

**EBPU** Evidence Based Practice Unit

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HeadStart Heads Up

Gender differences, improving support, and talking about mental health: learning from the 2020 HeadStart conference

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The HeadStart programme

Started in 2016, HeadStart is a five-year, £58.7 million National Lottery funded programme set up by The National Lottery Community Fund, the largest funder of community activity in the UK. HeadStart 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. To do this, six local authority-led HeadStart partnerships are working with local young people, schools, families, charities, community and public services to design and try out new interventions that will make a difference to young people's mental health, wellbeing and resilience. The HeadStart partnerships are in the following locations in England: Blackpool, Cornwall, Hull, Kent, Newham, and Wolverhampton.

The HeadStart Learning Team

The Evidence Based Practice Unit (EBPU) at the Anna Freud Centre and University College London (UCL) is working with The National Lottery Community 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) and the University of Manchester. This collaboration is called the HeadStart Learning Team.

Previous partners in the HeadStart Learning Team include The London School of Economics (LSE) and Common Room.

Common Room played a key role in supporting young people's involvement in the 2020 HeadStart Learning conference.

Background to this briefing

This briefing draws on table discussions at the HeadStart Learning 2020 conference, which took place in February 2020. The event was a collaboration between the HeadStart Learning Team and The National Lottery Community Fund, with substantial input from young people involved in HeadStart from across the six partnerships.

Approximately 170 people attended the conference. The mix of attendees included policy makers, participation workers, researchers, funders, programme and strategic leads, and practitioners, but the largest group in attendance was young people. Young people were at the heart of this conference and were involved in planning and running the event.



Young people at the heart of the conference

The conference would not have been possible without the contributions of young people. The HeadStart Learning Team and The National Lottery Community Fund are hugely grateful to the young people from the six HeadStart areas and to Young Champions at the Anna Freud Centre for their valuable input at every step of planning and running the conference. Young people were involved in a range of ways, including the following:

- Taking part in planning workshops to decide the themes and discussion questions for the conference.
- Providing creative ideas to ensure the conference felt accessible to all (for example, keeping keynote talks short and providing materials which allowed attendees to contribute ideas non-verbally).
- Attending the conference and sharing their views and experiences during the table discussions.
- Taking leading roles in the running of the conference, including:
 - co-chairing the event;
 - leading icebreakers;
 - taking photographs and video;
 - facilitating table discussions;
 - being on the panel and taking part in keynote talks;
 - performing poems about their experiences of mental health and wellbeing.

The three key themes for the day, developed by young people, were:

1. Why do we see different levels of emotional and behavioural difficulties in boys and girls?
2. How can adults improve recognition and support for young people who are experiencing difficulties with their mental health?
3. What things help or prevent young people from being willing and able to think about their own mental health, and to talk about mental health with other people?

Attendees took part in table discussions on each theme. Their contributions were captured on posters and are summarised within this briefing, together with implications for policy and practice. We also attempt to answer some of the questions raised by attendees as part of the conference discussions.



Theme 1

Why do we see different levels of emotional and behavioural difficulties in boys and girls?

To provide some context for the first discussion theme, Professor Jess Deighton (Director of the Evidence Based Practice Unit at the Anna Freud Centre and UCL), gave a keynote talk summarising the HeadStart Learning Team's research on gender and mental health during adolescence.

As part of their early research, the HeadStart Learning Team asked 30,000 young people about their mental health. Findings showed that boys are more likely to have behavioural problems and girls are more likely to have emotional problems (like anxiety and depression).¹ Research published by the HeadStart Learning Team in a recent evidence briefing suggests that mental health problems tend to increase for girls between Year 7 and Year 9; whereas boys' mental health problems tend to remain quite constant over this time.² Young people reviewed these research findings and wanted to know more about how and why these differences between boys and girls come about.

Attendees made several suggestions about why differences between girl's and boy's mental health were identified in the research. A common explanation, which was discussed at most tables, was that there are societal expectations and stereotypes which impact how boys and girls deal with and express their emotions and problems: "it is ingrained in us by society to behave in two different ways". Attendees discussed how the social standards set for boys and girls are different, where boys are expected to be stronger, "man-up" and not talk about their emotions, whereas girls are expected to be more emotional and "do the emotional work for everyone".

Related to this, attendees discussed that differences in mental health may also be linked to how young people see themselves, and that boys may not see themselves as being emotional or having emotional problems because of how they are socialised. It was suggested that true emotional problems among boys may not be adequately captured by the tools we use to measure mental health and wellbeing. Attendees also reflected that it may be that boys and girls have a different language to express their feelings and that girls have a 'better developed' emotional language, whereas it may be that boys express their feelings more as behaviours, or may be reluctant to share or express their feelings at all.

A second key explanation attendees provided for the observed differences in emotional problems between boys and girls was the differential impact of social media on mental health. Although attendees recognised that social media affects both boys and girls, it was viewed as having a different impact on girls compared to boys. Attendees spoke about how there is more pressure on girls when it comes to their appearance compared to boys. However, attendees acknowledged that the world will "stay digital." As such, we need to find ways to incorporate social media into our lives that aren't harmful, and to take care not to overemphasise the role of social media when its impact remains largely unknown.

Attendees also discussed the mental health needs of trans and non-binary young people. There was a common consensus that society imposes binary social norms in relation to gender. Dressing was one example participants offered, reflecting that school uniforms often follow binary norms. Attendees said that these kinds of social norms can lead to young people feeling like they don't belong which, in turn, can have an impact on mental health and wellbeing.



What does this mean for how we should support young people?

Attendees provided a host of wide-ranging suggestions about how we can better meet the needs of young people experiencing mental health problems, and there was a consensus that there is considerable room for improvement.

On a societal level, we need to work towards addressing gender stereotypes and creating a social landscape which is equal. Attendees reflected that having representative, positive role models for young people to relate to, both in the media and in their life, is an important aspect of this. Schools, parents and society as a whole all have a role to play in promoting a culture of acceptance and in dismantling societal, generational and cultural expectations of gender.

In terms of the best ways for adults to support young people, it was deemed important that young people have a trusted adult who they feel safe talking to in confidence. Parents and teachers should aim to look at the reason behind the behaviour or anger and recognise that often, 'bad behaviour' is a response to an internal, emotional problem. Given that young people can provide each other with valuable sources of support, adults should also help to provide young people with the tools and resources to support one other.

In terms of what we can do to support trans and non-binary people specifically, suggestions for support included not forcing disclosure, using the right pronouns, and asking people how they'd like to be referred to, as well as additional education about pronouns. Young people also advised that it was important to open up discussions about gender, and to promote a culture of openness and change in schools. Rather than trying to treat trans or non-binary young people differently, attendees spoke about the importance of interventions and lessons which encourage a culture of equality and acceptance among everyone.

What else did attendees want to know about gender differences and mental health?

Several questions were raised by attendees in relation to the discussion about gender differences and mental health:

- Do boys and girls answer questions differently on measures of mental health and wellbeing?

There is some evidence from the research literature that this may occur. For example, a study conducted with Norwegian adolescents using the Hopkins Symptom Checklist-10 - a measure of psychological distress - found that some items worked differently for boys and girls, including 'blaming yourself for things' and 'feeling blue'.³

- Does social media affect girls more than boys?

There is some evidence to suggest that this may be the case. Researchers have identified potential benefits of social media use for young people, for instance as a medium for emotional support.⁴ However, emerging evidence suggests that social media use is associated with depression, anxiety and psychological distress in young people.⁵ A recent study conducted with data from the UK Millennium Cohort Study based on 10,904 14-year olds found that the size of the of the association between social media use and depressive symptoms was larger for girls than for boys.⁶ The authors reported that more hours spent on social media related to outcomes such as greater body weight dissatisfaction, which in turn was linked to depressive symptoms.

- Can we improve the language we use to talk about gender as part of research, using less binary wording?

Moving forward, The HeadStart Learning Team is reviewing the possible addition of gender and sexuality questions to the Wellbeing Measurement Framework, a set of questionnaires we use to measure wellbeing and resilience in children and young people. We will also look for opportunities to further explore gender difference in our HeadStart research findings and we will continue to explore gender differences in relation to mental health into later adolescence.



MORE THAN MINUTES



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Theme 2

How can adults improve recognition and support for young people who are experiencing mental health difficulties?

During conference planning workshops, young people told us that adults often don't understand or see that they're struggling with their mental health and may perceive young people's difficulties as 'typical teenage behaviour'. Young people said that they want more adults to be able to empathise with them and look behind disruptive behaviour, to understand that they might be struggling.

To set the scene for this discussion, staff and pupils from Homewood School in Kent gave a keynote talk. They shared learning from the school's partnership with HeadStart Kent and discussed their whole school approach to mental health and wellbeing. Teachers from Homewood School spoke passionately about the value of listening to and learning from young people's perspectives. Pupils shared positive experiences of being involved in programmes like peer mentoring, and emphasised the importance of understanding the reasons underlying challenging behaviour, as it could indicate stress or other difficulties.



When adults don't respond well to young people who are struggling with their mental health, why could this be?

Attendees suggested a variety of individual factors which may influence the way adults, particularly school staff, respond to young people who are struggling, and the reasons behind their responses. Suggestions included a fear of making situations worse, a lack of confidence and knowledge to deal with a young person's difficulty, and not feeling equipped to deal with the specific problems faced by young people. Attendees also suggested that a staff member's own situation might impact on the way they respond to young people who are struggling - factors such as stress, feeling overworked and experiencing mental health problems themselves.

Systemic factors were also thought to influence the way adults respond to young people. Again, attendees centred their discussion around how school-level factors could impact on the way that staff respond. They reflected that a school environment which is results driven could make it difficult for staff to find the time and space to support young people with their wellbeing. A lack of resources and training to enable school staff to provide support for their pupils was also described. One attendee reflected on the "overwhelming responsibility of teachers to be mental health counsellors as well as teachers..."

Other school-level factors suggested by attendees include large class sizes, poor communication between members of staff and the potential for behaviour and wellbeing support areas to be misinterpreted as places of punishment, both by staff and young people: "The cooldown room could be seen as a trouble room."

Limited joined-up working and poor communication between schools and mental health services were among other factors thought to have an impact.

What could adults do better to empathise with and support young people who are struggling with their mental health and wellbeing?

Attendees discussed how important it is for teachers and other members of school staff to take the time to build trusting relationships with their pupils and “find out what’s meaningful to them”. Young people expressed a desire to have honest conversations with school staff, saying that they will respond more positively if they feel that their problems and experiences are being validated. Being asked how they would like to be treated and seeking solutions to problems collaboratively with members of staff was also highlighted as beneficial. Young people discussed their wishes for school staff to explain the steps they will take if they plan to share the information disclosed with others.

Attendees reflected that self-awareness among staff of their own difficulties and coping strategies could help adults to better empathise with and support young people.

Attendees also argued that schools could work to improve the training provided to staff and ensure that mental health and wellbeing provision is easily accessible for both staff and students, although they acknowledged that resources are needed to make this possible. Many attendees expressed that wellbeing and mental health should be a priority within schools, and that the capacity to support those who are struggling needs to be increased to prevent staff from feeling overburdened. Provision needs to have a trickle-down effect and be top-down from leadership, “young people learn from how teachers respond to situations”.

Outside of the school setting, attendees discussed the importance of community approaches to supporting young people, and to improving support and information for parents. They discussed the benefits of trauma-informed practice and mental health first aid training for young people, school staff and parents, and how important community outreach is to enabling young people to access a range of services: “It’s everybody’s problem not just the NHS.”



What else did attendees wish to find out from research to improve how adults support young people?

Attendees posed several questions in relation to what research can tell us about how adults can better support young people:

– Can we improve young people’s mental health through more informal supports, such as social prescribing?

Beyond the interventions provided directly by mental health services, there are several non-professional self-management approaches which may be beneficial in improving mental health and wellbeing for young people, including social interaction, physical activity and seasonal light therapy.^{7,8} Although the research evidence is limited, there is some support for providing structured group arts activities to help build resilience and contribute to positive mental wellbeing of children and young people.⁹ However, there is a need for additional research which assesses effectiveness of interventions not mediated by a mental health professional.

Within the context of child and adolescent mental health, the effectiveness and acceptability of social prescribing is in its infancy and research is sparse. A review of the evidence conducted by EBPU¹⁰ aimed to explore the evidence base around social prescribing and mental health and/or wellbeing of children and young people. The review identified a gap in the literature and, given the paucity of literature, no conclusions were able to be drawn in relation to the role of social prescribing in improving the mental health and/or wellbeing of young people.

– Can we improve young people’s mental health and support through better support for teachers, parents and carers?

This is an important question which requires additional research. Schools are increasingly being positioned as providers and coordinators of emotional and mental health support for young people, however, there has been limited consideration in the research given to the role of teacher wellbeing in achieving this. There is

evidence to suggest that teacher wellbeing, as measured by feeling valued and cared for, not feeling overloaded, and experiencing job stimulation and enjoyment, is associated with academic performance in pupils,¹¹ although it is important to consider that this relationship may be bidirectional. In terms of the association between teacher wellbeing and pupil wellbeing, the picture is less clear, and more research is needed. Resources to support school staff wellbeing can be found on the [Anna Freud Centre website](https://www.annafreud.org/what-we-do/schools-in-mind/resources-for-schools/supporting-staff-wellbeing-in-schools/).ⁱ

Parents and carers play an important role in the mental health and wellbeing of young people. From research we know that parents and carers are identified as a preferred initial source of help for emotional problems and continue to be a primary source of support and advice throughout adolescence and early adulthood.¹² The research literature also suggests that there are several parent or family factors associated with service use for young people with mental health problems, including parental burden, parent perception of need and recent change in family structure, highlighting the role that parents play in help-seeking when a young person is experiencing emotional or behavioural problems. These findings demonstrate that increasing support for parents and carers may be important for increasing service use among young people experiencing difficulties.¹³



i) <https://www.annafreud.org/what-we-do/schools-in-mind/resources-for-schools/supporting-staff-wellbeing-in-schools/>

Theme 3

What things help or prevent young people from being willing and able to think about their own mental health, and to talk about mental health with other people?

The HeadStart Learning Team's earlier research found that young people might not always think that their struggles with their mental health are something that others can help with, or they might not feel there is anyone they can trust to talk to about their mental health.¹⁴ Young people said cultural differences can affect how they understand and talk about mental health, and that attitudes about mental health in their families and communities can often be different to how it is viewed in school. These are areas that young people wanted to explore at the conference.

Before the table discussions on this theme, we welcomed our final keynote speaker, Dr Mike Ungar, Director of the Resilience Research Centre at Dalhousie University in Canada. Dr Ungar considered the spaces and places that can help young people to talk about mental health, drawing on mental health and wellbeing programmes from around the world. Professor Ungar emphasised the importance of culture and context when it comes to disclosing mental health difficulties.



What affects how willing and able young people are to reflect on and talk about their mental health and wellbeing?

Attendees reflected that young people's emotions can be an important factor in how willing and able they feel to talk about their mental health and wellbeing. They said that whether or not a young person feels able to talk about and reflect on their wellbeing might be influenced by embarrassment and pride; not wanting to burden others or draw attention to themselves by talking about problems; and confidence, or lack thereof. Attendees identified worries about being judged, and that the outcome of discussing their problems might lead to someone being sectioned or "taken away," as underlying reasons why young people may hesitate to talk about their mental health. Negative experiences of asking for help in the past were also identified as a barrier, including having felt judged, "shut down" or ignored by those they approached for support.

Participants highlighted that if a young person is experiencing low mood, low self-esteem, or low self-worth, this alone could make it difficult for them to discuss how they are feeling.

The context surrounding a young person was also identified as impacting on how willing and able young people are to reflect on and talk about their mental health and wellbeing. If a young person feels that they lack a support network, or does not have an adult they feel they can trust, attendees felt that this would make them less likely to talk about their mental health. Pressure from peers, bullying or difficult situations at home might also add to the challenge of sharing how they feel. Attendees suggested that it is important for young people to be in the right environment, with the time and space to allow them to feel comfortable discussing any difficulties. Attendees also felt that long waiting times to access support could impact negatively on young people's willingness to discuss their problems.



What does this mean for how adults should support young people?

When a young person reaches out, attendees suggested that adults should make sure they are transparent, letting the young person know if any information they have disclosed needs to be passed on. Attendees expressed the importance of adults setting boundaries and expectations for young people and giving them the power to disclose as much or as little information about their situation as they wish. Adults should ensure they use the appropriate language when talking with a young person, and that they don't belittle their experiences.

"[The] best way for adults to support young people is to give them the time and resources to support each other"

In addition to how adults respond when someone reaches out to them, attendees expressed that it is important to work to minimise the number of times that a young person must tell their story when they seek support. Working towards a more joined-up system of support involving family, school and the wider community was thought to be important.



What else do we need to find out from research to improve our understanding of what helps young people to be willing and able to reflect on and talk about their mental health and wellbeing?

- What are the barriers and drivers to young people seeking support with their mental health?

Existing research indicates that there are several key barriers to help-seeking, including perceived stigma and embarrassment, difficulty recognising symptoms (poor mental health literacy), negative attitudes about seeking professional help and a preference for self-reliance. Drivers are comparatively under-researched. However, evidence suggests that aids to the help-seeking process include positive perceptions of past experiences of help-seeking, the availability of established and trusted relationships with professionals, social support, and encouragement from others to reach out for help.^{15,16} Friends and family are often the preferred sources of help over health professionals.¹⁶

- Is peer to peer support effective for youth when talking about emotions?

Peer support is important for positive mental health and wellbeing in young people and can act as a buffer to negative experiences such as bullying.^{17,18} Schools are increasingly using peer support programmes to support pupils with their mental health and wellbeing, however, the research literature provides mixed evidence for the effectiveness of peer support schemes and outcomes. Some studies have identified positive outcomes¹⁹ but other findings provide a more inconsistent impact of participation.²⁰ An upcoming HeadStart evidence briefing will share findings from the evaluation of More than Mentors, a peer mentoring programme delivered by HeadStart Newham. This briefing will investigate the impact of the programme for mentors and mentees, and will be available on the [EBPU website](#).



Wrapping up: the young people's panel

The conference ended with a panel discussion. A young person from HeadStart co-chaired the panel. The panellists, who were also young people from across the HeadStart areas, shared their perspectives on key issues in young people's mental health and wellbeing and their own experiences of being involved in HeadStart.

Panellists reflected on the positive impact that involvement in HeadStart had on their self-esteem, emphasising the value of being heard and supported by HeadStart staff and feeling that they had made a genuine contribution to the development and delivery of the programme in their local areas. Asked what they would change if they were Prime Minister for the day, panellists responded that they would amplify young people's voices in decision-making and reduce pressures on both staff and pupils in schools. The panellists ended by sharing some top tips with other young people. They said that it's okay to reach out for help if you're struggling, and that young people have huge potential to make a difference in their communities when their perspectives are heard and acted on.

What's next for HeadStart?

Moving forward, the HeadStart Learning Team plans to continue working with The National Lottery Community Fund and the HeadStart partnerships to conduct interviews, collect survey data and evaluate evidence about the impact of HeadStart and changes in young people's mental health and wellbeing. In particular, the Learning Team is looking at the impact of different types of HeadStart interventions on outcomes, including whole-school approaches to building resilience and more targeted interventions such as mindfulness and online support. There are also several strands of work underway looking at the role of connection and supportive relationships, including the different types of support young people describe receiving and finding helpful from their parents, siblings, pets and teachers.

We look forward to sharing the findings from this work in the coming months. If you would like to be kept informed about the HeadStart learning programme, [join the mailing list for the Heads Up policy briefing](#)ⁱⁱ, and follow [EBPU on Twitter](#).ⁱⁱⁱ

ii) Sign up for the HeadStart Heads Up mailing list at http://eepurl.com/gum3_f

iii) Follow EBPU on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/EBPUnit>

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Where can I find support?

Childline: Call 0800 1111

The Samaritans: Call 116 123

On My Mind: www.annafreud.org/on-my-mind

The Mix: www.themix.org.uk

Shout: Text 85258

With thanks to the young people from HeadStart Newham who took many of the photographs that appear in this briefing.

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