

The mental health crisis in British schools

August 18 2024, by Jonathan Glazzard



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[NHS statistics](#) suggest that 20.3%—1 in 5—children and young people aged from eight to 16 years in England had a probable mental disorder in 2023. This a huge rise from 2017, when 12.5% had a probable mental health disorder.

Data from social mobility charity [The Sutton Trust](#) shows that the prevalence of mental ill-health is higher for girls than boys. Girls are more likely to experience psychological distress and self-harm and are at a greater likelihood of attempting suicide.

And research from charity [Just Like Us](#) highlights that young people who are LGBTQ+ are more likely to develop [mental ill health](#). The risk is even greater for Black LGBTQ+ young people, 89% of whom have contemplated suicide.

According to a recently released report from [The Lancet Psychiatry Commission on Youth Mental Health](#), there is substantial evidence across the world that [youth mental health](#) has substantially deteriorated. Key factors outlined by the report include [social media](#), concerns about climate change, food, housing and employment insecurity and intergenerational poverty.

This decline in youth mental health puts severe strain on schools, which play a central role in identifying [mental health issues](#) in [children](#), providing help and offering advice to families.

Under pressure

[The 2023 annual report](#) from education regulator Ofsted highlights some of the key challenges schools are facing.

Schools are using part-time timetables for children who are absent from [school](#) due to their mental health and are waiting for a clinical assessment. Many children are experiencing delays in accessing specialist mental health services. Children are not getting help in a timely way and the severity of needs that schools are dealing with is increasing.

Children with social, emotional and mental health needs form one of the

most common categories of special educational needs and disabilities. Too many children are in educational environments which do not meet their needs.

The previous UK government attempted to support schools by funding [education mental health practitioners](#) in schools. These practitioners are employed by the NHS and work in schools to help children manage common mental health problems.

Dedicated support like this is hugely important. But, according to research body the [Education Policy Institute](#), only a third of schools are currently benefitting from this service. And research suggests that the kind of support offered may not be right for some young people.

All children who need access to an education mental health practitioner deserve to benefit from this service. It is not acceptable for mental health support to become a postcode lottery.

What children need

The Labor government [outlined plans](#) in its manifesto before the [general election](#) to use some of the funds raised by removing the VAT exemption for private schools to ensure that every school has access to specialist mental health support.

This will require expanding the number of training providers which train these practitioners, as well as committing additional funding to support those who wish to train.

Urgent investment in the child and adolescent mental health service is also required to reduce waiting times. Schools cannot be expected to compensate for the shortage of mental health services. Teachers must be able to rely on the support from external professionals if they are to

focus on their core responsibilities in the classroom.

The government's [curriculum and assessment review](#) must consider how the school curriculum and assessment system can be better designed to support children's mental health. [Evidence](#) shows that exams cause children to access counseling [due to stress](#).

This review offers an opportunity to think differently and more creatively about how schools might conduct assessments. There are alternatives to the high-stakes examinations which cause so much anxiety.

In her [letter](#) to the education workforce in July, Bridget Phillipson, the [education secretary](#), acknowledged the challenges that teachers were facing in relation to mental health and special educational needs services. She has pledged to focus on early years education and to rebuild the relationship between government and the education sector.

While this is welcome, the magnitude of the task at hand should not be underestimated. Schools cannot solve all the problems.

Broader problems

The government has announced it will introduce a [children's well-being bill](#). This is intended to ensure that children are safe, healthy, happy and treated fairly. However, it is vital that these initiatives lead to real tangible change for children and young people.

The Labor manifesto also promised to introduce open access mental health services in every community. This would certainly be a welcome step.

Investment in developing community mental health hubs to support

[young people](#)'s mental health through non-appointment "drop-in" services is urgently required. Developing hubs to [support](#) families should also be a policy priority. Support hubs could help parents better manage their own mental health and to understand the importance of positive adult-child interactions.

Systemic issues such as [climate change](#) and poverty also need urgent attention because these are often the causes of poor mental health, as highlighted in [The Lancet report](#) on youth mental health.

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