What supports young people's mental wellbeing?

Results and recommendations from discussions with young people

February 2019

About the project

This project was conducted by a consortium of partners funded through the Health and Wellbeing Alliance[1]. It aimed to explore a range of young people's perspectives about what keeps them mentally well. Together with key messages from a scoping review[2] the findings have informed a Special Interest Group on children and young people's mental health and prevention, established by Public Health England.

This paper sets out the work undertaken with young people, presents themes arising from focus groups and interviews and makes recommendations for practice arising from the scoping review, feedback from young people and reflections from professionals involved in the work.

How did we engage young people?

A series of focus groups and interviews were undertaken between October 2018 and January 2019. 71 young people were involved. 69 in focus groups and 2 via one to one interviews. The sessions with young people followed a standardised methodology, addressing key questions as follows:

- Who are the most important **people** when it comes to making children and young people feel safe, secure and good about themselves? What are the qualities that make young people receptive to accessing their support?
- What **things** make young people feel safe and happy every day?
- Where are the **places** that children and young people go to feel well?

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[1] The Health & Wellbeing Alliance partners involved in this work were: Association for Young People's Health, Brook, Street Games, Youth Access, Carers Trust, Friends, Families and Travellers, The National LGB&T Partnership, Association of Mental Health Providers, NACRO, NAVCA and The Men's Health Forum

[2] YPHP, HWA (2018) What do children and young people tell us about what supports their wellbeing?

- Is there anything else that you would like to say about what's important in keeping children and young people and their families mentally well?

All conversations with young people were led by specialist voluntary sector organisations and young people co-facilitated sessions where possible. The sessions engaged with a cross section of young people with representation from young people with protected characteristics. The age of the young people involved ranged from 10-25 years, from different geographical locations and a range of ethnic groups including: Black African, Black British, White British and White Other. The groups included young men, young women, LGBT young people, those with experience of the criminal justice system, as well as those with lived experience of self-harm and a range of other mental health problems.

Detailed notes from all sessions were analysed for the main themes that emerged.

What young people say supports their mental wellbeing

The conversations suggested that the mental wellbeing of young people is greatly affected by and specific to their background, place and demographics, including sexuality, gender, ethnicity and poverty. However, some consistent themes emerged.

The most important people

Young people spoke both about the range of people who were important to them, and the characteristics of supportive people. Consistent with other research, the young people identified family (parents, carers, siblings, and extended family members), friends (including their own partners) and peers as important to them. Conversely they also cited reasons for not sharing information with parents. This included a reluctance to 'burden' parents who sometimes themselves are living with pressures (e.g. as a result of poverty or their own mental health problems); fear of the consequences such as not being allowed out; and a perception that parents may lack understanding of and skills to deal with or offer support.

> *"Your **friends** make you feel better, because they understand you". "They listen to you"*
>
> *Focus group feedback*

> **Family** were referenced by most participants as being key in the lives of young people. As one young person said *"they've known you since birth, not like friends who can leave".*
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> One participant said they would turn to their parents because *"they've been here longer than I have"* but that they would not turn to them if there were concerns for their physical safety because they would become upset and try to stop them going out.
>
> *Focus group feedback*

School staff, including teachers, pastoral and safeguarding leads may also be important sources of support for mental wellbeing, but schools are not always seen as safe places or staff perceived as having the necessary skills to help. *"Teachers, teach. They don't know how to help"*. Young people we spoke to

said that school handling of wellbeing and mental health issues was too often poor. Some groups of young people, for example LGBT young people and young carers, report particularly bad experiences.

Youth workers and voluntary and community youth agency staff are perceived as looking out for young people, understanding and keeping them safe *"They're [youth workers] important because they're always there for you"*. Some young people may also have a counsellor or mentor who they value and is important to their wellbeing.

For some young people, peer support groups (including on-line groups) are very important. LGBT young people, in particular, talked about the importance of such groups in providing people to talk to who share experience.

Young people talked about the qualities that they look for in people who are important to their wellbeing. They wanted the person to be supportive, friendly, a good listener, compassionate, non-judgemental and trustworthy. They also felt that, to be effective, they needed a good understanding of mental health issues, be engaged sufficiently to be able to identify changes in behaviour and mood and be empathic towards, or ideally share background and experience - e.g.in the case of supporting LGBT young people, to be LGBT themselves or LGBT aware and friendly. The continuity and consistency of the relationship was also important to young people.

Young people felt that professionals needed to have a clear understanding of boundaries and confidentiality issues and young people felt that this quality was often lacking. Young people want to feel empowered and involved in decisions about their wellbeing, but boundaries and confidences are often breached leading to mistrust and disinclination to talk to professionals. Several young people in focus groups felt particularly mistrustful of schools in respecting confidentiality – a primary reason why school staff should be important but are not seen as safe.

There was a strong feeling amongst young people that understanding of mental health and wellbeing issues needs to be improved amongst many parents, education and health professionals.

Learning about mental health and wellbeing issues in school and how to express feelings and communicate helps young people to make good use of professionals. Programmes like Addaction's Mind & Body were cited (the programme helps young people explore and manage thoughts and actions associated with self-harm).

Some young people suggested that regular screening using simple surveys could help to identify signs of deterioration of mental wellbeing and that mentoring and peer support schemes could help.

Many were of the view that better promotion of help available is needed to bring services to the attention of young people.

Things that make young people feel safe and happy

Young people listed many things that contribute to wellbeing. These include stability (home, employment, school), sleep, money, food, hobbies (art, gaming, reading), physical activity, music, pets, TV/film, shopping, volunteering, hugs.

Self-care and regulation were also seen as being important, including the ability to remove oneself from unsafe places and build resilience.

Conversations with young people highlighted the fact that access to many of these things is not equitable. For example, young carers can have less time to engage in their hobbies because of caring responsibilities.

Places where children and young people go to feel well

Young people reported that on-line spaces, if monitored and moderated, can be safe spaces that help them to feel included and not isolated. At the same time such spaces avoid the need to have to meet people face to face which can add to the stress and anxiety that some young people experience.

Safe places can also be a young person's home (bedroom), friend's houses, coffee shops and cafes, outdoor spaces, sports facilities (and clubs/teams), youth centres/agency spaces. Schools could also be safe but may also be places of stress and pressure.

As noted in the previous section access to safe places and activities is not equitable. Young people living in poverty or without access to resources are less likely to be able to access leisure facilities or indeed have their own bedroom.

Recommendations for practice

These recommendations have been drawn from the scoping review and feedback from young people. These were agreed at a workshop in January 2019 attended by 26 professionals from voluntary and community sector agencies plus national and local PHE colleagues. All Health and Wellbeing Alliance members involved in this work were present.

1. **Increase understanding that young people's wellbeing is affected by and specific to their background, place and demographics and will be affected by the inequalities they face.**
   - *It is vital that we understand that not all young people are the same.*
   - *Access to safe spaces and activities is not equitable e.g. young people living in poverty are less likely to have their own bedroom.*
   - *It is important that professionals don't inadvertently impose a particular set of values or beliefs.*

2. **Improve access for young people to talk about their feelings in the places where, and with the person/people with whom, they feel most comfortable.**
   - *A system wide approach is needed, with good links and referral arrangements between agencies and institutions, including pathways into accessible child and adolescent mental health (CAMHS) services where appropriate.*
   - *Better signposting of mental health and wellbeing services for young people is needed. Knowing, from a young person's perspective, where to advertise services for young people is critical.*
   - *The voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector is an important partner engaging with marginalised communities and providing young people with a safe and welcoming space. VCSE youth agencies can provide support without an institutional, formal or statutory role. Young people value high quality community youth agencies and specialist services such as services for young carers and young LGBT people.*
   - *Peer support groups, which put high value on shared lived experiences, are important, as are safe, regulated online spaces. In these face to face and on-line networks, young people can share experiences and questions with a like-minded community with the assurance that standards are moderated by, for example, a community manager or safeguarding lead.*

3. **Increase the focus on young people's wellbeing in education settings**
   - *A whole school approach to supporting young people with mental health issues is needed. High quality PSHE should be part of this approach as well as links to all services and organisations working in the local community to support young people's wellbeing.*
   - *There are general challenges within the education system, with young people feeling under pressure and stress and rising levels of exclusions. The DfE, Ofsted and others should consider how this is being addressed, including a focus on pastoral support.*
   - *Teachers need access to knowledge and skills that enable them to take a range of different approaches with young people experiencing mental health and wellbeing issues. School staff also need access to effective support and supervision to support themselves as they support young people.*

- *Confidentiality is a key issue for schools to address so that young people and staff have the same clear understanding about when information will need to be shared. Good practice guides exist e.g. Somerset Council toolkit for schools "Guiding Conversations with Young People".*
- *Having the same staff member designated for mental health issues and safeguarding and exclusions can mean that young people may not see them as safe or trustworthy.*
- *Consider introducing measures to support young people manage their education alongside other stresses and pressures within their lives e.g. Young Carers in Schools or Mind and Body programmes.*

4. **Make professionals aware of young people's fears about what will happen if they talk about their feelings**
- *Young people are always concerned about the repercussions of telling people about their feelings for themselves and for their family. They fear of removal of liberty by parents or institutions, intervention from social services or being stereotyped.*
- *Young people from protected characteristic and other marginalised groups can feel additional pressure to represent everyone within their group and not to play into negative stereotypes. For example, the scoping review highlighted boys continue to feel pressure to not show emotion and girls feel that their distress can be seen by adults as an over emotional reaction.*

5. **Support improved mental health and emotional literacy of young people, families and professionals**
- *More training is needed for parents, education and health professionals (e.g. in mental health issues, confidentiality, working with young people, building trust).*
- *Giving young people the skills to recognize when they need help with mental health issues is equally important. Improving emotional literacy, particularly for boys, is an important part of promoting wellbeing.*
- *Practitioners and professionals need to focus more on understanding the underlying reasons for young people's actions, not only the effects.*
- *Mental health literacy for parents is important, with a focus on engaging parents and carers and helping them to understand which agencies and services can help. Some young people will want to access help independently, while for others parents will be a preferred source of support.*
- *Access to sources of information and support for both mental health and other issues young people are experiencing is also important. For example the PHE "Rise Above" campaign.*

A commitment to a youth led charter about young people's rights and what they can expect from services can support a whole system approach to young people's wellbeing encompassing all of the above recommendations. This should include young people's agencies, schools and services with a focus on decision making, boundaries, levels of service and confidentiality.

About the organisations undertaking this work

This review is part of the work programme of the Health and Wellbeing Alliance, a group of 21 organisations that have been brought together to bring the voluntary sector's voice and expertise into national policy making. Together with the Young People's Health Partnership the project is being delivered by the following members of the Alliance:

- Carers Trust

- Friends, Families and Travellers

- The National LGB&T Partnership

- Association of Mental Health Providers

- Nacro

- NAVCA

- The Men's Health Forum