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HeadStart Year 1: National Qualitative Evaluation Findings – Young People's Perspectives

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Executive summary

Introduction

HeadStart is a five-year, £56 million National Lottery funded programme set up by the Big Lottery Fund, the largest funder of community activity in the UK. It aims to explore and test new ways to improve the mental health and wellbeing of young people aged 10 to 16 and prevent serious mental health issues from developing. Six local authority led HeadStart partnerships in Blackpool, Cornwall, Hull, Kent, Newham and Wolverhampton are working with local young people, schools, families, charities, community and public services to make young people's mental health and wellbeing everybody's business.

The Evidence Based Practice Unit (EBPU) at the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families and UCL is working with the Big Lottery Fund and the HeadStart partnerships to collect and evaluate evidence about what does and does not work locally to benefit young people now and in the future.

This document describes learning from the first year of the HeadStart programme, drawing on the first timepoint of research interviews conducted with young people at the HeadStart partnerships, as part of the qualitative evaluation of HeadStart led by the EBPU.

The aims of this document are:

1. to map the problems and difficulties that young people who have been or who may one day be involved with HeadStart report that they are experiencing, in order to highlight the issues that HeadStart is addressing or could seek to address
2. to describe the ways in which young people cope with such issues and delineate the types of support that they report accessing or receiving, in order to highlight potential gaps in support that HeadStart could fill or inform the types of support that HeadStart offers.

Method

To address these aims, the themes or patterns in young people's responses relating to such topics as problems or difficulties experienced, coping strategies, and sources of support accessed, were explored across 63 interviews with young people at five of the HeadStart partnerships. The young people were offered the opportunity to participate in the research interviews if school staff or HeadStart partnership staff identified the young people as having already begun receiving support from HeadStart, or identified the young people as being those who may in future receive support from HeadStart. The average age of the young people was 11.9, and 28 of the young people were female, while 35 were male.

Findings

The young people described experiencing a range of problems and difficulties, with the most prevalent being the issue of fights and arguments with peers. The young people also spoke about having fights and arguments with their parents and siblings, which could be similarly distressing, and alluded to the various sources of strain that their families were under, which could (though not always) take their toll on both them and their family. In terms of

their experiences of difficult feelings and emotions, the young people most often described experiencing explosive angry outbursts, which were difficult to control, and referred to their (sometimes chronic) worries and fears. In relation to school life, the young people described their struggles academically, such as regarding particular subjects, and behaviourally. Gender differences were found in line with previous research, in that girls tend to report experiencing more internalising problems (e.g. anxiety, depression) compared to boys, who tend to report experiencing more externalising problems (e.g. aggression, school issues).

The young people described the many ways in which they coped with difficult feelings and situations. These included engaging in positive thinking and activities that made them feel better, disengaging from problems through ignoring them, forgetting them, and being distracted, and accepting and getting used to difficult situations. The young people also talked about the various sources of support that they had or that they could access. The majority described their parents, friends, and school staff as being important individuals whom they could draw on for comfort, advice, distraction, and instrumental support; for example, to intervene in incidents of bullying.

The majority of the young people who had been involved in HeadStart described their perceptions of the positive changes that had happened or that they felt could happen in their lives as a result of taking part in HeadStart. These included having someone to talk to and receive advice from, and learning strategies, techniques and information about how to deal with difficult emotions and situations. However, some young people also referred to their perceptions of the relatively limited impact that HeadStart had had on their lives, or suggested possible improvements to the HeadStart initiatives that they had been involved in. For example, young people did not always perceive the support as being relevant to them if they did not see themselves as having any major problems that they needed help with.

Conclusion

The strengths of this study lie in the rich, in-depth insight into the difficulties and support experienced by young people within the HeadStart cohorts that these interviews have provided. There are implications for the HeadStart sites and other organisations/individuals seeking to support young people's wellbeing, which include:

- the importance for young people of having someone available to talk to about their problems or difficult situations when and if they need to
- the provision of time, where possible, for young people to do the things that relax them, that they enjoy, or that can make them feel better
- a reminder that exposure to a risk factor does not necessarily and automatically negatively affect wellbeing; thus targeted support could perhaps most benefit those who have experienced a negative impact on their wellbeing following their experience of a particular risk factor.



HeadStart Year 1: National Evaluation Findings

Young people's perspectives on difficulties and coping

Introduction

HeadStart is a five-year, £56 million National Lottery funded programme set up by the Big Lottery Fund, the largest funder of community activity in the UK. It aims to explore and test new ways to improve the mental health and wellbeing of young people aged 10 to 16 and prevent serious mental health issues from developing. Six local authority led HeadStart partnerships in Blackpool, Cornwall, Hull, Kent, Newham and Wolverhampton are working with local young people, schools, families, charities, community and public services to make young people's mental health and wellbeing everybody's business. These approaches include whole-school and community-based approaches, such as workforce development for staff and implementation of a common framework for understanding and providing support around young people's wellbeing, parent support provision, and activities and interventions for young people.

The Evidence Based Practice Unit (EBPU) at the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families and UCL is working with the Big Lottery Fund and the HeadStart partnerships to collect and evaluate evidence about what does and does not work locally to benefit young people now and in the future. Partners working with the EBPU on this evaluation include the Child Outcomes Research Consortium (CORC), Common Room, the London School of Economics (LSE), and the University of Manchester.

This document describes learning from the first year of the HeadStart programme, drawing on the first timepoint of research interviews

conducted with young people at five of the six HeadStart partnerships, as part of the qualitative evaluation of HeadStart led by the EBPU. Using a qualitative longitudinal study design over a five-year period, the aims of this strand of evaluation work are to:

- examine young people's perceptions and experiences of problems, difficulties, and coping
- examine young people's engagement with support (HeadStart and non-HeadStart; formal and informal) around their mental wellbeing
- examine young people's perceptions of the short- and long-term impact of support on their mental wellbeing (and the mechanisms behind this)
- examine young people's perceptions of other factors promoting or hindering their mental wellbeing.

The research questions that the first year of research interviews with young people at the HeadStart partnerships sought to address, and that the findings described in this document relate to, are as follows:

1. What problems or difficulties do young people describe experiencing?
2. What are the coping strategies or sources of support that young people describe using to deal with their problems or difficulties?

Thus, the aims of this document are:

1. to map the problems and difficulties that young people who have been or who may one day be involved with HeadStart report that they are experiencing, in order to highlight the issues that HeadStart is addressing or could seek to address
2. to describe the ways in which young people cope with such issues and delineate the types of support that they report accessing or receiving, in order to highlight potential gaps in support that HeadStart could fill or inform the types of support that HeadStart offers.

This document is for sharing learning and encouraging reflection within the wider professional community working with young people, in relation to young people's wellbeing and the factors that can support or hinder this.

Method

Ethics approval for the qualitative evaluation of HeadStart was granted by the UCL Research Ethics Committee (ID Number: 7963/002). As per the qualitative longitudinal study design of this strand of the evaluation, research interviews will be conducted once per year with the same small group of young people at each of the HeadStart partnerships over a five-year period. The findings detailed in this document refer to the first timepoint of this longitudinal study, coinciding with year one of the HeadStart programme.

The young people were offered the opportunity to participate in the research interviews if school staff or HeadStart partnership staff identified the young people as having already begun receiving support from HeadStart, or identified the young people as being those who may in future receive support from HeadStart. This support could be universal (e.g. a psychoeducational intervention delivered to a whole school class or year group), universal+ (e.g. a group support intervention for young people about whom school staff have emerging concerns around their mental wellbeing), or targeted (e.g. one-to-one counselling for young people with exposure to particular risk factors, such as domestic violence). If the young people agreed to participate in the research interviews, then parental consent was also sought. The young people received a £10 voucher at the end of their interviews as a thank you from the evaluation team for taking part.

63 face-to-face interviews were conducted with young people in schools at the Blackpool, Cornwall, Hull, Kent, and Newham HeadStart partnerships¹ in year one of the programme (from May to July 2017), ranging from 6 to 16 interviews per partnership. The number of schools at which the young people were interviewed at each partnership ranged from 1 to 3. Interviewees at the Blackpool partnership (N = 12) were in Year 5 (age 9 to 10)

¹ Interviews with young people were not conducted at the Wolverhampton partnership in year one because delivery of the HeadStart programme in Wolverhampton had not yet begun.

at a mainstream state-funded primary school, and interviewees at the other HeadStart partnerships were in Year 7 (age 11 to 12) at mainstream state-funded secondary schools. The young people completed a short demographics questionnaire at the end of their interviews, which asked about their age, gender, and ethnicity. The young people's ages ranged from 9 years, 10 months to 12 years, 9 months (average age = 11.87).² 28 of the young people were female and 35 were male. Ethnicity data can be seen in Table 1.

The transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis⁴ to examine the themes arising from the interviews in relation to the two research questions: What problems or difficulties do young people describe experiencing? What are the coping strategies or sources of support that young people describe using to deal with their problems or difficulties?

⁴ Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 77–101.

Table 1

Information collected about the ethnicity of the interviewees

Ethnicity	N (%)
White British	41 (65.1%)
Any Other White Background	7 (11.1%)
Black or Black British	3 (4.8%)
Asian or Asian British	5 (7.9%)
Mixed Background	7 (11.1%)

All interviews were conducted by a member of the evaluation team and took place in a private room in the school attended by the young person at each of the HeadStart partnerships. The interview guide was semi-structured (see Appendix A) and explored such topics as the young people's experiences of school, home and family life, friendships, and feelings and emotions, including problems and difficulties, coping strategies, and sources of support accessed in relation to these areas. The interviews ranged from approximately 15 to 60 minutes in length (average length = 31.29).³ All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. All audio recordings and transcripts were kept confidential and only accessed by the evaluation team. Transcripts were anonymised, with identifying details (such as names of people and places) removed.

² Standard deviation = 1.06

³ Standard deviation = 10.50



Findings

Research question 1: What problems or difficulties do young people describe experiencing?

The intention of the first research question was to map the problems and difficulties that young people who have been or who may one day be involved with HeadStart report that they are experiencing, in order to highlight the issues that HeadStart is addressing or could seek to address.

The main themes derived from the interview transcripts relating to the first research question have been split into four overarching categories. Gender differences, in terms of the number of interviewees who alluded to each theme, have been noted where apparent.

- The first category details the themes arising from the interviews around the feelings and emotions that the young people mentioned could be a source of difficulty for them, including anger, worries and fears, lack of confidence, and self-harm.
- The second category details the themes relating to difficulties with peers that the young people spoke about, including fights and arguments with peers and lack of friends.
- The third category describes themes around the difficulties that the young people had experienced in relation to their home lives, including fights and arguments at home, family strain, and issues related to their local area.
- The fourth category describes the themes relating to difficulties at school that the young people spoke about, including academic struggles and victimisation by teachers.



Category 1: Feelings and emotions

Theme 1: Explosive anger

Approximately 40% of interviewees (the majority⁵ of whom were male) spoke about experiencing extreme feelings of anger that were explosive, difficult to control or deal with, and easily provoked. Their experiences often involved storming or stomping off from situations, losing control of themselves, punching or kicking people and objects, and shouting.

"I think I have a really short fuse, so like I've literally got about five seconds and I like explode" (Female)

Young people referred to a range of events that could lead them to experience this level of anger, or tip them over the edge, such as being told off by teachers at school, being picked on or targeted by teachers, peers talking behind their back, peers spreading rumours about them, peers making fun of them, being wound up by siblings, and arguing with parents. Young people also described the consequences of experiencing this level of anger, including being told off by their parents at home, being disciplined by their teachers at school (such as being sent out of the classroom or threatened with school exclusion), finding it difficult to concentrate in lessons, and hurting themselves and others, physically and emotionally.

"It feels bad because it's just like getting angry I don't like doing it because it, as much as it hurts me, it hurts the people around me like my mum, she doesn't like [seeing me] getting angry" (Male)

Young people also sometimes alluded to their feelings of anger and sadness as being relatively interchangeable. This was in terms of noticing that their feelings of sadness could precipitate anger or that their anger could deteriorate into feelings of sadness and tearfulness, that both emotions could present at the same time, or that there were similarities in their experiences of anger and sadness, such as both emotions being difficult to control.

"He said stuff about my family... that upsets me... the most, and that. So what happens when you get upset? I get angry. And like then from sadness it turns up, ends up turning into rage, I get really angry. Yeah, I could... do something stupid when I'm angry, but eventually once I've calmed down it's just sad again" (Male)

Theme 2: Worries and fears

Approximately 40% of interviewees (the majority of whom were female) talked about particular issues that worried them or about their experiences of chronic worrying or anxiety. Young people spoke about experiencing school-related worries, including worries around exams, difficult lessons, transitioning to secondary school, a new school, or to a different school year group, getting told off by teachers, and making mistakes in schoolwork or lessons.

"I'm really worried about French because, honestly, in one class, as soon as I learned something I forget about it the next day, so I'm really worried about my French score. And what are you worried about in particular? Er... how my parents will feel" (Male)

⁵ Defined throughout as approximately 60% or more interviewees.

Young people also described experiencing worries related to their peers, including fears about being judged, being left with no friends, not being liked, and meeting new people, as well as worries related to their families, including worries about parents splitting up, parental health, getting told off by their parents, and their siblings going through a hard time. In addition, young people alluded to having fears or worries about their safety, such as following a traumatic event, in relation to a parent's problematic drinking behaviour, as a result of being bullied by peers, or due to the presence of violence in their local area.

"I don't want to go, but I think my mum has already booked it. What kind of feelings are there that are making you not want to go? Well in case something happens there, in case um there's another bomb that goes off or something, or [in case] there's someone there that has horrible stuff or something" (Female)

Theme 3: Lack of confidence

Approximately 20% of interviewees (the majority of whom were female) described themselves as lacking in confidence, such as in relation to meeting new people or putting their hand up in class at school. Young people described how their lack of confidence or 'shyness', could mean that making new friends,



answering questions in class at school, or asking for help from teachers was more difficult for them.

"Sometimes when I'm with people that I don't really know, I'm not really confident and I don't really say much 'cause I don't want to embarrass myself or something. And I, or I don't want them to... not like me... 'cause I want everyone to like me" (Female)

Young people also mentioned comparing themselves to others and described their low self-esteem or lack of confidence in themselves, such as in relation to their appearance, and in their abilities, particularly their academic capabilities.

"Well, I've got quite low self-esteem and, I don't know, I'm not confident, and... well, I kind of have negative thoughts, like, I'm not going to do well and stuff like that. Like, um, when there's exams, it really gets me" (Female)

Theme 4: Self-harm

Approximately 5% of interviewees (all of whom were female) spoke about experiencing incidents of self-harm. The young people described self-harming as a result of needing to take out their difficult feelings or emotions, such as anger and stress, on themselves or as a result of being influenced by their peers.

"I didn't know what else to do, I was getting so mad. I just... so... I was feeling angry, I was feeling stressed... and like, I didn't know what to do anymore" (Female)

Category 2: Peers

Theme 1: Fights and arguments with peers

Approximately 70% of interviewees spoke, sometimes extensively, about their experiences of having fights and arguments with their peers. Fights with peers could be verbal and physical and could take place in school and out of school. Physical fights could escalate until they and others were badly hurt. Young people described starting fights out of anger, such as punching first, or finding themselves involved in fights through trying to defend themselves, such as against someone else punching them.

"This is my rule, like if they hit first, I hit back. But I won't hit anyone unless they hit me. Like, if they hit me, I hit them back" (Male)

From the young people's perspectives, common subjects or causes of arguments and fights with peers included:

- a misunderstanding, such as friends perceiving you as ignoring them when you were not, or thinking that you did something to wrong them when you did not
- jealousy over you having other friends or in relation to you choosing to play with particular friends over others
- peers doing things that you disagree with, such as being a distraction in class, showing off, or not treating your friends and relatives nicely or appropriately
- being talked about by your friends behind your back.

It was clear that while some young people saw fights and arguments with their peers as being relatively normal, small, everyday occurrences, which resolved themselves or from which they could easily bounce back, for others these occurrences seemed to be a considerable source of distress. This was predominantly the case when young

people recounted experiences of bullying. Young people talked about feeling sad or upset as a result of this and sometimes became tearful in their interviews when speaking about it. Young people often directly used the term 'bullying' to reference their experiences. They described incidents of being threatened, targeted, picked on, or wound up by their peers, including being insulted (such as in relation to their appearance or family), called names (such as racist terms), having rumours spread about them, and being perceived by others as weak or different.

"He mainly chose me. He pretty much ignored my friends but swore at me and called me names and stuff" (Female)

Young people sometimes described themselves as being 'sensitive', which from their perspective potentially made them more vulnerable to being bullied or hurt by their peers' insults.

"If someone's rude to me... or if someone like says something about me, which no one really says anything about me, but if [they're] just joking or something that will make me upset... upset 'cause, I'm quite sensitive, so, like, if someone says something... , and they don't mean it, it'll probably still make me a bit upset" (Female)

Theme 2: Lack of friends

Approximately 20% of interviewees (the majority of whom were male) alluded to feeling lonely or spoke about the impact that a lack of friends could have on their lives.

"I don't like the point that we have like argued or something, because then I have got no friends to play with, and then I have to find another friend" (Male)

Young people described having to learn to entertain themselves as an only child or when their friends did not live near them, feeling upset when no one wanted to play with them, losing friends in arguments, feeling left out or 'ditched' by their friends, and finding it difficult to make friends. The latter was often ascribed to such factors as their own shyness, anxiety, or initial difficulties in settling into a new school or new area where they did not know anyone.



"I haven't got many friends in school, I've got one or two. I'm waiting for September 'cause all my friends come up from primary school. 'Cause I made friends with all the Year 4s and 5s, so, not the Year 6s. So I moved up and they stayed down in primary. I should've made friends with the Year 6s" (Female)

Category 3: Home

Theme 1: Fights and arguments at home

Approximately 30% of interviewees spoke about having arguments with their parents, either biological or stepparents, at home and sometimes became tearful during their interviews when talking about this. Young people described experiencing distress as a result of this, primarily when these arguments – often described as shouting matches – were perceived as being particularly frequent or explosive. The arguments tended to be with one parent rather than both.

"When I'm in my mum's house, I'm a completely different person. I'm always sad 'cause there's always something to argue over" (Male)

Young people also alluded to their experiences of being physically abused by their parents at home, primarily describing this in terms of being 'hit' or 'slapped'.

"I cried 'cause it, I've, [my dad's] never done it to me before. It was, like, it wasn't necessarily pain. There was no pain. It was just shock" (Male)

Approximately 45% of interviewees also referred to having fights and arguments with their siblings. Similarly to when describing their experiences of having fights and arguments with their peers, it was clear that some young people saw such fights and arguments with their siblings as being normal, everyday occurrences, which resolved themselves or from which they could easily bounce back. However, for others these occurrences seemed to be a source of distress, such as in terms of upsetting them or making them extremely angry, which could make life at home difficult.



“What kind of things do you like doing with your sister or your brother? We don’t bond a lot. Because my sister, she is always in the front room, she watched the telly, but she is usually like winding me up sometimes, and my brother, he is on his Xbox all the time, and he always fights with me a lot and I don’t like it” (Male)

Theme 2: Family strain

A number of young people mentioned that their biological parents had separated and were no longer living together. However, this was not described as problematic by all of these young people.

“Is it a problem for you at all? No... because like I can just call my dad or whatever on FaceTime” (Male)

On the other hand, for approximately 20% of interviewees this situation appeared to be difficult when:

- their parents had a particularly difficult relationship with each other; for instance, the young people spoke about their parents insulting each other or trying to turn them against the other parent
- the young people’s lives became chaotic or confusing due to having to balance living in two (or several) different places at different times, or due to being told conflicting things by each parent
- the young people missed the parent that they were not living with and felt that they were not able to see or communicate with them as much as they would have liked; for example, because of their parent’s work schedule or not being allowed by the other parent to see them.

“I don’t see [my dad] that much. I don’t see him every weekend, I see him every two weeks because his job, he works one weekend, but he doesn’t work another, so it’s really confusing when I can go or not. But other, other than that, my life is fine . . . [but] I do really miss him a lot” (Male)

Approximately 25% of interviewees also spoke about other sources of strain on their family that they had perceived which, from their perspective, had negatively impacted on their lives; for example, in terms of making them feel sad, worried, or affecting their sleep. Young people spoke about the negative impact of a parent’s physical health issues on them and on the family, or alluded to their awareness of their family’s financial hardship and the effects of this on their family, in terms of their parents having to work a lot or their parents getting stressed about money.

“[My mum’s] struggling on money. What’s that like? Like, hard. How do you feel about that? Sad, because she can’t pay the bills. She said she’s really, really badly struggling to pay them” (Male)

Young people also spoke about noticing the stress that their parents had experienced following a bereavement, or as a result of work-related strain or a traumatic event occurring within the family. Indeed, young people described finding it difficult themselves when a grandparent or pet died.

“My mum kind of panics but, she, she... it’s hard to explain. So basically she panics a bit, sometimes and she just gets really frustrated... and um... it didn’t, it doesn’t help when my granddad was in hospital too, she was just worried about him as well and was... kind of, taking it [out] on us in a way, she was just moaning at us a lot” (Male)

Young people sometimes indicated that they wanted to spend more time with their parents or with their family; for example, by doing more activities together, seeing each other more, or wanting their parents to have more time to listen to or interact with them. Young people described their time with their family as being limited by such factors as their parents living apart, or by younger siblings or other activities (such as parental employment) taking up their parents’ time.

“My mum and dad work a lot so we don’t have much time to spend together. Or I still have to look after, like, my sisters most of the time, so I don’t have a lot of time. What do you think about that? Er, I mean, it’s ok, ‘cause, I don’t know, er... I mean I would like to go out, but, I’m fine with it, I mean I could just stay at home, watch telly . . . so like, I don’t really mind but, I would like it, if we did go out more” (Female)

Theme 3: Issues related to local area

When asked about what they found more difficult about living in their local area, approximately 30% of interviewees described such issues as:

- their families having disagreements with their neighbours;
- feeling scared of their neighbours;
- the presence of neighbourhood bullies or gangs;

- living too far away from school or towns;
- not being able to sleep because of noise outside their house.

"The violence in this area is proper bad. People get stabbed and everything. Come into school, it is totally fine. But when you are outside school and you see a gang, it is kind of scary. You just walk past them totally fine, but do not react because they will react back"

(Male)

Category 4: School

Theme 1: Academic struggles

Approximately 40% of interviewees (the majority of whom were male) alluded to struggling with lessons and/or their behaviour at school. While for some young people difficult lessons appeared to represent a positive, challenging experience, for others such lessons seemed to be a source of distress, particularly when young people were worried about disappointing their parents with their grades, felt that their abilities were lower than others', were scared to ask for help from their teacher, or felt that they had too much schoolwork.

"It's sometimes a bit too much, like, I can't handle it 'cause, I mean I've got homework from school and then I've got a tutor, and then... I don't know what to do sometimes. What happens then? Um... I try and resolve it... and sometimes I might get a bit upset as well. How do you try and resolve that? Er, I try fixing the problem like... er, I might, wake up early" (Female)

Young people spoke about finding it difficult to concentrate in lessons or getting distracted in lessons due to their classmates misbehaving



or due to their own difficulties sitting still and focusing in class. Young people also described incidents when they themselves had misbehaved in school, such as fighting with peers, messing around in class, or talking to peers in class instead of doing their work, and been punished by teachers as a consequence, including being given detention, put on behaviour report, and being threatened with school exclusion.

"Because sometimes I talk a lot, yeah, and I talk to my friends a lot. And in classrooms, yeah, when we're learning, yeah, I get distracted. Because people are getting my attention" (Male)

Theme 2: Victimisation by teachers

Approximately 25% of interviewees (the majority of whom were male) voiced their perceptions of being unfairly treated or targeted by teachers, or being unjustly blamed by teachers for incidents in lessons for which they felt that they were not at fault or involved in. Having a reputation for misbehaving was one factor that the young people thought was behind this. This meant that they were then more likely than others to be blamed for incidents in lessons.

"I'm always usually getting blamed for a lot of things, even when I don't, doing nothing wrong. So like... I'm sort of thinking, um, what's the point in trying to behave, if I'm like, just going to get moaned at either way. . . it's been like this for quite a while now. I'm in trouble a lot. Now, like, no matter what, the teacher will have a go at me, 'cause of my reputation" (Male)

Young people also talked about having difficult experiences at school with particular teachers who did not understand their needs

or difficulties, such as their anger problems, or whose methods of teaching made them uncomfortable or were not compatible with their preferred way of working.

"It would just be a surprise test every Friday... and then he makes you shout out how much you got on the test... and... I don't like shouting out my answers, because sometimes [!] just get zero and stuff" (Female)



Findings

Research question 2: What are the coping strategies or sources of support that young people describe using to deal with their problems or difficulties?

The intention of the second research question was to describe the ways in which young people cope with their problems and difficulties, and delineate the types of support that they report accessing or receiving, in order to highlight potential gaps in support that HeadStart could fill or inform the types of support that HeadStart offers.

The themes derived from the dataset relating to the second research question have been split into three overarching categories. Gender differences, in terms of the number of interviewees who alluded to each theme, have been noted where apparent.

- The first category details the themes arising from the interviews relating to the young people's experiences of HeadStart, including their opinions on the interventions and activities that they took part in, and their perceptions of impact, the mechanisms behind this, and the factors potentially limiting impact.
- The second category details the themes relating to the sources of social support that the young people described accessing in times of need, including speaking with school staff members, parents, siblings, friends, and professionals.
- The third category describes the themes arising from the interviews around the self-care strategies that the young people spoke about using to deal with difficult feelings or experiences, including doing positive activities, disengaging from problems, accepting or getting used to difficult situations, having an understanding of the problem, self-defence, and keeping things hidden.



Category 1: HeadStart

Theme 1: Experiences of HeadStart

In terms of their involvement in HeadStart, just over 50% of interviewees from three of the HeadStart partnerships⁶ mentioned taking part in school- or community-based peer mentoring programmes, group psychoeducational or support programmes, or coproduction activities to inform the development of their area's HeadStart programme and improve their school environment. The young people often described their experiences of HeadStart as being fun, enjoyable, or exciting. They talked about the activities that they liked, such as playing games and eating or cooking food as a group before or during intervention sessions, and the aspects that they found interesting, such as being involved in a programme that aims to effect change and have an impact on their immediate environment.

"I guess it was just interesting because it seemed like such a grown-up thing. Like it seems very official and important and it seems to have a very big impact and a lot of weight on it and it just seemed... and it just generally seemed cool as well because you just get like to do these fun activities asking people about stuff" (Male)

Theme 2: Positive impact of HeadStart

When asked, approximately 90% of the interviewees who had been involved in HeadStart talked about their perceptions of the positive changes that had happened or that they felt could happen in their lives as a result of taking part in HeadStart. The young people described feeling more able to talk about their

⁶ Young people's participation in HeadStart support had not yet begun at two of the partnerships by the time of the interviews.

problems, emotions, and difficult times with others since being involved in HeadStart. This was often because the young people now felt that they had someone to speak to about this – for example, a peer mentor or a HeadStart intervention lead – or because they had been encouraged through their involvement in HeadStart to open up or talk about their difficulties.

Young people also described gaining knowledge and learning strategies through HeadStart, such as during psychoeducational sessions or as a result of advice from a peer mentor, about how to manage such emotions as anger, worries and anxiety, and sadness, and how to deal with conflict with peers or academic issues, which, as described in the previous section, could be problematic from interviewees' perspectives. Consequently the young people described feeling more able to manage these issues.

"What sorts of things did you learn about how to handle being worried? I learnt to stop, to stop exaggerating because it might not, you might be making it out to be... I can't think of the sentence... you might be, you might be over-exaggerating . . . so, you think like 'Oh all this is going to happen', but when you go you realise that it was simple all along" (Male)

Young people also spoke about feeling more confident and less shy now, which was another issue that interviewees indicated could be a source of difficulty for them (as detailed in the previous section). For example, this was in terms of being better able to speak out in group situations or talk to people that they did not know very well, as a result of being in a supportive group environment as part of HeadStart or receiving advice about how to be more confident.

“What do you think it is about the peer mentoring that’s made you feel stronger? Oh, like my mentor’s really helped me, she has talked me through like about ignoring [bullies] and like being confident, like... What do you mean by talks you through? Well like she... whenever I was sad like I’d talk to her about it and like she talked me through about what’s happened” (Female)

Young people involved in HeadStart group activities also mentioned making new friends through meeting others involved in the activities and, for those involved in coproduction activities, having an extracurricular activity to put on their college applications.

Theme 3: Helpful aspects of HeadStart

In terms of what specifically was helpful about HeadStart, young people spoke about the fact that through working with the HeadStart intervention leads or their peer mentors, HeadStart had provided them with someone to talk to about their day and about their problems or difficulties.

“I release that, the, the weight off my shoulders, I just tell [my mentor] what happened. Like, I have someone to tell if I don’t want to necessarily tell my mum, I can tell either [my mentor] or my friends” (Female)

In particular, young people involved in peer mentoring programmes, in which they were being mentored by an older student at their school, described finding it easy to talk about anything that they needed to with their mentor. Mentors were described as being nice, trustworthy, and on mentees’ wavelength in terms of having common interests, being close to their age, and having had similar experiences.

“What does the mentoring involve? . . . talking about stuff that’s hard for us. We just talk to them about it. It’s a bit like... this, but there’s more people, there’s other... there’s younger people helping you that probably went through the exact same issue, so they will understand” (Male)

Similarly, young people described the HeadStart intervention leads who delivered the psychoeducational lessons or group-based support interventions that they were involved in as being kind and someone with whom they could share their feelings and discuss issues confidentially. In addition, young people talked about the useful strategies, advice, or instrumental support that their peer mentors or the HeadStart intervention leads had given to them to help them to deal with their problems or difficulties, including:

- information about different feelings and emotions like sadness, stress, anxiety, and anger, and strategies for how to deal with them, such as using breathing techniques and stress balls
- advice around coping with schoolwork and exams
- assistance with dealing with peer conflicts and advice for how to deal with bullies, such as ignoring them
- advice and strategies for how to think positively about yourself and in difficult situations
- advice about who to talk to when you are having problems.

“[HeadStart is] like helping people with, like, emotions and like how to deal with things in the right way. And if you want to talk to people you can, like, and it has helped me, like because I used to... I didn’t used to deal with things the right way. Like, I used to take it out on, like, my friends and stuff. And like when I got home, like if I had a bad day at school I’d take it out on my mum and my dad and, like, it weren’t fair on them” (Female)

Young people also alluded to HeadStart as a place where they felt that they could be themselves and feel relaxed, as they perceived the atmosphere as being less rigid and not governed by usual strict school rules.

Theme 4: Factors limiting HeadStart impact

Nonetheless, approximately 50% of the interviewees who had been involved in HeadStart also commented on their perceptions that their participation in HeadStart so far had had relatively minimal or limited impact on their lives, or suggested possible improvements to the HeadStart initiatives that they had been involved in. This was chiefly when:

- the young people did not perceive themselves as having major problems that they needed to be helped with
- the young people perceived themselves as having an existing support network
- the young people felt that it was early days for their involvement in the programme or they had not yet had a need to use what they had learned as part of HeadStart
- the young people did not seem to understand the meaning or purpose of the activities that they were doing as part of HeadStart, or did not take in or remember the content of sessions.

“And you said that you didn’t think that you’d taken much in from the HeadStart activities. Why do you think that was? Because normally I didn’t really get what they were trying to mean... I just liked the activities they were doing but I didn’t really know what they were trying to get across” (Male)



Young people indicated that the HeadStart interventions that they had been involved in could be improved in the following ways:

- consistency of peer mentor over time
- ensuring that all young people involved understand the meaning, relevance, and purpose of the activities that they are taking part in
- provision of additional activities to suit young people's specific needs, such as trust-building exercises with peer mentors
- sessions not being held during curriculum lesson times.

"I wish I was still in it though but my mum said that I've got to focus on my [Science] in case I have like a test on it" (Female)



Category 2: Social support

Theme 1: School staff as a source of support

Approximately 80% of interviewees voiced their perceptions of school staff members (specific staff members or teachers in general) as being individuals in their lives to whom they could go with problems, such as being bullied or experiencing academic struggles, and receive help. Problems described by young people as being within school staff members' remit to provide help tended to be viewed as school-related, rather than issues to do with family or outside of school activities. Young people often talked about peer arguments and conflicts at school being mediated and resolved by school staff members. Young people indicated that school rules around no fighting or bullying gave school staff members power, from their perspective, to prevent and manage these situations, such as through being able to punish bullies.

"I guess I built up the courage and I couldn't deal with it anymore, and so, I just, yes, I told [school staff member]. I think they were like, they were told off, but, and I don't, and we were told to stay away from each other and I don't go near them anymore" (Male)

Young people described having a specific teacher, such as a form tutor or a subject teacher, or a particular adult in school, such as a member of the pastoral care team, a mentor, or a counsellor, who they trusted, knew well, or who they perceived to 'be there' for them. This individual was someone who the young people felt that they could go to for help with their problems or difficulties, such as if they were feeling upset or down, and talk to about their feelings. Young people also mentioned having a specific place to go in school if they were feeling upset.

"And like, my [History] teacher, he's the biggest help. Like I swear, if when I'm upset, he like pulls me out of class to talk to me. He's like, 'Right, it was, it was going to be all fine', and stuff like that. And, like, I think he's been, like, the biggest help. But he's leaving" (Female)

Young people also described having a specific teacher who had really made a difference in their lives, such as a teacher who had really believed in their abilities, which had helped to build their confidence.

However, young people also spoke about their perceptions of the limitations or issues with school staff members as a source of support in difficult situations or in relation to their problems. These included their perceptions of school staff members as not always being able to effectively discipline bullies or provide effective support in relation to their problems, as bullying did not always stop with school staff members' intervention, teachers were sometimes too busy to sort out problems, and teachers sometimes took the other person's side in a conflict.

"Maybe that they need some more, like, places set up around the school. They've got one for breaktime and lunch, but I mean like... they just need like more places around where there will be some teachers that can help a bit, like, a lot" (Male)

Young people also described feeling deterred from speaking with school staff members about issues with peers due to fears about being labelled as a 'snitch' by peers, which could then make problems worse, and not wanting to get themselves into trouble by talking to a teacher about fights that they had been involved in with peers.

"And I always have to go to the teacher saying, 'Oh he keeps on annoying me'. And then he starts calling me 'Snitch, snitch, snitch'. And I keep on saying to him, 'Stop it, you're acting like a five year old'. So sometimes when you've been to the teacher about it, they haven't been able to do anything? No. And he's called you a snitch for going to the teacher? Yes. But do you still feel ok speaking to teachers about things like this? No. So if you don't speak to a teacher then how do you deal with it? I just have to, like, let him do this to me and try [and] ignore him" (Male)

Theme 2: Parents as a source of support

Approximately 80% of interviewees spoke about their perceptions of their parents (biological mothers and fathers, and sometimes stepparents and grandmothers) as always being there for them as a source of support, and as trustworthy individuals to whom they could talk about their lives and their problems, and receive advice from.

"I feel like I can always trust [my mum]. Like... if I tell her something like, it won't go anywhere unless she's like really panicked about me, and um like, I think she gives the best advice, and um... 'cause my mum is like, I feel like we can really relate to each other, like we're very similar, so I think that's, like, helped a lot" (Female)

Young people talked about their parents telling their school about issues, such as incidents of bullying, on their behalf so that their school could take action, or their parents making their school aware of their problems, such as their anger issues, to inform teachers' treatment and management of them in class.

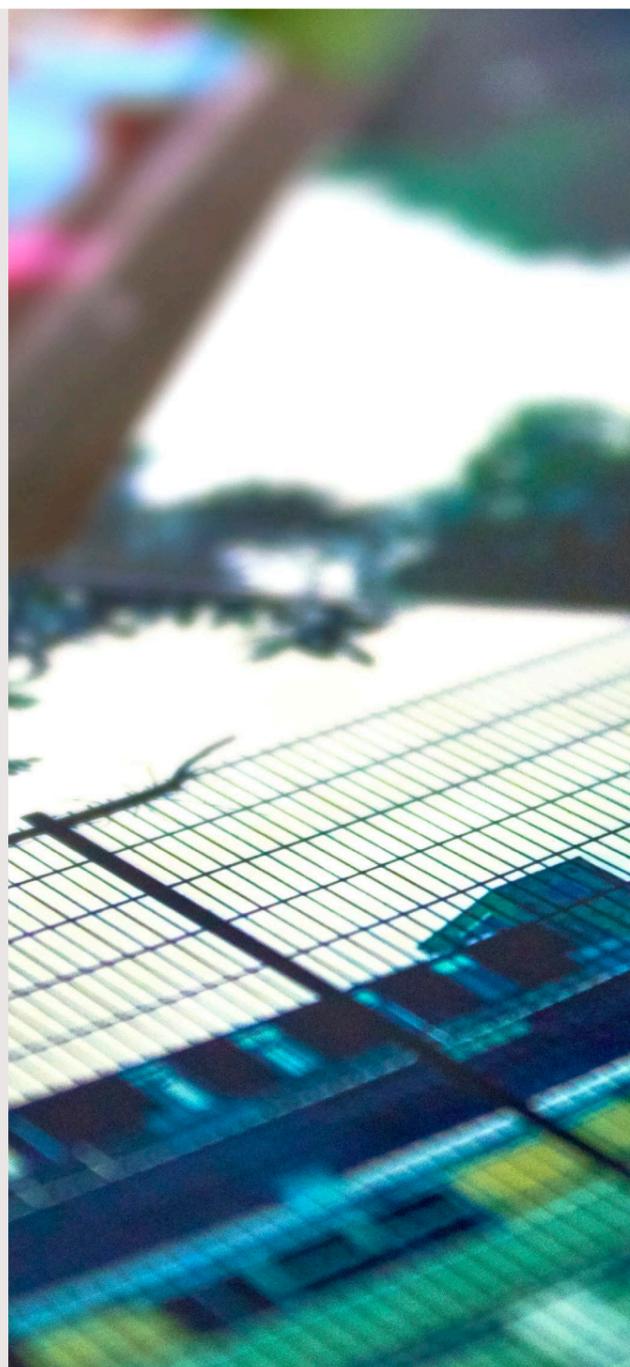
"My mum's phoned up the school, spoken to [school staff member]... about me and that, and about how, I can get angry real easily, and like, half the time, if I'm, if I sound like I'm having a go, I'm not... I'm not having a go, it's just how I'm speaking and that. Mm, so I have had some help" (Male)

Young people described their parents mediating in their arguments and fights with their siblings, which often required parental intervention in order to end. Young people also described their parents as standing up for them when they had fights with their peers, and giving them advice when they experienced arguments with their peers or in relation to dealing with bullies, such as ignoring them. Young people also mentioned their parents telling them not to be friends with or not to play with particular peers who had upset them.

"She is starting being really nice to me, but I am still not allowed to have her on any social media or my phone on, because um my dad said that he doesn't want to have this bullying again" (Female)

However, while one parent was viewed as a source of support for some young people, the other parent was viewed as a source of distress; for example, when one parent was abusive or when the young person argued frequently with one of their parents. Young people also sometimes described finding it easier or more productive to speak to one parent over the other; this was often their mother who they felt that they could relate to more (particularly as a girl) or who was around more at home.

"If something was worrying me that like that much, like I can't even think, I think I would definitely talk to somebody like, anybody that I can talk to. Like, obviously I would talk to my dad, like I would tell him that it was worrying me, I just don't think he would like... relate as much, like, as my mum, or my nana" (Female)



Young people also spoke about times when they had been reluctant to talk to their parents about particular issues or incidents for fear of getting told off and punished by their parents, not wanting to worry their parents or blow things out of proportion, and not wanting to raise things with their parents that could upset them or cause further difficulties.

"Sometimes if I get in trouble in school I don't necessarily want to tell my mum because then it'll just make it a big thing" (Female)

Theme 3: Siblings as a source of support

Approximately 30% of interviewees (the majority of whom were female) spoke about the range of ways in which they viewed their brothers and sisters as being a source of support, even if they were sometimes annoying or got on their nerves. Young people described how their siblings could cheer them up when they were feeling down.

"And if I just fell out with a friend, or a friend's just fell out with me and then [my sister] makes me laugh and then I feel happy, because I am thinking about my sister making me laugh even more, and I just forget about my friends ditching me and stuff" (Female)

Young people talked about how their siblings stood up for them against bullies or in arguments with their parents, encouraged and assisted them with getting help from parents or teachers, and were there for them to talk to and get advice from when they had problems or worries, including issues with peers, and difficult homework. Having an older brother or sister attending the same school as you could also make starting secondary school less nerve-racking. In addition, young people sometimes referred to their siblings' role *in loco parentis*.

"What sorts of things do you like doing with your brother? Um, mainly at school if I see him, I say hi to him, and if I've been having a problem I tell him about it and he says he will try and get it sorted out" (Female)

Young people also referred to their pets as being an additional source of support, in terms of providing comfort or a distraction in times of distress, or in terms of providing company for them when needed.

However, young people also sometimes spoke about their perceptions of the limitations or issues with their siblings as a source of support, describing how their siblings could actually sometimes make things worse for them, such as by blowing situations out of proportion or by giving them unhelpful advice.

"Is there anybody that you definitely wouldn't talk to if you were having a problem like that? Um... probably my sisters, because they will even, they will spread it or they will make it worse, and start making me cry" (Female)

Theme 4: Peer support

Approximately 80% of interviewees talked about their perceptions and experiences of friends as being a source of support. This was in terms of their friends being there for them in person or on the phone to cheer them up or provide help or advice if they were feeling upset or worried, such as if they had had a bad day at school, fallen out with their friends or family, or been bullied. A friend could represent another trustworthy person to talk to if they could not or did not want to talk to their parents or teachers about something. Young people also described how friends could recognise feelings and spot incidents, such as self-harm or bullying, and take them or encourage them as necessary to get

help from appropriate adults, such as parents or teachers.

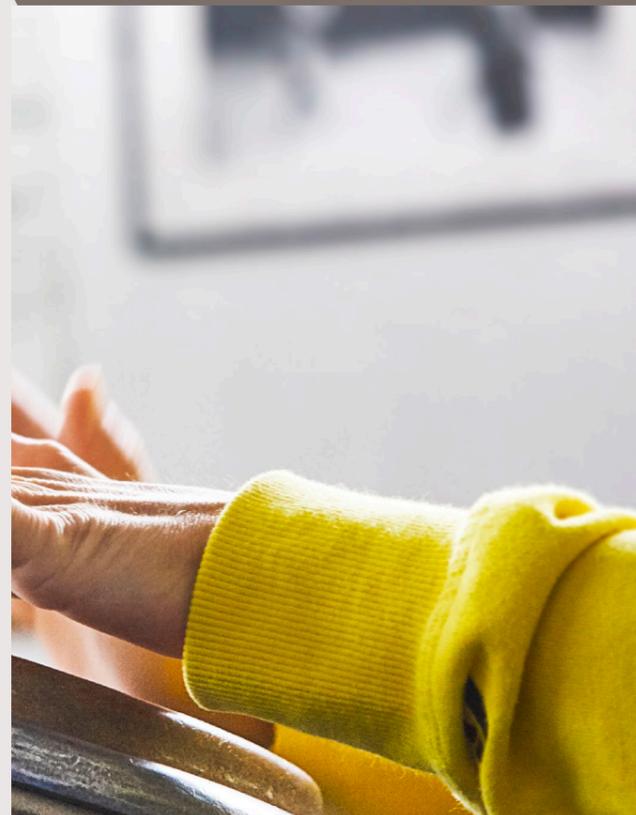
"I think it's pretty easy to talk with my friends because we've all had similar experiences, so we all know how to relate to it" (Female)

Young people also referred to their friends as being a good distraction, a source of calm, or as cheering them up when they were feeling sad, angry, or worried. Young people talked about their friends sticking up for them in fights with peers or restraining them to stop them from getting into physical fights with peers. At the same time, young people described how they were also able to resolve arguments with their peers by apologising, 'making up', and simply forgetting about what had happened and becoming friends again. Having a large enough group of friends so that if you fall out with one friend or get left out then you still have others that you can be with was also deemed helpful from the young people's perspectives.

"Is there anything that helps to sort of get rid of the sadness? ... my mates cheer me up a bunch, 'cause we're, we're all idiots, like we all do stupid things to make people laugh" (Male)

However, young people also spoke about their perceptions of the limitations or issues with their friends as a source of support; these were most often worries about friends telling others about their problems behind their backs.

"Do you talk to your friends at all if you're experiencing anything difficult? Not that much... Why do you think that is? Because normally... because a lot of the time when I don't I'm thinking, they're spreading it round to other people. And then I just want to keep it private between like adults so that... because I know they won't... they're not going to... like [be] as annoying as kids... so they won't go spreading it around to their... all their friends and everything... they'd only do it, they'll only tell a couple of people if they're a bit worried. So if you were to talk to friends then it might get spread around.. And then people might start laughing at me. Or then people get a bit scared of me, 'cause like if I've like badly hurt someone, they get a bit scared of me" (Male)



Theme 5: Support from professionals

Approximately 10% of interviewees talked about being offered or receiving support from professionals outside of school and HeadStart, such as counsellors or doctors, in relation to their worries and anxiety, anger problems, and family issues, such as dealing with parental divorce. While acknowledging the help that this support could provide, the young people also commented on their perceptions of the limitations of such professional help. This could be in terms of the limits to the impact that it had had on their symptoms or problems, in terms of whether techniques or suggestions that they had been given for dealing with particular issues had actually worked, or in terms of whether their problems (such as parental illness) were actually those that they felt could be helped.

"I try the stuff that the doctors tell me. Well, I keep meaning to, but when I'm angry I just forget about it all. What kind of things do they tell you to do? They just like tell you to sit down and count to 10, like all the usual stuff. Do any of those things work? I don't know, I haven't tried them because whenever I'm angry, like I keep meaning to, but whenever I'm angry they just all go away and my mind's just filled with anger" (Male)



Category 3: Self-care

Theme 1: Positive activities

Approximately 70% of interviewees described the activities that they engaged in that helped them to feel better. These activities served the purpose of providing a distraction, helping the young people to forget about the problem, cheering them up, or calming them down. These activities included:

“How was it moving from primary school to secondary school? Er... I mean, it was ok, 'cause I was quite excited rather than like... 'cause, um, when it was like, the last day of primary everyone was crying and... I mean, I don't know why I didn't cry but like... yeah I wasn't that upset 'cause I knew it was like, a, a new beginning, at secondary school and that. There's more opportunities and chances to come” (Female)

- THINKING POSITIVELY
- LISTENING TO MUSIC
- FOCUSING ON PARTICULAR TREASURED POSSESSIONS, SUCH AS CUDDLY TOYS
- PLAYING CONSOLE OR ONLINE GAMES
- WATCHING TELEVISION OR ONLINE VIDEOS
- USING DEEP BREATHING TECHNIQUES, STRESS BALLS OR FIDGET SPINNERS
- GOING ON A BIKE RIDE
- HAVING A BATH
- EATING TREATS
- PLAYING WITH OR INTERACTING WITH FAMILY, FRIENDS OR PETS
- PRAYER
- DOING SPORT OR EXERCISE, SUCH AS BOXING, DANCING, OR SWIMMING
- DOING CREATIVE ACTIVITIES, SUCH AS COLOURING, DRAWING OR WRITING STORIES
- GOING ON YOUR MOBILE PHONE, INCLUDING PLAYING GAMES AND RINGING OR TEXTING FRIENDS
- READING
- SINGING

“What I did before boxing was that, I just, I just used to yell at someone that was already there ... and I was, like, just go away, leave me alone, and like they was all trying to help, but I just wouldn't let them. I'm, like, I'm that angry, I was, like, get away from me. So, do you think that the... going boxing... It's made, it's made me feel a better person, instead of just taking it out on other people” (Male)

“I feel like I can put some of my feelings into art, so if I'm feeling sad I can, like, draw something sad, but overall, I just like it because of the colours and the material you can use and I just like it” (Female)

However, young people also sometimes alluded to their perceptions of the limitations of engaging in positive activities like the above, in relation to helping them to deal with such issues as feeling sad or having negative thoughts about themselves, as such activities could not always sufficiently resolve these issues, particularly big or serious problems. As alternative ways of coping, young people spoke about their need to talk to someone about these feelings instead, such as their parents or friends, or just needing to wait for these feelings to pass.

“I try to cheer myself up a bit, like going over to toy stores and playing with cool toys, and playing video games, but it doesn't really help, especially when it's, well, really big. So when the feeling is really big or the thing that's made the feeling happen is really big? Er, when the thing makes me feel it. Why do you think that doing those types of things aren't that helpful in relation to that feeling? Because... I don't really want to be happy in a time of sadness” (Male)

Theme 2: Disengagement

Approximately 85% of interviewees spoke about 'walking away' from or 'blocking out' their problems, and forgetting about or being distracted from them (such as through using the activities outlined in the previous theme), as strategies that they used for dealing with their problems or difficulties.

“I can control, I think, how I feel, so I can always feel happy. I can always feel happy, but I don't really feel upset or anything like that. How do you control it? I just don't think about it. So it would be a good, like, you could like have something said to you that upsets you but you just don't think about it a lot. You know, that's what I do, I just don't think about it at all” (Male)

Young people also described ignoring bullies or siblings (such as on the advice of a parent) as a way of dealing with being bullied or provoked by others, which could be effective, although not always.

“I was in dance and she was like saying mean stuff to me, she was just like, um, 'Oh you're so ugly'. She like always talks about my mum, and like I just ignored her and she won't stop.” (Female)

Young people described sometimes wanting to be left alone when they were feeling sad or angry, alluding to the benefits of having a time-out on their own in their bedroom or outside. These benefits included having time to think, having peace and quiet, escaping a difficult situation (such as a parent's stress), and having time to calm yourself down.

"I get really bad headaches when I am angry. I just want to be left alone to chill. Do you think that helps when you are angry? Yes, because I have time to think and not everyone is around me, telling me to do this, telling me to do that" (Male)

Theme 3: Acceptance

Approximately 40% of interviewees indicated that, for some problems or difficulties, they felt that they were able to cope because they had become used to the situation, or they just saw this as being part of normal life that they had to deal with and had to just 'get on with things'.

"What's it like for you, this upsetting feeling? Well, the fact that like, there's an argument going on or like people will be saying things, it, it, it does upset me, but it's not really an upsetting [feeling] that stops me from doing things, because I just get on with everything, but then, yeah, it doesn't really affect me that much" (Female)

Theme 4: Understanding the problem

Approximately 10% of interviewees alluded to learning how to deal with a problem over time, or referred to how understanding why a particular difficult situation had arisen, or why something was happening, could enable them to cope with it. For example, by helping them to stay positive in the face of difficulty or helping them to reason about another person's perspective.

"So even though you miss [your dad], how do you manage to stay ok? Because I know the only reason he still lives there is because it, is because he's got a job which is quite near there and it's a very important job"

Theme 5: Self-defence

Approximately 15% of interviewees spoke about their perceived need to defend themselves in physical fights with their peers and stick up for themselves when someone had been rude, nasty, or annoying.

"But when someone hits you, you have the right to defend yourself, so I, obviously I defend myself and I do get in a fight with them, but I don't hurt the person 'cause then I'll be in the wrong. I just defend myself. Like I'll block it, I'll punch them back if I need to, ... I know that I shouldn't be doing it, but if I don't, I'm going to get hurt. So it's either kill or be killed... really" (Male)

Yet, young people also spoke about how fear or knowledge of the consequences, such as hurting others or getting into trouble, could be a deterrent to getting into physical fights with, or retaliating against, peers.

"I've just been ignoring them and things and then that's helped as well, just not retaliating. Because I used to retaliate loads and found what's the point? Because it's just going to get you nowhere, it's going to get you excluded from the school, it's like I want a good career when I'm older" (Female)

Theme 6: Keeping things hidden

Approximately 20% of interviewees spoke about hiding their feelings, such as sadness or anger, from others, not wanting to talk about or share their feelings or difficult experiences with others, and not wanting to get other people involved in their problems (such as arguments with friends). Reasons given by the young people for why they did this included wanting to avoid

causing a fight or escalating a situation, wanting to avoid being seen as 'weak', not wanting others to know that they were feeling sad or angry, not wanting people to worry about them, and feeling that they could deal with issues themselves without needing to bring others into it.

"But I just kind of, just get really angry in my room, I just don't like showing it [in] front of other people ... I think I just don't like other people knowing the bad side of me. Yeah... I don't really know" (Female)

However, young people sometimes also acknowledged that if it was a big, serious, or overwhelming problem then they would talk to someone about it, such as a parent. In addition, they alluded to the issues that keeping their feelings or problems hidden could cause, including feeling even more upset as a result of keeping their difficult feelings or problems bottled up, or upsetting others by shutting them out.

"So like, I just keep it to myself, and it won't affect me either, I will be able to concentrate fine, even though there's things going on in my mind. And even if there is, like, and it's overwhelming, I will just go straight to my mum and tell her" (Male)

Conclusion

The aims of this document were to map the problems and difficulties that young people who have received or who may one day receive support from HeadStart are experiencing, and to describe the ways in which these young people cope with such issues and the types of support that they access or receive as a consequence. To address these aims, the themes or patterns in young people's responses relating to these topics were explored across 63 interviews with young people at five of the HeadStart partnerships.

Regarding the problems or difficulties that the young people described experiencing, the most prevalent, in terms of the percentage of interviewees who mentioned this, was by far the issue of fights and arguments with peers. While for some young people such arguments with their peers seemed to represent relatively normal, everyday occurrences from their perspective, for others these incidents were a particular source of distress, especially when they were incidents of bullying.

Young people also spoke about having fights and arguments with their parents and siblings, which could likewise be distressing, and alluded to the various sources of strain that their families were under, which could (though not always) take their toll on both them and their family, such as parental divorce, bereavement, and family financial difficulties. In terms of their experiences of difficult feelings and emotions, young people most often described experiencing explosive angry outbursts, which were difficult to control, and referred to their (sometimes chronic) worries and fears. In relation to school life, young people described their struggles academically, such as regarding particular subjects, and behaviourally.

The problems and difficulties described by the young people in this study were often interrelated and the themes arising from the interviews thus tended to overlap with each other. For example, the theme relating to the young people's experiences of having explosive angry outbursts overlapped with

the themes relating to fights and arguments with peers, parents, and siblings, as such fights were often caused by or perpetuated these angry outbursts. Additionally, having explosive angry outbursts related to having struggles in school with learning and behaviour, as such extreme anger could make concentrating in lessons difficult and was often coupled with bad behaviour in school.

There were also gender differences evident in the prevalence of some of the themes relating to the problems and difficulties that the young people spoke about. Specifically, higher percentages of boys described experiencing explosive anger, lack of friends, struggles with learning and behaviour at school, and perceived victimisation by teachers. On the other hand, higher percentages of girls referred in their interviews to their fears, worries, and lack of confidence. These findings are in line with the results of the HeadStart annual survey of young people's mental health and wellbeing, which was completed by 30,000 young people across the six HeadStart areas in year one of the programme.⁷ This also reflects the finding in previous research that girls tend to report experiencing more internalising symptoms (e.g. anxiety, depression) compared to boys, who tend to report experiencing more externalising symptoms (e.g. aggression, school problems) (Leadbeater et al., 1999).⁸ Indeed, just over half of the total number of interviewees were boys. This could suggest that boys may be easier to identify as being in need of support, as a result of their behaviour difficulties and outward displays of anger.

As well as discussing the problems and difficulties that they experienced, the young people described the many ways in which they coped with difficult feelings and situations. These could be grouped into several overarching themes, including engaging in positive thinking

⁷ Deighton, J., Lereya, T., Patalay, P., Casey, P., Humphrey, N., & Wolpert, M. (2018). *Mental health problems in young people, aged 11 to 14: Results from the first HeadStart annual survey of 30,000 children*. London: CAMHS Press.

⁸ Leadbeater, B.J., Kuperminc, G.P., Blatt, S.J., & Hertzog, C. (1999). A multivariate model of gender differences in adolescents' internalizing and externalizing problems. *Developmental Psychology*, 35, 1268–1282.

and activities that made them feel better, disengaging from problems through ignoring them, forgetting them, and being distracted, and accepting and getting used to difficult situations.

The young people also talked about the various sources of support that they had or that they could access, with the majority describing their parents, friends, and school staff as being important individuals who they could draw on for comfort, advice, distraction, and instrumental support, such as for intervention in incidents of bullying. However, young people also sometimes referred to hiding their feelings or problems, or being reluctant to talk about their issues, because they did not want others to know about them; for example, out of a wish to prevent the situation from being blown out of proportion or to ensure that they did not worry or upset others.

By the time of the interviews, just over half of the young people had experienced some form of support from HeadStart, including school- or community-based peer mentoring programmes, group psychoeducational or support programmes, and coproduction activities. The majority of the young people described their perceptions of the positive changes that had happened or that they felt could happen in their lives as a result of taking part in HeadStart, including:

- having someone to talk to and receive advice from
- feeling more able to talk to others about their problems
- learning strategies, techniques and information about how to deal with difficult emotions and situations
- feeling more confident
- making new friends and meeting new people.

However, some young people also referred to their perceptions of the relatively limited impact that HeadStart had had on their lives so far, or suggested possible improvements to the HeadStart initiatives that they had been involved in. For example, young people did not always perceive the support as being relevant to them if

they did not see themselves as having any major problems that they needed help with, or did not always seem to fully understand the meaning or purpose of the activities that they were taking part in.

The findings presented in this document have several potential implications for the provision of support, such as in a school setting, around young people's emotional wellbeing.



Implication 1

Interviewees who had been involved in HeadStart spoke about how, in terms of its benefits and positive impact, it had provided them with someone to talk to about their difficulties. Interviewees also described talking to their parents, siblings, friends, and school staff when they needed to about their problems. **Together, these findings indicate the importance for young people of having someone available to talk to about their problems or difficult situations when and if they need to.** Individuals working or interacting with young people could simply check with young people whether they have someone in their lives with whom they can talk. This could also point towards the potential benefits of workforce training or the development of a common framework for understanding and providing support around young people's wellbeing, so that everyone (e.g. parents, friends, siblings, school staff) who comes into contact with a young person could be a potential source of support.

Implication 2

Given that **the majority of the interviewees spoke about their parents, friends, siblings, and school staff as sources of support, formal support provision for young people could (where appropriate) highlight and draw on the support that young people may already get from these sources.** Moreover, this could similarly point to the potential benefits of large-scale training for those in contact with young people around how to help when a young person approaches you with problems or difficulties.

Implication 3

Interviewees described engaging in a wide range of activities and using various techniques and strategies for cheering themselves up, distracting themselves from their problems, and helping them to move past a difficult situation or feeling. This could indicate **the utility of the provision of time (such as a brief time-out outside of normal breaktimes during the school day) for, where possible, young people to do the things that relax them, that they enjoy, or that can make them feel better, such as reading a book or drawing.** This could also point towards the potential benefits of approaches aiming to promote wellbeing in young people, which draw on activities that young people enjoy, such as creative and sport-themed initiatives. Provision of an opportunity for young people to share their self-care strategies with their peers could also be helpful.

Implication 4

While experience of a particular risk factor, such as parental divorce, seemed to be problematic and a source of distress for some interviewees, this did not appear to be the case for other interviewees. Findings like this, therefore, remind us that exposure to a risk factor does not automatically negatively affect wellbeing. This also implies that **targeted support may most benefit those who have experienced a negative impact on their wellbeing following their experience of a particular risk factor.** Furthermore, knowledge of the ways in which a particular risk factor can negatively impact on wellbeing could usefully inform the content of such targeted support.

Implication 5

The finding that **a higher percentage of girls spoke about their worries and lack of confidence, whereas a higher percentage of boys spoke about their experiences of anger and behaviour issues at school may imply that particular support interventions could be usefully targeted towards these issues for these groups.**



The implications of the findings in this document must be considered within the context of the methodological limitations of this study. Chiefly, the findings were drawn solely from research interviews conducted with 63 young people across five of the HeadStart partnerships. Thus, the transferability of the findings is limited, in the sense that the findings cannot be said to necessarily speak for other young people who were not interviewed, either because they were not asked to be involved or because they chose not to be interviewed.

It is also important to consider that a whole range of factors can influence what interviewees choose to and remember to reveal during their research interviews, including the degree to which they feel that something is relevant, comfortable, or pertinent to mention. This means that the indications of the prevalence of the themes given in this document can only represent what interviewees chose or remembered to talk about, rather than being an objective measure of the incidence of particular issues within a given group of people.

Nonetheless, the strengths of this study lie in the rich, in-depth insight into the difficulties and support experienced by young people within the HeadStart cohorts that these interviews have provided, with implications for the HeadStart sites and other organisations/individuals seeking to support young people's wellbeing.

In terms of what is next for the evaluation, individual constellations of problems and difficulties, coping strategies, and sources of support accessed will also be explored. This is in order to examine, for instance, whether individuals with experiences of particular problems or difficulties may use specific coping strategies, have exposure to particular protective factors, and seek (or not seek) particular types of support, as well as to explore the co-occurrence of different types of problems and difficulties within individuals.

The second timepoint of interviews with the 63 young people will be conducted in 2018 and will explore how or if the young people's experiences and perspectives have changed in the last year, as they grow older, face new challenges, and have new experiences. This will also enable the evaluation team to look at the potential long-term impact of particular problems, coping strategies, and sources of support on young people's emotional wellbeing.

Appendix A

Semi-structured interview guide

Talking about life:

1. What do you like/not like/find difficult about being at school? Why?
2. Can you tell me about the area that you live in? What do you like/not like/find difficult about living here? Why?
3. Can you tell me about what life is like for you at home? What do you like/not like/find difficult about being at home? Why?
4. Can you tell me about your friendships? What do you like/not like/find difficult about spending time with your friends? Why?

Talking about emotions:

1. What kinds of things (e.g. activities, places, or people) can make you feel happy?
2. Being happy can look or feel different for everyone, so I was wondering what this looks like or feels like for you?
3. What kinds of things (e.g. activities, places, or people) can make it harder or more difficult for you to feel happy?
4. What sorts of feelings or emotions do you experience when you are not feeling happy? What do these feelings/emotions look like or feel like for you?
5. When you are not feeling happy or having a hard time, what do you do to feel better? What do you do when you have problems/difficulties in your life?
6. Have you ever received any help or support in relation to feeling like this?

If yes,

- What did this involve?
- Can you tell me about how you came to receive this help or support?
- Compared to before you received this help or support, how did you feel afterwards? Did anything improve/get worse? What? Was this what you expected?
- What was helpful about this help or support?
- Was there anything that was unhelpful? What?
- Was there anything that you would have liked to have been different about the help or support? What?

If no,

- Would you like to receive any help or support? What?

Talking about HeadStart:

1. Have you heard of something called HeadStart? If yes, can you tell me about what HeadStart is? If no, explain what HeadStart is in that area.
2. Have you been involved in any activities or lessons as part of HeadStart?

If yes,

- What did this involve?
- Can you tell me about how you came to be involved in HeadStart?
- Compared to before you got involved in HeadStart, how have you been feeling? Has anything improved/got worse? What? Was this what you expected?
- What have you found helpful about being involved in HeadStart? Has there been anything that you have found unhelpful? What?
- Was there anything that you would have liked to have been different about the activities/lessons? What?
- Have you ever taken part/been involved in anything like this before? What?
- Would you recommend HeadStart to any of your friends? Do any of your friends participate in HeadStart?

Giving suggestions/advice:

1. What advice or help would you give someone your age if they were experiencing a problem with:
 - Their friendships?
 - Their family?
 - School?
 - Their feelings or emotions?
2. Is this advice that you would follow yourself if you were experiencing this? Why/why not?

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About the HeadStart Learning Team

The **Evidence Based Practice Unit** at the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families and UCL is working with Big Lottery Fund and the HeadStart partnerships to collect, evaluate and share evidence about what does and doesn't work locally to benefit young people now and in the future.

Partners working with the Evidence Based Practice Unit on this evaluation include the **Child Outcomes Research Consortium (CORC)**, **Common Room, London School of Economics** and the **University of Manchester**.



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