



INVEST IN CHILDHOOD

Priorities for preventing mental ill health
among children and young people

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Mental health is a critical issue for babies, children and young people, and addressing mental ill health is essential for their overall wellbeing. The Government can help to create the conditions for them to thrive, with better mental health, improved life chances, and a brighter future. This report explores the available evidence about how government can use its powers to boost children's mental health, investing in what works, and stewarding its resources wisely.

THE SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF BABIES', CHILDREN'S AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S MENTAL HEALTH

The social determinants of mental health include a person's socioeconomic status, education, neighbourhood environment, and access to health care. These factors have a major impact on a child's mental health across the life course. Higher parental education levels correlate with better mental health outcomes in children. Community initiatives play a vital role in promoting mental health and preventing mental illness, particularly in communities with high levels of need where access to traditional mental health services may be limited.

FAMILY LEGACY AND INTERGENERATIONAL FACTORS

Family legacy and intergenerational factors also play a role in mental health, with stress and trauma (including racial trauma) experienced by previous generations altering genes in descendants, affecting their susceptibility to mental health difficulties. The Government should implement policies to meet the needs of racialised communities and provide trauma-informed care and support, promoting healthier outcomes for future generations.

THE HEALTH OF MOTHERS AND BABIES DURING PREGNANCY AND AFTERWARDS

Maternal mental health is a critical aspect of infant development, affecting their physical and mental wellbeing throughout life. Maternal mental ill health, including depression and anxiety, can adversely affect the mother-infant bond and the child's mental health. Effective support during pregnancy and early parenthood is essential for ensuring the mental health of mothers and infants. As such, health visitors play a particularly important role in closing current gaps in support (Farewell, Melnick and Leiferman, 2021).

Early childhood mental health interventions promote healthy emotional and social development. Collaboration between health care providers, educators and community organisations can ensure a comprehensive approach to infant mental health. Addressing systemic racism and discrimination is essential for improving the mental health and wellbeing of mothers and their babies.



THE ROLES OF EARLY YEARS SETTINGS, SCHOOLS, COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

Mental health is a critical aspect of children's development, and early years settings, schools, and colleges play a vital role in promoting it. By incorporating mental health education into daily practices, early years settings can foster emotional regulation and resilience. The Government can encourage early years settings to become places that actively promote mental health by implementing comprehensive policies that emphasise respect and inclusion.

Schools and colleges are uniquely positioned to promote mental health among young people, providing a structured environment for early identification of need and intervention. But in England, the education system's emphasis on high-stakes testing has negative psychological impacts on children, teachers, and the quality of education. Addressing these issues is therefore crucial for fostering an equitable and supportive educational environment.

School nurses play a critical role in the health and wellbeing of school-aged children, providing services such as health education, counselling, and referrals to other health professionals. The UK Government should increase funding for training and resources to ensure adequate staffing levels over the next ten years.

Universities in the UK are implementing a comprehensive approach to mental health, integrating it into all aspects of university life. The Government can support universities by increasing funding for mental health services, implementing mandatory policies, and undertaking regular audits.

LIVING INDEPENDENTLY AND THE WORLD OF WORK


Secure housing and employment are crucial for young adults' mental health and wellbeing. Access to stable jobs and housing can reduce feelings of anxiety and depression, and programmes designed to provide affordable housing can help mitigate the negative effects of housing instability. Where young adults need support in their transition to independent living and employment, effective strategies focus on creating a supportive community network, enhancing access to essential services, and fostering skills development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Our recommendations identify priorities from the evidence we have reviewed. They are primarily actions and investment decisions for national government, though many can be applied at other levels. They will be as relevant to devolved national governments as the UK Government, and can inform policies and resource allocation decisions in integrated care systems, combined authorities, local authorities, schools, colleges and universities.

These recommendations are in addition to the need to invest in better mental health support for children and young people experiencing mental health difficulties. These are discussed in our reports *Future Minds* (Centre for Mental Health *et al.*, 2025) and *Time for action* (O'Shea and McHayle, 2021).

- 1. The UK Government should take steps to tackle the social determinants of children and young people's mental health.** Current legislation to improve workers' and renters' rights are welcome measures towards this aim. Action to tackle violence against women and girls, child poverty, and racial injustice will further address some of the biggest drivers of mental ill health among children and young people today. A whole government mental health strategy, backed up with a mental health policy test and a Mental Health Commissioner, would strengthen the machinery of government so that future policies are made with children's mental health in mind.

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2. **The UK Government should create a nationwide programme to invest in community-led mental health promotion and mental illness prevention activity.** This could be modelled on the Better Mental Health Fund, to enable local councils across the country to support community initiatives to improve children's mental wellbeing. This should focus on the most disadvantaged and marginalised neighbourhoods and groups of people in each locality.
 3. **The UK Government should invest in evidence-based parenting programmes,** adopting a proportionate universal approach with a low-cost offer for all and additional help for those who need it. Some local and combined authorities have begun to implement this locally.
 4. **The UK Government should improve mental health support for mothers during the perinatal period,** building on the expansion of specialist community services to provide a more comprehensive support offer.
 5. **The UK Government should expand the health visitor and school nursing workforce.** Public health nurses play a vital part in supporting children's mental and physical health, and as such are a good long-term investment.
 6. **The UK Government should support early years education settings, schools, colleges and universities to adopt a whole education approach to mental health.** Applying a mental health policy test to education policies would further embed the whole school approach by providing greater consistency and evidence-based policies, for example around the curriculum and the ways behaviour and attendance are managed in schools.
 7. **The UK Government should fulfil its manifesto pledge to establish an open access mental health hub in every community in England.** These will provide early support for young people's mental health, and also help with housing, employment and other essentials for young adults up to the age of 25 making the transition to working life. These issues should be central concerns of the Government's forthcoming Youth Strategy.

INTRODUCTION

The mental health of babies, children, and young people is a critical issue that demands urgent attention from the UK Government (Pezley *et al.*, 2022; Phua, Kee and Meaney, 2020). Implementing a combination of prevention and promotion activities can create a supportive environment that fosters mental wellbeing and resilience from conception until early adulthood (Centre for Mental Health, 2023). There are immediate strategic actions that government departments, particularly in education, can take to improve mental health outcomes. They encompass a broad range of areas, including bullying prevention, inclusion, anti-discrimination, educational attainment, and equity promotion (McGorry *et al.*, 2024). By engaging the whole family and empowering young people, we can ensure good health and wellbeing throughout their lives (Sambrook *et al.*, 2019).

Poor mental health during childhood is not only debilitating in the moment but also casts a long shadow into the future. The trauma and stress experienced by children can have far-reaching consequences, affecting their friendships, academic performance, and overall quality of life. The adverse effects of poor mental health often extend into adulthood, leading to chronic mental and physical health issues, reduced employment opportunities, and strained relationships. Early trauma can predispose young people to a range of problems, including alcohol and substance use, criminal behaviour, and social isolation (Daníelsdóttir *et al.*, 2024; Hughes *et al.*, 2017; Nelson *et al.*, 2020). Addressing mental health issues early and providing robust support systems can mitigate these long-term impacts, helping young people build a foundation for a healthier, more stable future.

Schools and community initiatives play a pivotal role in these efforts, particularly in communities with high levels of need and where broader issues such as racism and poverty are prevalent (McGorry *et al.*, 2024). This document makes the case for investing in mental health promotion and mental illness prevention programmes, highlighting the significant impact these initiatives can have on young people's lives (Le *et al.*, 2021; McGorry *et al.*, 2024).

THE BRAIN AND BABIES', CHILDREN'S AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S MENTAL HEALTH

From a developmental psychological perspective, it is well-established that the human brain does not reach full maturity until the mid-twenties (Giedd, 2004). This prolonged period of brain development, particularly in the prefrontal cortex (which is responsible for executive functions such as decision-making, impulse control, and emotional regulation) underscores the vulnerability and plasticity of young people's mental health.

Understanding that the brain is still developing during teenage years and early adulthood is crucial for designing effective mental health interventions. For example, we know that half of mental health problems are established by age 14 and three-quarters by age 24 (Kessler *et al.*, 2005). This underscores the need for early and sustained support systems that are adaptable to the evolving cognitive and emotional needs of young people. By recognising the ongoing maturing of the brain, policymakers and practitioners can advocate for interventions that not only address immediate mental health issues but also promote long-term resilience and wellbeing. Programmes of support should therefore be grounded in developmental science, ensuring they are tailored to support the brain's growth and the individual's holistic development.

THE PREVALENCE AND INCIDENCE OF POOR MENTAL HEALTH

The prevalence and incidence of mental ill health among young people in the UK is alarmingly high. Recent studies indicate that one in five 8-25 year olds has a probable mental health problem (NHS Digital, 2023). This has increased significantly in recent years (from one in nine 7-16 year olds in 2017 – NHS Digital, 2022), reflecting the mounting pressures and challenges faced by young people today. Anxiety, depression, and behavioural disorders are among the most common issues, with many children experiencing multiple mental health conditions simultaneously. The incidence of these difficulties can vary by age, gender, and socio-economic status, with children from disadvantaged backgrounds and racialised communities often bearing a disproportionate burden.



HOW WE DID THE RESEARCH

The research method we employed in this exercise utilised snowball sampling to identify and gather textual sources from academic journals, policy documents, and trade press. The primary objective was to build a comprehensive understanding of the policies, strategies, interventions, services, and projects related to preventing mental ill health and promoting mental health among babies, children and young people.

Search terms focused on various domains, including family, school, and community settings, as well as specific mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety, and psychosis. Priority was given to articles published within the last six years, although older articles of particular interest were also included. The search was conducted on various academic portals and platforms, including Google Scholar, PubMed, JSTOR and PsycINFO (Bryman, 2021; Flick, 2022).

RISKS TO THE RESEARCH

Using a snowball sampling method – which involves identifying sources through close reading of initial source articles – presents certain risks to the research. One significant risk is the potential for selection bias, as the sources found through this approach may not be representative of the entire body of literature on the subject (Atkinson and Flint, 2001). Additionally, there is a risk of over-reliance on a limited network of sources, which could result in a lack of diversity in perspectives and findings. This method may also lead to the inclusion of sources of varying quality, as the criteria for inclusion can become less stringent as the search progresses (Akin, 1998).

To mitigate these risks, we used a diverse range of search terms and databases to capture a wide array of sources; we cross-referenced findings with established literature reviews and meta-analyses to validate our selections; and we included multiple perspectives from different disciplines to provide a more comprehensive view of the research topic.

RATIONALE FOR THE APPROACH

A systematic review was not undertaken in this research due to the broad and exploratory nature of the study. Instead, a purposive approach was chosen to allow for flexibility in identifying and including sources that were most relevant to the research objectives. This approach enabled the researchers to focus on obtaining a depth of understanding in specific areas of interest, rather than striving for comprehensive coverage of all available literature.

The purposive approach allowed the researchers to prioritise sources that provided valuable insights into recent developments and trends in mental health policies and interventions. It also facilitated the inclusion of seminal works and key studies that may have been published outside the prioritised timeframe but held significant relevance to the research topic. This method ensured that the research was grounded in the most pertinent and impactful literature, while also acknowledging the limitations inherent in a non-systematic approach. Wherever possible, we draw on others' systematic reviews of relevant academic literature because they provide comprehensive, rigorously evaluated summaries of existing research, which enhance the reliability and validity of our findings.

WHAT AFFECTS THE MENTAL HEALTH OF BABIES, CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE?

Many different factors can influence the mental health of children and young people, spanning social, psychological, financial, environmental, structural, biological, and emotional dimensions (see table 1). Social influences, such as peer relationships and family dynamics, play a crucial role in shaping a child's self-esteem and sense of belonging (McGorry *et al.*, 2024). So action to prevent mental health difficulties and boost the mental wellbeing of younger generations needs to span each of these factors in order to make a significant and sustained impact.

Table 1: Factors affecting the mental health of babies, children and young people

Factor	Description
Social influences	Peer relationships and family dynamics are crucial in shaping a child's self-esteem and sense of belonging (Kirkbride <i>et al.</i> , 2024).
Psychological factors	Individual temperament and coping mechanisms determine how young people manage stress and adversity (McGorry <i>et al.</i> , 2024).
Financial instability	Financial difficulties can cause chronic stress and limit access to mental health resources (Rainer <i>et al.</i> , 2024).
Emotional experiences	Events like bereavement and loss can significantly impact a child's mental health, requiring timely interventions for recovery (McGorry <i>et al.</i> , 2024).
Environmental factors	Living conditions, exposure to violence, and access to green spaces play a significant role in mental health (Kirkbride <i>et al.</i> , 2024).
Structural issues	Access to quality education and health care affects mental health outcomes, creating disparities (Kirkbride <i>et al.</i> , 2024).
Biological factors	Genetics and neurodevelopment can predispose individuals to mental health conditions (Kirkbride <i>et al.</i> , 2024).
Intergenerational trauma	Trauma from historical events like colonisation and systemic oppression can affect descendants' mental health (Abdinasir and Ahmadzadeh, 2023).
Racism and discrimination	Experiences of racism and discrimination, including against LGBTQ+ youth, can lead to isolation, fear, and chronic stress, worsening mental health issues (Abdinasir and Ahmadzadeh, 2023).





THE IMPACTS OF COVID-19

The impact of Covid-19 on the mental health of babies, children, and young people in the UK has emerged as a significant public health concern, particularly during the pandemic's lockdown periods (O'Shea, 2021; Duagi, Bell and Obateru, 2024). Research shows that the early developmental stages are crucial, with disruptions during pregnancy and infancy potentially leading to long-lasting emotional and behavioural challenges (Bevilacqua *et al.*, 2022; Kauhanen *et al.*, 2022). As approximately 200,000 babies were born during lockdown, many parents reported negative effects on their children's wellbeing, including increased anxiety, particularly among families from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

For older children and adolescents, the pandemic exacerbated pre-existing mental health issues while introducing new challenges, including heightened feelings of loneliness and anxiety due to school closures and social isolation (King's College London, 2023; BMJ, 2023). A significant rise in emotional distress, behavioural problems, and academic-related anxiety has been noted, with reports indicating that one in five children now experience mental health problems compared to one in ten prior to the pandemic (Bevilacqua *et al.*, 2022; O'Shea, 2021). This situation has been aggravated by disparities in access to educational resources, with disadvantaged students more likely to fall behind and experience decreased mental wellbeing (Kauhanen *et al.*, 2022; Bevilacqua *et al.*, 2022).

Furthermore, the long-term implications of these mental health challenges raise concerns among experts and policymakers. Disrupted attachment during infancy and increased stress in childhood are linked to higher risks of anxiety and behavioural disorders later in life (Bevilacqua *et al.*, 2022). This has prompted calls for enhanced investment in mental health services and community support initiatives, aiming to provide comprehensive, sustained support for both children and their families during the recovery phase and beyond (King's College London, 2023; BMJ, 2023).


Controversies surrounding the government's response to the pandemic, including the adequacy of mental health resources and the effectiveness of educational recovery strategies, continue to highlight the need for a coordinated approach to support the wellbeing of future generations (BMJ, 2023; King's College London, 2023; O'Shea, 2021). As the UK navigates the ongoing effects of the pandemic, addressing these mental health challenges remains imperative to fostering resilience and ensuring a healthier future for its youngest citizens.

THE IMPACTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media have become a pervasive influence in the lives of babies, children, and young people in the UK, offering both opportunities and challenges. Their impact is particularly significant in shaping perceptions of race and gender, with implications for identity development, mental health, and social interactions.

Positive impacts

Social media provide a platform for self-expression and community building, particularly for marginalised groups, including people with mental health problems. For young people exploring their racial or gender identity, platforms like TikTok and Instagram offer spaces to connect with like-minded individuals and access supportive communities (Hammack and Manago, 2024). These platforms also promote inclusivity by showcasing diverse gender identities and racial experiences, fostering a sense of belonging and validation (Hammack and Manago, 2024). For example, campaigns such as #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo have empowered young people to engage with social justice issues, raising awareness and advocating for change (Dixon *et al.*, 2019).



Additionally, social media can serve as an educational tool, providing access to resources and information that may not be readily available elsewhere. This is particularly beneficial for young people from underrepresented racial or gender groups, who can find role models and narratives that reflect their experiences (Woodward *et al.*, 2025).

Negative impacts

Despite their benefits, social media also perpetuate harmful stereotypes and inequalities. People from racialised communities often face online harassment and misrepresentation, which can negatively impact self-esteem and mental health (Dixon *et al.*, 2019). For instance, Black and Asian individuals are frequently subjected to stereotypical portrayals in media content, reinforcing societal biases. Similarly, gender norms are often perpetuated on social media, with platforms promoting unrealistic beauty standards and traditional gender roles. This can lead to body image issues and pressure to conform, particularly among young girls (Bristol CBT Clinic, 2021).

Moreover, the algorithms driving social media platforms can create echo chambers, limiting exposure to diverse perspectives and reinforcing existing prejudices (Hammack and Manago, 2024). They can also increase exposure to harmful content. For babies and toddlers, excessive screen time can hinder social and emotional development, as it reduces opportunities for face-to-face interactions. Cyberbullying is another significant concern as it can have long lasting impacts on a child's mental health and wellbeing (Frith, 2017; Sala, Porcaro and Gómez, 2024).

Social media can have detrimental effects on boys and young men, particularly through exposure to misogyny and pornography. These elements can distort their expectations and pressures around sex, leading to unhealthy attitudes and behaviours. Misogynistic content can foster disrespect towards women (Over *et al.*, 2025), while pornography can create unrealistic sexual expectations, contributing to anxiety and depression (Barker and Jurasz, 2019). The constant comparison to idealised images and the pressure to conform to these distorted norms can exacerbate feelings of inadequacy and isolation, negatively impacting mental health (Woodward *et al.*, 2025).



RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

The UK Government can play a pivotal role in mitigating the negative impacts of social media on young people. One approach is to enforce stricter regulations on social media companies to ensure they implement robust measures against online harassment and harmful content. The Online Safety Act, set to be enforced by Ofcom, aims to create safer online environments by requiring platforms to be transparent about the harms occurring and to embed safety into their design from the outset (Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, 2024). Additionally, the Government can invest in educational programmes that teach digital literacy and resilience, helping young people navigate social media responsibly. Research projects exploring the effects of social media on mental health and wellbeing can also inform policy decisions and interventions.

Parents, educators and policymakers play a crucial role in guiding young people to navigate these platforms responsibly, ensuring that the benefits outweigh the drawbacks.

ECONOMIC ANALYSES AND RETURN ON INVESTMENT STUDIES

Economic analyses of mental health promotion and prevention programmes have consistently shown that investing in these initiatives yields significant returns. By reducing the incidence of mental health difficulties and the associated health care costs, these programmes lead to substantial savings for both public health systems and wider society. For example, early intervention programmes for children can reduce the need for more intensive and costly treatments later in life, including hospitalisations, special education services, and juvenile justice involvement (Le *et al.*, 2021).

Return on investment (ROI) studies further underscore the value of these programmes. Research has demonstrated that for every pound invested in early childhood mental health initiatives, there is a return of approximately £4 to £9 in long-term savings and benefits. These benefits are not only financial but also encompass improved educational outcomes, higher productivity, and enhanced quality of life for young people and their families. ROI studies highlight the importance of sustained investment in mental health promotion and prevention, as the economic and social gains far outweigh the initial costs.

POTENTIAL SAVINGS

Centre for Mental Health has extensively explored the economic implications of investing in mental health support for babies, children, and young people in the UK. Our reports highlight the significant costs of inaction and the potential benefits of early intervention and comprehensive mental health strategies.

Centre for Mental Health has emphasised the substantial economic burden associated with untreated mental health problems in children and young people. For instance, *Future Minds* (2025) estimates that childhood mental health problems result in approximately £1 trillion in lost earnings across a generation. This figure underscores the long-term economic impact of failing to address mental health challenges early in life (Centre for Mental Health *et al.*, 2025).

Time for action (2021) highlights the historic underinvestment in mental health services for children and young people. Public spending on children's mental health significantly lags behind investment in adult mental health services, with wide regional disparities in funding. This underinvestment has created a postcode lottery of care, leaving many children without access to necessary support (O'Shea and McHayle, 2021). The report argues that promoting mental health in early childhood offers excellent value for money. For example, investing in infant wellbeing and early support hubs can prevent more severe mental health difficulties later in life, reducing the need for costly crisis interventions (Centre for Mental Health, 2023).

Mental health challenges in children and young people also have significant implications for education and future productivity. Poor mental health can lead to reduced academic achievement, higher dropout rates, and lower lifetime earnings. *Future Minds* calls for a whole school approach to mental health, integrating mental health support into educational settings to mitigate these impacts (Centre for Mental Health *et al.*, 2025).

The Centre has outlined several key recommendations to address these challenges. These include increased investment in children's mental health services to meet at least 70% of diagnosable need by the end of the current Parliament; full rollout of Mental Health Support Teams in schools, adapted to meet diverse needs; establishment of open-access mental health services in every community; development of a comprehensive workforce plan for children's mental health services; and enhanced local government funding for prevention and early intervention initiatives (Centre for Mental Health *et al.*, 2025).

Addressing these challenges is not only a moral necessity but an economic priority. By prioritising early intervention and comprehensive support systems, the UK can reduce the long-term costs of poor mental health and unlock significant economic and social benefits.

In 2024, Centre for Mental Health provided a detailed analysis of the economic and social costs of mental ill health for both children and adults. The report calculates that the total cost in England in 2022 was £300 billion, highlighting the immense financial burden on society (Cardoso and McHayle, 2024).

A whole system preventative approach to mental health could yield substantial savings by addressing issues before they escalate into more severe problems. A whole system approach involves integrating various services and sectors, such as health care, social care, education, and community organisations, to work collaboratively towards common goals. For example, the Greater Manchester Health and Social Care Partnership's whole system approach has shown promising results in improving mental wellbeing and reducing the need for crisis interventions. By implementing similar strategies nationwide, the UK could potentially save billions in health care costs, reduce the economic burden of mental ill health, and improve overall societal wellbeing (NHS Confederation, 2024).



RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

To achieve these goals, the Government needs to take several actions. Firstly, it should ensure adequate funding for mental health services, prioritising early intervention and prevention. This includes expanding access to mental health support in schools and communities, and increasing investment in training and retaining a skilled mental health workforce. Additionally, the Government should implement policies that promote mental health awareness and reduce stigma, ensuring that mental health is treated with the same importance as physical health. By adopting a comprehensive and proactive approach, the Government can significantly improve mental health outcomes and generate substantial economic savings.



SIX AREAS FOR IMMEDIATE ACTION

To address the complexity of young people’s lives and understand how we can best prevent poor mental health, we have identified six key areas for immediate action. They are not distinct, and they certainly overlap, but together they form the essential building blocks to improve young people’s mental health, now and in the future (Clark *et al.*, 2024; Green, 2025).

They are:

1. The social determinants of babies, children’s and young people’s mental health
2. The families and homes into which we are born and in which we grow
3. Family legacy and intergenerational factors
4. The health of mothers and babies during pregnancy and afterwards
5. The roles of early years settings, schools, colleges and universities
6. Living independently and the world of work.

Table 2: Interventions to prevent mental ill health among children and young people at different stages and in different settings

Settings	Challenges	Groups	Interventions
Home	Behavioural issues, trauma	Babies, children	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Parental training and support• Family therapy sessions• Creating a safe and nurturing environment• Routine and structure establishment
Early years education settings	Developmental delays, attachment issues	Babies, young children	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Early intervention programmes• Play therapy• Parent-child interaction therapy• Staff training on mental health and wellbeing
School	Anxiety, depression, bullying	Children, emerging adults	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• School counselling programmes• Peer support groups• Mindfulness and relaxation techniques• Teacher training on mental health awareness• Anti-bullying programmes (e.g. Positive Action, STOMP Out Bullying)



Non-school	Social anxiety, low self-esteem	Emerging adults, young adults	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Community-based programmes• Recreational activities and sports, youth clubs• Mentorship programmes• Art and music therapy
Online	Cyberbullying, social isolation	Emerging adults, young adults	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Online counselling and support groups• Digital literacy and safety education• Virtual peer support networks• Telehealth services
Further education colleges and universities	Exam stress, depression, anxiety	Emerging adults, young adults	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mental health resources and workshops• Peer mentoring programmes• Stress management techniques• Access to counselling services
Support into housing and employment	Depression, anxiety, long-term mental health problems	Emerging adults, young adults	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• One to one support from peers and practitioners• Life skills programmes, bill paying, etc.

SOCIAL DETERMINANTS

Social determinants significantly impact the mental health of babies, children, and young people. Social determinants of mental health refer to the conditions in which individuals are born, grow, live, work and age, which influence their mental health. These include socioeconomic status, education, and access to health care (Marmot, 2005; Tall and Biel, 2023; Kirkbride *et al.*, 2024). Poor housing conditions and neighbourhood safety also contribute to stress and anxiety (JAMA Pediatrics, 2024). Inequalities are found across society as a result of these determinants, and addressing them requires comprehensive strategies to reduce inequalities and promote inclusive, supportive environments for all young people (Tall and Biel, 2023).

Recent studies have further elucidated the profound impact of early life contexts on mental health. Socioeconomic status (SES) is the most significant determinant, influencing access to resources such as nutritious food, health care, and educational opportunities, which are fundamental for mental health (Clark *et al.*, 2023). Children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds often experience chronic stress due to financial instability, which can lead to adverse mental health outcomes (Hair *et al.*, 2015). They are four times more likely to have mental health problems than those from the highest earning backgrounds (Gutman *et al.*, 2015). They also experience reduced access to resources that support mental wellbeing (Reiss, 2013).

Safe and supportive neighbourhood conditions can enhance social cohesion and provide a protective buffer against stressors. Conversely, exposure to neighbourhood violence and a lack of community resources can exacerbate mental health problems, particularly for young people (Sampson, 2018). Recent studies have shown that increased access to green spaces has positive effects on mental health. Additionally, the availability of recreational facilities has been linked to improved cognitive function and reduced stress levels (Zhang *et al.*, 2020).

Systemic discrimination also has an impact. For instance, Centre for Mental Health's *A space to be me* report highlights how racial discrimination adversely affects young Black people's mental health (Abdinasir and Treloar, 2024). Similarly, gender, LGBTQ+ identity, and disability can lead to unique mental health challenges due to societal biases and lack of support.



RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

The Government can take systemic action on broader social determinants that impact mental health, such as poverty, housing instability, and access to education. Initiatives can include providing affordable housing solutions to ensure stable living conditions; improving access to education and employment opportunities for families; promoting social justice and addressing systemic inequalities. Legislation currently in Parliament to secure stronger rights for tenants and workers, and to tackle domestic abuse and male violence, will all help to create a stronger foundation for children's mental health long term. It is essential that the Government's child poverty strategy is sufficiently robust, and fully implemented, in order to address the biggest social determinant of mental ill health in the UK today. This must include changes to the social security system to provide parents and families with a financial safety net to meet the basic costs of living (Rainer *et al.*, 2024).

Mental health is made in communities. So while national government can help to create the right conditions for good mental health by tackling systemic factors, it must also enable local action to take place within communities to boost children's mental health in the places they live, play and learn.

It is essential to engage communities with high levels of need in the development and implementation of mental health initiatives. This means actively involving community members in decision-making processes, ensuring that services are culturally sensitive and relevant, and addressing barriers to access. By empowering communities to take an active role in their mental health, these initiatives can foster a sense of ownership and sustainability.

The Better Mental Health Fund was established by the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (OHID) in 2021 to address mental health challenges arising from the Covid-19 pandemic. It is an example of a programme of community-based actions which aimed to address, at least in part, some of the social determinants of mental health. The fund was allocated to local authorities in 40 of the most disadvantaged areas of England, enabling them to run 314 projects aimed at improving mental health and wellbeing. The evaluation (Woodhead, McHayle and Newbigging, 2023) highlights the importance of sustained investment in public mental health and the benefits of tailoring interventions to the specific needs of local communities. Key findings include the effectiveness of diverse approaches such as parenting programmes, bereavement support, debt advice, befriending programmes, and mental health promotion for young people. The projects reached over half a million people, demonstrating the significant impact of community-led initiatives on mental health outcomes. The report underscores the value of collaboration between local councils and community organisations in delivering evidence-based interventions, and calls for continued support to build a lasting legacy from the Better Mental Health Fund (Woodhead, McHayle and Newbigging, 2023).



THE FAMILIES AND HOMES IN WHICH WE ARE BORN AND IN WHICH WE GROW

The home environment acts as an incubator of mental health, where positive interactions and secure attachments foster emotional resilience. Consistent and nurturing relationships with caregivers help children develop trust and emotional security, which are essential for mentally healthy development (Granqvist *et al.*, 2017).

Recent research has shown that early childhood experiences within the home environment have a profound impact on brain development and functioning. Positive interactions stimulate neural pathways that support emotional regulation and cognitive development, while adverse experiences can disrupt these pathways and lead to developmental delays and mental health difficulties.

Moreover, positive parenting practices, such as warmth, consistency, and responsiveness, are linked to better emotional regulation and resilience in children. Attachments formed through consistent, nurturing interactions with caregivers help children to regulate their emotions, cope with stress, and build healthy relationships with others. This underscores the importance of early intervention and support for families to create a nurturing and safe home environment for children.

Exposure to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) like abuse and neglect can have lasting detrimental effects, increasing the risk of mental health difficulties such as anxiety, depression, and PTSD (Hughes *et al.*, 2017). Experiencing maltreatment in early childhood can lead to long-term psychological issues, including anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Cicchetti and Toth, 2005).

Parental substance use further exacerbates these issues, creating an environment of instability and emotional insecurity. Children of parents with substance use disorders are at a higher risk of developing mental health difficulties, including anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Addiction Group, 2025). The presence of substance use in the home can lead to neglect and inconsistent caregiving, which significantly impacts a child's emotional and psychological development (Addiction Resource, 2021). Studies have shown that children exposed to parental substance use often experience heightened stress responses and developmental delays (Kids Mental Health, 2024).

Positive parenting practices are linked to better emotional regulation and resilience in children (Phua, Kee and Meaney, 2020). Centre for Mental Health strongly advocates for a proportionate universal offer of parenting programmes akin to the Triple P program, which has undergone comprehensive evaluation in Ireland. The findings from this evaluation revealed substantial reductions in children's emotional and behavioural issues, alongside notable decreases in parental stress and psychological distress (Owens, 2014; Canavan, 2016). This evidence underscores the critical need for accessible, evidence-based parenting support programmes that can benefit all families, regardless of their circumstances.



RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

By implementing parenting programmes universally, the Government can ensure that every family has access to the support they need to foster healthier family dynamics and improve overall wellbeing.

The Government can also implement policies and programmes that support positive parenting practices. These include providing parent-infant programmes that teach skills such as warmth, consistency, and responsiveness – such as Healthy Little Minds in Nottingham (Iskander-Reynolds *et al.*, 2025). The Government can also boost parent-infant mental health by offering resources and support through community centres, schools, and health care providers, and ensuring access to mental health services for parents to address their own emotional needs and stressors (Pezley *et al.*, 2022; Sambrook *et al.*, 2019).

The Government should proactively take steps to prevent abuse and neglect within homes. This can be achieved through establishing robust child safeguarding services that intervene in cases of maltreatment; implementing social welfare programmes that support families in financial distress, reducing the risk of neglect; and creating public awareness campaigns about the signs and consequences of abuse and neglect (Clark *et al.*, 2023; Hall and Williams, 2008).



FAMILY LEGACY AND INTERGENERATIONAL FACTORS

The concept of family legacy continues to gain empirical support. Epigenetic research – which explores how environmental factors and behaviours influence gene activity and expression without altering the DNA sequence, impacting development, health, and disease susceptibility – has shown that stress and trauma experienced by previous generations can alter gene expression in descendants, affecting their susceptibility to mental health problems (Yehuda and Lehrner, 2018).

Family legacy, including the hypothesis that our health is influenced by the health of our grandparents more than our parents, underscores the intergenerational transmission of health and wellbeing. This concept suggests that the experiences and health behaviours of previous generations can have lasting effects on the mental health of subsequent generations, emphasising the importance of addressing family-wide health issues to break this cycle (Hertzman and Boyce, 2010; Hoffman *et al.*, 2022; Sambrook *et al.*, 2019).

Research has highlighted racialised trauma as a critical factor in intergenerational mental health. Trauma experienced by racialised communities, such as that caused by systemic racism, institutional violence, and discrimination, has been found to lead to an increased susceptibility to mental health difficulties (Lee *et al.*, 2023). Addressing racialised trauma through comprehensive interventions, such as culturally sensitive therapy, community-based support programs, and educational initiatives aimed at raising awareness and promoting inclusivity, is essential for breaking the cycle of poor mental health in families (Lee *et al.*, 2023).

Insights from Centre for Mental Health's research further emphasise the importance of these measures. *Shifting the dial* highlights the need for structural change to address the causes of poor mental health among young Black men in Britain. The report calls for the Government to commit to tackling all forms of racism and discrimination, including in schools, policing, employment, and health care (Harris *et al.*, 2022). It also recommends that the NHS invest in tailored support for young Black men's mental health and that charitable bodies ensure Black-led organisations get fair access to funding, especially for programmes aiming to improve health in racialised communities (ibid).

A constant battle explores the intergenerational consequences of racism in the UK, highlighting how experiences of racism towards both parents and children affect their mental health and parent-child interactions (Abdinasir and Ahmadzadeh, 2023). The report calls for concrete action across research, policy and practice, including fully resourcing work with racialised communities to design more racially equitable mental health support. It underscores the importance of social cohesion, safe spaces, and education programmes as areas for priority action.



RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

The Government should be tackling racism as part of its core work. It should implement policies that specifically address racism and provide trauma-informed care and support. This can include funding for mental health services that are culturally sensitive and accessible, training health care professionals to recognise and treat trauma related to systemic racism, and creating community programmes that foster resilience and empowerment.

All schools, colleges and universities should ensure they take a whole setting approach to anti-racism, equality and diversity. The Department for Education should include anti-racism and microaggression training as part of mandatory teacher training and education workforce training. By acknowledging and addressing the unique challenges faced by racialised communities, the Government can help to mitigate the impact of intergenerational trauma and promote healthier outcomes for future generations.



THE HEALTH OF MOTHERS AND BABIES DURING PREGNANCY AND AFTERWARDS


Maternal and perinatal health have a major impact on the mental health of babies and their development throughout life. The first three years of life from conception are particularly critical as they lay the foundation for cognitive, emotional, and social development. Maternal mental health problems, such as depression and anxiety, can adversely affect the mother-infant bond and the child's subsequent mental health (Phua, Kee and Meaney, 2020). Ensuring adequate support and care during pregnancy and after childbirth is essential for the wellbeing of both mother and child (Pezley *et al.*, 2022).

Perinatal mental health interventions require a multi-faceted approach that includes medical, psychological and social support. Health care providers (including midwives, GPs and health visitors) should be trained to recognise the signs of perinatal mental health problems and provide appropriate referrals to mental health professionals. Community-based support groups can offer a safe space for mothers to share their experiences and receive peer support (McGorry *et al.*, 2024). Addressing the stigma associated with perinatal mental health is also important, as educating the public about the prevalence and impact of these issues can encourage more women to seek help without fear of judgement. Comprehensive perinatal mental health programmes that include education, screening and treatment can significantly improve outcomes for mothers and their children (Pezley *et al.*, 2022; Phua, Kee and Meaney, 2020).

Mental health services play a crucial role here. Integrating these services into maternal and child health care can ensure that women receive the support they need during the perinatal period, including routine mental health screenings, counselling, and support groups for expectant and new mothers. This creates a safe and stigma-free environment where women can discuss their mental health concerns, promoting early identification and intervention (Pezley *et al.*, 2022; Sambrook *et al.*, 2019). Specialist support for women who experience baby loss is effective but not consistently offered (O'Shea, 2019).

Centre for Mental Health's briefing for integrated care systems (ICSs) emphasises the importance of maternal mental health and outlines steps ICSs can take to provide effective support. It highlights the need for universal services, specialist perinatal mental health services, and timely baby loss support to reduce health inequalities and improve outcomes for mothers and their families (Centre for Mental Health, 2023).

Community-based programmes can provide valuable support to mothers during the perinatal period, often involving home visits by trained professionals who offer emotional support, parenting education, and resources to help mothers cope with the challenges of pregnancy and early motherhood (Pezley *et al.*, 2022). Such initiatives can reduce the risk of perinatal depression and anxiety, promoting better outcomes for both mothers and their babies (Sambrook *et al.*, 2019).



Partner and family involvement in perinatal mental health interventions can enhance their effectiveness, providing emotional stability and practical assistance, and reducing the stress and isolation experienced by new mothers. Programmes that encourage partner and family involvement can strengthen the support network around the mother, fostering a healthier environment for both her and the baby (Sambrook *et al.*, 2019). Additionally, assessing the mental health of fathers, other co-parents, and partners during the perinatal period is crucial, as their wellbeing significantly impacts the overall family dynamic (Darwin *et al.*, 2021).

Access to community resources and support networks can significantly benefit families with young children by offering social connections and practical assistance, thus reducing the isolation experienced by many parents (Pezley *et al.*, 2022; JAMA Pediatrics, 2024). For example, local parenting groups and childcare centres provide opportunities for parents to share experiences and receive advice, while food banks and housing assistance programmes offer essential support to families in need.

Addressing systemic racism and discrimination is crucial for improving the mental health and wellbeing of mothers and their infants (Lee *et al.*, 2023). This can be achieved through initiatives such as culturally sensitive health care services and anti-racism training for health care professionals.

The Sure Start programme in the UK demonstrated that early intervention can significantly improve outcomes for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Evaluations (Hayre *et al.*, 2024) showed reductions in hospitalisations, accidental injuries and obesity, as well as improvements in breastfeeding rates and dental hygiene – each one an indicator of mental health and wellbeing. Additionally, Sure Start enhanced educational attainment and helped mitigate neurodevelopmental disorders (Eisenstadt, 2024). Learning from Sure Start is useful today as it highlights the importance of adequately funded, evidence-based early years programmes. By incorporating these lessons, current initiatives can better support families, reduce health inequities, and improve children's long-term prospects (Molloy *et al.*, 2024).

NICE GUIDELINES

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) provides comprehensive guidelines for perinatal mental health to support women during pregnancy and the postnatal period. These guidelines aim to ensure early identification, appropriate intervention, and effective treatment for mental health difficulties in order to improve outcomes for both mothers and their children.

NICE recommends routine screening for mental health problems in pregnant women and new mothers. Health care professionals should be trained to recognise early signs of mental distress and conduct assessments during antenatal and postnatal visits. This includes asking about the mother's mental health history and current mood.

The guidelines highlight several risk factors for perinatal mental health difficulties, such as a history of mental illness, lack of social support, stressful life events, and domestic violence. Health care providers are advised to conduct thorough assessments to identify these risks and monitor women who may be more vulnerable to developing mental health problems during the perinatal period.

NICE guidelines emphasise the importance of timely and evidence-based interventions for perinatal mental health problems. Recommended treatments include cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), interpersonal therapy (IPT), and other forms of counselling as first-line treatments for mild to moderate perinatal mental health difficulties. These therapies can help women develop coping strategies, manage symptoms, and improve overall wellbeing.

When psychological therapies are insufficient, NICE advises considering pharmacological treatments. The guidelines provide detailed information on the use of antidepressants and other medications, considering the potential risks and benefits for both the mother and the baby. Health care professionals should discuss treatment options with the patient, ensuring informed decision-making.

Creating a supportive environment is crucial for women experiencing perinatal mental health problems. NICE recommends the provision of comprehensive support services, including peer support groups where women can share their experiences and receive emotional support from others; access to specialist perinatal mental health teams that offer tailored care and treatment plans; and involvement of family members and partners in the care process to provide additional support and understanding.

NICE guidelines stress the importance of continuity of care throughout the perinatal period. This involves consistent monitoring and follow-up appointments to track the woman's progress and adjust treatment plans as needed. Effective communication and collaboration between different health care practitioners, including midwives, obstetricians, and mental health specialists, are essential for ensuring comprehensive care.

NICE guidelines for perinatal mental health provide a robust framework for identifying, treating, and supporting women with mental health difficulties during pregnancy and the postnatal period. By implementing these guidelines, health care providers can improve outcomes for both mothers and their children, enhancing the overall wellbeing of families.

HEALTH VISITING

Health visiting is a cornerstone of early childhood support, offering a unique opportunity to engage with families during the formative years of a child's life. Health visitors are trained nurses who work with families to promote health and prevent illness. They provide a range of services, including developmental assessments, health education, and support for parenting.

One of the primary ways health visiting contributes to mental health is through early identification of need and intervention. Health visitors are often the first professionals to identify developmental delays, behavioural issues, or signs of parental mental health problems. Early intervention can significantly improve outcomes for children and families. For instance, a study by Woodman *et al.* (2022) found that health visiting services are effective in identifying and supporting families facing adversity, including those experiencing parental mental health problems, substance use, and domestic violence.

In the UK, health visiting services have been instrumental in supporting families and promoting mental health. The Institute of Health Visiting (iHV) highlighted several case studies demonstrating the impact of health visiting on family wellbeing. For example, health visitors might implement team meetings in children's centres drop-ins for other professionals. This multi-agency approach supports holistic care and ensures that families receive comprehensive support.

A survey by the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (2023) found that health visitors play a critical role in addressing the social determinants of health, such as rising rates of poverty, food insecurity, and domestic violence, all of which impact mental health. Health visitors have been essential in providing support and resources to families facing these challenges.

Hall 4, also known as Health for All Children, is a framework that guides health visiting practice in the UK. It emphasises the importance of early intervention and support for children and families. Hall 4 advocates for a flexible approach to health visiting, allowing for tailored support based on individual needs. The framework includes the re-introduction of the 24-30 month assessment, which aims to detect childhood developmental concerns early and provide appropriate interventions (Scottish Government, 2011).

Health visitors provide continuous support and build trusting relationships with families, allowing for the monitoring of a child's development and the provision of timely intervention. The continuity of care provided by health visitors is crucial for maintaining the mental health and wellbeing of both children and their parents. However, the health visiting workforce has faced significant challenges in resourcing and capacity. According to a survey conducted by the iHV, there has been a substantial decrease in the workforce, impacting the ability to support families effectively (Institute of Health Visiting, 2024). This reduction has strained the delivery of consistent and effective care, affecting the overall quality of support available to families.



RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

The Government should improve access to health visiting for families experiencing vulnerabilities by investing in the training and recruitment of health visitors to ensure adequate staffing levels. Funding should be allocated to expand services and create more community outreach initiatives, enabling health visitors to fulfil their potential to support better mental health.

NICE guidelines set out a very clear and comprehensive approach to meeting the mental health needs of women during pregnancy and after the birth of their child. These should be implemented in full, with adequate resources to enable all integrated care systems to put comprehensive support into place. This will be enhanced by expanding the current network of Family Hubs into all local areas, restoring the benefits of Sure Start where these have been eroded and extending access to evidence-based interventions, community and peer support.

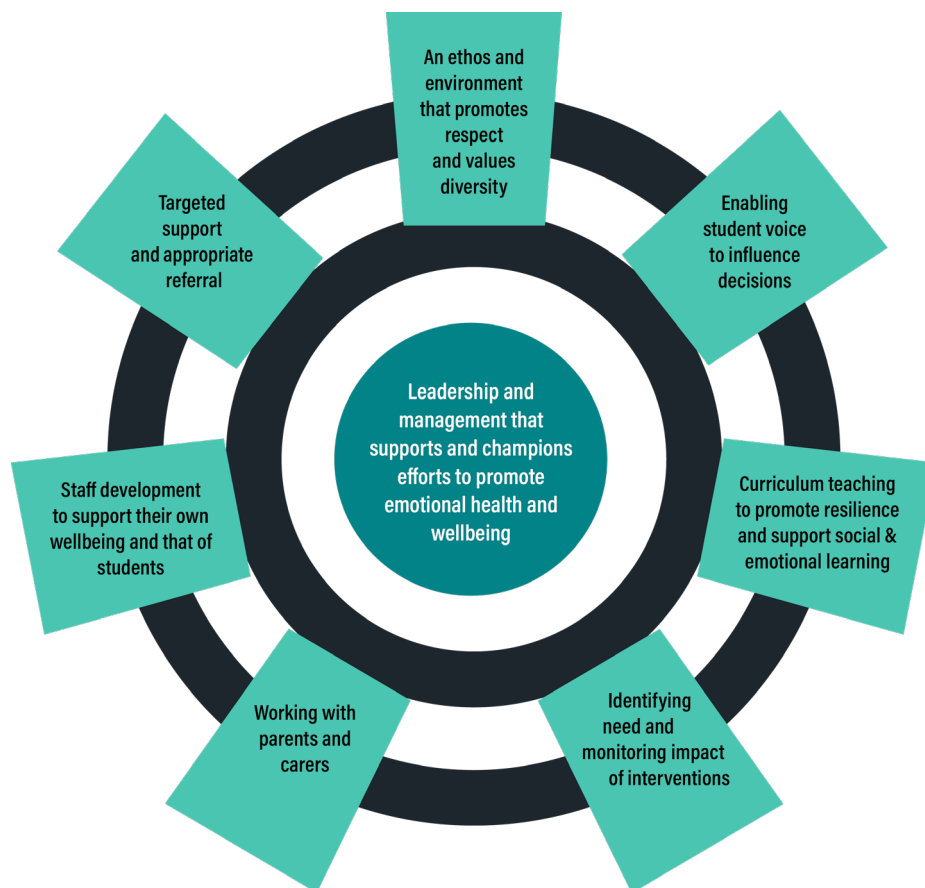
The Government also plays a vital wider role in supporting families by funding and implementing policies that increase access to affordable childcare, health care and housing. Additionally, government policies aimed at reducing health disparities and promoting social equity can help address the systemic issues that affect the wellbeing of mothers and their children.



EARLY YEARS SETTINGS, SCHOOLS, COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

Educational settings play a vital role in preventing mental illness and promoting mental health among children and young people. They provide structured environments where children and young people can engage in activities that support their mental wellbeing. In all of these settings, a whole school approach to mental health is likely to have the greatest benefits to students, staff and their wider communities.

Figure 1: A whole school approach to children and young people's mental health



EARLY YEARS EDUCATION SETTINGS

Early years education settings, for 0 to 5 year olds, play a crucial role in promoting mental health and preventing mental ill health among young children. By integrating mental health education into daily practices, early years settings can equip children with essential tools to navigate life's challenges. Activities such as storytelling, meditation, and breathing techniques can foster emotional regulation and resilience (Crossley, 2024). Additionally, outdoor play and fostering positive relationships among peers can significantly enhance children's mental wellbeing (PACEY, 2022).

One example of nurseries making a positive impact is Kindred Nurseries, which has implemented the Physical Activity and Nutrition Coordinator (PANCo) programme. This initiative promotes positive nutrition and physical activity, contributing to overall mental health (Kindred Nurseries, 2023). Another example is the use of the Kindred Satchel app, which allows parents to stay connected with their children's daily activities, reducing anxiety and fostering a sense of normality during challenging times (Kindred Nurseries, 2023).

Furthermore, early years settings that prioritise staff wellbeing through flexible working arrangements and mental health workshops create a nurturing environment for both children and staff. These efforts demonstrate the significant role early years settings can play in promoting mental health and preventing mental ill health.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

The Government can encourage early years education settings to become places that actively promote the mental health of babies and children by integrating evidence-based approaches into their routine work and functioning, and by allocating resources specifically for this purpose.

SCHOOLS

Schools are ideal settings for prevention, early identification and intervention. Table 3 outlines strategic actions for schools to enhance the mental health and wellbeing of their students. These actions are grounded in evidence-based research and include comprehensive anti-bullying programmes and inclusive education practices. By implementing these strategies, schools can create a safer, more supportive environment that fosters the mental wellbeing of all students.

Table 3: Actions for schools to promote the mental health of their students

Strategic actions	Description
Implement comprehensive anti-bullying programmes	Adopt evidence-based anti-bullying programmes that address all forms of bullying, including cyberbullying. Involve students, teachers and parents to create a safe and supportive school environment (Gaffney, Farrington and Ttofi, 2019).
Promote inclusive education practices	Promote inclusive education practices to ensure all students, regardless of their abilities or backgrounds, have access to quality education (Florian and Spratt, 2013).
Implement anti-discrimination policies	Implement and enforce anti-discrimination policies to protect children and young people from discrimination based on race, gender, disability, or other characteristics. This should be accompanied by education and awareness campaigns (Priest <i>et al.</i> , 2013).
Enhance educational attainment through supportive interventions	Provide targeted support for students at risk of falling behind academically. Include tutoring, mentoring, and after-school programmes focusing on academic and social and emotional learning (Durlak <i>et al.</i> , 2011).

Promote equity in education	Ensure all students have equal access to educational resources and opportunities. Address disparities in funding, facilities, and support services between schools in different areas (Reardon, 2011).
Engage families in mental health promotion	Develop programmes that involve families in promoting children's mental health and wellbeing, such as parenting workshops, family therapy, and community events that foster strong family bonds and communication (Sanders, 2008).
Empower young people through participation	Create opportunities for young people to participate in decision-making processes that affect their lives, e.g. student councils, youth advisory boards, and community projects that give young people a voice (Checkoway, 2021).
Implement school-based mental health services	Provide accessible mental health services within schools, including counselling, psychological support, and mental health education. Integrate these services into the school environment to reduce stigma and increase accessibility (Weist, Evans and Lever, 2018).
Promote physical activity and healthy lifestyles	Encourage physical activity and healthy lifestyles as part of the school curriculum, which can boost mental health in children and young people (Biddle and Asare, 2011).
Review and reform assessment and classification systems	Review and reform systems used to assess and classify children in educational and mental health contexts. Move towards approaches that de-pathologise and de-criminalise children, focusing on their strengths and potential (Timimi, 2010).

Whole school approaches to promoting mental health involve integrating policies, practices and programmes across all aspects of the educational environment to create a supportive, inclusive and nurturing atmosphere. Strong partnerships between teachers and families can provide insights into children's environments and potential mental health challenges (Gerzon-Kessler, 2024). However, this approach requires careful planning and training to ensure safety and effectiveness (American Psychological Association, 2024). Engaging with families is a core part of the whole school approach, and for many parents their children's primary school is an accessible place to visit and get advice and support. Successful approaches have several elements:

Early identification and intervention

Schools can play a crucial role in the early identification of mental health needs. Teachers and school staff are often the first to notice changes in a student's behaviour or performance that may indicate underlying mental health problems. By implementing regular mental health screenings and training staff to recognise the signs of mental distress, schools can ensure that students receive the support they need at the earliest possible stage (Kaskoun and McCabe, 2021).

School-based mental health services

Providing mental health services within schools can significantly reduce barriers to access, such as stigma and lack of transportation. School-based mental health professionals, including psychologists, counsellors, and social workers, can offer individual and group therapy, crisis intervention, and ongoing support. These services can help students manage stress, build resilience, and develop healthy coping mechanisms (American Psychological Association, 2024).

Creating a supportive environment

Schools can foster a supportive environment that promotes mental wellbeing by implementing policies and practices that prioritise mental health. This includes creating a safe and inclusive atmosphere, promoting positive relationships among students and staff, and integrating social and emotional learning into the curriculum. Such an environment can help to reduce the stigma associated with mental health difficulties, and encourage students to seek help when needed (UNICEF, 2024).

Creating safe places in which to learn

Tackling bullying in schools is essential for fostering a positive mental health environment. Bullying can have severe and long-lasting effects on mental health, leading to anxiety, depression, and a significant decrease in self-esteem. By implementing comprehensive anti-bullying policies and promoting a culture of respect and inclusion, schools can significantly reduce these negative outcomes. Students who feel safe and supported are more likely to engage in learning, build healthy relationships, and develop resilience. Additionally, addressing bullying helps create a more cohesive and empathic school community, which benefits the mental wellbeing of all students.

Creating opportunities for creativity and activity

Schools and colleges can bolster mental health and wellbeing by facilitating opportunities for creativity and physical activity. By incorporating programmes and spaces dedicated to art, craft and design, theatre, and other creative outlets, schools enable students to express themselves and explore their talents. Additionally, encouraging participation in sports, team activities, and social clubs helps students stay active, work collaboratively, and forge meaningful friendships. These activities are crucial for developing resilience, self-esteem, and a sense of belonging, all of which are essential for mental wellbeing. Schools and colleges that nurture these opportunities create an environment where students can thrive both academically and emotionally. In doing so, schools need to be aware of inequities in access; for example, for children whose families cannot afford to pay for additional costs, or those with caring responsibilities or travel arrangements affecting their ability to participate in after-school activities.

Harnessing the potential of technology

Technology offers promising avenues for enhancing mental health support. Digital tools can help young people by providing access to information and resources that promote mental wellbeing (Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2020; NHS England, 2025). These technologies can also support teachers in assessing academic progress without the pressures of high-stakes exams, thereby reducing stress and anxiety among students. Furthermore, technology can play a crucial role in addressing discrimination for marginalised communities, and bullying, which are significant barriers to mental health. By fostering inclusive and accepting environments, we can mitigate the negative impacts of these challenges and promote a sense of belonging and self-worth among young people.

Digital tools for formative assessment can enhance learning by providing real-time feedback and allowing teachers to adjust their strategies (NWEA, 2024). Tools like Google Forms, Kahoot!, and Edpuzzle are effective for engaging students and tracking progress (Bell, 2021). The possibilities and opportunities of technology are yet to be fully understood and realised.

Consistent approaches to safeguarding and welfare

Implementing consistent and comprehensive safeguarding approaches can have a profound impact on the mental health of children and young people. By establishing clear guidelines and protocols for identifying and responding to signs of abuse, neglect, or any other forms of harm, schools and communities can create a protective environment where students feel secure and valued. Safeguarding practices that involve training staff, setting up reporting mechanisms, and ensuring prompt and effective intervention can prevent trauma and its long-term psychological effects.



A consistent approach builds trust between students and adults, encouraging open communication and making young people more likely to seek help. Safeguarding aims to prevent harm and foster a culture of safety and support, promoting positive mental health outcomes.

Regular surveys can help identify mental health problems early. Studies show that concerns about secondary school and pre-existing mental health difficulties can predict adaptation challenges (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2019). Surveys can provide valuable data to tailor interventions and support systems (Bee Well Initiative, 2025). In Greater Manchester, the Bee Well initiative has been a trailblazer in gathering information systematically and acting upon it at sub-regional and local levels, as well as in individual schools.

Keeping a register of students with mental health problems can help schools monitor and support these students (who should already be included within the definition of SEND). This is part of the work of a Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) who identifies and supports students with special educational needs, coordinates provision, liaises with parents and professionals, and advises staff in educational settings.

Early identification and intervention are crucial, as highlighted by experts in school psychology (American Psychological Association, 2024; Alis Behavioral Health, 2025). This approach requires clear protocols and trained staff to manage sensitive information.

Comprehensive training for teachers, senior leaders, and parents is essential for creating a supportive environment. Providers like iheart and the Anna Freud Centre offer accredited training to enhance resilience and mental health awareness (School Mental Health, 2019; You Can Do It! Education, 2025). Continuous professional development ensures that staff are equipped to handle mental health challenges effectively.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

The Government can play a crucial role in encouraging schools and colleges to become bastions of mental health prevention by implementing comprehensive policies that emphasise respect and inclusion. Establishing mandatory anti-bullying programmes and funding mental health promotion through community initiatives can reduce anxiety, depression, and self-esteem issues. Additionally, creating inclusive educational environments that recognise diverse factors such as gender, race, LGBTQ identity, neurodiversity, and physical disability is essential. The Government can provide funding and support for professional development programmes that equip educators with the skills to foster a supportive atmosphere. Regular assessments and collaborations with mental health organisations can further ensure that institutions are equipped to address and prevent mental health problems effectively.



THE MENTAL HEALTH IMPACTS OF EDUCATIONAL ASSESSMENT POLICIES

Testing serves an essential function in the education system, enabling teachers to discern which students are excelling and which require additional support to grasp the subjects. This diagnostic tool allows educators to adjust their teaching methodologies and modify the pace at which subjects are taught and topics are covered. However, the current system often fails to accommodate these adjustments adequately, resulting in students falling behind. As time progresses, the likelihood of these students catching up diminishes, leading to a cumulative disadvantage. Over the years, such students may miss out on the full benefits that education should offer, eventually perceiving themselves as failures. This perception negatively impacts their self-confidence, self-belief, and overall mental health. The detrimental psychological and educational consequences of this system have been highlighted by recent studies (Ball, 2021; Reay, 2024; Putwain, 2008). Addressing these issues is crucial for fostering an equitable and supportive educational environment.

The education system in England has been subject to extensive critique, particularly regarding its emphasis on testing, assessing, and classifying academic performance. This focus has been argued to have significant negative psychological impacts on children of all ages. Various psychologists, educationalists, and sociologists have explored these impacts, highlighting issues such as increased anxiety and reduced self-esteem.

High-stakes tests, such as SATs and GCSEs, are used to measure student performance and hold schools accountable. However, this approach has been criticised for creating a high-pressure environment. According to the House of Commons Education Committee, the high-stakes nature of these assessments can lead to a narrowing of the curriculum, with teachers focusing primarily on test preparation at the expense of a broader educational experience (UK Parliament, 2017).

Psychologists have also raised concerns about the impact of high-stakes testing on children's mental health and have argued that this culture leads to increased anxiety and stress among students, which can have long-term negative effects on their mental health and academic performance. Test anxiety is a well-documented phenomenon, with symptoms including increased heart rate, sweating, and feelings of dread. Howard (2020) notes that test anxiety can significantly impair students' performance, creating a vicious cycle where poor performance leads to increased anxiety and further poor performance. This anxiety is not limited to the testing period but can extend to other areas of students' lives, affecting their overall wellbeing.

Educationalists have argued that the focus on testing and assessment can undermine students' intrinsic motivation to learn. Ken Robinson, a leading thinker in the field, has argued that this approach to schooling stifles creativity and fails to nurture the diverse talents of students. His work advocates for a more holistic approach to education that values creativity and individuality (Fjortoft, Gettig and Verdone, 2018). Professor Dylan Wiliam has also critiqued the emphasis on summative assessment in the UK education system, arguing that this focus can lead to a neglect of formative assessment practices that support learning and development (Wiliam, 2019). When students are constantly assessed and compared to their peers, they may become more concerned with achieving high grades than with the learning process itself. This shift in focus can lead to a reduction in creativity and critical thinking skills, as students prioritise rote memorisation over deeper understanding. The Education Committee (2017) called for a reconsideration of the balance between technical aspects of writing and creativity in primary education, suggesting that the current emphasis on spelling, punctuation and grammar may not lead to improved writing skills.

Sociologists have highlighted the broader social implications of a test-centric education system. The pressure to perform well on tests can exacerbate existing inequalities, as students from disadvantaged backgrounds may lack the resources and support needed to succeed. This can lead to a widening achievement gap, with students from more affluent backgrounds performing better on tests and gaining access to better educational opportunities. Stephen Ball has explored the social implications of the UK's education policies, particularly the impact of high-stakes testing on social inequality. He argues that these policies exacerbate existing inequalities and place undue pressure on students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Ball, 2021). Similarly, Diane Reay's work on the impact of the UK's education policies on working-class students suggests that the focus on testing and assessment can lead to a sense of failure and demotivation among these students, further entrenching social inequalities (Reay, 2024).

The negative psychological impacts of the UK education system's focus on testing and assessment are not limited to students. Teachers also experience significant stress and pressure to ensure their students perform well on tests. This pressure can lead to burnout and a reduction in job satisfaction, which can, in turn, affect the quality of education students receive. The Education Committee (2017) called for a reduction in the stakes associated with testing, suggesting that a rolling three-year average of results for Key Stage 2 – which covers children aged 7-11 and focuses on developing core skills in subjects like English, maths and science – should be published, instead of results from a single cohort.

To foster a supportive educational environment, it is imperative that teachers are adequately resourced and granted the autonomy to teach without undue interference. When educators have access to the necessary tools, training and support, they can focus entirely on the educational and emotional needs of their students. Removing excessive administrative burdens and constant pressure from high-stakes testing allows teachers to cultivate creativity, critical thinking, and a genuine love for learning in their classrooms. Empowering teachers in this way is essential for nurturing a balanced and effective education system that prioritises the wellbeing and development of every student.

Centre for Mental Health's report *Making the grade* highlights the profound effects that educational settings can have on young people's mental health and wellbeing. It identifies the way that timetables, lessons and cultures can make schools stressful places, especially for young people facing the greatest adversity. But they can also be good for mental health – for example, through teaching life skills and creative subjects. The report shows how schools, colleges and universities can better support young people's mental health, including making more time in the curriculum for creative education and greater attention to the wellbeing of staff. Schools should be supported to teach children about how to look after their mental health and to develop life skills, and exam systems should be reviewed to tackle the 'teach to test' culture in many schools. The report calls on the Government to ensure funding for schools, colleges and universities enables them to create a healthy, nurturing environment, especially for children and young people facing the biggest disadvantages and adversity (Abdinasir, 2019).



RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

To address these concerns, the Government can implement several strategies to create a more balanced and supportive education system. Firstly, there should be a reduction in the emphasis on high-stakes testing, allowing for a broader and more diverse curriculum that fosters creativity, critical thinking, and a love of learning. This can be achieved by adopting formative assessment practices that support students' ongoing development rather than focusing solely on summative assessments. While Ofsted emphasises the importance of assessment systems that support pupils' journeys through the curriculum rather than focusing solely on data (Zone of Education, 2024), the impacts of the testing are clear. Abolishing high-stakes assessments like SATs and GCSEs could reduce stress and allow for more holistic evaluations of student progress (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2019).

Another important step is to address social inequalities which affect educational outcomes. This includes providing additional resources and support for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, ensuring that they have equal opportunities to succeed. By tackling the root causes of inequality, the Government can help to close the achievement gap and create a more equitable education system.

Lastly, the Government can also encourage professional development for teachers, equipping them with the skills and knowledge to foster a positive learning environment. This includes training on mental health awareness, inclusive teaching practices, and strategies to reduce test anxiety.

SCHOOL NURSES

School nurses play a vital role in the health and wellbeing of school-age children. They are often the first point of contact for children experiencing health issues, including mental health problems. They provide a range of services, including health education, counselling, and referrals to other health professionals.

The presence of school nurses in educational settings is particularly important for promoting mental health. They are uniquely positioned to identify early signs of mental health problems and provide immediate support. According to a review by Royal College of Nursing (n.d.), school nurses are essential in supporting children with emerging mental health difficulties and existing mental health diagnoses. They provide a safe space for children to discuss their concerns and receive appropriate care.

School nurses also play a critical role in health education, teaching students about mental health, coping strategies, and the importance of seeking help. This is vital for reducing stigma and encouraging children to speak openly about their mental health. Additionally, school nurses collaborate closely with teachers and parents to create a supportive environment for children, which is essential for their mental wellbeing.

Underfunding and lack of critical planning significantly impact school nursing services, leading to increased workloads and reduced effectiveness (British Journal of Nursing, 2019). These challenges hinder the ability of school nurses to provide comprehensive care and support to students (JAMA Health Forum, 2025).

One notable example of activities undertaken by school nurses is the implementation of school-based, multi-agency, confidential health drop-ins. These drop-ins provide a safe space for students to discuss their health concerns, including mental health difficulties. The drop-ins are well-attended and have been recognised as examples of good practice by Education Scotland. These initiatives demonstrate the importance of school nurses in creating accessible and supportive environments for students.

Another example is the Education for Wellbeing programme, delivered across England from 2018 to 2024, which included interventions such as role-play lessons to enhance students' understanding of mental health and reduce suicide rates (Anna Freud Centre, 2025). The programme also involves teacher training to improve staff knowledge of mental health and the implementation of relaxation and mindfulness techniques in schools (Department for Education, 2025). These interventions have shown promise in improving mental health literacy and providing students with tools to manage their mental health (Department for Education, 2025; GOV.UK, 2025).

Table 4: The role of health visitors, school nurses and public health nurses in preventing mental ill health

Key aspect	Description
Building trusting relationships	Health visitors, school nurses and public health nurses work to build trusting relationships with families.
Providing education and resources	These nursing roles provide families with valuable education and resources on various health topics, including mental health.
Early identification and intervention	Health visitors and school nurses are often the first to identify signs of mental health difficulties in children and parents.
Coordinating care and referrals	These professionals play a crucial role in coordinating care and making referrals to other health and social services, including safeguarding.
Supporting family dynamics	Public health nurses and health visitors often work with families to address broader social determinants of health.
Collaborative programmes and initiatives	Health visitors, school nurses and public health nurses often collaborate on community-based programmes and initiatives.
Advocacy and policy development	These nursing roles advocate for policies and programmes that support mental health and wellbeing.

Health visiting, school nursing and public health nursing are integral to promoting the mental health and wellbeing of babies, children, young people, and their families. These services provide early identification and intervention, support, health education, and community-based care. By addressing the mental health needs of this demographic, these nursing services contribute to healthier, more resilient communities. The importance of their roles cannot be overstated, and continued investment in these services is essential for the wellbeing of future generations.



RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

The Government can enhance and expand the role of school nursing by providing funding for training and resources, ensuring adequate staffing levels, and integrating school nurses into multidisciplinary teams. Initiatives to promote mental health awareness and support within schools should be prioritised, alongside policies that recognise the critical role of school nurses in early intervention and care coordination. By fostering collaboration with other health and social services, the Government can ensure comprehensive support for the mental health and wellbeing of students.

COLLEGES

As with schools, further education colleges can adopt a whole college approach to mental health, drawing on many of the same principles, but tailored to the age group they serve (Department for Education, 2021). Promoting good mental health in colleges has the potential to improve student outcomes and retention rates (Islam, 2024). However, challenges such as resource limitations and the need for comprehensive staff training must be addressed (Nelson, 2024).

An example of good practice is the implementation of the Association of Colleges' Mental Health Charter, which provides a framework for colleges to develop and articulate their mental health strategies. This includes establishing transparent accountability, consistent practice, and embedding annual reviews to ensure services remain relevant (Association of Colleges, 2023).

The mental health of young adults is influenced by various intersections, including gender, race, LGBTQ+ identity, neurodiversity, and physical disability. Young people from racialised communities may face discrimination and cultural stressors that contribute to mental distress (Abdinasir and Treloar, 2023). LGBTQ+ students often encounter bullying and a lack of acceptance, which can lead to higher levels of anxiety and depression (Gaffney, Farrington and Ttofi, 2019). Neurodiverse students, such as those with autism or ADHD, may experience social isolation and academic challenges. Additionally, students with physical disabilities might struggle with accessibility and inclusion, further impacting their mental health (Florian and Spratt, 2013). By recognising and addressing these intersections, colleges can create a more inclusive and supportive environment for all students.

UNIVERSITIES

Universities in the UK are increasingly adopting a whole university approach to prevent mental ill health and promote wellbeing among students and staff. This approach integrates mental health into all aspects of university life, recognising that good mental health is fundamental to learning, work and community (Universities UK, 2023).

Key approaches to promoting mental health at university include strategic frameworks, collaborative efforts, and support services. One strategic framework is *Stepchange: mentally healthy universities*. This framework integrates mental health into the core mission of universities, focusing on learning, supporting, working, and living. Actions include reviewing curriculum design, creating supportive environments, and reducing stress from assessments (Universities UK, 2023).

The *University Mental Health Charter*, developed by Student Minds, aims to support universities in adopting a whole university approach to mental health and wellbeing (Student Minds, 2024). It provides a framework of evidence-informed principles to guide institutions in creating environments that promote mental health. The Charter has the potential to significantly improve student and staff wellbeing, leading to better academic outcomes and overall satisfaction (Universities UK, 2020). However, challenges such as varying levels of institutional commitment and resource constraints can hinder its implementation (Student Minds, 2024). Despite these challenges, the Charter has seen positive uptake, with 113 universities participating in the 2024-2025 programme, reflecting a strong commitment to mental health (ibid).

Collaborative efforts can be seen in the University of York's mental health strategy. This strategy prioritises coproduction with students, staff and leadership, and collaboration with agencies like the NHS. It aims for early identification and support with mental health difficulties to minimise their impact on students' lives (University of York, 2021). Universities also offer various support services such as counselling, mental health teams, digital interventions, helplines, and after-hours support, ensuring accessibility and responsiveness to needs (Universities UK, 2023).

The demand for mental health support in universities has significantly increased, putting pressure on existing resources. Universities need to ensure that their services are adequately resourced and managed to meet this growing need (Universities UK, 2023). Despite efforts to reduce stigma, mental ill health can still be a taboo subject. Universities are working to create a culture of openness and awareness, encouraging students and staff to seek help without fear of judgment (University of York, 2021). Effective communication and coordination between different services and external agencies are crucial. Universities must ensure that information sharing supports student wellbeing, and that there are clear plans in place for mental health crises (Universities UK, 2023).

Some universities are redesigning their curriculum to position health gain alongside learning gain, creating collaborative and supportive learning environments. Embedding mental health support in fitness to study processes ensures consistency and support across the university (Universities UK, 2023). Initiatives to build thriving communities and respectful behaviours contribute to a healthier university environment (University of York, 2021).



RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

The Government can support universities in preventing poor mental health through funding for mental health services, implementing mandatory policies, and undertaking regular audits to ensure standards. Professional development for staff, curriculum integration, and national awareness campaigns can reduce stigma and raise awareness. Facilitating partnerships with mental health organisations and providing grants for research can enhance support services. Promoting inclusivity and social support networks within universities can create a healthier environment, ensuring that mental wellbeing is a priority in academic settings.



TRANSITIONS TO ADULthood

Supporting young people as they transition into adulthood is crucial for their mental health. Access to stable employment and secure housing can significantly reduce stress and anxiety, providing a foundation for a healthy, independent life. These factors not only contribute to financial stability but also foster a sense of belonging and purpose. Ensuring young adults have the necessary resources and support can help them navigate this critical period with confidence and resilience.

EMPLOYMENT SUPPORT

As young adults transition into the workforce, the role of employment in mental health becomes increasingly significant. Feeling secure and valued in the workplace contributes to overall wellbeing and helps emerging adults establish their place in the world. Employment provides financial stability and a sense of purpose and belonging. It is essential for employers to create supportive work environments that recognise the mental health needs of young workers and provide resources to help them thrive.

Meaningful employment offers psychological benefits such as financial security, social identity, and a sense of purpose, which are vital for young adults coping with mental health problems. However, unemployment can worsen feelings of anxiety and depression. Stable environments foster emotional resilience and enable individuals to engage meaningfully in their communities. Programmes designed to support young adults in achieving housing stability and employment improve their mental health outcomes, but also contribute to broader community wellbeing, including reduced crime rates and enhanced educational achievements for children in these households.

However, young adults, especially those with long-term mental health problems, often encounter significant barriers to achieving stable employment and housing, such as personal challenges, discrimination in the workplace, and the episodic nature of many mental health problems (Lee, 2024). Addressing these obstacles requires comprehensive strategies including tailored employment programmes, mental health support services, and community-building initiatives.

HOUSING SUPPORT

Stable housing is crucial for mental wellbeing, providing a secure environment that promotes emotional balance and overall wellbeing. Access to stable and affordable housing allows individuals to focus on personal growth, employment, and overall stability without the burden of housing insecurity. It serves as a sanctuary where young adults can establish routines and foster relationships, which are crucial for mental wellness. Research shows that secure housing significantly lowers rates of depression and anxiety, illustrating the direct link between housing stability and positive mental health outcomes (RMHS, 2025). Stable living environments also enhance emotional security and resilience, especially for people facing challenges such as substance use or mental health problems (Culli, 2025).



Programmes designed to provide affordable housing and support those at risk of displacement are crucial in mitigating the negative effects of housing instability. Secure housing extends beyond individuals, positively affecting neighbourhoods, and leading to lower crime rates and improved educational outcomes. As awareness of the connection between stable housing and mental health continues to grow, prioritising housing stability as a key component of mental health strategies is essential (USICH, 2025).

Housing stability and employment contribute to healthier communities: neighbourhoods with low housing insecurity often have better employment rates, reduced crime, and improved educational outcomes for children. Supporting young adults in their transition to independent living and employment should include a focus on creating a supportive community network, enhancing access to essential services, and fostering skill development.

SUPPORT HUBS

Early support hubs have a critical role to play, alongside wider support services for young adults, to deal with the challenges they face at this crucial stage of life.

Early support hubs are instrumental in facilitating smoother life transitions and enhancing mental health outcomes for young people. By providing accessible, community-based resources and services, these hubs offer a proactive approach to mental health care, addressing issues before they escalate (NHS England, 2025). Early support hubs foster resilience and coping skills by integrating mental health support with educational and social programmes, ensuring that young people have the tools they need to navigate life's challenges. These hubs serve as a bridge between various support systems, such as schools, health services, and community organisations, creating a cohesive network that supports overall wellbeing. Through early intervention and consistent support, early support hubs can significantly reduce the stigma associated with mental health problems and promote a culture of openness and help-seeking behaviours (McGorry *et al.*, 2024). They provide a one-stop shop for young people, bringing together mental health support alongside support for employment, education, housing, sexual health, and substance use.

CONCLUSIONS

The mental health of babies, children and young people in England is a pressing concern, with evidence indicating a significant decline, particularly in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. Studies have shown that the pandemic exacerbated existing mental health problems, leading to increased rates of anxiety, depression, and other mental health difficulties among young people (GOV.UK, 2022; YoungMinds, 2021). This decline underscores the urgent need for comprehensive strategies to prevent mental health problems and promote wellbeing.

Our review of the literature highlights the profound impact of social determinants on mental health. Factors such as socioeconomic status, family dynamics, and the quality of educational environments play crucial roles in shaping the mental health outcomes of young people (Youth Access, 2015; Health Foundation, 2018; Kirkbride *et al.*, 2024). Health visitors are pivotal in this context, providing essential support and early intervention to families and children. Their roles include conducting developmental reviews, offering guidance on healthy lifestyles, and identifying early signs of mental health difficulties. They also offer support to parents who might be finding parenting challenging, or have mental health difficulties of their own.

Discrimination, racism, and issues faced by people from LGBTQ+ communities significantly impact the mental health of young people. Studies have shown that young people from racialised communities and those identifying as LGBTQ+ often face higher levels of mental health problems due to stigma, discrimination, and social exclusion. These groups are also less likely to receive appropriate support. Uneven opportunities and systemic inequalities further exacerbate these challenges. It is therefore crucial to address these disparities through targeted interventions and inclusive policies (Moagi *et al.*, 2021).

Investment in the basics of life is fundamental to improving mental health outcomes for young people. Ensuring that babies, children and young people grow up in secure material circumstances, with access to good health care, secure housing, nurturing relationships, and supportive educational settings, can lead to good mental health outcomes (Department of Health and Social Care, 2023; House of Commons Library, 2024). This requires a sustained shift in focus towards creating environments where young people can thrive and fulfil their potential. All educational settings, including early years, must adopt cultures that are supportive and centred on the psychological development of students, rather than solely on academic achievement.

While some recommendations require targeted spending, others require a shift in the way policies are created, and will not create additional costs but rather use existing resources more effectively. All of these actions are far less costly than allowing young people's needs to escalate until they require specialist care or face financial adversity and lifelong disadvantage.

The evidence is clear: to secure a brighter future for babies, children, and young people, we must invest in childhood. By harnessing the possibilities that technology brings, building on the evidence of what makes a difference, and creating health-enhancing environments, we can empower young people and families, support educators, and tackle the broader challenges of disadvantage. These actions are essential steps towards preventing mental health problems and fostering a generation of young people who are healthy, resilient, and capable of achieving their full potential.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Preventing childhood mental health difficulties in the context of a challenging fiscal climate and global instability requires targeted investment and policy-making, in ways that will maximise the benefits from limited resources. Our recommendations identify priorities from the evidence we have reviewed. They are primarily actions and investment decisions for national government, though many can be applied at other levels. They will be as relevant to devolved national governments as the UK Government, and can inform policies and resource allocation decisions in integrated care systems, combined authorities, local authorities, schools, colleges and universities.

These recommendations are in addition to the need to invest in better mental health support for children and young people experiencing mental health difficulties. This is discussed in our reports *Future Minds* (Centre for Mental Health *et al.*, 2025) and *Time for action* (O'Shea and McHayle, 2021).

- 1. The UK Government should take steps to tackle the social determinants of children and young people's mental health.** Current legislation to improve workers' and renters' rights are welcome measures towards this aim. Action to tackle violence against women and girls, child poverty, and racial injustice will further address some of the biggest drivers of mental ill health among children and young people today. A whole government mental health strategy, backed up with a mental health policy test and a Mental Health Commissioner, would strengthen the machinery of government so that future policies are made with children's mental health in mind.
- 2. The UK Government should create a nationwide programme to invest in community-led mental health promotion and mental illness prevention activity.** This could be modelled on the Better Mental Health Fund, to enable local councils across the country to support community initiatives to improve children's mental wellbeing. This should focus on the most disadvantaged and marginalised neighbourhoods and groups of people in each locality.
- 3. The UK Government should invest in evidence-based parenting programmes,** adopting a proportionate universal approach with a low-cost offer for all and additional help for those who need it. Some local and combined authorities have begun to implement this locally.
- 4. The UK Government should improve mental health support for mothers during the perinatal period,** building on the expansion of specialist community services to provide a more comprehensive support offer.
- 5. The UK Government should expand the health visitor and school nursing workforce.** Public health nurses play a vital part in supporting children's mental and physical health, and as such are a good long-term investment.
- 6. The UK Government should support early years education settings, schools, colleges and universities to adopt a whole education approach to mental health.** Applying a mental health policy test to education policies would further embed the whole school approach by providing greater consistency and evidence-based policies, for example around the curriculum and the ways behaviour and attendance are managed in schools.

7. **The UK Government should fulfil its manifesto pledge to establish an open access mental health hub in every community in England.** These will provide early support for young people's mental health, and also help with housing, employment and other essentials for young adults up to the age of 25 making the transition to working life. These issues should be central concerns of the Government's forthcoming Youth Strategy.

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GLOSSARY

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs): Traumatic events occurring before age 18, such as abuse or neglect, which can have long-term impacts on mental and physical health.

Attachment theory: A psychological model describing the dynamics of long-term relationships between humans, particularly the bond between children and their caregivers, which is crucial for emotional development.

Counselling and psychotherapy: Talking therapies aimed at helping individuals understand and resolve personal issues, improve emotional health, and develop coping strategies.

Early intervention: Strategies and support provided at the earliest signs of mental health difficulties to prevent deterioration and improve outcomes for children and young people.

Emotional wellbeing: A state where individuals can understand and manage their emotions, build positive relationships, and cope with life's challenges, which is essential for overall mental health.

Family therapy: A type of psychological counselling that helps family members improve communication and resolve conflicts, often used to address mental health problems in children and young people.

Health visiting: A proactive, universal service by trained nurses and midwives to support families with children aged 0-5, enhancing health and reducing inequalities.

LGBTQ+ people: People who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, and asexual, who often face unique mental health challenges.

Mindfulness: A mental practice focusing on being aware of the present moment, which can help reduce stress and improve emotional regulation in children and young people.

Neurodivergent people: People whose neurological development and functioning differ from typical patterns, including conditions like autism and ADHD.

NICE Guidelines: Evidence-based recommendations for health and care in England and Wales, aimed at improving quality and preventing ill health.

Parental mental health: The mental health status of parents, which significantly influences the emotional and psychological wellbeing of their children.

Perinatal mental health: The emotional and psychological wellbeing of mothers during pregnancy and postpartum, crucial for both maternal and infant health.

Primary prevention: Measures taken to prevent disease or injury before it occurs, such as vaccinations and health education.

Protective factors: Attributes or conditions that mitigate risks and promote mental health, such as strong social support and positive coping skills.

Public health nursing: Nursing practice focused on promoting and protecting the health of populations using knowledge from nursing, social, and public health sciences.

Resilience: The ability to recover from setbacks, adapt well to change, and keep going in the face of adversity, which is crucial for mental health in children and young people.

Risk factors: Characteristics or conditions that increase the likelihood of developing a disease or disorder, such as poor housing, poverty, smoking or poor diet.

Safeguarding: Measures and policies to protect vulnerable adults, children and young people from abuse, neglect and exploitation, ensuring their safety and wellbeing.

School nursing: Specialised practice of public health nursing that supports student health, wellness, and academic success through care coordination and health education.

Secondary prevention: Efforts aimed at early detection and prompt intervention to treat mental health difficulties, reducing severity and preventing progression, such as screening programmes and early therapeutic support.

Self-harm: Deliberate injury to oneself, often as a way to cope with emotional distress, requiring sensitive intervention and support.

Social determinants: Non-medical factors affecting health outcomes, including socioeconomic status, education, and living conditions

Racialised communities: People who belong to racial or ethnic groups that face systemic inequalities and unique mental health challenges as a result of racism.

Trauma-informed care: An approach in health and social care that recognises and responds to the impact of traumatic experiences on individuals' mental health and wellbeing.

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