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While we wait for change, this is our role...

Caroline Voogd, editor

Yet further proof – if any were needed – of the mental health crisis overwhelming our young people. The latest statistics from the NHS tell us that 20.3% of 8 to 16-year-olds have a probable mental health condition – up from 12.1% in 2017 when this research was first carried out.

At primary level, 15.7% of 8, 9 and 10-year-olds have a probable condition, rising to 22.6% of 11 to 16-year-olds.

We do not, perhaps, need to be told these figures. We see them every day in our work with children and young people in schools. We hear about them from teaching staff and other colleagues. We see them in the CAMHS and safeguarding referrals we support.

I have written before about the frustratingly slow roll-out of the government's flagship Mental Health Support Team programme. These new figures justify that frustration. These teams are currently only reaching a third of pupils (Department for Education, 2023). I don't need to tell you how many are falling through the cracks.

The 'good' news from the annual NHS survey is that the numbers have increased only slightly since last year (18% then compared to 20.3% now). Perhaps the impact of the pandemic is slowly releasing its grip on our young people, although you and I both know that it is foolish to think that these issues are just down to COVID – they have been building for some time, only to be exacerbated by the pandemic and its lockdowns.

A silver lining in the NHS figures is that 80% of 11 to 16-year-olds were positive about their access to mental health support in their school, while 60% said they felt comfortable talking to adults about their mental health, and 65% said their school's support was helpful.

The NHS research outlines the all-too-familiar threats – eating disorders, self-harm, poverty, loneliness, climate change anxiety. We know what we are dealing with. Our role now is to support schools to do what they can with the limited resources they have. Our role is to ensure the children and young people we work with know where they can turn, where they can find someone to talk with – whether that be us or other professionals. Sometimes, just talking through our problems can set us on the road to recovery. Early intervention is key, especially when trying to head off mild issues.

While we wait for more Mental Health Support Teams to roll out (200 more are due to be operational by spring 2025 to add to the 398 that currently exist), while we wait for better funding to improve the capacity of CAMHS and other services, not least our own, while we wait for the pandemic's impact to recede, this is our role.

Department for Education. Transforming children and young people's mental health implementation programme: Data release, May 2023: <https://tinyurl.com/mpcynnaf>
Newlove-Delgado T, Marcheselli F, Williams T, Mandalia D, Dennes M, McManus S, Savic M, Treloar W, Croft K, Ford T. (2023) Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2023. NHS England, Leeds. <https://tinyurl.com/44tn76hv>



British Journal of
Child Health

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