

How can you improve your pupils' help-seeking for mental health needs?



The UK picture so far...

- ✚ Children's happiness with their overall life, friends, appearance, and enjoyment of school is significantly lower in 2018-19 compared to 2009-10 (The Good Childhood Report, 2021).
- ✚ A recent NHS (2021) report indicates that *'in 2020, one in six (16.0%) children aged 5 to 16 years were identified as having a probable mental disorder, increasing from one in nine (10.8%) in 2017. The increase was evident in both boys and girls'*. Young people are still not accessing the support they need from community and health services due to a range of barriers (NHS, 2017).
- ✚ Educational provisions are now acting as a key source of mental health support (Department for Education, 2017; 2018). The NHS report (2021) found *'62.6% of children aged 5 to 16 years with a probable mental disorder had regular support from their school or college'*.

How can we promote pupils' help-seeking in school?

A literature review carried out in 2018-19 explored the barriers and facilitators to young people seeking help from school-based staff or resources from their perspective only. From 20 studies published across the world, common themes from young people were identified (viewed below), with the aim of improving mental health provision in schools.



Key barriers to overcome:

- ✚ **Awareness and misconceptions of mental health provision** e.g. what the school offered, who the providers were, and how/where support could be accessed.
- ✚ **Logistical** e.g. lack of time, understaffing, a focus on discipline or attendance instead
- ✚ **Lack of confidence or negative beliefs about provider** e.g. fear the support source may not believe or understand them or judge their problems.
- ✚ **Confidentiality** e.g. fears their source of support may disclose their problems without consent and a lack of clarity about what would be kept confidential.
- ✚ **Stigma / negative responses from others** - negative stereotypes continue to persist in the school environment e.g. 'insane', 'crazy', or 'not being able to handle their own problems'.
- ✚ **Mental health literacy / lack of problem recognition** i.e. lack of awareness about their own (ill) mental health e.g. not feeling their problem was relevant or severe enough.
- ✚ **Preference for self-reliance** – i.e. being responsible for their own problems.

Key facilitators we can draw on:



- ✚ **Trusting staff-pupil relationships** i.e. having a trusted person in school to speak to.
- ✚ **Confidentiality and privacy** – keeping their issues private from others.
- ✚ **Access to a School-Based Mental Health Service (and online counselling for some pupils)** – this can overcome access issues e.g. travel, staff they know, and a safe space to go.
- ✚ **Good detection and referral routes** e.g. referrals from staff or peers on behalf of the pupil.
- ✚ **Autonomy** e.g. greater control over what and how their personal information would be exchanged, their counselling agenda, and how online communication would occur.

Key thoughts for schools



Does your school's mental health support match your pupils' demographics and needs? – There is no 'one size fits all' approach to mental health provision. Pupils need to have a voice regarding their provision and tailoring (e.g. through forums or feedback systems).



Reducing stigma around mental health – is there more you could be doing to tackle stigma in your school and wider community?

The young people in this review had some good ideas: formal teaching about mental health, open group discussions, liaison with local charities, parent drop-ins, and making time for non-academic activities (e.g. yoga and dance clubs).



Do you have clear confidentiality and safeguarding procedures at your school?

These need to be carefully considered and shared with pupils and their families. Young people also suggested: private rooms for sessions, anonymous help-seeking routes, clear rules about storing and sharing of personal information.



Trusting pupil-staff relationships – how is your school enabling and nurturing these positive relationships? Pupils mainly wanted support to be welcoming, caring, non-judgmental, facilitative of problem-solving, and flexible in meeting their needs. Schools need to give their (especially pastoral) staff time, space, and resources to provide a supportive and helpful environment for their pupils.



A nurturing whole-school approach – does your school focus on ensuring the wellbeing and emotional safety of pupils as well as their academic progress? Is this filtered down through the schools' policies, curriculum, staff development, and procedures? Take time to explore and reflect on how happy your students are in school, as this can affect their academic, emotional, and social development.



References / additional reading:

NHS (2017) - [Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2017 \[PAS\] - NHS Digital](#)

NHS (2020) - [Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2020: Wave 1 follow up to the 2017 survey - NHS Digital](#)

The Good Childhood Report (2021) - [The Good Childhood Report 2021 | The Children's Society \(childrenssociety.org.uk\)](#)

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