

# **Transforming mental health and wellbeing support for children and young people in schools**

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## **Transforming mental health and wellbeing support for children and young people in schools**

### **In Summary**

1. Children and young people's mental health is in decline; this is one of the greatest public health crises facing the UK.
2. The full effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on children and young people's mental health and wellbeing remain to be seen.
3. Schools are one of the most significant developmental settings for children and young people and they have a responsibility to safeguard their students' mental health and wellbeing.
4. The government and national policymakers also have a key role to play in supporting schools and improving the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people more widely.
5. Schools should: increase the number of fully implemented, high quality, effective mental health interventions; regularly assess children and young people's mental health using validated methods, and; train teachers to recognise and respond to the signs of mental health difficulties.
6. The government and national policymakers should: increase funding for mental health initiatives, both in the education setting and for specialist services; address social factors that are commonly associated with higher rates of mental ill health, and; move away from the emphasis and prioritisation of high stakes academic assessments.

## **In Detail**

### **1. The state of children and young people's mental health and wellbeing**

Evidence shows that there has been a significant decline in children and young people's mental health in recent years. Longstanding estimates place the prevalence of mental health difficulties among children and young people between [one in ten](#) and [one in eight](#). However, the true figure may be significantly, and worryingly, greater than these estimates. In 2019, my colleagues and I found evidence which suggests that [2 in 5 children and young people](#) experience above 'abnormal' levels of hyperactivity, and emotional and conduct problems. This stark nearly four-fold increase means that children and young people's mental health is one of the greatest public health crises facing the UK.

Mental health difficulties among children and young people can lead to harmful individual and societal consequences in the long term. For the individual, mental health difficulties in childhood can lead to [poorer physical health, higher rates of criminal behaviour, and an overall lower quality of life in adulthood](#). Mental ill health in childhood can also lead to lost productivity within the economy, as well as higher service utilisation. **Taken together, these long-term consequences of childhood mental health difficulties cost [an estimated £100 billion per year in England alone](#)**. Addressing the growing problem of children and young people's mental health is crucial, both on an individual and societal level.

## **2. The impact of COVID-19**

The COVID-19 pandemic is likely to have had a worsening effect. In the last three years alone, there has been a [5% increase in probable mental health disorders](#) in children aged between 5 and 16. While current research has not yet demonstrated a causative link between the pandemic and this increase, it is likely that the pandemic will have contributed in part.

Qualitative evidence from the [Teenagers' Experience of Life in Lockdown](#) (TELL) study shows that young people experienced a wide range of emotions during the first national lockdown. Although some felt positive emotions, like a sense of relief at not having to sit exams, these were often outweighed by negative emotions. Teenagers reported feeling worried, anxious, upset, frustrated and disillusioned. Consequently, there was a significant increase in the number of children and young people seeking mental health support. **The online service Kooth saw a [significant increase in demand throughout the pandemic and by August 2020 there had been a 97% increase in the number of children and young people presenting with mental health concerns compared to 2019.](#)**

The full extent of the pandemic's effects on children and young people's mental health remains to be seen. In any event, there are actions that schools, the government and national policymakers should take now to improve children and young people's mental health and wellbeing more generally.

### **3. The role of schools**

Schools play a significant role in children and young people's development. Among other formative events, [children and young people can create friendships, face exam pressures, and experience bullying within the school setting](#). Each of these situations can significantly influence a young person's mental health and wellbeing. **It is therefore vital that schools can recognise the signs of emergent mental health difficulties and react appropriately.**

The government also recognises that schools have a responsibility towards their students' mental health and wellbeing. Most recently, the Department for Education updated its '[Keeping children safe in education](#)' statutory guidance to clarify the links between mental health and safeguarding. It notes that teaching staff are well placed to notice changes in a student's behaviour that may indicate an emergent mental health difficulty or a safeguarding issue. The guidance also refers to other, more detailed guidance on '[Mental health and behaviour in schools](#)', which focuses on four key areas: preventing mental health problems, identifying emergent mental health difficulties, helping students to access early support, and helping students to access specialist support when necessary.

To adhere to the government's guidelines, schools can take several actions.

## **Recommendations**

### **4. What should schools do?**

Schools can make positive changes to their mental health provision in three key areas. They should:

- 1. Increase the number of fully implemented, high quality, effective mental health interventions.** Alongside several colleagues, I have assessed the effectiveness of a wide variety of interventions for children between the ages of 7 and 13. We found that [social and emotional learning programmes](#) are effective for younger children and programmes such as [BounceBack](#) and [peer mentoring](#) can be effective for older children. However, schools must dedicate the required time and resources [to implement the programmes fully](#) to achieve the greatest success. They therefore need to be supported to do so by the government (see section 5 below).
- 2. Regularly assess children and young people's mental health using validated methods.** This ensures that schools can develop an understanding of the specific issues that their students face. With this understanding, schools can implement targeted support programmes to tackle known problems. Additionally, monitoring mental health helps to determine whether any interventions are succeeding in their desired goal. By using validated methods instead of [home-grown surveys](#) home-grown surveys, schools can rely on the accuracy of the data. This rationale underpins the [#BeeWell Programme](#), which will survey all children and

young people within participating schools over three years between 2021 and 2024 to build an accurate picture of children and young people's mental health, which in turn can enable a data-driven response within and beyond schools.

- 3. Train teachers to recognise and respond to the signs of mental health difficulties.** Teachers are [often the first professionals](#) that parents/carers approach when they have concerns regarding a young person's mental health. Teachers therefore need support to develop the knowledge and skills to support children and young people's mental health effectively. Schools should implement [initial mental health literacy training](#) for all staff and provide additional youth mental health first aider training where necessary. Although [the government refers](#) to a single designated senior mental health lead, [some schools may require more than one](#), especially if they wish to develop a whole-school approach to mental health provision.

Some of these recommendations require additional funding and support, which is a role that should be fulfilled by the government and other national policymakers.

## **5. What should the government and national policymakers do?**

The government and other national policymakers, such as exam regulators, also have a role to play in protecting children and young people's mental health, and in ensuring that schools have the resources to do their part.

The government and national policymakers should:

- 1. Increase funding for mental health initiatives, both in the education setting and for specialist services.** The government should dedicate additional funding to schools so that they can implement mental health initiatives and training for staff, as noted above. The government should also increase funding for specialist services so that education providers can refer students who require additional support. At present, the funding for children and young people's specialist mental health services is insufficient. [Between 2005 and 2015](#), the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) experienced budget cuts of 5.4%. Over the same period, CAMHS saw a 13% decrease in the number of service users. The recently announced [mental health recovery plan](#) is a welcome step but the government should monitor its progress to ensure that the funds are used where they are most needed.
- 2. Address social factors that are commonly associated with higher rates of mental ill health.** Research repeatedly demonstrates that [certain groups of children and young people](#) are at greater risk of experiencing mental health difficulties. In addition to treating the mental health difficulties of these groups, the government must intervene at the source to address social factors that influence mental health difficulties. For some groups, such as children with special educational needs, this will require increased funding within education, health and social care plans. For other disparities, like those between genders and ethnicities, the



government should inspect the reasons for the disparities and take action to address them.

**3. Move away from the emphasis and prioritisation of exam results.**

Much of the discourse surrounding the full re-opening of schools has focused on the need to [‘catch up’](#). However, evidence shows that the government’s current prioritisation of exam success has a detrimental impact upon children and young people. Those who are ‘lower attainers’ in Key Stage 3 often [feel like failures](#) despite successes in other areas of their lives. Additionally, [there is evidence](#) that academic difficulties can lead to an increase in internalising symptoms (withdrawal and anxiety) among girls. The focus on academic testing exacerbates these issues. The government should instead re-examine its focus on academic achievement and place greater and equal emphasis upon students’ mental health and wellbeing, and successes outside of traditional academic subjects.

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## Authors



[Neil Humphrey](#) is the Sarah Fielden Chair in Psychology of Education. His research interests include mental health, social and emotional learning, and special educational needs.

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