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Supporting children's mental health and wellbeing at transition from primary to secondary school: Evidence review

Dr Jane White
Evidence for Action, NHS Health Scotland

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0131 314 5300

nhs.healthscotland-alternativeformats@nhs.net

Author: Dr Jane White, Public Health Intelligence Adviser, Evidence for Action Team, NHS Health Scotland

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Contact: For further information about this publication please contact:

Jane White – jane.white16@nhs.net

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Introduction

The transition between primary- and secondary-level schooling is recognised as an important event in children and young people's lives.[1,2] Children need to adapt to changes in the physical and social environments of their school.[1,2,3,4] Even though many children are apprehensive beforehand,[5] the majority navigate the changes successfully.[1] However, some children find the difference in experience between primary and secondary school more challenging.[1] These children may need additional support to prevent adverse social, emotional and educational outcomes.[5,6]

NHS Health Scotland was asked by the Scottish Government's Learning Directorate to review what works to support children's mental health and wellbeing at transition from primary- to secondary-level schooling. This report brings together international review-level evidence and published outcome evaluations of programmes implemented in schools in the UK and Ireland. The purpose is to inform the development of policy, guidance and support for primary to secondary school transitions. Ultimately, this will contribute to the Scottish Government's National Outcome: 'We grow up loved, safe and respected so that we realise our full potential'.

The method used to identify papers for this review is detailed in Appendix 1. The review was restricted to international systematic reviews and research conducted in the UK and Ireland to ensure findings were as relevant to the Scottish education system as possible.

Key points

Why is this important?

- The transition between primary and secondary education is an important step for children and young people. The majority of children navigate the changes successfully despite many being apprehensive beforehand.

- Children's social, emotional and educational outcomes can be adversely affected by poor transition experiences. Children with additional support needs are particularly vulnerable to negative transition outcomes.
- Relationships with peers, teachers, school staff and parents are key to successful transitions.

What works to support smooth transitions?

- A whole-school approach that nurtures and supports children's relationships with peers, teachers and school staff while preparing primary school pupils and their parents for the practical and academic changes is likely to be effective for most children.
- Children with additional support needs may need extra support tailored to their individual developmental needs. Clear communication channels between primary and secondary school as well as between home and school are important.
- Further research is needed to find out which combination of universal approaches is the most effective in supporting children during transition.

Background

Primary to secondary school transition

In Scotland, and the rest of the UK, children move from primary- to secondary-level schooling around the age of 11 or 12 years.[7,8,9,10] Transition is a process that starts before the child leaves primary schooling and continues after they have moved to secondary schooling.[5,8] In secondary school, children need to adjust to a different physical and social environment,[2] at a time they are starting to undergo the physical, cognitive and psychosocial changes associated with adolescence. Secondary schools tend to be physically larger than primary schools and pupils are expected to navigate their way between classrooms to be taught by a variety of subject teachers. In primary school, children tend to stay in one classroom with a single classroom teacher for most of their day.[2,6] They are used to being in a relatively small peer group that is the oldest in the school, whereas, in secondary school, they become

one of the youngest in a larger, more diverse school population.[11] In addition, in secondary school, there is an expectation that pupils will take more responsibility for their own learning.[11] As a result, relationships with teachers and peers change when the young person moves into secondary school.

Children tend to have mixed feelings about transferring to secondary school.[3,5,8] Moving to secondary school can be seen positively, as it can signal more freedom, opportunities to study a more varied curriculum and take part in a wider range of extracurricular activities.[3,9,12] At the same time, many are apprehensive.[6,10,13] Young people report that the larger, more diverse secondary school population means they are able to make friends with a wider group of peers than previously, as well as having the opportunity to change how they are perceived by their peers if they wish.[6] The clear structure and routine of secondary schooling is welcomed by many but following a timetable with different subjects from day to day requires the development of organisational skills to ensure the right equipment is brought to school on the right day.[6,13] Children report being worried about getting lost in secondary school, especially in relation to moving between classrooms.[3] Socially, young people express concerns about making new and losing old friends and being bullied as well as meeting the higher academic expectations of stricter teachers.[3,6]

Transition experience outcomes

On the whole, although starting at secondary school can be stressful,[5] any anxieties associated with the move tend to be short-lived for the majority of children.[7,10,14] However, for a minority, negative transition experiences can have longer-term consequences.[3,6,14] Poor experiences can affect children's engagement with education and learning.[6] Disengagement with schooling has been found to be associated with an increased risk for poor social and emotional health, and lower educational outcomes.[5] In a systematic review of international published literature undertaken for the Scottish Government, Jindal-Snape et al found that, although a small number of studies (n = 4) reported that transition had no negative or small positive impacts on children's wellbeing, the majority described short-term negative outcomes such as school misbehaviour, depression and anxiety, and low self-esteem.[6] In particular, children who had experienced 'difficult' transitions or had

additional support needs were more likely to be adversely affected.[6] Less is known about the long-term consequences.[6] Several studies have reported a 'dip' in attainment around the time of transition.[4,12] However, the evidence is inconsistent.[6] For example, in Jindal-Snape et al's review, nine out of 14 studies reported a decline in academic grades in one or more subjects at the time of transition, with the remainder of the studies suggesting there was no impact.[6] However, it is not clear whether the reported fall in attainment was a direct effect of transition, an indirect consequence of pupils' transition experiences on their wellbeing or another factor such as curriculum discontinuities or teaching style inconsistencies between the different levels of education.[6,10,12] Most of the samples included groups of pupils who were experiencing other difficulties at school which were likely to affect their educational outcomes.[6]

Protective and risk factors for successful transitions

The majority of young people adjust quickly and successfully to secondary school.[10,13,14] Pointers that children are doing well after transition include the development of new friendships, feeling safe at school, liking school, feeling a sense of belonging to the school, as well as having good attendance and classroom behaviour.[2,5] A range of related and interacting background factors can influence the experience of transition and its impact.[4,5,14] At an individual level, high self-esteem, and well-developed social and problem-solving skills can help children navigate the new environment and relationships,[5,6] particularly if they believe that transferring to secondary school will be a positive move.[6] Equally, children who enjoy school and have a record of good school attendance are more likely to make positive transitions.[6] Relationships with peers, parents and teachers are key.[2,6] In a systematic review of international published quantitative studies, Bharara looked at factors that promoted a positive transition experience in the general school population.[4] Perceived social support from parents, siblings and peers was found to be positively associated with successful transitions.[2,4,6] Having positive relationships with teachers and school staff, feeling connected to the school and taking part in extracurricular activities were also found to be important.[4]

A proportion of children, however, do not adapt well to the changes.[3,5,6] Risk factors for negative outcomes of transition include coming from a lower socioeconomic background, having lower academic achievement prior to transition, being care-experienced, coming from a cultural background different from the majority in the school, and having poor social and emotional skills.[3,5,14] While parental support for children at transition is important, having parents who are overly concerned about the move increases the possibility of negative outcomes.[5] Children with additional support needs are particularly vulnerable to adverse outcomes.[14] The difficulties associated with specific disabilities, such as autistic spectrum disorder, can present additional challenges.[6,14] For example, the larger, noisier and busier environment of secondary school can be overwhelming for children who are sensitive to sensory stimuli.[6,15,16] Problems with social skills and communication can hinder the development of supportive relationships with teachers and peers, leaving children at risk of being bullied as well as feeling isolated and excluded.[5,14]

What works to support smooth transitions?

School transition programmes are designed to reduce children's concerns about moving school. They can equip them with the necessary knowledge and skills to promote a smooth transition to secondary school and reduce the risk of negative outcomes.[4,8,16] Strategies can be aimed at the whole class/year population or specific groups of children who are at increased risk of negative outcomes. Programmes to support children during transition to secondary school usually combine a range of activities[13] and can be implemented while pupils are in their final year of primary school, at the beginning of secondary school and/or bridge the two.[7]

For this review, the search strategy identified two systematic reviews of international studies and eight studies based in the UK or Ireland that examined the effectiveness of approaches to support children at transition to secondary school. Details of the full methodology are included in Appendix 1. The next section begins by looking at the four individual studies which examined universal approaches for the general school

population, followed by a consideration of remaining studies that centred on targeted strategies for children with additional support needs.

Universal approaches

'Normal' practice

The search strategy found one study that examined the effectiveness of approaches implemented by primary schools to help reduce children's anxieties after transition.[8] In the School Transition and Adjustment Research Study (STARS), the authors identified, from literature and expert consultation, 17 common approaches used by primary schools to support children during transition. Based on their theoretical underpinnings, these strategies were categorised into three broad groupings (see Appendix 2).

1. **Systematic approaches** were considered to recognise that children's anxieties at transition may be influenced by family and peers. Activities in this category might include developing links between secondary schools and their feeder primaries to help maintain consistency across the sectors, building effective communication channels between the two levels and helping children to widen their social support networks.
2. **Cognitive strategies**, such as giving children the chance to talk in whole-class discussions about their concerns about the school move, were believed to help identify children's negative thoughts and address their unrealistic concerns.
3. **Behavioural approaches** were deemed to centre on reducing children's anxieties by familiarising them with their new school prior to transition through, for example, school visits and open days.[8]

The research surveyed pupils and their parents in nine secondary schools in South East England at two different time points. In the summer term of the children's last year at primary school, pupils were asked questions about their school worries and concerns, as well as more general worries and concerns. They were also asked about which transition strategies had been or were being used by their school. At the same time, the children's primary school teachers were asked about the approaches they had implemented. In the first term of secondary school, pupils completed the

measures about school and general anxiety again. In addition, their parents were asked to complete questionnaires about the transition approaches used by their child's primary school.[8]

Children had experienced a programme of transition activities, which had included, on average, a combination of three cognitive, four behavioural and three systematic approaches. Systematic approaches were found to be positively associated with improvements in children's post-transition school anxieties after their level of pre-transition worries was taken into account. However, cognitive and behavioural strategies were found to have no effect in reducing children's post-transition school anxieties. No approach was found to be associated with reductions in measures of generalised anxiety. For children with special educational needs* no specific approach was associated with lowered levels of anxiety post-transition.[7,8]

Big Brothers Big Sisters youth mentoring programme

The school-based strand of the Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) youth mentoring programme in Ireland aims to support young people at transition by helping them to settle into their new school environment.[17] During their first term of secondary school, pupils can apply to join the programme in which they are matched with a senior (same gender) pupil in the same school who acts as their mentor in the first few months of secondary school. The mentor–mentees are expected to meet weekly, for at least 40 minutes, in a group setting from September/October until April/May of the mentee's first year of secondary school. The sessions are facilitated by the school's BBBS link teacher.[17,†]

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* In England, a child or young person has special educational needs if they have a learning difficulty or disability which calls for special educational provision to be made for him or her. A child or young person has a learning difficulty or disability if he or she: a) has a significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of others of the same age; or b) has a disability which prevents or hinders him or her from making use of facilities of a kind generally provided for others of the same age in mainstream schools. (National Audit Office. Support for Pupils with special educational needs and disabilities in England. HC 2636 London: National Audit Office; 2019).
In Scotland, a child or young person is said to have 'additional support needs' if they need more, or different, support to what is normally provided in schools or pre-schools to children of the same age. Definition from https://enquire.org.uk/parents/what-is-asl

† As part of the BBBS programme, schools are asked to identify a teacher to act as a link with BBBS staff and provide programme support in the school.

In a qualitative study, principals and link teachers from 23 schools took part in interviews (n = 23). In addition, focus groups with mentors (n = 56) and mentees (n = 50) in five participating schools were carried out. In general, the teachers, mentors and mentees felt the programme was beneficial. They thought it had contributed to a positive school ethos and helped to prevent and identify early problems affecting younger pupils. Mentees felt that the programme helped them to develop new friendships. They talked about their appreciation of knowing that there was someone who was 'looking out' for them. They liked being able to go to someone older in the school to help them with any problems they might have. Mentors described their enjoyment in helping younger pupils and described how the programme helped them to develop confidence and communication skills. They also felt that their link with the younger pupil helped reduce the risk of the mentee being bullied. From the teachers' perspective, they felt that the programme had helped the mentees settle into their school as well as help them build a peer-support network. They agreed with the mentors that the programme had had a role in addressing bullying.[17]

Mentees self-selected to take part in the BBBS youth mentoring programme. It is not known whether the pupils who chose to apply are representative of the larger pupil population. Further research is needed to understand the impact of this programme by comparing, for example, the school concerns and school connectedness, before and after the programme, of mentees who take part in the programme with pupils who do not.

Cognitive bias modification of interpretations training

Cognitive bias modification of interpretations (CBM-I) seeks to reduce anxiety by modifying an individual's interpretation of a potentially anxiety-provoking situation. Cox et al recruited Year 6 children,‡ who were about to transfer to secondary schooling, along with their parent, from four primary schools in England.[18] The child–parent dyads (n = 38) were randomly allocated to either undertake CBM-I training or to an active comparison group. In the intervention group, parents were expected to

‡ Children, aged 10–11 years, in their last year of primary school.

carry out the CBM-I and imagery exercises with their child on three consecutive evenings. Parents in the comparison group were asked to work through three booklets (one per evening) with their child. These booklets had been produced by the local transfer support team. Each booklet dealt with a potentially anxiety-provoking situation related to transition and gave parents structured questions to ask their child. The aim was to help the pupil talk about their feelings and help them to identify practical solutions to the situation. The children completed questionnaires about their school concerns and symptoms of anxiety before the first session and, again, after the final session.[18]

The school concerns and anxiety symptoms of children in both groups significantly reduced when measured immediately after the three sessions were completed. The findings indicated that both the CBM-I training and the booklets produced by the transfer support team were effective in reducing anxiety and school concerns about transition to secondary schooling in the short term. The similarities between the intervention and active comparison group, for example, exposure to anxiety-provoking hypothetical situations and active parent–child interaction, are likely to have contributed to this finding. The parent–child discussions may have added to a perception of parental support which is known to be important for smooth transitions.[6]

The findings of this study should be interpreted with a degree of caution for a number of reasons. First, as the measures were not repeated at a later date, it is not known whether or not the observed improvements were maintained beyond the end of the intervention. Second, the number of children–parent dyads who took part was small and it is not known if the children and parents who took part were representative of the population of Year 6 pupils in the four primary schools. It is possible that the children who took part were more or less anxious than those who did not take part.

Shared learning days

In Northern Ireland, four primary and four secondary schools took part in a shared learning project.[19] A primary teacher from each of the participating schools was paired with a secondary school teacher. They worked together to plan and teach two

'shared learning' days for the pupils in their classes in an outdoor classroom environment. In total, 180 pupils, in their last year of primary schooling or in the first year of secondary schooling, from the eight schools took part. At the end of the school year, all the participating teachers were interviewed. In addition, a small number§ of pupils from each school took part in a focus group.[19]

Primary school pupils reported feeling better prepared for both the practicalities and the academic expectations of secondary school. They talked positively about meeting pupils and teachers from the new school. Secondary school pupils spoke positively about their role as a mentor to the primary school children. In addition, they discussed planning to help their primary school counterparts settle into their new school environment after transition. The teachers noticed that the primary pupils displayed more confidence about the forthcoming transitions to secondary school. However, as the children were not followed up after they started secondary school, it is not known if taking part in the shared learning programme had influenced their post-transition experiences. Only a small number of children took part in the focus group and it is not possible to tell from this report how they were selected to participate in the evaluation or if they were representative of the pupil population who took part in the programme.

Strategies for children with additional support needs

International review-level evidence

The search strategy identified two systematic reviews of international studies that examined what works to support children with additional support needs* at or during transition from primary- to secondary-level schooling. Overall, the body of evidence from international studies of strategies that support children with additional support needs is limited in quality and volume.[9,16] The majority of the studies found in the international review-level papers focused on describing the difficulties that children with additional support needs, in particular children with autistic spectrum disorder,

§ The number of pupils taking part in each school is not reported.

may or may not face, rather than strategies to support affected children at transition.[9] Indeed, the review by Cantali et al found that there was a lack of rigorous studies which examined actions that could be generalised to all children with additional support needs. Studies that looked at approaches to help children with autistic spectrum disorder predominated.[9]

Nuske et al found 10 international studies[**] that looked at transition strategies that were designed to support children with autistic spectrum disorder.[16] Approaches at a student level included familiarisation with the new school environment by visiting the school on more than one occasion with primary school teachers and/or parents; peer-buddy systems to provide social support; having a designated 'safe' person or place so that pupils know where they can get support whenever needed; and helping children to develop skills to manage their negative emotions at school. Strategies involving teachers included transition meetings between primary and secondary school staff; developing channels of communication with parents; and creating pupil profiles, written by their parents and primary school staff, outlining the child's strengths, interests, behaviours and communication style. The evidence suggested that making the school environment predictable helped to smooth transitions for children with autistic spectrum disorder. Approaches included providing children with opportunities to familiarise themselves with the new school environment and developing visual supports, such as a map of the school, along with having nominated social supports in place and teaching coping strategies, based on the child's individual needs, throughout transition. Effective communications between the primary and secondary school as well as between home and school were key.[16]

Approaches evaluated in the UK

The search strategy identified four individual studies that evaluated interventions to support children with additional support needs at or during transition from primary- to secondary-level schooling in the UK and Ireland.

[**] Including one UK study which is discussed separately below.

Pyramid Club

The Pyramid Club is a short-term, weekly after-school activity programme for children who are quiet, shy, anxious, isolated, withdrawn or finding it difficult to make friends. Small group sessions offer children the chance to make friends, and build their social skills and resilience through fun activities in a safe and supportive environment.[20] In Lyons and Woods' case study, nine Year 6 pupils who were due to transfer to one secondary school in North West England were recruited from three primary schools. Club leaders were teaching assistants in the secondary school, and two Year 8[††] pupils acted as mentors. Five sessions took place during the last term of primary school and four were held during the first term of secondary school.[20]

Information about pupils' social and emotional functioning was collected before the club sessions began and again in the following January when the children were in their first year of secondary school. Social and emotional difficulties lessened between the first and second data collection points. Qualitative information from focus groups with pupils suggested that the club had helped to alleviate their concerns about starting secondary school.[20] It is, however, difficult to attribute the reported changes to the intervention for a number of reasons. First, it is known from previous studies that anxiety and concerns about starting secondary school tend to improve over time once pupils start secondary schooling. Without a comparison group it is not known whether children's anxiety and concerns reduced more or less than they would have without any intervention. Second, in this study, the group leaders were school staff from the secondary school, so it is likely that the pupils had built a supportive relationship with a staff member of their new school before starting at secondary school. This relationship may have helped children to feel less anxious about moving school, rather than the activities of the programme. Finally, only nine children took part in this study. A sample size of this magnitude is unlikely to be sufficient to detect the 'true' effects of the programme.

[††] Children, aged 12–13 years, in secondary school.

Summer activity transition project

In the summer activity transition project, teachers in 10 primary schools, in a rural area of England, identified children who were at risk of negative transition outcomes (n = 48).[21] Criteria for referral included teacher-rated concerns about pupils' self-esteem, behaviour, their attendance record and learning needs. The activity programme comprised a series of fun after-school activities in the last month of primary school followed by activity days during the summer break. Activities included sport, arts and crafts, and day trips. Prior to the start of the activity programme, 65% of those taking part (n = 31) had teacher-rated scores that were within the 'likely' or 'probable' difficulty range of the total difficulties category of the Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ). By the end of their first year at secondary school, 31% of children (n = 12)‡‡ had scores within the 'likely' or 'probable' difficulty range. Reductions in the emotional symptom subscale between the two data collection points accounted for the majority of the observed improvements. Very little impact on teacher-rated behaviour issues was observed.[21]

The authors' conclusion that the transition project had a positive impact on children's emotional symptoms should be interpreted with a degree of caution for a number of reasons. First, this study relied on teacher-completed measures. However, it is not possible to tell from this report if the same person completed the questionnaires before and after transition. Assessment of a child's strengths and difficulties may depend on how well the teacher knows the child. Primary school class teachers towards the end of a school year are more likely to be familiar with their pupils than secondary subject teachers in the first year of secondary school. Second, it is known that children's anxiety about going to secondary school tends to lessen over their first year of secondary schooling. This means that without comparing the scores of children who took part in the project with similar young people who did not, it is not possible to determine the contribution of this project to the observed improvements.

‡‡ N = 48 pre information, n = 39 post information.

Systematic Transition in Education Programme for Autism Spectrum Disorder (STEP-ASD)

The Systematic Transition in Education Programme for Autism Spectrum Disorder (STEP-ASD) is an intervention designed to help children with autistic spectrum disorder transfer successfully from mainstream primary to secondary education.[22] A transition meeting is held in the summer term prior to transition with the child with autistic spectrum disorder, their parents and an allocated professional from their primary and designated secondary schools. At this meeting, a STEP-ASD worker helps to identify the needs of the child and generate strategies to support transition. This forms the basis of an individualised transition management plan and pupil profile which is developed by the STEP-ASD worker. Clear statements about who is taking responsibility for each support strategy are included. The management plan and pupil profile are distributed to key personnel in the secondary school. At the same time, a transition pack is circulated to the school staff which contains information and resources about how school staff could ease the transition. Examples include arranging for the child to become gradually familiar with their new school environment and other ways that increase the predictability of the new environment.[22]

In a non-randomised pilot trial in South East England, school-reported and parent-reported social and emotional problems of 17 children with autistic spectrum disorder who had taken part in the STEP-ASD intervention were measured before they left primary school and then again in the second term of secondary school. Their scores were compared with those of 20 children with autism living in the same geographical area who had made the transition in the previous two years and who had not taken part in the intervention. At a group level, the schools reported statistically significant improvements in the children who had received the STEP-ASD intervention, which were not seen in the comparison group. Although parents in the intervention group reported some improvement in social and emotional symptoms, it was not statistically significant. In the comparison group, parents reported a worsening of social and emotional symptoms after transition. However, while the STEP-ASD programme was reportedly thought to be acceptable by school staff, the monitoring information collected by the STEP-ASD workers found that only about half of the

children had experienced full implementation of their agreed management plan and only a fifth had their pupil profiles fully distributed in their destination secondary schools. It is not known what the impact of the programme would have been if it had been fully implemented.[22]

It is difficult to determine how transferable this intervention would be to a Scottish context for a number of reasons. First, the sample size was small, and the participants were recruited through adverts in Child and Adolescent Mental Health services, websites, publications and support groups for parents of children with autistic spectrum disorder. It is not known whether the experiences of this self-selecting population are typical of a more general population. Second, the school staff who completed the assessments of emotional and social difficulties were aware that the children had taken part in the STEP-ASD programme. It is possible this knowledge may have changed their interpretation of a child's strengths and difficulties. Finally, it is not known what support, if any, was offered to children in the comparison group. It is possible the enhanced transition processes[§§] offered to children with additional support needs in Scotland provides comparable support to the STEP-ASD programme.

Transfer support project

The transfer support project took place in one local authority in England. Children in their last year of primary schooling who were identified at risk of negative transition outcomes by their teachers[***] were offered support. The programme consisted of six sessions delivered during the spring or summer term of their last year of primary school.[10] Each group session, delivered by a transfer support assistant, followed a set curriculum which focused on the organisational, social and academic aspects of

[§§] Enhanced transition includes additional activities such as more opportunities to meet their teachers and become familiar with the new school environment. Local authorities have a statutory duty to start transition planning for children with additional support needs at least 12 months before they move to secondary school.

[***] Children in care or with social services involvement; were or had been excluded from school; had refused to attend school; were young carers; had learning, physical, socio-emotional, speech or language difficulties.

the transition process. Up to six further group sessions were offered once the children had transferred to their new secondary school.[10]

Pupils from 75 primary schools (n = 351) were supported by the transfer support team during their transition to secondary school. Participants completed the School Concerns Questionnaire (SCQ) before and after the intervention and again in their new school. The pre- and post-intervention SCQ results were compared to the scores from a non-equivalent comparison group (n = 106). This group was an opportunistic sample of children, taken from five Year 6 classes in two schools, who had not been referred for transition support and received whatever transition preparation processes were in place in their school. Before the transfer support project, the intervention group reported more school concerns than the comparison group. At the second data collection point (post intervention), both groups reported fewer school concerns and there was no difference between the groups. This suggests that the intervention helped to reduce the school concerns of those in the intervention group to a level similar to those of the comparison group.[10]

In addition, children in the intervention group completed three subscales of Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)††† before they took part in the project and again after they had started in secondary school. There were statistically significant reductions in emotional symptoms and peer-relationship problems between the two data collection points.[10] However, as the comparison group were not asked to complete the SDQ subscales and were not followed up in secondary school, it is not possible to work out if the observed improvements were attributable to the intervention or would have happened anyway.

Discussion

This review has examined what works to support children and young people's mental health and wellbeing during transition from primary- to secondary-level schooling. It

††† Emotional symptoms, peer relationship problems and pro-social behaviour.

has brought together evidence from international review-level studies and outcome evaluations of research carried out in the UK and Ireland. In general, the literature was dominated by work that examined the viewpoints of pupils and/or their parents about their concerns prior to and/or experiences during transition.[9] The largest body of evidence about what works to support children during transition examined targeted transition programmes for children with additional support needs. There were relatively few studies that evaluated universal approaches for the whole school population. Even though the transition from primary to secondary school has been described as a process in the literature, none of the universal approaches bridged both levels of schooling. In contrast, the majority of the targeted programmes provided support before and after the move. Moreover, while parental support for children during transition is thought to be important, there was limited involvement of parents in the programmes that met the inclusion criteria of this review.

Most universal school transition programmes involve a combination of different elements. Further research is needed to determine what combination of which elements work best to support children during transition to secondary-level schooling. The available evidence suggests the relationships that children have with their peers, teachers and school staff, as well as the connections their parents have with the schools are important. A whole-school approach that nurtures and supports these relationships during the process of transition, while preparing primary school pupils and their parents for the practical and academic changes associated with secondary school, is likely to be effective for the majority of children.[3,4,7,19]

Children with additional support needs represent a diverse group with a wide range of strengths and vulnerabilities.[14] Programmes that tailor support to the developmental needs of the individual child, beginning before the move and continuing throughout, are more likely to be effective in preventing adverse social, emotional and educational outcomes of the transition process.[8,16] Having clear channels of communication between primary and secondary schools and between schools and parents is important.[3,16]

Limitations

The findings of this paper should be interpreted in the light of following limitations. The overall quality of the available studies was weak, with mainly small sample sizes and a lack of equivalent comparison groups.[9] The follow-up period of studies was relatively short, so little is known about the longer-term effects. This paper was limited to published international-review level studies and published outcome evaluations of programmes that aimed to support children and young people's mental health and wellbeing during transition. It is possible that the search strategy missed some programmes. However, the reference lists of the included international reviews were searched and any UK-based studies (where the study's country was detailed) that met the publication date inclusion criteria were retrieved for potential inclusion. As there was a focus on published evaluations, this paper does not capture information about initiatives that are currently being implemented in Scotland at a school or local authority level to support children during transition to secondary school.

Conclusion

This review has highlighted a lack of rigorous outcome evaluations, undertaken in the UK or Ireland, of programmes that aimed to support children's mental health and wellbeing during their transition from primary- to secondary-level schooling. This means that it is difficult to draw firm conclusions about what programmes would work best in Scottish schools. Comprehensive programmes that bridge across both levels of schooling, support pupils' relationships with their peers and teachers, involve parents, and address common concerns alongside the provision of additional individualised support for children vulnerable to negative outcomes are likely to be the most effective.

Examples of positive action and sources of further information

The links provided in this section are not under the control of NHS Health Scotland. They are offered as sources of information and their inclusion is not an endorsement of their quality or effectiveness.

Universal approaches

- Bridging the gap at Bannockburn High School
  A project to involve parents in the transition process from primary to secondary school.
- Making the Leap – Peebles High School
  Secondary and primary school staff worked collaboratively with external partners from the creative arts to increase family participation and engagement during the primary-secondary transition process.
- School Transition and Adjustment Research Study (STARS) followed a group of around 2,000 pupils from South East England as they made the transition from primary school to secondary school. It collected information from pupils, parents and teachers throughout the transition period and asked about pupils' wellbeing, academic achievement, and their views about school and relationships with friends and teachers. They looked at how pupils changed and adapted to secondary school over the course of the study. As part of the study, a number of resources were developed which are free to use.

Children's perspectives

- **Life at school: Part 2.** The transition to secondary school
  Imagining Aberdeen is a partnership between Children's Parliament and Aberdeen City Council. Children from across the city are imagining Aberdeen as a place where children are healthy, happy and safe. They have identified things that schools can do to help the transition from primary to secondary school.

- **Children's Parliament 2014:** Moving on Up

The transition from primary to secondary school was at the centre of a collaborative project that worked with children from Renfrew High School and its three feeder primaries. The project aimed to support children to articulate their needs in relation to transition; increase the understanding of children's rights and children's voice for children and staff; facilitate shared dialogues between teachers and pupils around transition; and provide a supportive environment for children to nurture mutual support and confidence around transition.

Children with additional support needs

- **STEP:** Supporting transitions with mobile families
- **Enquire:** Transition timescales – summary of duties
- **Autism Tool Box:** Primary 7 to secondary school

Appendix 1: Method

Research question: What works to support children and young people's mental health and wellbeing during transition from primary to secondary schooling?

Search strategy:

The search strategy was developed in discussion with NHS Health Scotland's Knowledge Services:

#1. Schools/
#2. "primary school" or "junior school" or "junior-high school" or "middle school" or "elementary school" or "secondary school" or "high school" or "secondary education"
#3. "primary-secondary school" or "primary-to-secondary school" or "post-primary school" or "post-middle school" or "post-junior school" or "post-elementary school" or "secondary school" or "high school" or "secondary education"
#4. #1 or #2 or #3
#5. transition or transfer or mov* or transit* or transf*
#6. interven* or preven* or evaluat*or strateg* or facilitat* or support* or help or approach*
#7. #4 and #5 and #6

Using these search terms, the following health and education electronic databases were searched: Medline, ERIC, Psychinfo, Psychological behavioural and sciences collection, Public Health, PsychArticles, IBSS, Sociological Abstracts, ASSIA.
The electronic database searches were limited to peer-reviewed papers published in English between January 2012 and March 2019, when the latest search was carried out.

In addition, the following journals were searched for relevant articles: Educational & Child Psychology, British Educational Research, Educational Psychology in Practice, Educational Psychology Review. The terms transition and school were used to search in Google Advanced to look for reports not published in the peer-reviewed

literature. Further studies and papers were identified by examining the reference lists of relevant articles identified by the search.

Selection process:
The titles and abstracts were screened for potential inclusion. Studies were included if they reported:

- international review-level studies
- UK or Ireland outcome evaluation of a specific intervention that focused on supporting transfer to secondary school or equivalent
- support for mental health and wellbeing at transition
- studies that included outcomes related to mental health and wellbeing
- transition from mainstream primary level schooling to mainstream secondary-level schooling.

Studies were excluded if they reported:

- papers that did not report an evaluation of an intervention
- studies that examined support for school subjects during transition, e.g. literacy, numeracy, science, physical activity
- studies that looked at support for transition
    - to employment, further or higher education
    - from home or early learning and childcare to school
    - of young people who have experienced school exclusion, and the process of re-integration to mainstream settings
- discussion or commentary papers
- papers that did not report an intervention

A total of 3,864 records were screened for inclusion. The screening process identified 84 articles and reports for further consideration. The full text of each paper was then assessed for inclusion and 10 were identified for critical appraisal and synthesis. Of these, two were review-level papers and eight were primary studies which had been carried out in the UK or Ireland. Further details of the selection process are available from the author of this report.

Appendix 2: Categories of transition strategies and example activities employed by primary schools‡‡‡

Behavioural

- Whole-class visit(s) to secondary school
- Increase in homework in last year of primary school
- Changes to school timetables in last year of primary school with multiple subject teachers
- Additional pupil responsibilities in last year of primary, e.g. class monitor
- Drama workshops to develop skills needed for transition
- Additional visits to secondary school (over and above whole-class visits
- Lessons geared towards transition issues such as following a school timetable
- Teaching secondary school vocabulary

Cognitive

- Class discussions about transition worries
- Assemblies about secondary move in last year of primary
- Use of web-based resources
- Provision of written information about secondary school

Systematic

- Peer support groups with pupils who are all going to same secondary school
- Shared projects/bridging units with secondary school
- Pupil passports (completed by pupils and passed on to new school)
- Meetings with parents, e.g. open evenings
- Parent support groups

‡‡‡ Adapted from page 35 of Neal S, Rice F, Ng-Knight T, Riglin L, Frederickson N. Exploring the longitudinal association between interventions to support the transition to secondary school and child anxiety. Journal of Adolescence 2016;50:31–43.

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