

Prevention in health and social care: Call for proposals

Response from The Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition

The Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition welcomes the Committee's inquiry on prevention and the opportunity to shape the scope of the inquiry. Prevention cannot begin early enough, and babies, children and young people should form an integral part of this inquiry. In particular, we would like to recommend that the inquiry has a specific focus on **babies, children and young people's mental health and wellbeing**.

Why should the Committee consider this issue?

Mental health problems emerge early in life. Data suggests that a third of mental health problems start before the age of 14 and half by the age 18 (Solmim et al., 2022).

There has been a continuous rise in mental health problems in children and young people in recent years. In 2022, one in six children aged 7 to 16 had a mental health problem, an increase from one in nine in 2017 (NHS Digital, 2022). There has been a particular increase in young people aged 17 to 19, with 1 in 4 young people experiencing a mental health problem in this age group compared to 1 in 6 in 2021.

Consistent findings show that some groups of children and young people are at greater risk of experiencing mental health problems. This includes children living in poverty, young people who identify as LGBT+, young people with learning disabilities, young people with autism, young people with caring responsibilities, young people with a parent with poor mental health, and young people from racialised communities.

The Covid-19 pandemic has heightened existing challenges and widened inequalities for children and young people's mental health. Analysis suggests that 1.5 million children and young people under the age of 18 could need new or increased mental health support due to the pandemic. The cost of living crisis is also adding additional pressure to children and young people's mental health, with recent data from NHS Digital showing that more than one in four (29%) 7-16 year olds with a mental health difficulty lived in households which experienced a reduction in income in the past year (NHS Digital, 2022).

Why would this issue benefit from further scrutiny?

Firstly, there has been a lack of clear direction and strategy for preventing mental health problems from emerging. In particular, emphasis within the children's mental health system has predominantly been placed on the acute end of the system and on managing crisis rather than on building the strengths children and young people possess and implementing effective preventative approaches. Consequently, there have been few nationally led initiatives aimed at promoting babies, children and young people's mental health.

Secondly, prevention in children and young people's mental health is an area that has seen significant de-prioritisation and cuts to funding in recent years. For example, total public spending on children has fallen in real terms by 10% since 2010/11 and prevention and

early intervention services have been reduced further as increasing proportions are spent on acute need (O'Shea, 2021).

Finally, tackling disparities and risk factors in the early years and childhood are some of the most effective preventative measures that can be taken, yet there has been a lack of action to address the risk factors to children and young people's mental health. The Mental Health Foundation notes that the risk factors for poor mental health are the social economic and environmental circumstances which can lead to the development of mental health problems. These can include experiences of trauma, adversity, inequality, racism and discrimination, poor housing, having a parent with mental health problems and parental conflict. For example, adverse childhood experiences increase the risk of developing later mental health problems, with research suggesting that almost 1 in 3 diagnosed mental health conditions in adulthood relate directly to adverse childhood experiences that have subsequently impacted on their psychological development and wellbeing.

Our members are clear that without action to address the risk factors of poor mental health in childhood, wider efforts to improve mental health will not be effective in creating change.

References

NHS Digital (2022) *Mental health of children and young people in England 2022 – wave 3 follow up to the 2017 survey*. Available from: <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/2022-follow-up-to-the-2017-survey>

O'Shea N. (2021) *Time for Action*. London: Centre for Mental Health. Available from: https://cypmhc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/CentreforMH_TimeForAction.pdf

Solmi, M., Radua, J., Olivola, M. et al. Age at onset of mental disorders worldwide: large-scale meta-analysis of 192 epidemiological studies. *Mol Psychiatry* 27, 281–295 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41380-021-01161-7>