

Impact of Covid-19 crisis on the behavioural and emotional adjustment of children with autism and their families: a national study

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BACKGROUND

Children and young people (CYP) with autism experienced a variety of emotional and behavioural challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated lockdown. Some reported challenges included: anxiety, social distancing, loneliness, and low mood.

Little is known about whether the emotional and behavioural challenges experienced by CYP with autism and intellectual disabilities (ID) during the COVID-19 pandemic differ to those experienced by CYP with ID only.

IMAGINE-ID is a national UK study of CYP with ID of known genetic origin, a proportion of whom also have an autism diagnosis. We surveyed caregivers about their CYP's behavioural and emotional adjustment during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, when lockdown impacted CYP's ability to access in-person educational provisions for several months.

Aim: Compare reported emotional and behavioural adjustment during the COVID-19 pandemic of CYP with ID and autism to those experienced by CYP whose ID was not associated with autism.

Hypothesis: Caregivers of CYP with ID and autism will report that their CYP experienced more severe emotional and behavioural challenges during lockdown than those with CYP who have ID not associated with autism.

METHODS

1063 caregivers of CYP (6 to 26 years, M=14.9, SD=4.4, 55% male) completed the Coronavirus Health and Impact Survey (CRISIS; crisissurvey.org) between May-December 2021.

CRISIS asked caregivers to report on their CYP's experiences of familial stress, biggest challenge and behavioural changes during the pandemic. We used a subset of the CRISIS that asked questions about:

Biggest Challenge

A question about caregiver's perception of their CYP's biggest challenge during the lockdown: social distancing, anxiety, loneliness, or low mood.

Behavioural changes

Questions about CYP's behaviour changes as reported by their caregivers during the pandemic compared to their behaviour before the pandemic began:

- **Positive changes** were defined as becoming happier, more relaxed, and more confident.
- **Negative changes** were defined as becoming more irritable, less energetic, and more restless.

RESULTS

40.5% of IMAGINE CYP had autism. There was no significant difference in age ($p=0.129$) or sex ($p=.532$) between those with and without autism.

Overall, most families (84.5%) reported that their CYP faced emotional and behavioural challenges to their mental health due to the pandemic and its associated lockdown.

Biggest Challenge

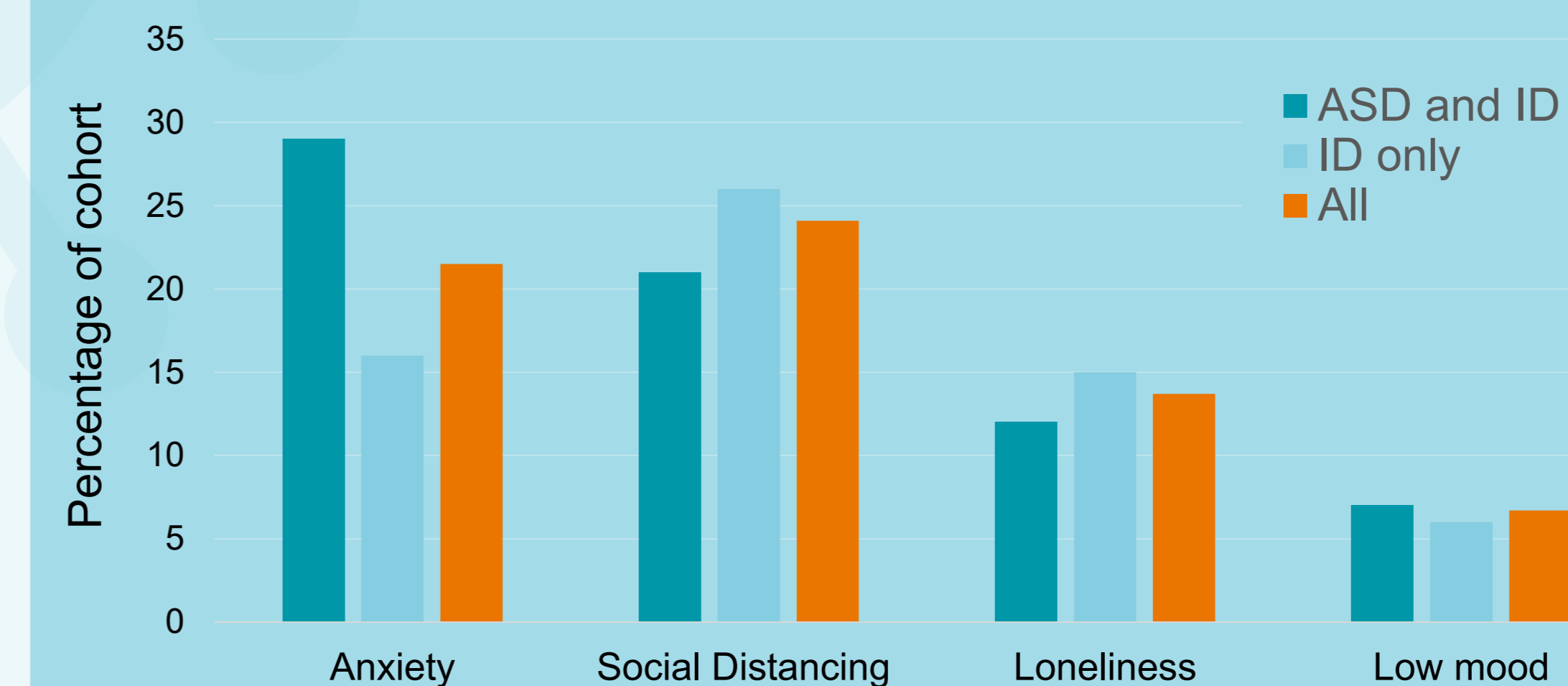


Figure 1. CYP's biggest challenge during the pandemic

Based on caregivers reports the biggest challenge for CYP with autism and ID was anxiety.

By contrast, the biggest challenge for children with ID alone was social distancing (Fig.1).

Behavioural changes

Overall, 42% of the IMAGINE cohort reported negative changes and 16% reported positive changes.

There were more negative behavioural changes (46% autism vs 39% ID only) and less positive behavioural changes (14% autism vs 18% ID only) in the autism and ID group compared to those with ID only (Fig.2).

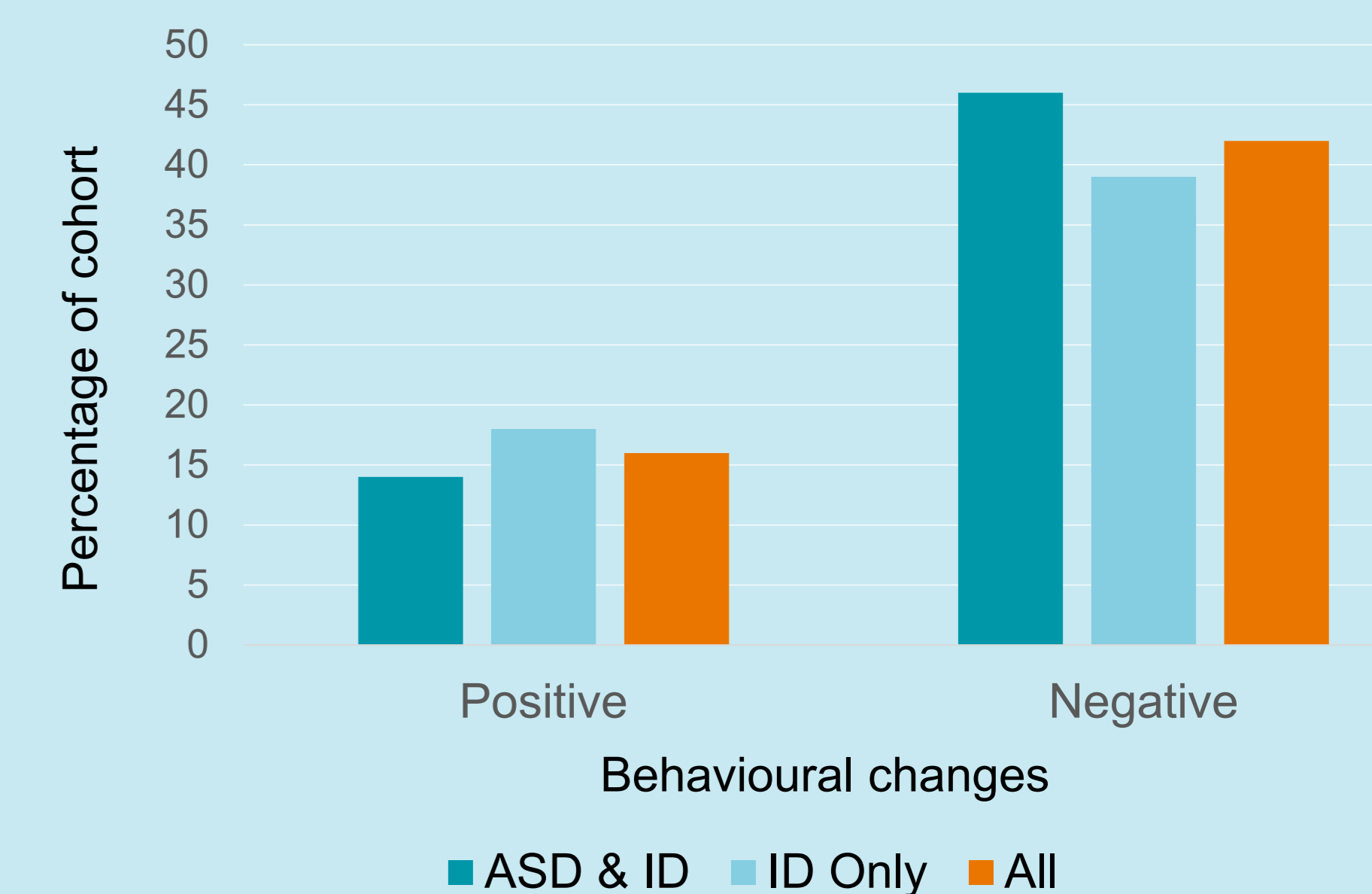


Figure 2. Direction of behavioural change during the pandemic

INTERPRETATION

During the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, caregivers of CYP with ID and autism reported that their CYP experienced more challenges with anxiety, greater negative behavioural changes and less positive behavioural changes during lockdown, than CYP with ID only.