines etc. more clear so that young people had a better understanding of what is happening (at the moment it seems more like vague directives and rules spread by word of mouth rather than a clear unified message).

Male, 15 years, South East

I WOULD PROVIDE MORE CLEAR INFORMATION

“ Providing more information to young people. It gives us a sense of security. With this information we might cope better and not constantly feel overwhelmed and unsure.

Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and/or South Sea Islander, Male, 17 years, North Queensland

“ I would explain to them why these safety and health rules needed to be put in place and help their understanding of it.

Female, 13 years, Metropolitan

“ The vaccine information was confusing for me. It was hard to understand why I didn't have to get it then all of a sudden I did.

Non-binary, 15 years, Metropolitan

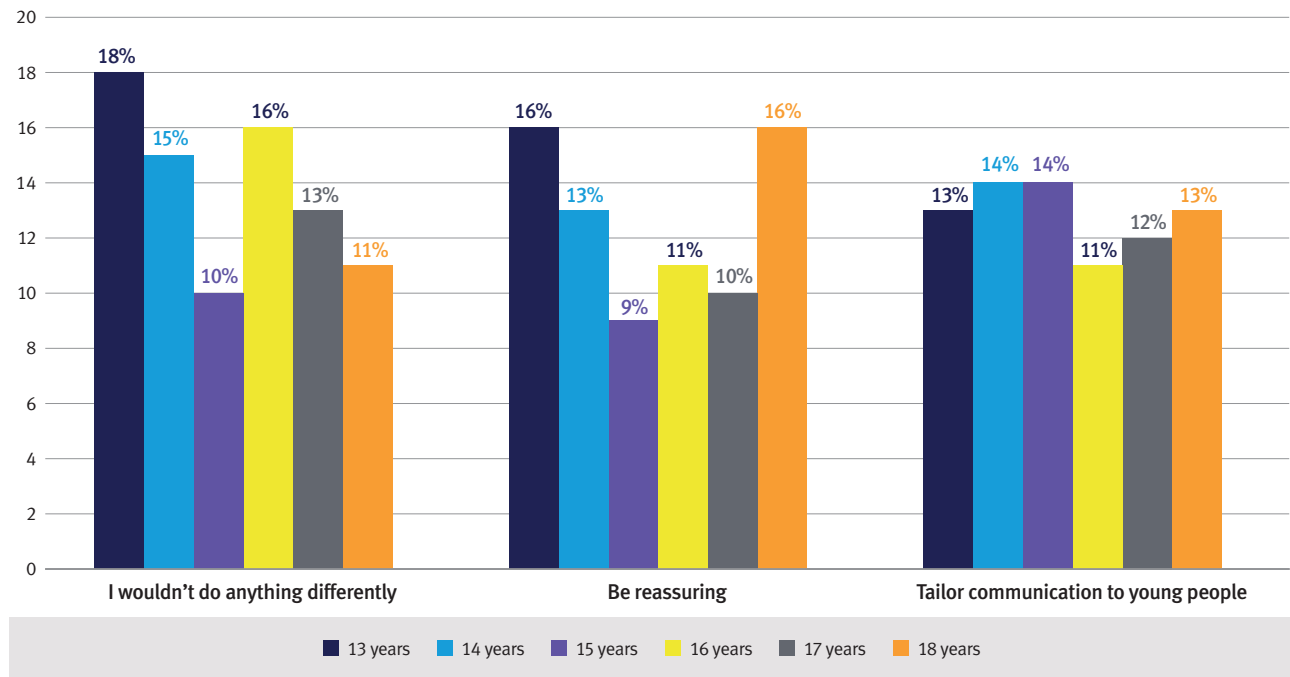
“ More explanation behind certain decisions.

Female, 16 years, South East

Age differences

The top three responses did not differ between age groups, but the percentage of participants who gave each response differed; for example, participants aged 13 years were more likely than other age groups to say they would not do anything differently (see **Figure 13**).

Figure 13. What young people would do differently: top three responses by age



I WOULDN'T DO ANYTHING DIFFERENTLY

“ Nothing, Queensland has done an amazing job.
Female, 13 years, South East

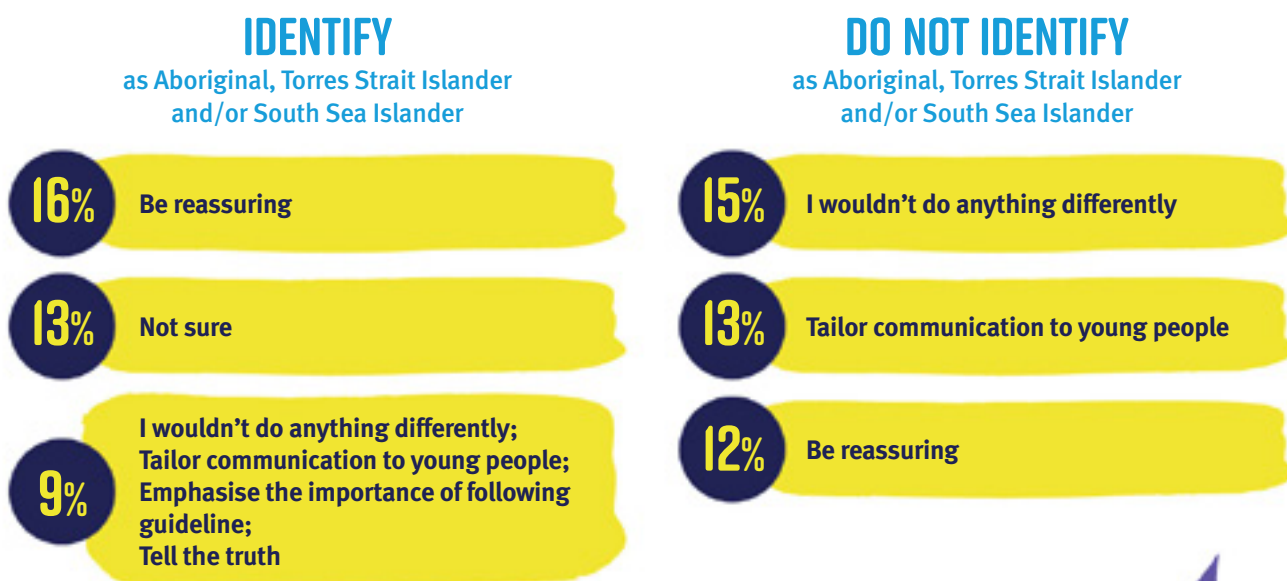
“ I wouldn't do anything differently when talking about COVID-19 to kids.
Male, 13 years, Darling Downs South West

“ I think the Government has done an adequate job when it comes to talking to young people about the situation. Updates are often in the form of 'easy-to-digest' infographics, that don't overload us with information but give enough vital information.
Male, 16 years, South East

Perspectives of Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and South Sea Islander participants

The top three responses did not differ between participants who identified as Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and/or South Sea Islander and those who did not. For both groups, the top three responses were they would be reassuring, they would not do anything differently, and they would tailor communication to young people (see **Table 6**).

Table 6. What young people would do differently: top three responses by Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and South Sea Islander status



I WOULD BE MORE REASSURING



“ I would let them know that you're not alone, and that it won't last forever.

Female, 16 years, South East

“ I would have reassured teenagers and suggested ways to deal with the negative outcomes.

Female, 16 years, Central Queensland

“ Let them know that it's not that scary but you just gotta be careful and smart.

Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and/or South Sea Islander, Male, 17 years, South East

“ Not hype it up so much and make people as fearful.

Male, 17 years, North Queensland

“ Talk about milestones in moving forward from the virus.

Male, 15 years, South East



A further 306 participants provided responses that did not address communication. These participants described more general ideas about how COVID-19 should be handled; for example, participants made suggestions about vaccination availability, schooling and enforcing restrictions.

“It took ages for the vax to get north or at least it felt like that. It was all in the big cities and that made people in small town not feel as important so I would do that different. Make sure everyone has access to what you say is important.”

Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and/or South Sea Islander, Male, 17 years, Far North Queensland

“I would enforce more discipline and consequences for breaking lockdowns.”

Female, 16 years, Metropolitan

“Do lockdown sooner to help stop the spread.”

Male, 14 years, Metropolitan

“I would listen to what other countries have discovered in their fight against COVID and implement this knowledge as a leader.”

Female, 18 years, Metropolitan

“Make it that only essential workers do work during lockdown and school to be open.”

Male, 14 years, South East

“I guess we had it pretty easy but I think for other kids in schools in cities I would find a better way to have them learn because it's tough on the computer by yourself.”

Male, 16 years, Far North Queensland

“Have older people allowed to leave nursing homes. We wanted to bring grandma home because it would have been safer but we weren't allowed in there to get her. She was sad.”

Female, 13 years, Metropolitan

“Support more businesses.”

Female, 17 years, North Coast

“School should have stayed open for year 11 and 12 because it's hard to catch up on learning.”

Female, 16 years, Central Queensland

“Get vaccination centres at school.”

Female, 13 years, Metropolitan



“ Not all kids have phones and people assume we do. I got not let in to so many places because I didn't have a phone so that's unfair. Couldn't you find a way where we scan school ID cards or go cards to check in.

Male, 16 years, South East

“ Getting different plans for people working in remote areas. I help dad and mum on a farm and they couldn't get much help last year because staff and people who help were lockdown even though there were only small cases but they couldn't come to remote Queensland. Remote quarantine might also be good because it could bring money and support and attention to small towns.

Male, 18 years, North Queensland

“ Set up mental health services offered directly to students through their schools.

Male, 18 years, North Coast

“ Being allowed out for an hour wasn't long enough. Where people could access a park there could have been an app which people could book out park areas and we should have stayed out longer.

Female, 13 years, Metropolitan

“ Free or loaned iPads to homes for grandparents to talk to us.

Male, 13 years, Central Queensland

“ I would deliver food or have set times for people to shop. That would help older people.

Female, 13 years, Metropolitan

“ I would give resources out for young people to use to remain connected to their friends in different mediums. Rather than just using Facetime and what not, something different.

Female, 15 years, Metropolitan

“ I would allow students to be vaccinated in schools – it's much more efficient, high impact and increases the scope/scale of the rollout.

Gender not provided, 16 years, Metropolitan

“ Provide people with entertainment or organise online events that are interesting to young people.

Female, 16 years, Darling Downs South West

SUMMARY

Young people, particularly females, value connections with their family and friends. They told us that physical separation from these important people in their lives was the most difficult part of COVID-19 lockdowns. These connections were cited less frequently by male and non-binary participants. Young people who speak English at home were more likely to develop a greater appreciation of their friends as a result of lockdowns compared with those who speak a language other than English at home.

Young people value face-to-face learning and shared the challenges of remote learning. They reported insufficient support, limited communication and distractions at home as some of the things that impacted their learning. Unsurprisingly, young people aged 17 years, many of whom would have been completing Year 12 during COVID-19 lockdowns, were most likely to find remote learning challenging, with many telling us about the challenges of exams and missed special events such as formals and graduations.

Participants who identified as non-binary were more likely to experience challenges with remote learning, and more likely to express their dislike at spending more time at home with their families. This finding resonates with what gender-diverse young people told us in 2020, when only two per cent of gender-diverse participants reported feeling happy when spending time with their families compared with an average of eight per cent for participants who identified as male or female (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2021). These findings may reflect challenges faced by gender-diverse (including non-binary) young people around family acceptance, with research showing that many families struggle to accept their children who identify with a gender outside of the traditional binary classification (Katz-Wise, Rosario, & Tsappis, 2016).

Young people appreciate time away from the home environment, including time spent playing sport, hanging out with friends and shopping, so some found having to stay home challenging. This aligns with what young people told us during *Growing up in Queensland 2020* about what they value in their communities (Queensland Family and Child Commission, 2021). Younger teens were more likely

to cite the importance of social relationships and recreation compared with 18-year-old participants.


Young people told us that time for themselves, flexible learning environments and a flexible daily schedule were what they appreciated most about lockdowns. They told us that the elimination of commute times to school meant that they were able to get more sleep, and they also enjoyed the freedom to eat throughout the day. Recent research has begun to explore the impact of the removal of commute times on young people's learning and wellbeing, with early indications suggesting a better alignment of sleep with natural circadian rhythms and longer sleep duration (Stone, et al., 2021). Many also spent the extra time honing existing skills or learning new ones while in lockdown.

Others focussed their attention on their physical and mental health. Young people spoke of enjoying time to exercise, focusing on their nutrition and taking steps to improve their mental health, for example, through mindfulness and relaxation techniques.

Young people value clear, youth-friendly, accessible, and balanced information. They want social media channels to be used alongside traditional media to communicate clear information about the reasons for restrictions, and vaccination information. Many want leaders to frame information in a positive manner and to provide reassurance during these challenging times, while others stressed the importance of being told the truth and treated like adults. Some participants who identified as Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and/or South Sea Islander called for information for diverse groups.

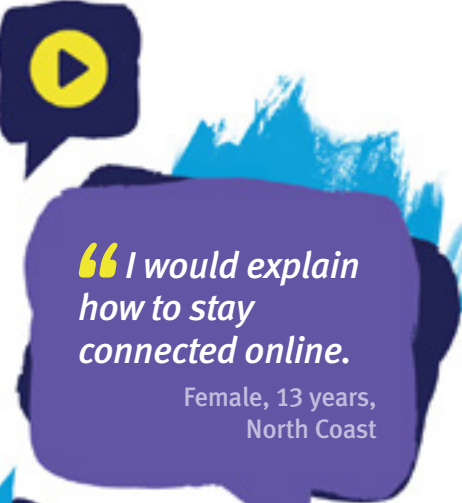
WHERE TO FROM HERE?

This study has given us an understanding of how lockdowns affect young Queenslanders. Young people described a lack of contact with friends as one of the worst things about lockdowns. As a result, we have a better idea of how to support young people through lockdowns; for example, media campaigns that encourage social media contact and support young people to manage feelings of loneliness may be effective in reducing the impact of loneliness that results from lockdowns.




“One main thing I would do differently, if I were a leader, was promoting online events for young people to participate.”

Female, 15 years, South East



“I would explain how to stay connected online.”

Female, 13 years,
North Coast



“Give more information on how young people can connect with friends.”

Female, 16 years, South East

Young people's suggestions about how to communicate with them about the pandemic are helpful in informing us how to support young people during other crises. Young people want youth-centred information that is based on facts and not diluted by political debate. Some Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and/or South Sea Islander participants want information that addresses the concerns of their communities. These suggestions may also have implications for public messaging beyond the pandemic, including during natural disasters.

“ I would address young people specifically and cater my speech around the key issues affecting them such as mental health during lockdowns and organisations that can assist with mental health.

Female, 16 years, Metropolitan

“ Many mob aren't sure if the vax is safe and we need better info about it being safe and we need better access.

Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and/or South Sea Islander, gender not provided, 17 years, North Queensland

“ Talk differently without so much fear and make sure you talk to us mob in the regions and not just people in a big city.

Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and/or South Sea Islander, Male, 17 years, North Queensland

“ Give more support to minorities (eg. lgbtq+, poc [person of colour]) and let them know they are seen.

Female, 13 years, Metropolitan

Young people provided valuable insights into the impacts of lockdowns and suggestions about communication about the pandemic. Together, these insights and suggestions have implications for how we support and communicate with young people during the COVID journey and beyond.

REFERENCES

- Attenborough, J. (2021). *2021 UNICEF Australia Young Ambassador Report*. Sydney, Australia: UNICEF Australia.
- Fahey, G. (2021). *Beating lockdown blues: Students pass the Covid test*. Sydney, Australia: The Centre for Independent Studies.
- Greenland, N., & Hall, S. (2021). *Young voices of the pandemic – Youth survey COVID-19 report 2020*. Sydney, Australia: Mission Australia.
- Katz-Wise, S. L., Rosario, M., & Tsappis, M. (2016). Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth and family acceptance. *Pediatric Clinics of North America*, 63(6), 1011 – 1025.
- Loades, M. E., Chatburn, E., Higson-Sweeney, N., Reynolds, S., Shafran, R., Brigden, A., . . . Crawley, E. (2020). Rapid systematic review: The impact of social isolation and loneliness on the mental health of children and adolescents in the context of COVID-19. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 59(11), 1218-1239. doi:10.1016/j.jaac.2020.05.009
- Queensland Family and Child Commission. (2021). *Voices of hope: Growing Up in Queensland 2020*. Brisbane, Australia: Queensland Family and Child Commission.
- Stone, J. E., Phillips, A. J., Chachos, E., Hand, A. J., Lu, S., Carskadon, M. A., . . . Rajaratnam, S. M. (2021). In-person vs home schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic: Differences in sleep, circadian timing, and mood in early adolescence. *Journal of Pineal Research*, 71(12757). doi:10.1111/jpi.12757
- Strauss, P., Cook, A., Winter, S., Watson, V., Wright Toussaint, D., & Lin, A. (2017). *Trans pathways: the mental health experiences and care pathways of trans young people. Summary of results*. Perth, Australia: Telethon Kids Institute.

