

EBPU

Evidence Based
Practice Unit

A partnership of



Anna Freud
National Centre for
Children and Families

Mental health questionnaire research with children and young people in schools:

Recommendations for good practice

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Introduction

The mental health of children and young people is recognised as an international public health priority and, therefore, a research priority. Researchers are increasingly asking children and young people to complete self-report questionnaires to better understand their health and wellbeing. Often, this research is carried out in schools, partly because this is a useful way of engaging with large groups of children and young people, but also as a way of assessing local needs and evaluating interventions.

So far, there has been limited evidence about how children and young people experience taking part in this kind of research, and little guidance focused on best practice in children and young people mental health questionnaire data collection. Some recent projects led by the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families and its partners^{1,2} have offered insight into the ways that children and young people can experience completing self-report mental health questionnaires at school. The evidence suggests that for most children and young people, answering these kinds of questions does not cause distress and may even be positive, allowing emotional reflection and release,^{1,2} but that a small proportion may experience low mood after taking part.^{1,3}

Research also indicates that school-based questionnaire completion can have particular challenges. For instance, children and young people have described feeling a lack of privacy when participating in a classroom with their peers, and expressed concern that researchers may share their individual responses with their teachers; some have also noted that teachers do not always know how to provide support.^{2,4,5} Evidence also indicates confusion regarding consent in a school environment, with children and young people assuming participation is compulsory given that they are typically required to follow instructions in

school.² Such issues highlight the need for clear and explicit information to participants and to ensure support and guidance for schools and school staff who facilitate engagement with questionnaires.



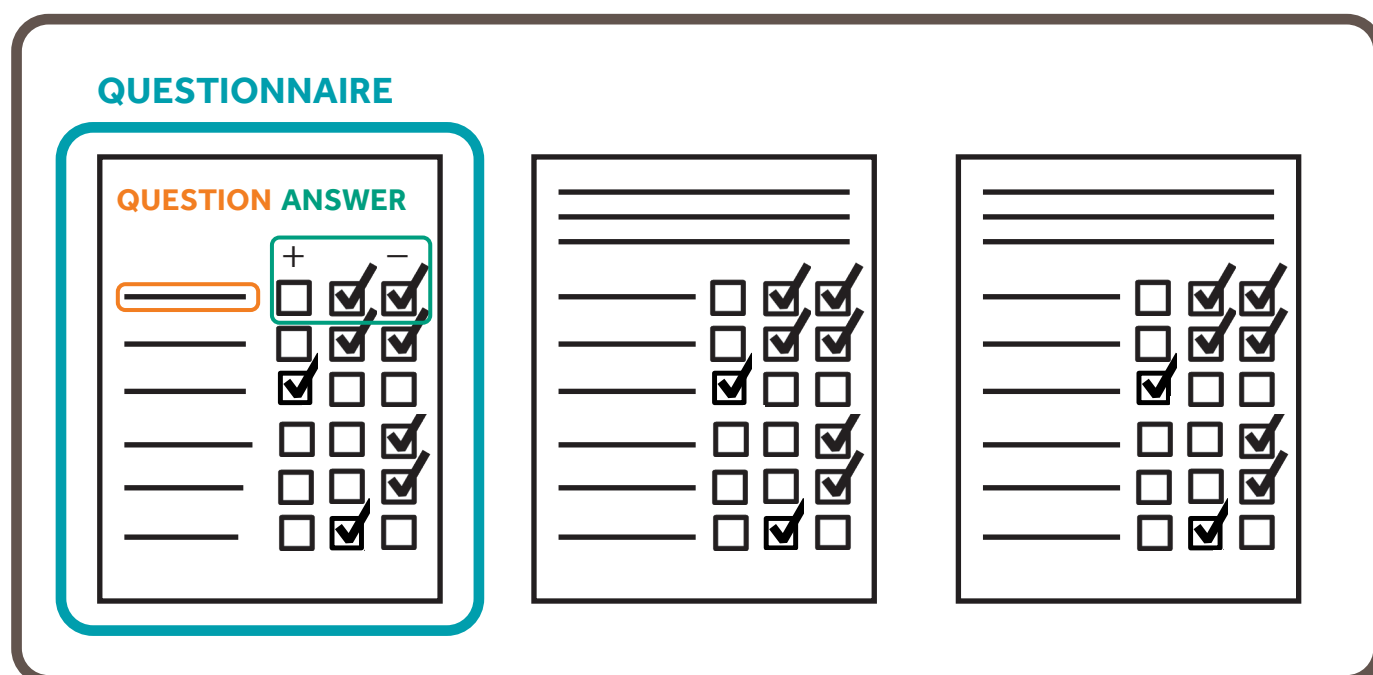
About this guidance

Here, we offer a range of recommendations for facilitating school-based self-report mental health data collection with children and young people. **These recommendations should be tailored to the context of each individual project and used in conjunction with standard and institutional ethical and data protection guidance.**

The guidance is informed by our own extensive experience in facilitating self-report data, our emerging evidence around children and young people's participation experiences,^{1,2} and the wider literature and recommendations for data collection in this context.^{3,6,7} This guidance is relevant to anyone using self-report mental health questionnaires in research in education settings, including academic researchers, schools and colleges, and local authorities. We suggest these recommendations are appropriate for research with participants aged nine and older, but highlight that most of the evidence is focused on secondary school-aged pupils (11+ years). The age of participants and particular school/research context should inform how this guidance is applied.

Note that in these recommendations we use 'questionnaire' to refer to a single research instrument designed to measure one or more areas of interest, 'question' to refer to the individual statements a participant directly responds to in a questionnaire, and 'questionnaire framework' to describe a set of multiple questionnaires that are integrated and administered jointly to create a dataset capturing multiple areas of interest. Below is a figure that illustrates how these terms are used and their relationship to one another, as well as noting the Likert style answer options typically presented to participants.

QUESTIONNAIRE FRAMEWORK



Recommendations

Summary of key recommendations:

1. [Select questionnaires carefully](#)
2. [Ensure participant information and instructions are clear and age-appropriate](#)
3. [Consider accessibility for different groups of children and young people](#)
4. [Have clear procedures to support participants emotionally](#)
5. [Provide clear guidance and support for schools](#)
6. [Get support from school leadership](#)

1. Select questionnaires carefully

An individual's experience of completing a questionnaire, and the subsequent quality of the data collected, will be influenced by the specific questions that they are asked. Therefore, it is important to:

- Make sure that chosen questionnaires are designed or validated for use with your chosen age group and use accessible, age-appropriate language. For specific self-report mental health and wellbeing questionnaires designed for use with children and young people, see CORC's [dedicated website space](#) and the Education Endowment Foundation's [SPECTRUM database](#)).
- Since questionnaire frameworks involve compiling multiple questionnaires, review the length of the overall framework to avoid unnecessary burden for participants. Where there is a need to include a large number of different questionnaires, consider short questionnaires where these are available and have been found to be reliable and valid with children and young people. It is also useful to review chosen questionnaires for areas of overlap and fit across the overall framework to identify any unnecessary repetitiveness.
- Unless the aim is to validate a new or adjusted questionnaire, questionnaires should be used as set out by developers and should not be altered. For instance, both introductory and question wording should not be edited, specific questions should not be removed or re-ordered, and answer options should stay the same.
- Open-ended text boxes can be useful, but are often unmanageable in large-scale projects and require different ethical and safeguarding considerations. Consider whether qualitative data could be collected separately, where techniques like interviews and focus groups are used to give children and young people an opportunity to share their voice.
- Piloting the questionnaire framework with a smaller group of participants can help to identify specific challenges, which can then be addressed where possible prior to rollout for data collection.

2. Ensure participant information and instructions are clear and age-appropriate

It is important that children and young people are given clear, accessible information about the nature of taking part so that they are able to give informed consent. There are steps that can help with this:

- Use simple, age-appropriate language and avoid complex terms and 'jargon'.
- Review information with your chosen age group to make sure it is clear and accessible to them.
- Consider using pictures or video to explain key information, as this may be more engaging and clearer than written information.
- Ensure that information clarifies the purpose of data collection and how data will/will not be used, including explicit statements about anonymity and confidentiality.
- Clearly explain participants' rights and make sure they have clear contact information for the research team in case they have queries.

Mental health and wellbeing questionnaires are often unfamiliar to children and young people, and many may not have answered questions like these before. To avoid confusion, there is some useful information that can be provided to participants:

- Let participants know that their participation is not a test – there are no right or wrong answers, and everyone's answers are going to be different.
- Clearly tell participants that they do not have to answer all of the questions and can skip something if they feel uncomfortable. It may be helpful to reiterate this in multiple ways (e.g., including reminders throughout the questionnaire framework as well as at the outset, asking the staff facilitating data collection to emphasise this in any guidance offered).

- An alternative, individual activity could be offered to emphasise that taking part is a choice, not a task that pupils have to complete. However, think carefully about what the alternative activity is – if it's something very exciting, pupils will just want to do that instead!



3. Consider accessibility for different groups of children and young people

Think about the different types of needs your participants might have that could make it difficult to read and understand the information and questions, such as special educational needs or having English as an additional language. Considering how you can design information and procedures to best meet varied needs is important:

- Consider the variety of characteristics and needs of individuals in your group and try to find questionnaires that can match that (e.g., finding questionnaires considered to work well across different groups and cultures, such as gender and ethnicity).
- Using simple language is helpful for everyone, but especially useful for those with additional needs.
- It is useful to give guidance to schools on how they can support pupils who may have additional needs, i.e., how they can provide reading or interpretation support without viewing or commenting on a participant's answers.

When questionnaires are completed online, some additional options may be available for accessibility:

- Functions such as text-to-audio can increase accessibility (though consider whether this necessitates additional equipment, such as headsets).
- Where possible in online data collection, ensure that the system 'saves' answers at the end of each section so that participants can take a break and return at a later point if needed.
- Provide a 'roll-over' function where young people can hover their mouse over trickier words to be provided with a definition.

4. Have clear procedures to support participants emotionally

Although emerging evidence suggests that most young people will not feel upset by completing mental health questionnaires, a small proportion may feel emotional afterwards and/or may wish to talk about how they are feeling.

- Ensure that final questions within the overall questionnaire framework are positively framed and not sensitive, which can help with ending on a more positive note (e.g., a wellbeing questionnaire).
- Consider providing a space designed to offer emotional relief at the end, for instance by including animal pictures or a doodle page.³
- Clearly explain to participants what they should do if they feel upset during or after taking part, through reminders that school staff are available to provide support and clear signposting to appropriate services.
- When questionnaire frameworks are being completed anonymously, some participants may still believe that someone will read their responses and know they are in distress. It is important to emphasise at the beginning and end of data collection that this is not the case and to remind young people of how to access support.
- Ensure school staff are present throughout completion and available to provide support, and that this is made clear to participants at the beginning.
- Encourage schools to consider which members of staff facilitate sessions to ensure a supportive environment. Some participants may feel better supported by a teacher they know well (e.g., a form tutor), or a pastoral member of staff.
- Support staff to encourage and facilitate children and young people in seeking help and support if they would like to after taking part. For example, staff could remind pupils of avenues of support within the school.



5. Provide clear guidance and support for schools

In large-scale projects, school staff are often tasked with leading data collection sessions with children and young people. It is important to put in place clear procedures and guidance so that staff understand their role:

- Set up clear guidance and procedures so that schools and school staff understand what their role is in data collection; e.g., how to introduce what the questionnaire framework is, how to help with answering questions or supporting those with additional needs.
- Consider how you can make the steps involved very clear and easy to follow for school staff, such as providing a handout to use during data collection, covering 'key messages' (e.g., consent information) and a 'crib sheet' with frequently asked questions and suggested answers.
- Providing suggestions of how staff can facilitate the process while maintaining privacy for participants is important. Completing questionnaires in a full class can mean pupils may be able to see each other's answers, and completion in smaller groups or more private spaces can reduce this issue.
- Make sure that staff understand that participants' answers are private and that they should give individuals the space to complete without adults looking at their answers.
- However, be aware that staff are very busy, and any guidance should be brief to avoid additional burden.

6. Get support from school leadership

It is clear from the above that a small but important amount of preparation and planning is required on the part of schools to ensure questionnaires are completed smoothly. It is therefore valuable to have 'buy-in' from school leaders, to ensure that members of staff are enabled and supported throughout:

- Clearly articulate the benefits to the school of facilitating good data collection and communicate this to school leaders.
- Ensure that school leaders understand what will be involved in administering questionnaires and encourage them to work with their staff to make decisions (e.g., who will be present, how staff can provide emotional support, etc.).
- Consider providing an incentive for schools to participate, such as offering brief anonymised feedback on aspects of the data once collected. This feedback should provide schools with an indication of something relevant to their school (e.g., how wellbeing and mental health in their school compares to national norms).

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