



Centre for
Mental Health



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The power of the ordinary

Evaluating BBC Children in Need’s A Million & Me programme

Executive summary

In 2019, A Million & Me set out to construct and scale up a system or ‘scaffolding’ around children, developing people and resources that would promote their mental wellbeing. The programme set out to explore how ordinary, trusted relationships can help children who are beginning to struggle with their mental wellbeing. The programme took place against a backdrop of rising mental distress in children, and widespread concerns about the impact of high levels of inequality, trauma and stress affecting millions of children.

The programme was developed by BBC Children in Need in recognition that many children who go on to have mental health problems in later life have started to show signs of illness before the age of 14 (Kessler *et al.*, 2005), and that some of these problems could have been prevented. We know that most children with mental health problems do not get treatment at all, and for those that do get help, it often follows a long delay (Khan, 2016).

From its inception, A Million & Me has focused on two important concepts – wellbeing and resilience in children – learning how systems (or ‘scaffolding’)

around children can be developed which maximise these factors, and prevent problems.

“Resilience does not come from rare and special qualities, but from the everyday magic of ordinary, normative human resources in the minds, brains, and bodies of children, in their families and relationships, and in their communities.” (Masten, 2001, p 235)

Therefore, unless we consider the concept of resilience, we are not considering how a child can respond to adversity – some children will need more or different scaffolding in order to maintain mental wellbeing.

A Million & Me has represented a fresh approach to grant giving; the various programme elements were proactively identified to fit into an ‘ecosystem’ of projects, where the individual projects worked together to enhance and amplify each other’s work. Across the programme there has been a strong focus on learning and development, as well as a requirement for each project to have plans in place to scale up and sustain their work. As evaluation partner, Centre for Mental Health has been facilitating this learning approach, and this report represents our findings and reflections as A Million & Me draws to a close.

A Million
& Me



The impact of A Million & Me

A Million & Me has achieved what it intended to do. Tens of thousands of children have seen an improvement in their mental wellbeing, important new digital assets have been created, and there is now a clearer understanding of how children aged 8-13 can be supported to enjoy better mental wellbeing.

Improvements in wellbeing tended to involve children feeling calmer, happier, more positive and more relaxed. Children improved their resilience by being more willing and able to reach out for effective help.

We found that the following approaches are particularly important:

- Fun and happiness – ensuring that children have access to play and positivity
- Easy and flexible access – support being safe and easy to find and use in a range of different ways and at different times, for example through digital models
- Creative self-expression – helping children recognise and express their emotions by providing them with tools and language
- Valuing relationships where children can share and learn about their mental wellbeing.

A Million & Me projects, taken together, present a ‘scaffolding’ model. This means that as well as tools and resources for children themselves, there have been resources aimed at parents/carers, adults working with children, wider communities and people who plan and commission services.

The role and importance of parents/carers and other trusted adults was particularly prominent. We found that parents/carers and other trusted adults were already interested in children’s mental wellbeing and motivated to help, but lacked confidence and tools. It was important to validate the role of these adults as mental wellbeing resources, encouraging them to see themselves as part of the ‘mental health system’ and be empowered to act. A Million & Me promoted and demonstrated the importance of adults listening to children and offering them voice and agency.

A particular feature of A Million & Me was the prominence of digital tools and resources. Around half of the projects resulted in the development of some kind of digital resource, ranging from an online digital exhibition of girls’ art to online videos for parents, bibliotherapy resources, podcasts and apps. Children valued these digital resources as tools with which to independently improve their mental wellbeing.

Responding to mental health inequality

A Million & Me has been open to all children but has worked proactively and throughout to understand and address inequality. Many projects were particularly aimed at children facing multiple disadvantages, for example as a result of poverty, isolation, or gender or racial inequality. In relation to gender, we noted different patterns of accessing help, with girls and non-binary/trans children more likely to access the digital projects of A Million & Me than boys.

While the programme lacked explicit data about the experiences of children from racialised communities, two projects were aimed at children marginalised by racism, and they have helped the whole programme to be more responsive.

During the evaluation we noticed that children who self-reported as being disabled were accessing the digital projects in particular, and the whole programme responded by drawing in expert advice about how digital projects could respond appropriately, in particular to neurodiverse children.

A Million & Me had begun to consider the impact of isolation, in particular rural and coastal isolation, on children and on the systems of support around them (see Allwood, 2020). The Covid-19 pandemic sharpened this focus and aligned the whole programme towards online and digital responses. Projects considered how to reach out to isolated children without compromising the quality of their experience.

The programme approach

A high level of thought and planning went into ensuring that the programme operated as a system and maximum benefit could be gained from learning.

This effective programme approach featured:

- Adequate development and learning time for projects to consider and develop their models
- A proactive focus on enhancing the voice and influence of children, parents and carers in every element
- High levels of support for projects from BBC Children in Need and the evaluation team, particularly through facilitating cross-programme learning and sharing of ideas.

The Covid-19 pandemic hit the programme in its second year, and has had significant impacts, both negative and positive. While projects experienced delays and disruptions, for example in recruitment of staff or participation by children, there was an increased drive to the digital aspects, and this accelerated roll-out of some important new digital resources.

Our recommendations

A Million & Me has successfully improved the wellbeing and resilience of children aged 8 to 13. This has been done by enhancing the ‘scaffolding’ that surrounds them, which then has the power to support mental wellbeing and so prevent mental ill health.

At the same time, a continuous and dynamic approach to development and learning in the programme has resulted in a better understanding of how this system can be optimised.

Based on this learning, we recommend:

For service providers:

1. Children and their families must be afforded voice and influence in the design and implementation of projects to support their mental wellbeing
2. Digital provision should be developed as a tool to reduce health inequalities by reaching children that other approaches do not reach.

For funders and commissioners

3. Charitable funders and statutory service commissioners should work towards systemic, multi-faceted programmes that seek to prevent mental health problems in children aged 8 to 13

4. Charitable funders and statutory service commissioners should take a longer-term and iterative approach to programmes promoting children’s mental wellbeing, ensuring projects have time to learn, develop and change
5. Charitable funders and statutory service commissioners should offer a diversity of types of mental wellbeing support in order to help address emerging mental health inequalities
6. Funders need to make sustained investment, particularly in rural areas where projects can take longer to establish alongside more limited local infrastructure
7. Programmes aiming to prevent mental health problems should build the capacity of the people and projects who already have trusting relationships with children, crucially via better alignment between the voluntary sector and statutory sector provision.

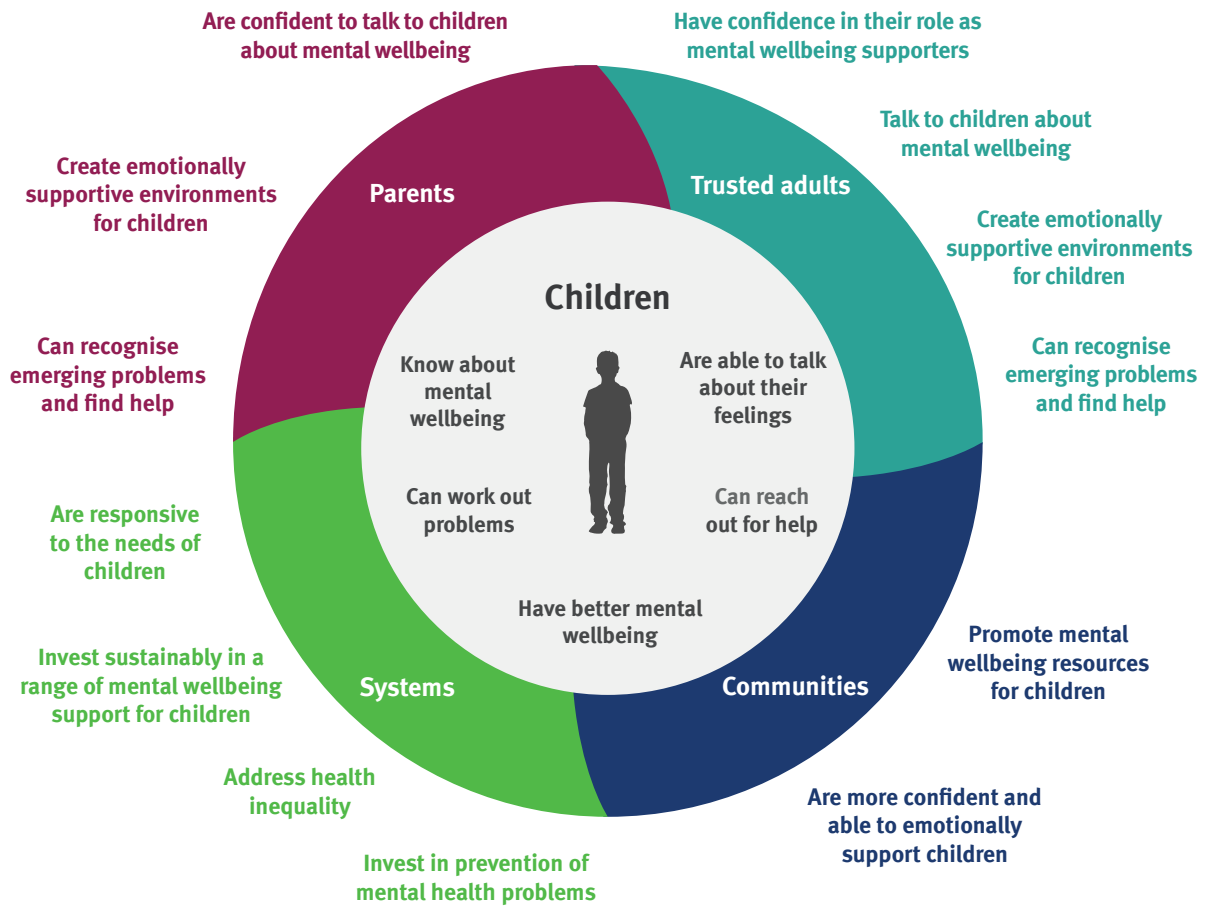
For policy makers

8. The Governments in each of the four nations of the UK should take systematic steps to improve the mental wellbeing of younger children. This should include strategic action to address mental health inequalities and investment in early intervention
9. It is important to validate the role of the wider children’s workforce in supporting children’s mental wellbeing and provide tools and resources for these trusted adults.

For communicators and influencers

10. The BBC and other media organisations should promote and use the resources produced through A Million & Me to widen their availability and uptake in the longer term
11. Media and campaigners focused on children’s mental health should communicate and promote the importance of early preventative work, based on a system of informed, trusted relationships and support for children aged 8 to 13.

How scaffolding around children can build their mental wellbeing



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Executive summary of *The power of the ordinary*.
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