



Education and opportunity

Debate briefing

July 2024

The Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition (CYPMHC) and Centre for Mental Health welcome this general debate on education and opportunity on Wednesday 24th July. It is essential that education settings are a safe and supportive environment for young people in order for them to thrive and succeed. At the centre of this must be a commitment to promoting, protecting and supporting the mental health and wellbeing of all students and staff. This briefing provides insights and recommendations on how to strengthen mental health provision in all schools and colleges.

Summary

- In 2023, about 1 in 5 children and young people aged 8 to 25 years reported a mental health problem, such as anxiety and depression (NHS Digital, 2023). This is a rise from 1 in 9 in 2017.
- Schools and colleges play an important role in children and young people's mental health, including the provision of information, advice, and support. Nearly a quarter of children and young people (23%) have accessed support at school for their mental health (NHS Digital, 2023).
- It is crucial that schools and colleges create supportive and inclusive environments that prioritise whole education approaches to mental health and wellbeing, working with the whole family, and putting in place systems of support around schools.
- Centre for Mental Health and the Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition are calling for:
 - **The full, national roll out of mental health professionals in all schools and colleges**
 - **A fully resourced, national implementation programme to support every school and college to adopt a whole education approach to mental health and wellbeing**
 - **A cultural shift in the way that attendance and behaviour are perceived and dealt with**

1. The impact of schools and colleges on mental health

Over the last decade, there has been a worrying rise in mental ill-health among children and young people in England. The latest figures from NHS Digital finds that 1 in 5 children and young people aged 8 to 25 years reported a mental health problem, such as anxiety and depression, in 2023 (NHS Digital, 2023). This is a sharp rise compared to figures from 2017 with 1 in 9 children and young people 8 to 16 years reporting concerns. It is also well established that half of all lifetime mental health problems are established by the age of 14 and 75% by age 24 (Kessler et al., 2005).

The education system is essential in both preventing mental ill-health in young people and in providing timely support. Our joint Making the Grade (2019) report explored children and

young people's experiences of mental health provision within educational settings (Abdinasir, 2019). It found that schools and colleges can have both a positive and negative impact on young people's mental health and their learning outcomes. Positive impacts can include children and young people being able to establish healthy peer relationships, learn about their mental health, take part in creative and physical activities, and develop the vital skills they need in adult life. Negative effects include experiences of bullying and discrimination, poorly managed transitions between different educational setting, academic pressures, and high stakes examinations.

According to data from NHS Digital, children and young people with mental health problems are significantly less likely to report to say they enjoy learning at school (35%) compared to those without reported difficulties (71%) and had much higher absence rates (almost four times as likely to have had 15 or more days off school in one term (NHS Digital, 2023). Over 1 in 5 children were persistently absent in 2022 (Department for Education, 2024a)

A recent report by CYPMHC also found that mental health problems and special educational needs and disabilities can contribute to behavioural problems in school (Abdinasir et al., 2023). The report recognised that punitive behaviour management techniques, such as the use of remove rooms and permanent exclusion, by some schools, can negatively impact children and young people's mental health and wellbeing, and may in turn worsen their behaviour.

2. Mental Health Professionals in schools

Schools are well placed to support children and young people with mental health difficulties and are often the first port of call for children and their families. NHS data shows that in 2023, seeking help from education services was the most commonly reported source of help and advice by parents of children with a mental health difficulty (NHS Digital, 2023).

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. These teams provided children and young people with mild to moderate mental health problems with evidence-based interventions. In 2023-24 there were 4.2 million pupils covered by a Mental Health Support Team, equating to 44% coverage of schools and colleges in England (Department for Education, 2024b).

An evaluation of the MHST programme (led by NHS England) so far has found some positive outcomes. For example, staff feeling more confident talking to children about mental health problems, being able to access advice about mental health problems more easily and having quicker access to support. However, some groups of children and young people continue to fall through the gaps in support. This includes those with more serious mental health difficulties and groups such as young people with special educational needs or neurodiversity, those from racialised communities and some religious backgrounds, and children with challenging family or social circumstances (Ellins et al, 2023).

We welcome the proposals by the Government to provide access to mental health professionals in all schools. However, it is vital that this builds on the roll out of the Mental Health Support Teams model in order to address the current gaps in provision as highlighted in the evaluation and bring an end to the postcode lottery in support.

3. Embedding a whole school and college approach

Early years settings, schools, colleges, and universities all have an important role to play in promoting and protecting children and young people’s 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.

Such approaches are crucial in making every pupil feel valued, and in supporting positive mental health and wellbeing in education settings. A study by UCL and the National Education Union demonstrates the impact of a sense of safety, belonging and wellbeing on student performance and engagement (National Education Union, 2020). Whilst many schools are working to implement whole educational approaches this work is often underfunded, comes from core budgets, and remain optional within schools.

The Government should embed whole education approaches to mental health and wellbeing in all of its policies and across all education settings to promote positive mental health and wellbeing for both learners and staff. This would have a universal impact on the health of every child and young person. A whole school approach programme in England would cost approximately £530 million per year based upon the key elements of such an approach, as costed by our CYPMHC member Place2Be (CYPMHC, 2024)

4. Approaches to attendance and behaviour

Current approaches towards the management of behaviour and attendance can be damaging to mental health and often fail to tackle the underlying needs behind the presenting issue. Our research has shown that there is often a link between poor behaviour (Abdinasir et al., 2022) and poor attendance (Shafan-Azhar & Bottomley, 2024) and mental health.

It is important for the dial to be shifted towards more compassionate and relationships based to attendance and behaviour. Schools should be adequately resourced to have the capacity to work with families and pupils to understand the reasons for poor behaviour or non-attendance and consequently support their needs.

There are various changes that can be implemented to better support children and young people struggling with poor attendance or behaviour:

- A culture shift in the attitude to behaviour and attendance are approached, away from punitive approaches and towards an understanding of the underlying causes of behaviour and strategies to support.
- Increasing the availability of mental health support in schools

- Full implementation of whole education approaches to mental health
- Building systems of support around schools and families to increase access to support
- A mental health code of absence to authorise mental health related absences.

Questions to Government

- What are the plans for expansion of mental health support in schools and how will this build upon the commitments in the Transforming Children and Young People's Mental Health green paper?
- What will the Children's Wellbeing bill encompass and what is the timeline for development?

About the Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition

The Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition is a collaborative network of over 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.

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.

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