



**Emotional Wellbeing of Children and
Young People aged 8 to 11 years in
Bexley**

October 2017

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Acknowledgements

Healthwatch Bexley would like to thank the school and the young people for their valuable contribution and for participating in the survey.

1. Executive Summary

This report presents the findings of a small pilot study into the emotional health and wellbeing of 217 children aged 8 - 11 years in Bexley. The study highlights that school and exam pressures are commonly experienced amongst primary school aged children and are particularly noticeable in Year 5 pupils, who are preparing for the selection tests. A high proportion of the children across Key Stage 2 also reported having troubles sleeping and less than said they feel happy or relaxed about going to secondary school. The majority stated they have one good friend or more and three quarters of children take part in after school activities. The results demonstrate the importance to identify the emotional needs of pupils and to target interventions at an early age, to prevent issues from escalating into secondary school and adolescent.

This report will further draw on findings from our second emotional wellbeing survey, amongst 11-19 year olds (n=1208), in which comparisons are made where possible. This allows Healthwatch to provide a broader picture of the emotional wellbeing of young people in Bexley, spanning from 8-19 years of age.

2. Introduction

Children and young people's emotional wellbeing is a topical issue and has been on the national agenda for some years. There is evidence of growing prevalence of mental ill-health among children and young people, particularly for behavioral and emotional conditions such as anxiety, depression and conduct disorders (House of Commons, 2017). More than 50% of mental ill health starts before the age of 15 and 75% before the age of 18 and teachers are often the first to notice mental health issues. It is estimated that 3 children in every classroom are experiencing or living with a diagnosable mental health condition, rising to 1 in 4 when emotional distress is included (Young Minds, 2017).

A report by the World Health Organisation, in 2012, found that 11 and 16-year-old pupils in England feel more pressured by their school work than the vast majority of other European countries. This is evidenced by the increased number of children seeking support by the national charity, Childline (2013,14), particularly in relation to school and exam pressures. Moreover, Young Minds

states in their report “Wise Up to Wellbeing in Schools” (2017) that there is an imbalance in schools, with too much emphasis on academic attainment with the wellbeing of students being secondary. The key message portrayed to teachers and pupils, through education policies, league tables and Ofsted inspections, appears to be that the main purpose of school is to get qualifications and pass exams. The introduction of the new tests for primary assessment has also attracted criticism, whereby technical aspects, such as grammar and spelling, takes priority over creativity and composition within written assessments (House of Commons, 2017).

Children and young people spend a considerable amount of time in school and this provides an ideal environment for promoting good emotional wellbeing and identifying early behaviour changes and signs of mental distress. Schools are ideally placed to promote the health and wellbeing of children and young people; laying the foundations for healthier outcomes in adulthood through school-based health promotion programmes. The social and emotional skills, knowledge and behaviours that young people learn in the classroom can help them to build resilience and set the pattern for how they will manage their mental health throughout their lives. There is some evidence that targeted health promotion programmes can have positive effects on certain health outcomes, including emotional wellbeing and especially for anxiety prevention programmes (Marmot, 2010).

The use of social media presents a challenge to schools. A recent report by the Royal Society of Public Health (RSPH), into Social media and young people’s mental health and wellbeing (2017), demonstrate that whilst there are benefits associated with social media use, there is also evidence of links between excessive social media use, sleep deprivation and depression in children and young people. RSPH suggests that schools can support children in making wiser and informed choices about their use of social media, but states that it is important to recognise that schools have limited capacity to tackle the issue of children’s use of technology, particularly outside of school. However, schools can ensure they share information and specialist knowledge with parents to increase awareness.

Good mental health is the foundation of young people’s emotional and intellectual growth, underpinning the development of confidence, independence and a sense of self-worth. Crucially, poor mental health is associated with poor outcomes in later life; including poor physical health, erratic employment and social exclusion.

3. Methodology

This survey is based on quantitative data which was captured through a structured questionnaire, consisting of 15 questions including gender and year group. The questionnaire was drafted by Healthwatch and amended by the school to ensure questions and choice of words were appropriate for the age group. The questionnaire prompted the children to 'tick' the relevant box, which most accurately reflected their experience.

The questions related to:

- General wellbeing e.g. worries
- Exam pressures, homework, and tests
- Experiences of bullying and sleep problems
- Use of mobile phone and social media
- Feeling listened to

All children in Key stage 2 (Years 3-6) were invited to take part in the survey. The children were introduced to the survey during assembly, in which the purpose of the survey was explained along with some of the questions. The children subsequently filled in the questionnaires in their classrooms and a total of 217 questionnaires were completed. The survey was anonymous but one question asked if the child would like to speak to someone about any concerns or worries, in which case the name and the person they would like to speak to was recorded.

The survey took place on Friday 12th May, during SATs week. The school has obtained a summary of the results for each class so that interventions can be targeted if and where necessary.

About the school:

The school is a large primary school with a nurse. It has a speech, language and communication resource, which provides specialist provision for a number of children with education and health care plans. Two thirds of the school's pupils are from white British backgrounds and one third are from a wide range of minority ethnic groups, the largest of which is Black African. The number of pupils who speak English as an additional language is below average and the proportion of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities is a little above average (Ofsted).

Limitations

Healthwatch acknowledge that whilst efforts to obtain a representative sample of the young population in Bexley has been made, the results of this pilot study may not be generalisable to the wider school community or indeed young people at large in Bexley. The results do however provide a starting point for discussion and further exploration which, schools, commissioners, service providers and the wider community, may use to inform their future priorities and strategies.

This report will be distributed to all secondary schools in Bexley, Bexley Local Authority, Health and Wellbeing board, Overview and Scrutiny Committee, Oxleas NHS Foundation Trust, Bexley Clinical Commissioning Group, Bromley Healthcare, Healthwatch England, BVSC, community groups and other stakeholders.

4. Results of the survey

The results of the survey will be presented as a collective response from the whole of Key stage 2, followed by a brief discussion. However, where there are significant differences between year groups, this will be stated.

Summary of main findings:

- 57% of children said they have trouble sleeping
- 1/3 of children felt worried, unhappy or sad about going to secondary school
- 59% of children have a mobile phone with internet access
- 1/3 of children in all classes use social media
- 76% of children take part in after school activities
- 1/3 of children felt worried, unhappy or sad about school tests
- 44% of children said they experience school pressures
- 1/2 of the children said they sometimes worry a lot

Question 1 and 2 related to gender and year group.

	Boys	Girls	Total per year group
Year 3	28	27	55
Year 4	25	27	52
Year 5	30	26	56
Year 6	29	25	54
Total	112	105	217

Q. 3 related to a set of statements:

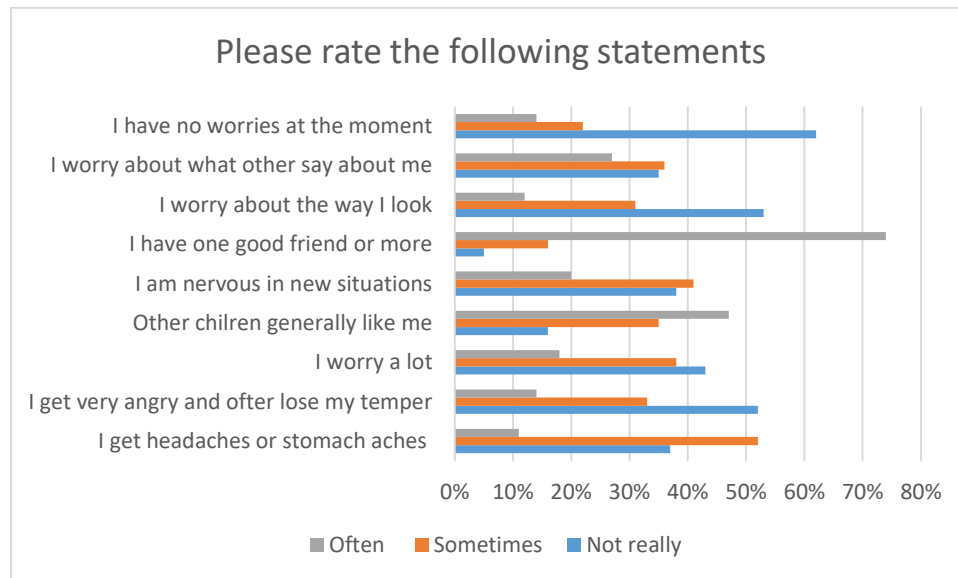
1. I get headaches or stomach aches
2. I get very angry and often lose my temper
3. I worry a lot
4. Other children generally like me
5. I am nervous in new situations
6. I have one good friend or more
7. I worry about the way I look
8. I worry about what other say about me
9. I have no worries at the moment

Friendship is a protective factor for mental health and helps us to maintain a positive sense of wellbeing. The survey demonstrates that the majority of children, 74%, state that they have one good friend or more, with 16% stating they sometimes feel they have a good friend. However, 11 children said they do not feel they have one good friend. This is something that schools needs to be mindful of and understand the reasons behind, as some children will require support to form and sustain friendships.

Interestingly, less than half of the children, 47%, felt confident that they are generally liked by other children, with 34 children stating they did not think other children generally liked them.

More than half of children also stated they worry about what others say about them. This is consistent with a survey by mental health charity, Place2Be, amongst Year 6 children (n=705), which demonstrated that two thirds of children stated they “worry all the time” about school life, home life or themselves (Place2Be, 2017). The 11-19 survey also demonstrated that 52% of young people said they worry about a friend or a relative.

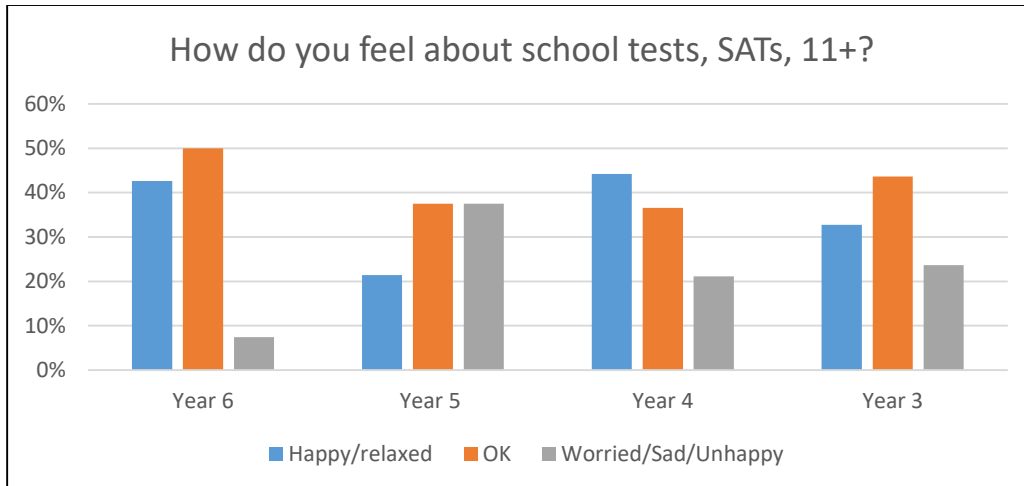
One third of children also stated that they “sometimes” get very angry and lose their temper, which may be a sign of anxiety and stress, with over half of the children (52%) stating they “sometimes” get a stomach or headache.



Q4. How do you feel about school test, SATs and 11+?

Research demonstrate there is an increase in stress, anxiety and mental health problems linked to school work or exams (Hutchings, 2015). Moreover, data from ChildLine (2014,2015) demonstrates that school and exam pressures are one of the biggest causes of feelings of stress and anxiety amongst children and young people. ChildLine, the counselling service for children and young people, reported that there was a 200 % increase in counselling sessions related to exam stress between 2012- 13 and 2013-14; and that there was a considerable increase, in all age groups, in counselling sessions related to school and education problems. Exam pressures was further identified as a concern in young people aged 11-19, in which 57% of young people reported experiencing exam and school pressures.

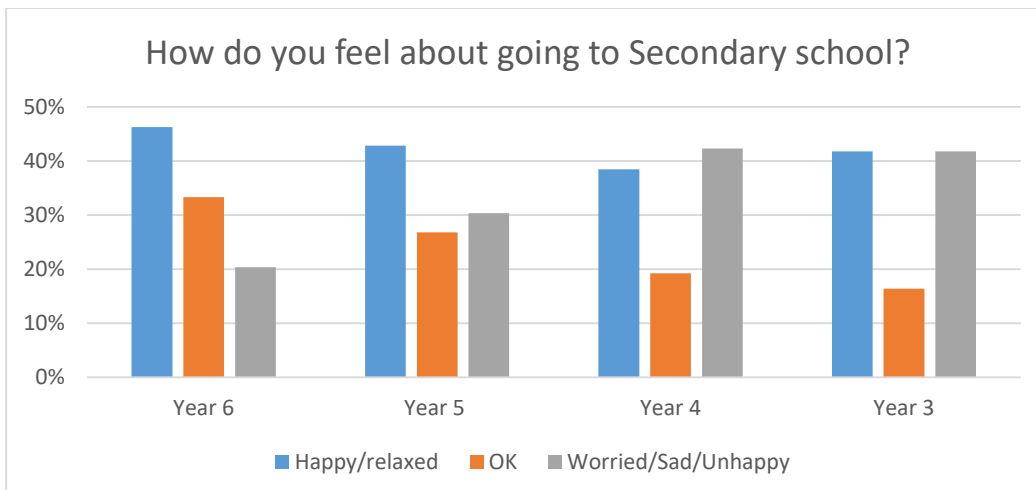
The survey results between the year groups varied significantly, so they are presented individually. The survey demonstrates that less than half of the children feel happy or relaxed about school tests and this is significantly reduced for Year 5, in which only 1 in 5 children feel happy or relaxed about school tests. Collectively, nearly one quarter of the children reported feel worried, sad or unhappy about school tests and, interestingly, this is significantly higher for Year 5 (38%) compared to Year 6 (7%).



Q5. How do you feel about going to secondary school?

The move from primary to secondary school can be challenging and stressful for any young person. Fears of losing old friendships and expectations of the new school environment are common concerns, with transition strategies recommended to support this. Examples of these include work projects, that children begin in primary school and complete in secondary school, and for children to be actively involved in the new school at an early stage (Rice, et al. 2015).

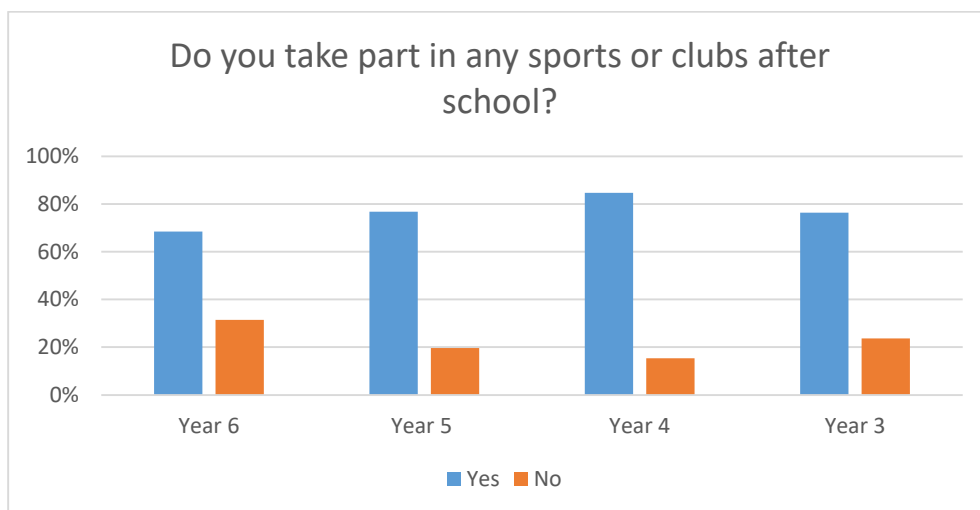
The survey demonstrates that anxieties over secondary schools are highest amongst Year 3 and 4, with a steady decrease between Year 5 and 6. However, 1 in 5 of Year 6 children stated feeling “worried, sad or unhappy” about going to secondary school and the percentage of children feeling “happy or relaxed” about secondary school remains largely the same across Key Stage 2, with only a small increase from Year 3 at 42% and Year 6 at 46%.



Q.6 Do you take part in any sports or clubs after school?

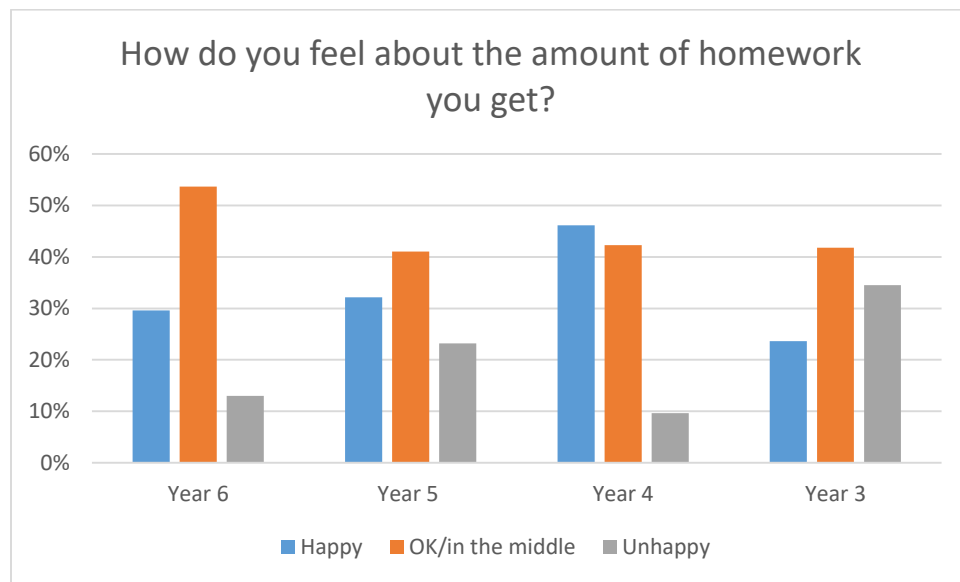
The benefits of exercise are well documented and include improved physical health, such as muscular fitness and bone health, coupled with better mental health and general wellbeing (WHO, 2017). It is also a protective factor for many lifestyle diseases, including obesity, type 2 diabetes, and cardiovascular disease. After school clubs have also been demonstrated to have a positive effect on children's health and may improve academic performance, reduce risky behaviours and promote opportunity for physical activity (youth.gov. 2017).

The survey demonstrates that the majority of children, 76%, take part in after school activities, with Year 5 reporting the largest positive answer of 85% compared with Year 6 at 69%. The types of activities mentioned included: football, swimming, drama, Beavers and Guides, guitar, street dance, boxing, choir, cricket and horse riding.



Q7. How do you feel about the amount of homework you get?

The survey demonstrates that across Key stage 2, one third of children feel “happy” about the amount of homework they get, with 1 on 5 feeling “unhappy”. Year 3 results show an increased dissatisfaction with homework (35%), whilst Year 4 report the highest satisfaction levels with homework (46%).

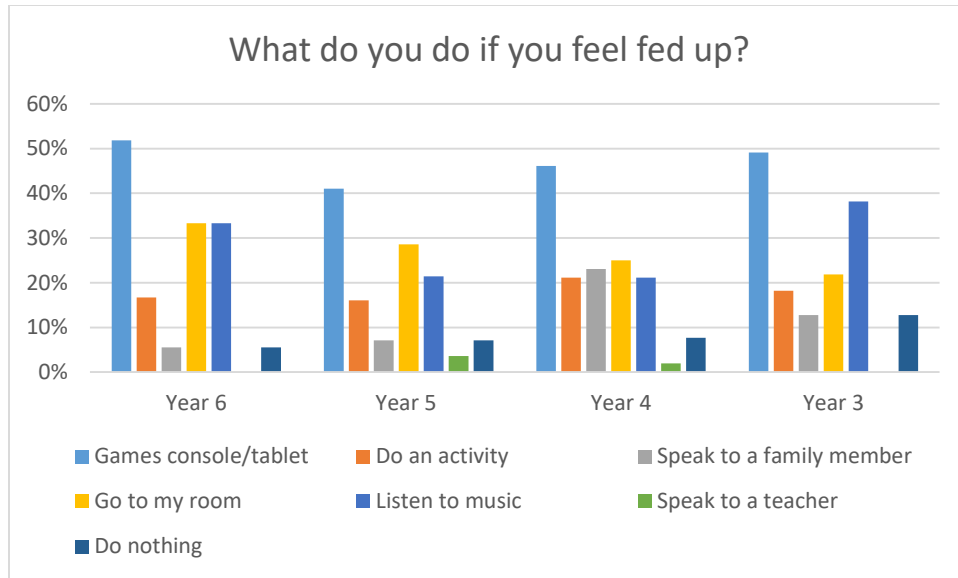


Q.8 What do you do if you feel fed up?

Having an outlet for one’s emotions is an important part of “bouncing back” from feeling fed up. The children were asked what they do when they feel fed up via a selectable list, and/or add a comment of their own.

The most common way to deal with bad emotions is to play on a “games console or tablet”. Listen to music attracted higher responses from Year 6 and 3, although still a popular choice across Key Stage 2, as well as “going to my room”.

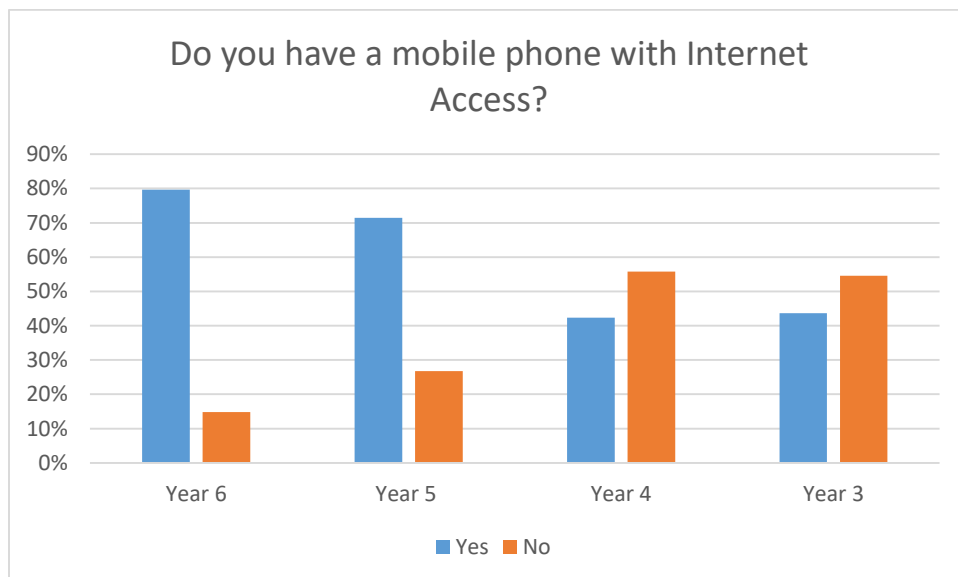
Additional comments recorded were: punch a wall, go into the garden, just stop thinking about everything, have time out, talk and punch things, relax and carry on, play with my teddies, sit down with a red face, go to my room and cry, watch YouTube, iPad, be on my own, talk to nearest person to me, lose my temper, go into the garden, read a book, play Lego, play with friend, sit on the sofa, watch TV, and play.



Q9. Do you have a mobile phone with Internet access?

Research demonstrate that the majority of under 10s have their own mobile phone, with 10 being the average age that children are given their first mobile phone (Broadband Choices, 2014).

The overall response across Key Stage 2 demonstrated that 59% of children have a mobile phone and 38% do not. As expected the highest number of children with a mobile phone with internet access was Year 6. However, almost half of the Year three children (44%) stated they had a mobile phone with Internet access.

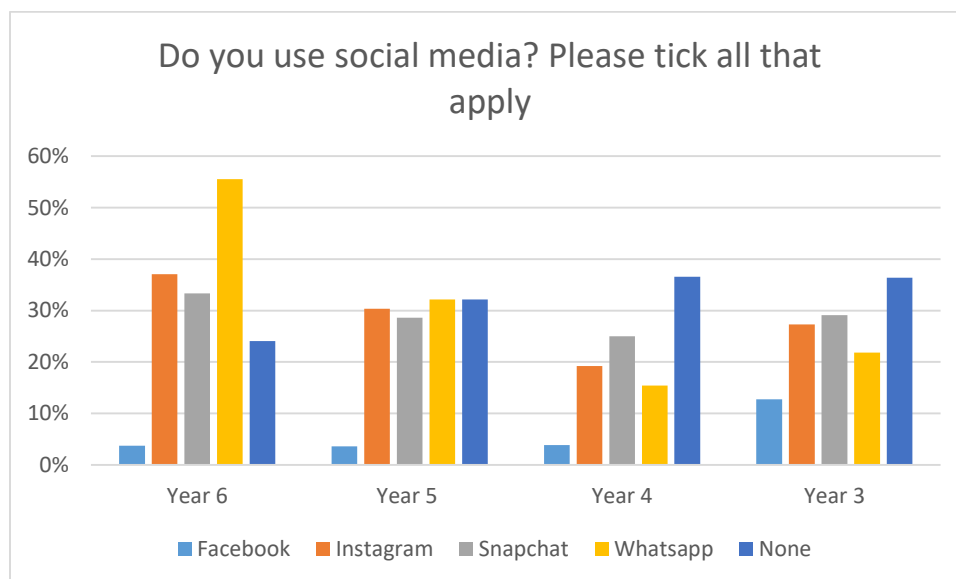


Q10. Do you use Social Media?

A report by the RSPH into Social media and young people's mental health and wellbeing (2017) demonstrated that use of social media is highest amongst young people, especially those aged 16-24. Whilst there are reported benefits of social media use, such as feeling emotionally supported through one's contacts, the research predominately suggests that young people who are heavy users of social media, i.e. spending more than two hours per day on social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter or Instagram, are more likely to report poor mental health, including symptoms of anxiety and depression. Moreover, the research demonstrates that young people themselves report that four of the five most used social media platforms actually make their feelings of anxiety worse, with Instagram being reported "worst" for mental health, followed by Snapchat.

The children were asked to tell us which apps they use and were given the option to select an answer from a tick list and/or add a comment of their own. The survey demonstrated that the most popular use of Social Media was via WhatsApp (31%), with Snapchat and Instagram on (29%). A third of children commented they didn't use Social Media at all. Interestingly, Year 3 reported the highest use of Facebook, with Year 6 the highest use of Whatsapp.

Additional use of social media apps includes: YouTube, music.ly, and imessage.



Q11. Have you ever experienced any of the following?

This question asked the children, via a selectable list, if they had experienced any of the following:

- Bullying
- Cyber bullying
- Trouble sleeping
- School pressures
- Social media pressure to look a certain way
- Not being listened to/feeling lonely
- None of the above

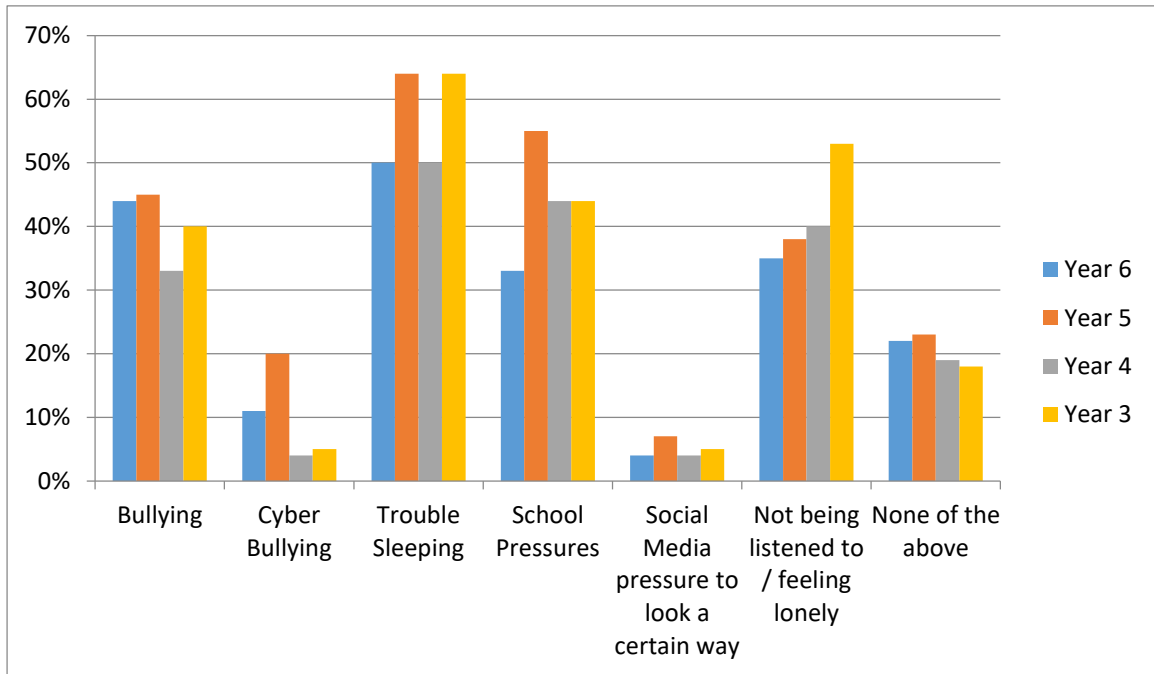
Trouble sleeping, bullying and cyber bullying are all related to poor mental health. Research has shown that increased social media is closely associated with poor sleep quality in young people (RSPH, 2017). Sleep is particularly important for children and young people as this is a key time for development and allowing people to function properly throughout the day.

Moreover, bullying is a key risk factor for a number of issues, including mental health, social relationships and education (RSPH, 2017). The RSPH state that 7 in 10 young people have experienced cyberbullying. This is significant, as victims of bullying are more likely to experience low academic performance, depression, anxiety, self-harm, feelings of loneliness, and changes in sleeping and eating patterns, which may impact on exams and affect their development personally and socially. However, bullying was not identified as a key concern in our 11-19 survey, in which 14% reported experiencing bullying and 5% cyber bullying. Having said that, every individual experiencing bullying is a concern that must be dealt with.

The graph illustrates, that the top three reported issues the children experienced across Key Stage 2 were sleep problems (57%), school pressures (44%), not being listened to and bullying (both 44%). Years 3 and 5 have the highest number of children reporting having ‘trouble sleeping’, with Year 3 also attracting the highest percentage for ‘not being listened to/feeling lonely’. Year 5 also reported high levels of experiencing “school pressures”, which may be related to the preparation for the Selection test in Bexley. However, bullying is identified as a key concern and experienced consistently across the whole of Key Stage 2.

Interestingly, only a small amount of children reported feeling pressured by social media to look a certain way. We obtained a similar result from our 11-19 survey, in which 10% of 1208 pupils said they feel pressured by social media to look a certain way. This is in contrast with other research, which has reported

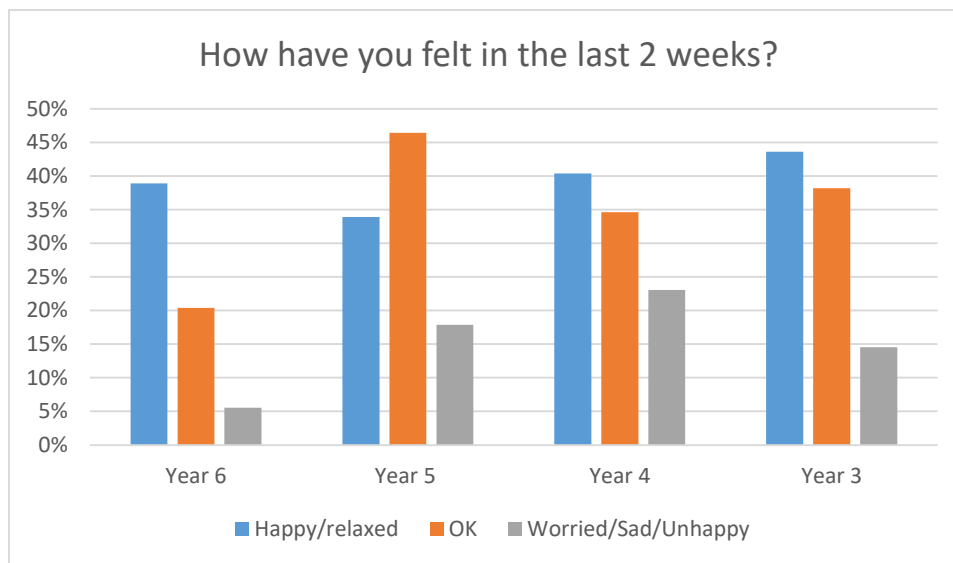
a negative impact on body image and a heightened desire to change one's appearance due to social media (RSPH, 2017).



Q12. How have you felt in the last 2 weeks?

The most common worries identified by Place2Be (2017) were family, friends being ok, not doing well at school and bad things happening in the world.

The survey demonstrates that less than half of the children, 39%, reported feeling “happy or relaxed” in the last two weeks, with 35% of children stating they had felt “OK”. However, 15% of the children reported having felt “worried, sad or unhappy” in the past two weeks, the equivalent of more than one whole school class in Key Stage 2 reporting low levels of emotional wellbeing.

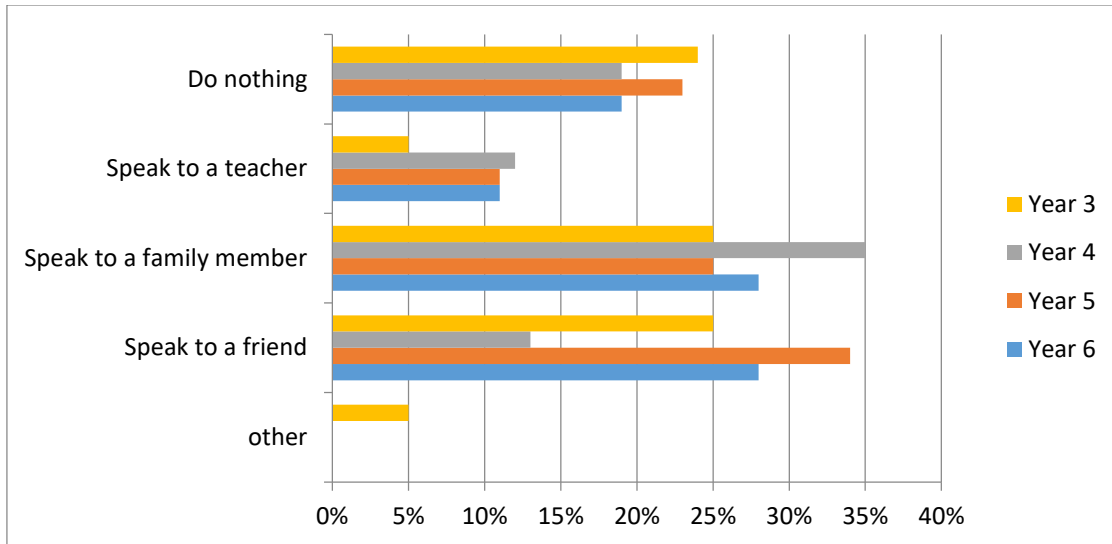


Q13. If you felt worried, sad or unhappy in the last 2 weeks, did you:

In this question we asked the children how they respond to emotional issues and what they had done in the last 2 weeks if they felt worried, sad or unhappy.

Children had the option to select an answer from a tick list and/or add a comment of their own.

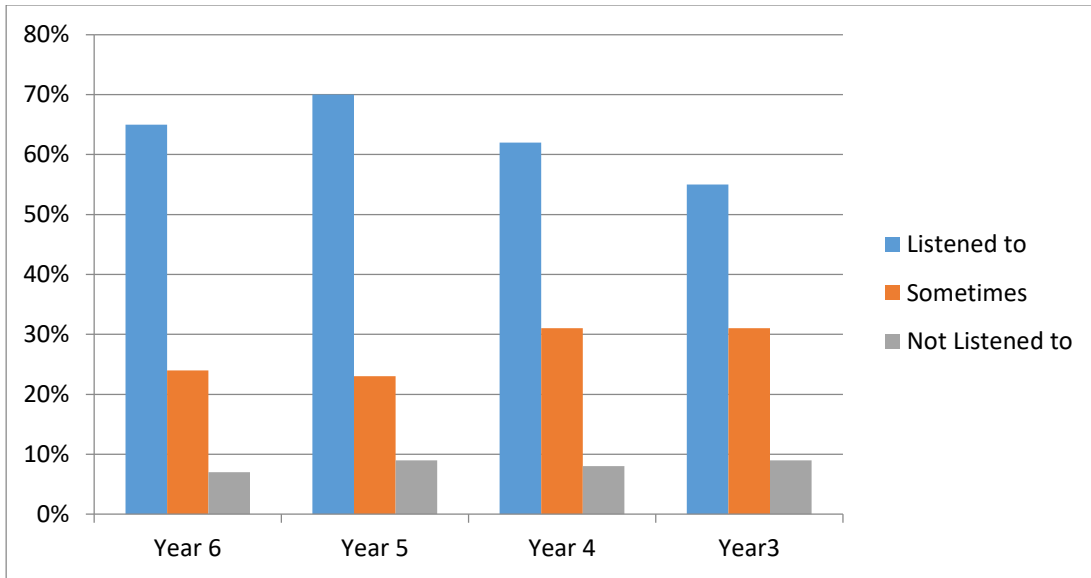
The most popular response we received, was ‘Speak to a family member’ , followed by “Speak to a friend”. However 21% of the children would ‘Do nothing’. Looking at each year group separately, the most popular choice for year 5 is ‘speaking to a friend’ and for year 4, they would prefer ‘speaking to a family member’.



Q14. When you talk to adults (teachers, doctors, family members) do you feel listened to and respected?

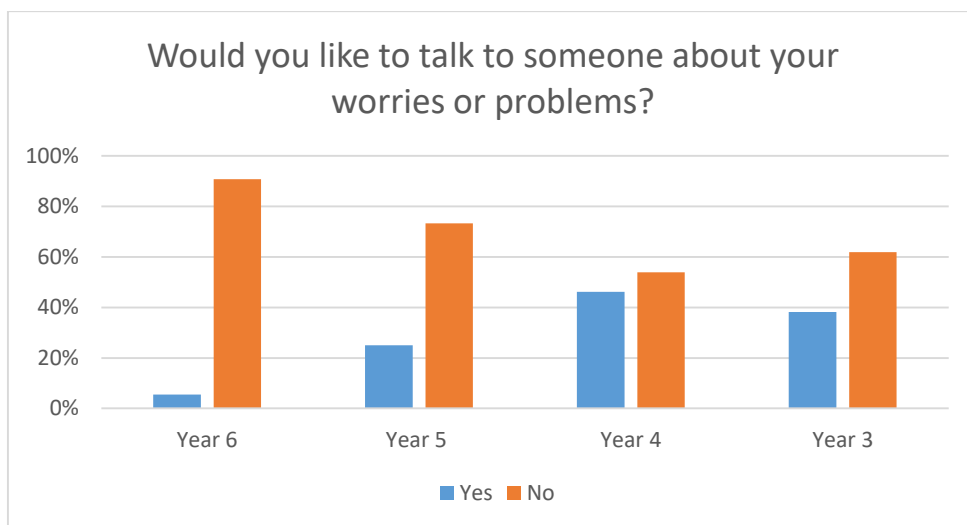
The United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child states that “every child has the right to express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously”. This relates to all aspects of life including education, health and day to day home life (Unicef, 2017). It further encourages children to become active citizens in a democratic society and has a positive impact on achievement and attainment (Department for Education, DfE, 2014).

The children were asked to score their response from 1-5, where 1-2 means ‘listened to/respected’ and 4-5 ‘not listened to/respected’. The survey demonstrates that the Year 5 and 6 felt more ‘listened to’ than the younger children. Overall 63% of the children said they felt ‘listened to’, 27% ‘sometimes’ and 8% ‘not listened to’. This is fairly consistent with the 11-19 survey, which demonstrates that 1 in 4 young people do not feel listened to. Feeling listened to and active participation increases confidence, self-respect and an improved sense of responsibility, which has been demonstrated to have a positive impact on motivation and engagement in learning (DfE, 2014).



Q15. Would you like to talk to someone about your worries or problems?

This question was suggested by the school to allow children who may want to raise a concern over the issues covered in the survey to do so. This subsequently enabled the school to identify and engage with children who may have concerns not previously identified and thus facilitate support and interventions as necessary. Overall, 30% of the children stated they would like to talk to someone and 70% would not. When broken down into year groups, more young children than older children stated they would like to talk to someone following the survey.



5. Discussion and conclusion

Good mental health is the foundation of young people's emotional and intellectual growth, underpinning the development of confidence, independence and a sense of self-worth. There are many aspects which impact on children and young people's emotional wellbeing. School pressures, social media, social relationships and home life are all factors which contribute to the wellbeing of young people and which may result in anxiety, depression sleep problems, bullying and stress. Building resilience and equipping young people with the knowledge, tools and strategies to cope with every day stresses is crucial to reduce the onset of mental ill health. Crucially, identifying the signs of mental ill health and distress promptly is fundamental so that interventions can be implemented and targeted appropriately.

The survey demonstrates that young people start to experience anxiety, stress, sleep problems and bullying at an early age. More than half of the children reported they sometimes get stomach aches or headaches, which may be symptoms of stress and anxiety, along with trouble sleeping and having angry outbursts. Stomach aches and headaches are commonly experienced by low perceived classmate or peer support. With less than half of children (39%) stating they have felt "happy" and "relaxed" in the last 2 weeks, coupled with the expression of worry and dissatisfaction with school tests and going to secondary school, it is clear that a significant proportion of young children are living with heightened levels of stress and anxiety.

The survey demonstrates the positive impact peers and social relationships, including family, may have on emotional wellbeing as children cited that speaking to a family member or friend as their preferred option when feeling "worried, sad or unhappy". This is further supported by the majority of children saying they have one good friend or more. However, a small minority of children reported not having one good friend and schools should strive to create supportive classrooms in which all students feel integrated.

Children and young people spend a significant amount of time within the education system and as such, schools are ideally placed to promote emotional wellbeing through nurturing and supportive classroom environments. However, addressing emotional wellbeing needs for children and young people is a priority for society as a whole. It requires a systems-approach through a wide range of non-mental health settings, through enhanced family and peer support, coupled with adequate and sufficient services within primary care and community settings. Crucially, more needs to be done to protect the mental wellbeing of all children and young people by educating them, and those who look after them, about the factors that help and hinder mental health.

6. Recommendations

There are a number of recommendations for schools and commissioners arising from this report.

Recommendations for schools:

1. Implement strategies and interventions for peer support within the school setting, as this was identified by young people as a coping strategy when experiencing emotional distress.
2. Appoint a member of staff responsible for emotional wellbeing activities within the school setting.
3. Schools to take appropriate action to identify young carers within their community and ensure appropriate support is in place, as there was a high proportion of self-reported young carers in the 11-19-year-old survey.
4. Ensure young people know where and how to access help and support when in need, recognising that this may need to be repeated throughout the school year as young people's emotional wellbeing fluctuates.
5. Promote external mental health services available for children and young people in Bexley.
6. Provide mental first aid training for key staff.

Recommendations for commissioners:

1. The extent to which children in this survey have expressed trouble sleeping and experiencing school pressures at such a young age warrants further exploration, through additional engagement work.
2. Ensure emotional wellbeing of young people remain a priority in Bexley.

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