



Everyday magic

How BBC Children in Need's A Million & Me projects are supporting 8-13 year olds' mental health

Juliet Snell

Summary

With levels of poor mental health rising among children and young people, there is a clear need for sustained effort to promote good mental wellbeing and reduce inequalities. This will, in turn, prevent children from needing more intensive, costly support in later life. We now know that one in six children aged 6-16 is experiencing a mental health difficulty. We also know that half of mental health conditions start by the age of 14.

A Million & Me is a three-year programme funded by BBC Children in Need. The programme has adopted a partnership approach to identifying and scaling up support which builds “scaffolding” around children, enhancing their mental wellbeing and resilience.

Centre for Mental Health has worked with A Million & Me to extract learning from the programme for wider use.

At the halfway point in this constantly evolving programme, some key learning points are emerging:

- Children need and value positive, rewarding relationships to help them make sense of their own mental wellbeing
- Everyday conversations about mental wellbeing, within these relationships, equip children to learn about their wellbeing, develop healthy habits and reach out for help when they need it
- Meaningful, early involvement of children in a project’s design enables projects to innovate and provide a tailored response to children’s needs
- Multi-faceted partnership responses can be helpful to provide a scaffolding of support around children, by enabling and equipping their parents, carers, communities and the services who know them
- Digital assets can be effectively developed alongside face-to-face responses, with approaches learning from each other.

The programme was based on a sound review of current evidence. A systemic approach to children's mental wellbeing requires the elements of the system to share ideas, learn from each other and cooperate. By working together to design a system-wide response, and by sharing successes and challenges, a more sustainable response is being developed through A Million & Me. We are learning that the process can be time-consuming, and projects may take longer to plan and develop, but have more chance of being sustained and scaled up.

Some children are less well reached by mental health support. We began the programme with an understanding of the needs of children living in financial hardship, in marginalised communities or with a disability. However, throughout the programme we have learned more about the needs of children living in rural, coastal or island communities and about children with behavioural needs, whose mental distress can be deprioritised by the adults around them.

Giving children the best possible chance of enjoying good mental health has multiple benefits, both immediately and in the long term. A holistic approach to supporting children's mental health is more likely to produce those benefits. This means providing consistent and reliable resources and information that children can trust and use. It also requires statutory children and young people's mental health services to build closer partnerships with families and voluntary sector organisations as well as schools: for example, by sharing techniques and approaches that can boost children's wellbeing with trusted adults, equipping them to spot the signs of emerging difficulties and how to respond. And it means taking proactive steps to overcome inequalities in children's mental health – reaching out to children and families with the greatest risks to their mental health and the poorest access to help.

This report recommends:

1. The formation of partnerships between voluntary sector and statutory organisations to deliver a more consistent, relationship-driven approach to supporting children's mental wellbeing
2. Investment in good quality resources and information about children's mental wellbeing across the spectrum, aimed at both children and adults
3. The provision of training and resources for the wider children's workforce, including in the voluntary sector, to increase capability to have good conversations about mental wellbeing
4. The recognition among children's mental health services of the potential of high quality curated digital support to reach children at scale
5. The provision of additional support for children making the transition between primary and secondary school, with extended offers for children from marginalised communities
6. Ensuring that children are meaningfully involved in the early design stages of projects that aim to improve their mental wellbeing
7. The development of interventions with a specific focus on children who are currently poorly served: including disabled children, children with behavioural difficulties, children living in rural and coastal communities, and children living in poverty.

Introduction

About one in six 6-16 year olds in the UK have at least one mental health problem, with rates rising with age (NHS Digital, 2021).

Numerous studies highlight how mental health inequality arises from an interplay between genetically inherited, environmental and social factors, including:

- Poverty
- Gender and age
- Racism and racial injustice
- Physical health and disability
- Family relationships
- Adverse childhood experiences.

Key risk factors to children's mental health include lack of supportive and loving relationships, experiences of bullying, and social isolation (Rutter, 2013; Khan, 2014).

In 2017, BBC Children in Need committed £10m over three years to the A Million & Me programme. A Million & Me aims to improve the emotional health of 8-13 year olds because:

- BBC Children in Need noticed an increasing focus on addressing emerging mental health and wellbeing problems in their grants programme, and a gap in provision for 8-13 year olds
- There is evidence that half of mental health conditions start by 14 years of age (Kim-Cohen *et al.*, 2004).

While A Million & Me is a complex programme, its central aim is to improve the mental wellbeing of 8-13 year old children and their families, whilst also generating learning that can influence systems and have impact beyond the life of the programme. An important principle of A Million & Me is to create an environment where the partnership works together to enhance and amplify the work of each component. The programme is running from 2019 to 2022.

To date, the programme has included:

- The convening of a Children's Advisory Group, who have developed a model of children's participation for A Million & Me, with support from Queen's University Belfast
- A UK wide initiative to expand Shout 85258, a text service operating a 24/7 crisis support line
- Five regional grants, testing how successful local projects can be scaled to reach more children and families, for example WellRead in Northern Ireland, an app-based activity designed to help parents boost their children's emotional wellbeing with a combination of storytelling and targeted conversations
- Three innovation grants, supporting the development of new resources such as Ollee, a digital friend for children which helps them explore feelings around school, family and friends and share advice with a parent or trusted adult
- A partnership with Boots, promoting mental wellbeing to customers and upskilling store staff to have positive conversations about children's mental health with the public
- Rapidly developed navigation projects to help children access help quickly during the coronavirus pandemic
- A capacity building programme to upskill adults who work with children.

Centre for Mental Health was appointed as the evaluation partner to A Million & Me in 2019 and will work alongside the programme until September 2022. The evaluation partner's role is to track the development of the diverse programme elements, measure progress towards objectives, shape the monitoring requirements of individually funded projects, and share insights between delivery partners, individual project evaluators, corporate partners

and advisory groups. As evaluators, we have also been exploring the process of design and delivery. The aim is to allow delivery partners to learn and respond as the programme develops. Centre for Mental Health gathers learning annually and shares it with the partnership.

This briefing presents evidence on the mental wellbeing and resilience of children aged 8-13, alongside insights gathered from the programme so far. This includes learning about:

- How multi-faceted, diverse programmes can be convened into a coherent, systemic response
- How projects are addressing the challenges of sustaining and scaling their work
- How relationships and conversation sit at the heart of A Million & Me's approach to helping children develop resilience and good mental wellbeing.

The mental health of children

What the evidence base tells us

The latest prevalence survey carried out by NHS Digital finds that rates of mental health problems among children and young people continue to rise. Earlier this year, one in six children aged 6-16 years old were identified as having a mental health difficulty, rising from one in nine in 2017. This increase was observed in both boys and girls (NHS Digital, 2021). The study finds that lockdown and school closures brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic were starting to impact on children and young people's mental health, with over half of those aged 11-22 with a mental health problem saying lockdown has made their life worse (Ibid).

Analysis by Centre for Mental Health suggests that approximately 1.5 million children and young people under the age of 18 will require new or increased mental health support due to the pandemic. This relates to a range of mental health problems including anxiety and depression, trauma, and complex bereavement (O'Shea, 2020).

The A Million & Me age range (8-13 years old) spans a crucial stage in a child's life. By the end of this time span, half of those who will go on to have a mental illness as adults have already begun to experience mental health difficulty.

The gender profile of mental distress shifts significantly during this time, with boys experiencing problems more often at age 8, and girls more often at age 13. Many children have

been made more vulnerable by their transitions to secondary school, or by protracted exposure to risk factors such as poverty, discrimination or trauma (Khan, 2016).

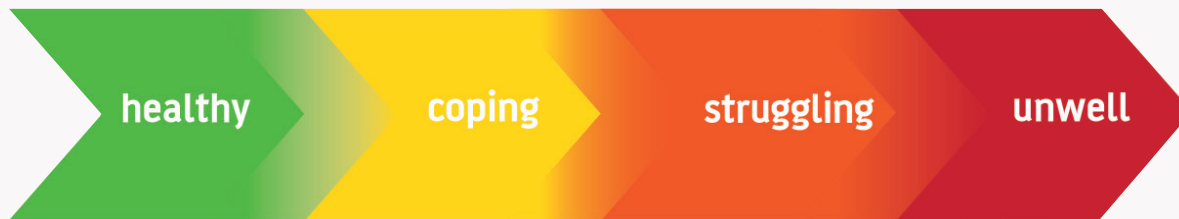
The spectrum of mental health

Mental health is not just about people who are feeling unwell. We may describe emotional wellbeing as:

"A positive sense of wellbeing which enables an individual to be able to function in society and meet the demands of everyday life." (Mental Health Foundation, 2015)

At any one time, a child or young person may be anywhere on a spectrum for their mental health (Figure 1, overleaf). A child's environment and life experiences contribute to where on the spectrum they are at any given moment in their life: protective factors can help children to enjoy good mental health, while risk factors make them more likely to be unwell. The balance between risk and protective factors is crucial to determining their chances of good or poor mental health, both immediately and later in life.

Many children's difficulties go unnoticed. Evidence suggests that there is a ten-year average delay between children and young people experiencing the first symptoms of a mental health difficulty and receiving help (Khan, 2016). This is despite most parents seeking help for their children.

Figure 1: Mental health spectrum

Centre for Mental Health, 2017

What works to support children's mental wellbeing?

A brief review of evidence carried out for this project highlighted findings that are particularly relevant to the mental wellbeing of children in this age range:

- When thinking about what helps their wellbeing, children said they valued having good quality relationships with adults and peers
- Children prioritise having a voice and influence in their lives generally, and in services
- Fun and play are vital to children's wellbeing
- Children prefer to get help with their mental health in non-clinical, multi-purpose, welcoming environments.

Effective systems to improve children's mental health need to be run transparently, as well as being joined up, evidence-based, and focused on easy access. They must work continually on improvement by enabling strong and meaningful involvement of children and their families.

The evidence base for mental health interventions tends to focus mostly on responses to diagnosable problems. However, there is some evidence that maximising protective factors – for example by tackling bullying, offering parenting support, counselling, group work, peer support and mentoring – can be effective for children who are struggling to cope.

Learning from A Million & Me

At this halfway point in the programme, A Million & Me has reached many thousands of children and adults. With a strong focus on developing new assets and products, and in scaling up successful approaches, A Million & Me has facilitated a broad and diverse range of approaches.

The programme has also been learning about doing things differently: working more closely in a partnership approach among funder, providers, children and parents, corporate partner, evaluator and the media. Most A Million & Me projects included a development phase, during which the main focus was on listening to children, testing and learning.

In the first two years of the evaluation we have uncovered the following themes.

The importance of relationships and good conversation

In the first year, through our role as evaluators, we explored the mechanisms of change that A Million & Me's projects were using to improve outcomes for children. We were working on an assumption that children's mental health would be improved if the people around them (parents, carers, communities, the children's workforce) felt confident and knowledgeable about mental health.

This assumption was supported by the emerging models. However, we also discovered from many of the projects' development stages that children valued relationships and interaction highly, and saw such interactions as an end in themselves. This shifted our focus from ensuring that adults were knowledgeable about mental health, to enabling adults to facilitate helpful conversations with children.

Several projects developed tools to help in these conversations, such as story content, avatars, carefully curated language and help to value the 'everyday magic' of communication and interaction.

A Million & Me is facilitating better relationships, driven by conversations that directly address important mental health

concepts, equipping children and adults with language about mental health, and teaching children and adults to respond positively to the spectrum of mental health experience.

“Scaffolding” around children

In the first year, the evaluation of A Million & Me uncovered how the programme was striving to construct “scaffolding” around children. We were learning how building capacity around each child can help to protect them from worsening mental health. By exploring in detail the changes each project was trying to effect, we constructed a picture (Figure 2, overleaf) of how better resources around children will improve their mental health.

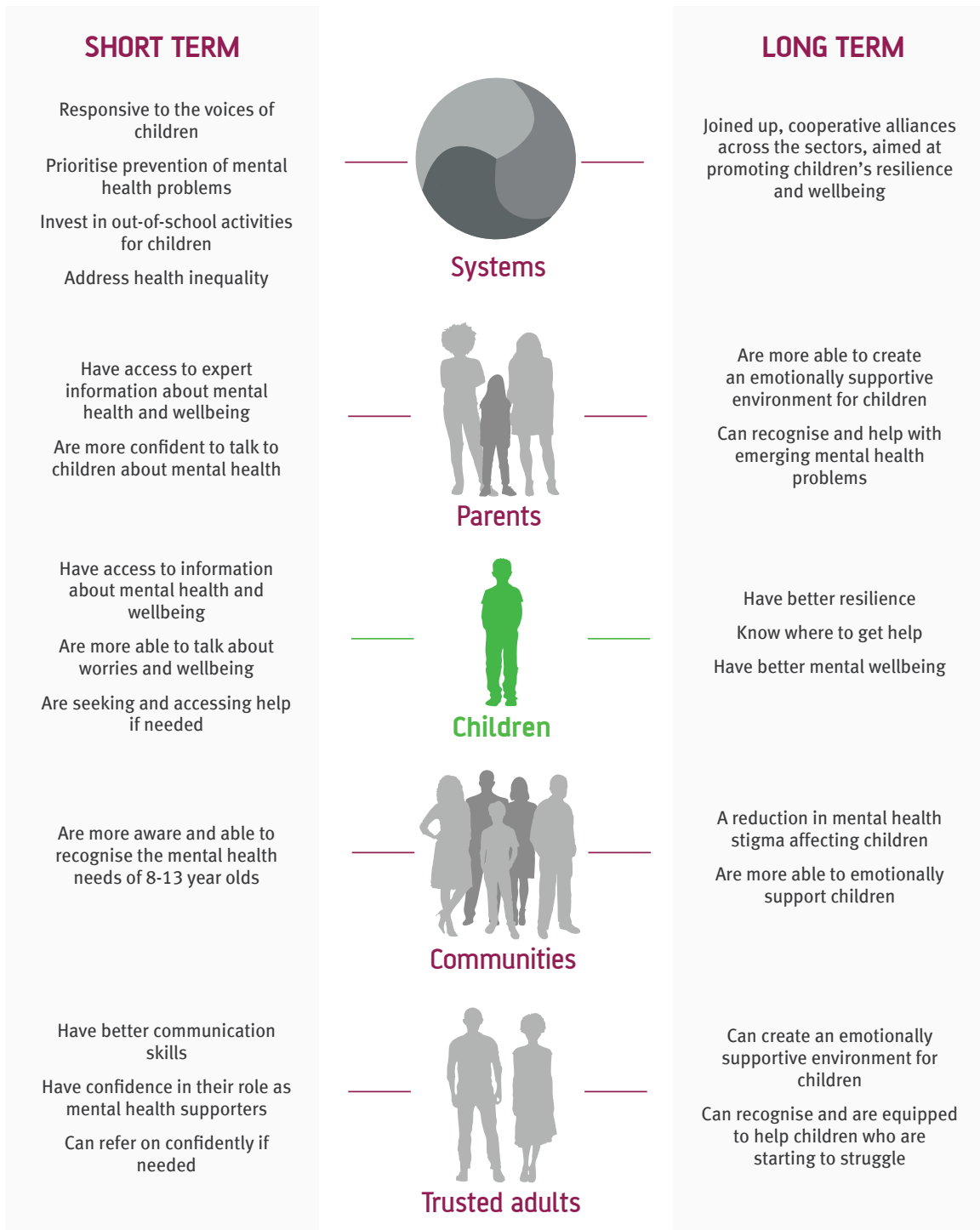
In their midway evaluations, A Million & Me projects have demonstrated these outcomes for children:

- **Feeling calm**, for example by having help and time to “feel” and identify emotions
- **Being in a good mood**, for example by connecting positively with peers and adults
- **Feeling positive about the future**, for example by learning to value your own strengths
- **Working out problems by talking about them**, for example by having positive conversations with an adult when they are experiencing mental health problems.

And for parents:

- **Feeling confident talking to children about their mental health**, for example by taking language and ideas from online videos from expert sources
- **Feeling able to do things that will help their children's mental health**, for example by using strategies to improve mental health through movement
- **Knowing what to do if their child is having problems**, for example by being navigated to help by a trusted person in your community
- **Knowing where to find information and help**, for example by accessing simple online navigation tools.

Figure 2: Potential outcomes of resources to promote children's mental health



Growing and developing in partnership

A Million & Me projects are proactively identified by BBC Children in Need and offered substantial levels of support to coproduce a response that fits well into the wider programme. We found that A Million & Me projects valued this way of accessing funds: being given time and space to think, listen and learn from the wider programme and innovate before committing to a final delivery model.

The programme is learning throughout, at a number of different levels. At individual project level, partners are encouraged to include coproduction, testing and improvement stages in their delivery. This has resulted in further changes to many projects. All projects are offered ongoing contact and support from the team at BBC Children in Need and from the programme evaluators.

As we moved into the second year, partners were encouraged to share findings, collaborate, offer support and work in closer partnership with one another. Learning events were held to facilitate shared learning in key areas of interest.

Common areas of interest which partners have discussed include:

- Involving and listening to children – the Children’s Advisory Group developed a toolkit about how to involve children in decision-making at the strategic level, and this was shared and discussed
- What’s in the conversation – talking to children about mental health was a core learning from the emerging projects, and a workshop was held to develop our shared understanding and resources to improve our approaches
- Digital marketing methods – these were new to several partners, and a workshop allowed them to learn from partners with more experience
- Working with children with disabilities – we saw from year two data that several projects were reaching out well to children with disabilities, with a particular focus on neurodiversity. We sought expert advice to support the whole programme to consider how to respond
- Scaling up the work – this was a common factor for most of the projects, though approaches varied. We shared experiences, insights and ideas with some expert input.

Sustaining and scaling projects

A Million & Me seeks to have a legacy beyond the life of the programme, and to make sustained and large-scale changes to the capacity of communities to support children’s mental health. All projects, whether local or national, were developed with an underpinning assumption that they would be sustained in the long term and would be able to expand their impact beyond their current geographical or service borders.

Mechanisms of sustainability and scalability have included:

- Testing and rolling out social prescribing
- Development of accessible and expert websites, apps and video content
- Training and capacity building
- Learning about and sharing new models of practice
- Current and potential engagement with BBC platforms (e.g. BBC Education).

Learning from the coronavirus pandemic

With a wide range of ways to reach children and the people around them, A Million & Me was well placed to adapt to the challenges posed by the coronavirus pandemic and the resulting lockdowns.

Most projects sustained their delivery, and those that were already operating online saw a rise in demand.

The growing understanding that children’s mental health was vulnerable during the lockdowns accelerated some projects and prompted them to act quickly to make digital assets more widely available.

Projects that were based on face-to-face delivery encountered more challenges, and some closed for a time. In common with mental health services across the country, many found that the pandemic highlighted existing inequalities, disproportionately affecting families with less digital access. However, reach to some communities improved. For example, A Million & Me noticed that projects working remotely (via text or website) tended to have better reach to disabled children.

Implications for policy and practice

Supporting the mental health of children aged 8-13 has largely been overlooked and under-resourced. Younger children in particular have not been the focus of policies and practices designed to promote and protect mental health, which are aimed predominantly at older children and young people, and which focus mostly on treating mental health difficulties once they have escalated to crisis point.

It is clear from the projects supported by A Million & Me that investing in relatable and age-appropriate support and information about mental health for both children and trusted adults will produce significant benefits.

Children value and need positive, rewarding relationships to help them make sense of their own mental health. Everyday conversations about mental health, within these relationships, equip children to learn about their mental wellbeing, develop healthy habits, and reach out for help when they need it. Resources that enable those conversations to take place will be important for both children and adults: within families, in communities, in schools and online.

Research has shown that it is often groups with the highest risks to their mental health that have the poorest access to effective help (Commission for Equality in Mental Health, 2020). A Million & Me has identified groups of children facing especial challenges to their mental health who are also poorly supported by existing services. These include:

- Disabled children, including those with learning difficulties and disabilities (Children and Young People’s Mental Health Coalition, 2019)
- Children with behavioural difficulties
- Children growing up in remote rural and coastal communities (Allwood, 2020)
- Children living in poverty.

Interventions seeking to promote wellbeing and protect mental health among children aged 8-13 need to address these inequalities: in both the determinants of mental health, and in access to effective support.

Giving children the best possible chance of enjoying good mental health has multiple benefits, both immediately and in the long term. A holistic approach to supporting children’s mental health is more likely to produce those benefits. This means providing consistent and reliable resources and information that children can trust and use. It also requires statutory children and young people’s mental health services to build closer partnerships with families and voluntary sector organisations as well as schools: for example, by sharing techniques and approaches that can boost children’s wellbeing with trusted adults, equipping them to spot the signs of emerging difficulties and how to respond. And it means taking proactive steps to overcome inequalities in children’s mental health – reaching out to children and families with the greatest risks to their mental health and the poorest access to help.

Recommendations

This report recommends:

1. The formation of partnerships between voluntary sector and statutory organisations to deliver a more consistent, relationship-driven approach to supporting children's mental wellbeing
2. Investment in good quality resources and information about children's mental wellbeing across the spectrum, aimed at both children and adults
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- Children need and value positive, rewarding relationships to help them make sense of their own mental wellbeing
- Everyday conversations about mental wellbeing, within these relationships, equip children to learn about their mental wellbeing, develop healthy habits and reach out for help when they need it
- Meaningful, early involvement of children in a project's design enables projects to innovate and provide a tailored response to children's needs
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