

Mental Health – Findings from The Big Ask

Introduction

In April 2021, the Children’s Commissioner for England, Dame Rachel de Souza, launched The Big Ask: a national consultation exercise with children in England to ask them about their lives and their priorities, aspirations and worries for the future. The purpose was not only to provide a large-scale ‘state of the nation’ assessment of the views of children on these issues, but also to help inform the Commissioner’s priorities and longer-term strategy for her term in office, and to help ensure that children’s needs and interests could be placed at the forefront of policy measures to recover from the impacts of the pandemic.

The Big Ask ran for approximately 6 weeks and gathered more than 550,000 responses, making it the largest ever survey of children anywhere in the world, to our knowledge.

The 6-8 and 9+ ‘Big Ask’ surveys included one qualitative question each. To ensure the survey was age-appropriate, the questions asked to the 6-8 age group and children aged 9+ were slightly different, though designed to capture the same theme and underlying issues.

The 9-12 and 13-17 surveys asked:

- ‘What do you think stops children/young people in England achieving the things they want to achieve when they grow up?’

The 6-8 survey asked:

- ‘If you could change anything to make your life better when you grow up, what would it be?’

This analysis explores what children said about health and wellbeing, their relationships with others, and the impact that these relationships can have on their self-esteem.

The survey question asked children to describe the barriers to achieving the things they want to when they are older but did not ask children about the causes of those barriers. This means that in many cases children have simply stated ‘mental health’ or wellbeing a barrier – without saying what led to it. However, some children did describe the potential causes of poor emotional wellbeing and mental health, explored below. It is important to note that this is not a comprehensive discussion of the causes of worsening mental health or poor emotional wellbeing experienced by children.

Because some children related stress and pressure with their mental health and wellbeing, we included the words ‘stress,’ ‘pressure,’ and ‘worry,’ as well as words that refer to a specific mental health condition such as ‘depression,’ ‘anxiety,’ and ‘suicide.’ Therefore, the responses included in this analysis therefore are not always talking explicitly about mental health in a narrow or clinical sense.

The methodology for how these data were analysed is available [here](#).

Quantitative findings

- The majority of children aged 9-17 (80%) said they were happy or OK with their mental health. But 20% were unhappy with this, making it the top issue that they were unhappy with.
- Girls were nearly twice as likely as boys to say they were unhappy with their mental health (25% vs 13%), while older children were also more likely (32% of 16-17 year olds, compared to 9% of 9-11 year olds). 40% of girls aged 16-17 said they were unhappy with their mental health.
- Some ethnic groups were less likely to say they were unhappy with their mental health (e.g. 16% of Asian children compared to 21% of White children).
- There was little variation by deprivation, but children from a vulnerable background were more likely to be unhappy with their mental health – e.g. around a quarter of children with a social worker and a quarter of young carers said this.
- Children want to have good wellbeing in the future, not just now. Among 9-17 year olds, just over half (52%) said that having good mental health was one of their most important future aspirations.
- As children get older, they are more likely to emphasise the importance of good mental health: 63% of 16-17 year olds said this was important for their future, compared with 43% of 9-11 year olds.
- Among 9-17 year olds, children living in the most affluent areas were slightly more likely to say that good mental health and good physical health were important future priorities for them, compared to children in the most deprived areas. Vulnerable groups were generally less likely to say this.

What do children mean by mental health?

‘Mental health’ is an incredibly broad phrase that children use to refer to a range of issues – from feeling sad, nervous or unhappy, to lacking self-belief or confidence, worrying, poor emotional wellbeing, or clinical conditions such as depression, anxiety or Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD).

‘[If I could change anything] I would change my mental health because I can get quite sad and it doesn’t feel quite right and it gets annoying’ - *Girl, 8*

‘Stress, people don’t think they’re capable of doing things and this has a negative effect on their mental (and potentially physical) health.’ - *Girl, 16*

‘My mental health is going down all the stress of homework I have to revise everyday.’ - *Girl, 11*

‘Young people nowadays are constantly battling with pressure from all sides of life, [...] this prevents us [...] to progress in life with a healthy and relaxed mentality.’ - *Girl, 14*

Statistical overview of children who mentioned mental health in their response

Table 1 - Percentage of children whose response referenced 'mental health', by demographic characteristics

Characteristic	Percentage of children whose response referenced mental health and emotional wellbeing
Age	
6-8	1%
9-11	12%
12-15	26%
16-17	29%
Gender	
Male	13%
Female	22%
Self-identified gender	31%
Ethnicity	
Asian	19%
Black	17%
Mixed	19%
Other	18%
White	19%
Ethnicity not given	13%
Happiness with current mental health	
Happy with mental health	14%
Neither happy nor unhappy with mental health	23%
Unhappy with mental health	37%

19% of all categorised responses were categorised under this topic, including 13% of boys, 22% of girls, and 31% of children who self-identified their gender mentioned mental health. Older children were much more likely to mention words and phrases relevant to this topic: 29% of 16–17-year-olds and 26% of 12–15-year-olds, compared to 12% of 9–11-year-olds (Table 1). Children who were unhappy with their current mental health were the most likely to mention mental health in their response (37%), however 14% of children who were happy with their current mental health mentioned mental health as a possible barrier for children in England, showing that awareness of mental health isn't limited to personal experience for children.

'Social media which leads to mental health problems. Social media has made everyone so aware of themselves, so stuck in their own head that they've lost touch with reality. It seems that so have I.' - *Girl, 13*

'I also think people judge themselves using social media too much and it can take over their lives so they become paralysed by the idea that they need to be perfect when in reality no-one is perfect!' - *Girl, 16*

'Young people nowadays are constantly battling with pressure from all sides of life, such as body image, academic pressure, social pressure and even economic pressure. This prevents us having an equal platform to speak from, or to progress in life with a healthy and relaxed mentality.' - *Girl, 14*

'The amount of pressure that is put on young people to be the social norm and the amount of fear that young women have whilst outside by themselves or in groups of other women. I myself have personally felt both of these on a daily basis.' - *Girl, 14*

'Children can get bullied on apps such as instagram, snapchat, tiktok, youtube, and lot more, it's very sad how some people can act towards people, as well as people not wanting to tell anybody how they feel and just bottling it up, you should check how your child is doing daily and make sure they are okay' – *Boy, 10*

Bullying

Bullying, and a failure to address it, was also mentioned by some children as a cause of poor emotional wellbeing or mental health often through its effects on self-confidence and self-belief:

'Bullying stops people being able to do many thing how they normally would and it affects their mental health so much.' - *Girl, 12*

'I think its bullying/cyber bullying because **you can never forget something that someone has said to you and it can effect your mental health.**' - *Boy, 12*

'Frequent bullying and harassment in schools that are rarely dealt with or dealt with in an ineffective manner and can lead to exceptionally low self-esteem, and the mental health problems... anti-bullying prevention in schools is ineffective at best and does not offer any support there [other] than we'll let them know their bullying is unacceptable.' – *Gender not given, 15*

'I was severely bullied in school to a degree that I was withdrawn into home education; therefore, I feel that people who cannot thrive fully in their early education and who are not helped (like I eventually was) may become less able later in life.' - *Boy, 13*

'I think it is important to stop bullying before it starts to progress and get worse because it starts affecting children's physical and mental health. **As I have experienced this I know how it feels to be worried to go to school, because you fear that you will be bullied again.** So, I think that schools should take more time to create their bullying policies.' - *Girl, 11*

Family

Often children listed 'family problems' or 'family issues' as a barrier alongside mental health and did not state an explicit link between them. But where there was a link,

children talked about pressure from parents, family breakdown, lack of parental support for a child's lifestyle or preferred activities/careers or family strains, particularly as a result of the pandemic.

'The **pressure of adults/parents comparing another child to another child on work ethics and processes in education and parents are too busy** to take care or spend free time with their children for better social skills.' - *Girl, 12*

'Unaccepting parents is a big problem, whether it's not respecting/supporting their beliefs [beliefs], religion [religion], sexuality or pronouns. **I think parents/careers [carers] like this can really affect a child's mental health.**' - *Girl, 10*

"The people/parents don't get enough money or help for their children. **My dad gets away with not paying my mum because he always quits his job or always gets fired.** [...] My mum is a single parent who hasn't got a job and has 4 kids. **We barely have enough money to stay in the house and get food and stuff to live.** [...] I'm worried about my mum and her mental health and to be honest I'm worried about mine." - *Girl, 10*

School

Children talked about how important their education was, and many felt their mental health and wellbeing affected their chances of success:

'I think **we all know education is important for jobs and careers** but for many people, being **unmotivated, low-self esteem and other problems get in the way of our learning and education.**' - *Girl, 13*

Some felt that some schools didn't always get the balance right between academic pressure and supporting wellbeing:

'Immense stress from school, **worsening mental health and the expectations from teachers and schools, who only care about grades.**' - *Girl, 15*

'**I think and know that education is important, but if you overwork someone, it can be severely damage them.** Mentally and physically. If you punish someone because they're stressed and need help that's just creating more problems.' - *Girl, 14*

'Too much pressure on exams in schools causing anxiety among many. **If the focus was more on education being for later life and less for the soul purpose of doing well in exams then people would likely have a much better mental health in general.**' - *Boy, 13*

Many children saw a clear link between their exam results and their future beyond school, whether they are thinking about university, apprenticeships, or alternative routes into the job market and adulthood. For these children there is a perceived 'single point of failure' where a grade on an exam can have a significant impact on the rest of young person's life, creating considerable anxiety.

'We have a lot of pressure and exams [...] I have to do well or I'll be a mess and I feel like we think that exams **if you fail it's the end of your life and you won't get to do what you want to do in the future.**' - *Girl, 15*

'The stress of GCSE exams, those exams make **students fail and boom their entire life is down the drain.**' - *Boy, 16*

'The exam hall is a horrible place to be in when you start thinking about how **this one paper could prevent you getting the job you want or living the life you want in the future** simply due to employers wanting people with higher grades.' - *Girl, 17*

Many children also mentioned the effects that lockdowns, missed schooling due to COVID-19, and learning from home had had on their wellbeing:

'I didn't learn anything in lockdown and I'm really struggling. I also think **children's/teenagers mental health needs to be talked about more, this pandemic has been so draining for us.**' - *Girl, 15*

'Having been learning online for most of last year and half of this year, there is lots of pressure on us for next year, when we do our GCSE exams in year 11. **This deteriorates our mental health and causes lots of stress, especially because there is little communication on what will happen to us next year.** It's like we were being left in the dark.' - *Girl, 15*

Supporting mental health

Children felt that the lack of proper and timely mental health support was a barrier to achieving in later life, for example because it meant that they couldn't focus as much on education as they would like to.

'Bad mental health can impact learning as **if your sad you don't want to learn** and then you won't get a good education.' - *Boy, 12*

"Other issues affecting your performance in school or exams e.g. **having mental or physical health issues at a time when studies are most important.**" – *Gender not given, 14*

"Bad mental health, **you worry too much about that and then you don't focus on more important things** that will help in your career and education." – *Girl, 13*

Children explained how the long waiting lists and barriers to accessing treatment meant that they were reaching crisis points before receiving any help or support.

'**The lack of help with mental health has been the biggest thing that has stopped me and my friends from achieving what we want.** It is difficult to access as we are not taken seriously, and when we are, waiting lists are so long.' - *Girl, 17*

'**Lack of mental health support , definitely.** I've been on the waiting list for counselling before, and I was waiting months. I feel like if young people had someone they could talk to about their education, they would feel a lot more confident, and would have a lot more belief in themselves.' - *Girl, 13-17*

'I think that **we need more access to mental health people because I know people that have killed themselves because they had no one to talk to.**' - *Boy, 13*

'Both myself and many of my friends have at some point tried to access CAHMs, but **we were deemed not mentally-ill enough. Some of them were self-harming.** Even

if they weren't self-harming support was still needed, as surely it is better to prevent the mental illness from worsening, then dealing with it when it is serious and hard to manage/address.' - *Boy, 16*

'I had to wait years to receive help for severe social anxiety and PTSD following childhood sexual abuse [...] and many who are able to receive support feel the services are underfunded and unable to provide the best care because of that.' - *Girl, 17*

We spoke directly with children who spent lockdown living in low and medium secure mental health wards. One girl told us that due to everyone wearing masks, she hadn't seen anyone smile in seven months. These children strongly believed that early intervention that may have prevented their admission to wards.

"I didn't really get more help until it was too late. I was on a waiting list for CAMHS and then when you do get in, they only see you like one time, unless you're at breaking point". - *Girl, 18*

"It takes you so long to get on the list. It would prevent stuff from happening [if you got help earlier.]" - *Girl, 17*

"With eating issues, outreach only came once a day, which still leaves five meals or snacks for parents to supervise. You want your parents to be your mum and dad, not your therapist. Parents should be able to be parents and not carers. More outreach would mean fewer hospital admissions."

Children thought that introducing or bolstering the mental health support available in schools would help reduce the impacts of poor mental health.

'With more money schools can afford better councillors [counsellors] to fix the problems [...] Surely if you expect children to withstand the stress they are subject to you should have to pay for the things they need to cope. Thanks to the pandemic people are talking way more about mental health. But actions speak louder than words. **Schools can identify the mental health crisis but they can do nothing.'** - *Girl, 17*

"Mental health is important and it should be supported more in schools. For a lot of people, school is their safe place!" – *Girl, 15*

Some children talked about the need for more mental health awareness in school. Simply being able to talk to a teacher, or having a teacher understand what they are experiencing, would make a difference:

'The lack of understanding amongst teachers too; **all teachers (regardless of their subject) should have to go on mental health courses so they know what possible symptoms are and what they can do to help** in the scenario that someone is showing them instead of just ignoring it.' - *Girl, 12*

'Need more teachers and people to be trained to deal with mental health issues in young people.' - *Girl, 16*

Often, children talked about only needing someone who they could talk to but are worried about being taken seriously or not knowing who they could talk to. For these children, additional support in school could be an effective intervention to provide advice or counselling, without needing referral to CAMHS.

'Our mental health is important but it's hardly ever talked about we are told to tell adults about our sadness **but when we show signs of depression or anxiety we are told to pull ourselves together it's not fair.**' - *Girl, 12*

'Many children like myself struggle mentally and I don't think mental health is talked about enough and **many people are silently struggling with no one to talk to and many people don't get the proper help they need even if they were strong enough to ask for help.**' - *Girl, 14*

Impacts of poor mental health

When children were unable to access support, they shared some of the impacts of this in their response. Children talked about struggling with, for example, self-harming and feeling suicidal.

'[...] Mental health has also become such a taboo subject, **I self-harm, but don't know how to get help**, simply because it's so hard to bring up. I've spoken to other people in person and online about this, and a lot of them feel the same way :)' - *Girl, 14*

'Bullied for 13 years and **just been depressed suicidal, self-harming.**' – *Boy, 15*

'**I personally struggle with self harm.** I've never even considered reaching out to school because I know they do not have the facilities to help.' – *Girl, 16*

'I'm 15 and **me and so many people self harm and so many have panic attacks**, mental health is huge. 2 people near me killed themselves and this is London, not even a bad area.' – *Boy, 15*

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