

Children and Young People's Views of Mental Health



We love you feeding the ducks, but could you please feed at the grassed side of the pond only.

Youthhealth
County Durham

Are you between 14-24?
Youth Health wants to hear from you!

We are here to listen to the young people of County Durham, to make sure young people's views on health and care issues are heard.



You could help us by taking part in:

- Surveys
- Group discussions
- Enter and View visits
- Gathering feedback
- Sharing the views of young people



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Contents

Contents.....	2
Background and introduction.....	3
Participants.....	4
What does mental health mean to you	5
Young people's experiences of support.....	6
Barriers to support.	8
Conclusion	10
Recommendations.....	11

Background and introduction

In 2023, NHS England stated that one in five children and young people (aged 8–25 years old) had a mental health disorder. More children and young people are presenting with a form of anxiety and accessing mental health services than ever before. **Youth Health** wanted to hear what the young people of County Durham thought about mental health.

Over the past few months, we have been engaging with children and young people in a variety of settings such as community centres, colleges, schools, universities, leisure centres, family hubs and supported accommodation. We have attended drop-in sessions and focus groups with children and young people, listening to their experiences, thoughts and feelings on and around mental health.

The participants of this piece of work ranged from 14 to 25 and were from a whole host of backgrounds consisting of school children, college pupils, university students, NEETs (Not in Education, Employment or Training) and expectant and young parents.




'Mental health determines how you think, feel and act. Good mental health is when you feel positive about yourself and can cope with the everyday pressures. If you experience issues dealing with everyday problems, it could be a sign of a mental health problem and should be addressed.'

Young female parent

Who we spoke to....

Venue	Numbers of Children & Young People
Freemans Quay Leisure Centre	19
East Durham College	31
University of Durham	32
Durham School	25
New College	17
Durham Sixth Form Centre	31
Bishop Auckland College	28
Louisa Centre Stanley	10
Durham Cricket Club	17
Public Spaces	9

The children and young people shared their views with **Youth Health** and described their experiences of:

	Whether they felt heard and supported
	Access to services
	Speaking out

Children and young people have expressed to us that they *“feel embarrassed talking about mental health”*, do not want to be judged in a negative manner and feel that their parents don’t need to be troubled with these concerns; one child noted, *“they are too busy to listen to what’s in my head, it will go away”*.

What does mental health mean to you?

All the children and young people we spoke with had knowledge and experience of mental health due to family or friends being diagnosed with a mental health issue.

The most common responses:

- Feeling stressed and or worried
- Feeling alone
- Feeling scared
- Feeling unstable
- Feeling emotional

We spoke to the children and young people about what mental health looks like and means to them. The most common answers indicate that most of the children and young people we have spoken with see mental health as a negative feeling.

“When I have mental health, I deal with things differently, everything becomes difficult to cope with, I feel angry more and don't like to do what I normally do” male aged 17.

“I really don't want to get a mental health condition; nobody would like me” male aged 14.

“Mental Health to me is like when your mind is dark” male aged 16.

Just 10% of the young people stated that nothing would stop them from asking for support.

What are children and young people's experiences in relation to the support on offer?

Most felt that they had experienced barriers and felt it a burden to find their own support from mental health services. Many talked about the stigma still associated with mental health issues.

"I wouldn't like to talk about it if I felt I had mental health issues as people with mental health are name called and not trusted" Female aged 21.

"I'm told there is much on offer to help me but as I am 19 it is down to me to source these places, make contact and self-refer, I feel I am just being passed on from person to person with no answers" Male aged 19.

The children and young people are aware that the current waiting times to gain a diagnosis and or support can be lengthy. They told us that they would not reach out for professional support because of this prolonged wait.

"There's no point speaking to my school or doctor as by the time I finally get around to seeing anybody I will be an adult looking for employment and will sort myself out" Female aged 16.

"My child's mental health has deteriorated whilst waiting for support from the mental health sector" Female parent.

A quarter of the young people we spoke with asked 'if they experienced a mental health problem, would it be with them for the rest of their lives?'

We heard there is a lack of knowledge and understanding around what mental health is and how long standing it's effects can be. This affects young people's perception of how mental health may affect them.

"My Dad has mental health problems, and he is in prison, my nana said he's always had mental health, he was in a young offender's institution, thrown out of school and has been in and out of prison for most of his adult life, he'll never get rid of it will he?" Male aged 15.

"My Mam is emotional and cries most days, she says it is because of her mental health, she takes sleeping tablets from the doctors which leave her unable to work or do things with us but, says she will stop taking them when she feels better. Will she ever get rid of her mental health?" Female aged 16.

"My mum apologises all of the time saying I'm passing these feelings on to you, they're my issues, not yours, so is it hereditary?" Male aged 15.

Although most of the experiences we heard were negative, there were some positive elements. The right staff member could have a positive impact if children and young people were provided with time and attention, and were able to build a rapport.

"Yes, the support staff member was lovely, friendly and listened to me, but I also couldn't ignore the fact that she was being 'paid' to be friendly, caring and listen to me" Male aged 22.

"A friend of mine from a different school says they have a very supportive class at school. On starting the day they all pick out a magnetic face of emotion and place it next to their name to show the class how they are feeling. When she put a worried face people were nicer to her and her tutor and friends made time in that day to ask what was worrying her and so her day was much better. She was able to tell people that her parents were thinking about re-locating, but that she really didn't want to have to start a new school. The school helped her to talk it through with her parents and they are now moving when she is ready to start sixth form". Female aged 16.

Schools can offer a level of support, and most young people note that they are a useful source of mental health information (both formally and through word of mouth).

"There are posters up in school with websites and telephone numbers for who to contact if we are struggling" Male aged 14.

"We need mental health to be talked about more in school to remove the bad feeling around it. Right now, I would be too scared to share my emotions and feelings with my friends or family in case they thought I was unstable? So, I would google a private, confidential route of support" Female aged 16.

However, we also heard that school itself can be a major source of stigma and misunderstanding. A lack of awareness or understanding about mental health problems and trauma in schools often results in punishment, such as being asked to leave the classroom or missing break times to discuss behaviours. This further impacts young people's mental health and becomes a barrier to beneficial support.

"My teacher doesn't get that I am struggling, I can't concentrate for as long as they might want and when I switch off to quieten my mind, I'll be asked to answer a question to prove I was listening which just humiliates me and makes me angry" Male aged 14.

Delving deeper into potential barriers, Youth Health asked:

What prevents you from asking for help?	
Feeling uncomfortable talking to a stranger	27%
Worried what my friends and family might say	22%
Fear of being bullied	19%
Fear of it ruining my career opportunities	14%
Nothing would stop me	10%
Fear of needing medication	8%

Table shows percentage of young people who agreed with the statement.

"I first experienced a mental health episode when I had a stay in hospital; as a full-time student with a part time job, boyfriend and great social life, I have managed to keep my mind occupied somewhat. Then I was laid up in hospital with so many hours in the day to think about things. I began having flashbacks and can remember vividly things that I must have blocked out. I was now re-living this trauma and had nothing to occupy my mind. I spoke to my mum, she then spoke to a nurse for me, however, the nurse informed her that to offer any support I would have to be the one to ask for the help. Why can't my mum request the support for me?" Female aged 21.

"I am powerless, I am not an adult, I can't make appointments for myself, I can't decide for myself either but nobody in my family understands what I am trying to explain" Female aged 15.

"My mum is too poorly with anxiety already; I wouldn't want to make her worse by telling her my feelings" Female aged 17.

"If it's not liquid medicine I couldn't take it, swallowing pills is something I just couldn't do, I'd gag and choke" Female aged 14.



21%

**of children and
young people, we
spoke to asked**

**“Can you
catch Mental
Health?”**

Conclusion

We heard that children and young people would benefit from being able to talk to a person with lived experience of childhood or adolescent trauma – a supportive adult who could understand, empathise, and suggest coping strategies.

As a child or young person, reaching out and receiving mental health support is a difficult journey that can make the young person feel judged, stigmatised, and discriminated against. The system of mental health support is often confusing, fragmented, and difficult for a young person to navigate. Often, it is left to the young person themselves to negotiate a complex system to find the appropriate support. For those dealing with past or ongoing trauma, this can be especially difficult, and long waiting times and negative experiences of support are sometimes severe enough to cause a child or young person's mental health to deteriorate further.

When children and young people are seeking information and advice, they want to go to people they know and trust, like family members and friends – people who are not necessarily being 'paid to care'. These family members or friends may then ask for help on the young person's behalf. Once the young person has reached the age of 18, there's often insistence that a request comes directly from the young person, which many find challenging. A person with lived experience or a young people's advocate would be able to provide guidance here, removing one of the barriers to accessing support.

From listening to the children and young people, we have heard that many of them have a family member dealing with mental health concerns of their own. Often the children and young people would rather not discuss their own mental health issues through fear of causing even more stress to their family member.

The adult experiencing poor mental health can feel guilty, thinking they have passed on their mental health issues, as well as not feeling equipped to help and support their child. They may seek advice from their own mental health support worker, but these would not be a specialist in children's services.

There is growing concern about mental health in the minds of children and young people. They told us they want to express their feelings and be open about their mental health and would like encouragement and support from all those around them. We heard there is a lack of places of education promoting and encouraging speaking out on emotional wellbeing. Children and young people want a space to talk with other people who understand due to their own lived experiences.

Children and young people need to have the confidence to ask for support and to know where to go for this.

Recommendations

Dedicated lived experience peer support workers for children and young people – individuals who can relate to individuals through shared experience, specifically trained to support and advise those under the age of 25 years old.

Better education around mental health, which should include how to support family members who have mental health issues.

Actively promote anti-stigma messages within settings for young people, to help reduce the barriers to speaking out.

Increase health literacy to empower children and young people to feel confident in seeking mental health support.

Develop a positive culture where people feel they can speak up and their voices will be heard, listened to and acted on, regardless of age.

Safe spaces to be established, in places accessible by children and young people, where they can speak honestly, in confidence and without fear of judgement.

Use a person-centred approach to ensure adequate transitional support from children's services into adult services. Ensuring that the young person is equally important in the process and listening to their views and needs. Involving the young person and their family or carers, health and care professionals, and colleagues in education, as appropriate.



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