



Babies, children, and young people's mental health

Debate briefing

Tuesday 30th January 2024

Centre for Mental Health and the Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition (CYPMHC) welcome this Westminster Hall debate on Children's Mental Health Week on Tuesday 30th January, led by Rosena Allin Khan MP. It is well understood that the majority of adult mental health problems first emerge in childhood and adolescence, with half of all lifetime mental health problems established by the age of 14 and 75% by age 24 (Kessler et al., 2005; McGorry et al., 2007). Mental health needs in children and young people have risen even more in recent years, with the Covid-19 pandemic further exacerbating need and deepening inequalities within society - such as poor housing, poverty and systemic oppression - that in turn impact on mental health. Whilst there have been many measures introduced to improve mental health support for children, young people, and families in recent years, many still struggle to access timely mental health support from services.

Summary

- In 2023, 1 in 5 children and young people aged 8 to 25 years had a mental health problem (NHS Digital, 2023). This is a rise from 1 in 9 in 2017.
- Analysis by Centre for Mental Health shows that 1.5 million children under the age of 18 could need new or increased mental health support as a result of the pandemic.
- However, children and young people still struggle to access timely support with their mental health. In 2021-22, 32% of referrals to NHS Children and Young People's Mental Health Services (CYPMHS) resulted in no treatment, amounting to almost a quarter of a million children.
- Alongside this, early intervention support services are not consistently available and the roll out of additional support in schools through Mental Health Support Teams is limited.
- Centre for Mental Health and the Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition are calling for:
 - **National action to address the determinants of poor mental health, such as introducing a new Child Poverty Act.**
 - **Increased investment to Integrated Care Systems to deliver a comprehensive pathway of mental health support.**
 - **Full implementation of whole education approaches to mental health and wellbeing in all education settings, including the full roll out of Mental Health Support Teams.**
 - **Increased early intervention support in the community through the national roll out of early support hubs.**
 - **Reform the Mental Health Act.**

1. The mental health babies, children and young people

- There was a significant rise in prevalence of mental health need amongst children and young people in the last decade, from one in ten in 2004, to one in nine in 2017 to one in six in 2020 (NHS Digital).¹
- This high level of need has since remained stable. In 2023, about 1 in 5 children and young people aged 8 to 25 years had a mental health problem (NHS Digital, 2023).
- The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated need, with analysis showing that 1.5 million children and young people under the age of 18 could need new or increased mental health support following the Covid-19 pandemic (O’Shea, 2021).
- Evidence suggests that NHS specialist mental health services are turning away one in three children and young people referred to them for treatment (Local Government Association, 2023).
- It is estimated that around 75% of young people experiencing a mental health problem are forced to wait so long that their condition gets worse, or they are unable to access any treatment at all (Local Government Association, 2023).
- The number of under-18s attending hospital emergency departments with recorded diagnoses of a psychiatric condition tripled between 2010 and 2019 (YoungMinds, no date).
- The cost of intervening is high. The economic and social cost of mental ill health has grown to almost £119 billion a year in the last decade (Centre for Mental Health, 2020).

2. Addressing social determinants of poor mental health

Some groups of children and young people are disproportionately impacted by mental health problems largely driven by a complex interplay of social and environmental determinants of poor mental health. Children living in poverty, with a parent with mental health illness, LGBTQ+ children and young people, those with special educational needs and disabilities, care experienced children and young people, and children from racialised communities are all significantly more likely to experience poor mental health. Recent research by Centre for Mental Health has also found that experiences of poverty, racism, inadequate housing and poor access to green spaces increased the risk of childhood behavioral problems which are among the most common childhood mental health difficulties (Davie et al., 2023).

Tackling disparities and risk factors for poor mental health in the early years and childhood are some of the most effective preventative measures that can be taken, yet there has been a significant lack of action taken by the Government in this area. There has been substantial cuts to preventative support, with analysis highlighting a 26% reduction in the Public Health grant on a real terms per person basis since 2015/16, risking essential services for babies, children and young people, such as school nurses and health visitors, being cut (Finch, 2023).

¹ This relates to children and young people aged 5 to 16 years old.

We are clear that without action to address social determinants, like poverty, racism and discrimination, and environmental factors, including housing, other efforts to improve mental health will not be effective in creating change. As a first step, this should include:

- Delivering on the Association of Directors of Public Health's call for a new Child Poverty Act to eradicate child poverty by 2030.
- Prioritising whole family approaches to support and implement comprehensive support for families, including evidence-based parenting programmes.
- A commitment from government to tackling all forms of racism, discrimination, and exclusion through a comprehensive cross-government strategy. This should include action to address the specific injustices faced by children and young people from racialised communities within key settings such as health, education, and the criminal justice system.

3. Investing in a comprehensive pathway of mental health support

Mental health care for babies, children and young people has been underfunded for many years. Whilst the NHS Long Term Plan committed to address the disparity in funding for children's mental health by investing in these services at a rate faster than both overall NHS funding and total mental health spending, the reality is that services remain woefully under-resourced, and demand continues to outstrip capacity. As a result, many children and young people face high access thresholds for services, rejected referrals and long waiting times for support. For example, in 2021-22, 32% of referrals were discharged from NHS CYPMHS without any treatment, an increase from the previous year and almost a quarter of a million children.

Urgent action is needed to ensure that 100% of babies, children, and young people who need mental health support, receive it. We estimate that this would require an **additional £1.7 billion** to be delivered to Integrated Care Systems to ensure that they can deliver a comprehensive pathway of support for 0-25 year olds that reaches across health, social care, education, justice, and the voluntary sector.

4. Increase early intervention support

Whilst early intervention has been an ambition of successive governments, there has been no specific workstream established to ensure it is implemented across local areas and as a result, there is patchy provision of support. This ultimately costs more, as more young people reach crisis point for lack of earlier help.

A lot could be achieved by investing in a national network of early support hubs in every local area. Early support hubs offer easy-to-access, drop-in support on a self-referral basis for young people who don't meet the threshold for CYPMHS or with emerging mental health needs, up to age 25. They are community-based and are often delivered in partnership between the NHS, local authorities or the voluntary sector depending on local need and existing infrastructure. A mix of clinical staff, counsellors, youth workers, advice workers and volunteers provide a range of support on issues related to mental health and wellbeing.

Building on the existing evidence base for these services, early support hubs would reduce pressures on the NHS and improve young people's life chances by providing a community space to access flexible support for emotional wellbeing.

To establish a hub in every local authority area, we estimate that it will cost between **£114m to £134.5m** per annum for running costs and an additional **£125.4m to £205.2m** for capital costs to establish hub sites. It is important to note that there will be regional variations in costs as well as in access to existing infrastructure and properties, which will either reduce or increase costs.

5. Whole education approaches to mental health and wellbeing

Education settings have an important role to play in promoting and protecting children and young people's mental health and wellbeing. The Transforming Children and Young People's Mental Health: A Green Paper (2018) committed to the establishment of new Mental Health Support Teams (MHST) in schools and colleges with the aim of reaching a fifth to a quarter of the country by the end of 2022/23. As of Spring 2023, 398 teams are operational covering 6,800 schools and colleges and 35% of pupils in schools and learners in Further Education. An additional 100 more teams undertook training during 22/23 and NHS England expect approximately 500 MHSTs to be up and running by 2024.

While we welcome the laudable progress made in rolling these teams out, the future funding and rollout of the programme remains uncertain, and without this, we are concerned about the continued post-code lottery of MHST provision. Further funding for the national roll out of Mental Health Support Teams needs to be guaranteed to ensure that all children and young people can access mental health support within schools.

Alongside this, it needs to be ensured that ensure that all education settings fully embed whole education approaches to mental health and wellbeing. A whole education approach encompasses a complete, setting-wide, and multi-component approach to the promotion of children and young people's mental health and wellbeing and aims to place mental health as foundational to all aspects of educational life, for all students and staff.

We have long advocated for full implementation of a whole education approach to mental health and wellbeing across all education settings in order to promote positive mental health and wellbeing for all learners, and to create inclusive and supportive environments where all children can thrive.

6. Reform the Mental Health Act

It is estimated that around 3,500 children aged under 18 are admitted to mental health inpatient settings a year (Article 39, 2021). Care of this kind is extremely expensive, with acute care costing over half a million pounds per child, per year (O'Shea and McHayle, 2021). Too many children and young people are also placed in inappropriate settings and on adult wards, and insights gathered from children and young people highlight that their experiences of inpatient care are often poor.

Reforming Mental Health Act provided a key opportunity to not only improve care and strengthen safeguards for children and young people admitted to mental health hospitals, but also to reduce the number of people being detained under the Act, particularly those from racialised communities. However, a new mental health bill to reform the Mental Health Act was omitted from last year's King's Speech. It is imperative that a new Mental Health Bill is introduced to reform the Mental Health Act, and this must ensure that children and young people's rights are explicitly protected and promoted, and careful consideration must be given to how the reforms apply to this group.

Centre for Mental Health and the Coalition also support the recommendation made by the Joint Committee of MPs and Peers on the draft Mental Health Bill for the establishment of a Mental Health Commissioner for England. This role could benefit the public by ensuring there is consistent leadership for mental health across government.

About Centre for Mental Health

Centre for Mental Health is an independent charity. We take the lead in challenging injustices in policies, systems and society, so that everyone can have better mental health. By building research evidence to create fairer mental health policy, we are pursuing equality, social justice and good mental health for all. Centre for Mental Health are proud hosts of the Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition.

About the Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition

The Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition is a collaborative network of nearly 300 organisations and individuals dedicated to advocating for and influencing policy in relation to the mental health needs of babies, children, and young people. Our coalition consists of diverse stakeholders, including mental health organisations, youth support services, educational institutions, and concerned individuals, all united by a shared commitment to improving the well-being of children. We aim to raise awareness of the importance of mental health and ensure that children and young people have access to the necessary support and services.

For more information, please contact Charlotte Rainer, Coalition Manager, on Charlotte.Rainer@cypmhc.org.uk

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