

Providing mental health support in schools

Dr Chris Boyle and Dr Will Shield (University of Exeter) write.

The UK government's plans for child mental health (outlined in its 2017 green paper) would see mental health teams provide extra support in schools, and introduce waiting time targets. However, a recent joint report by the Education and Health and Social Care Committees comments that the government's strategy for child mental health won't address the complexities of young people's mental health issues.

Government figures suggest that close to one in five young people have experienced a 'common mental disorder', such as depression or anxiety, in the past week. What's more, young people are less likely to recover from mental health issues if they are from a deprived area or have a disability. Life's complexities can be magnified in school; pressures to conform to the norm, pass exams well, be socially accepted and have a strong social media following are just a few of the difficulties that children and young people face every day.

In our experience, waiting times for mental health services can be lengthy and service delivery varies vastly depending on geographical location. Children and young people want support they can access, from people they know and trust. Training and support is desperately needed for those professionals working in schools to support children and young people's mental health every day. Learning mentors, learning support assistants, lunchtime supervisors and teachers are all adults in schools whom children and young people trust and talk to on a daily basis.

Mental health support needs to be accessible outside the clinic, in children's everyday lives. With so many young people requiring extra support, it's high time for psychologists to take on a bigger role in schools. Educational psychologists are already based in schools and come with extensive training in child mental health. However, in many areas in England, schools are now required to commission their own educational psychology services, with only statutory work for special educational needs and disability being provided by the local authority.

We urge the government to consider the important role that qualified school-based psychologists can have in ensuring frontline child mental health services are available for those in need. Schools need the funding to commission these services, which could in turn reduce the need for more serious psychiatric interventions. Some wealthier schools are able to buy more of a psychologist's time than would otherwise be possible. But this creates a disparity between mental health services in schools that can pay, and schools that can't – instead of a system that responds to young people's needs, regardless of which school they go to.

The government's green paper is timely. But it remains focused on identifying mental health needs, rather than tackling the underlying social causes, such as the social, economic and physical environments where people live. On this view, it's the child that needs to change. But perhaps it's time for all members of society to take collective responsibility for promoting positive mental health and emotional wellbeing; it does, after all, take a village to raise a child.

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