

What we learned about young people's mental health from HeadStart

About HeadStart

Started in 2016, HeadStart was a six-year programme set up by The National Lottery Community Fund. It aimed to explore and test new ways to improve the mental health and wellbeing of young people aged 10–16 and prevent serious mental health issues from developing. The six HeadStart areas were Blackpool, Cornwall, Hull, Kent, Newham and Wolverhampton. The HeadStart programme ended in July 2022, though many of the approaches from HeadStart have continued locally. We completed the national evaluation of HeadStart in mid-2023.

The HeadStart Learning Team was a group of researchers from the Evidence Based Practice Unit (UCL and Anna Freud) the University of Manchester and the Child Outcomes Research Consortium (CORC), a project of Anna Freud. Previous partners in the HeadStart Learning Team include the London School of Economics and Common Room. The HeadStart Learning Team researched the ways that HeadStart supported young people and looked at whether this support was helping.

About this leaflet

This leaflet sets out some of our most important learning from the HeadStart programme. Over the course of the programme, we've gathered a lot of information about the young people who have been involved in HeadStart. For example, we've been able to track some young people from age 10 or 11 to age 16 and learn a lot about their experiences of mental health and of getting help, including their experiences of the coronavirus pandemic. We also spoke to staff in schools and some parents and carers too.

It can be difficult to make clear-cut statements about 'what works' for young people in a large and complex programme like HeadStart, but here we have shared some key findings about the kinds of support that can help. This leaflet is for young people and the adults who work with young people. Professionals could use it with young people in school and community settings, for example, to co-develop meaningful responses to the learning from HeadStart.



What we learned from HeadStart about support

Our evaluation shows that there should be more focus on ensuring all those that need help get it.

Where young people experience multiple challenges that affect their mental wellbeing, support might need to be 'stepped up':

- Support might need to be in place for a long period of time.
- There might need to be a number of different types of support put in place. For example, support within school, support for the family and community-based support.

How effective support is will depend on how well it is implemented and how well young people engage with it. There must be enough of it delivered, and delivered well, for it to make a difference.

What we learned from HeadStart about building resilience

Resilience is a word we use to describe experiencing stable mental health and wellbeing, even when there are difficult things going on our lives.

Our learning shows that adults can help young people to build their resilience in three ways:

- supporting young people to develop skills within themselves such as their ability to solve problems, manage their emotions and handle their relationships with other people.
- making sure that young people have access to more and better support from people around them, including adults at school, home and within the community.
- ensuring there is more and better support from professionals, that is joined-up, appropriate and available when young people need it.

Learning from HeadStart

Mental health problems are quite common in children and young people. Our research shows that one in five young people report high levels of mental health problems at the age of 11–12.

There is also evidence that the pandemic had negative impacts on young people in terms of their mood, sense of social connections and the support they could draw on.

What increases chances of mental health problems, and what protects us?

Young people's mental health often varies based on their own identities and what's going on in their lives. We use the term **'risk factor'** to mean characteristics or experiences that are linked to greater risk of developing mental health problems. HeadStart found that the number (and the nature) of these 'risk factors' makes a difference. The more there are, the more difficult it can be to manage. We found that certain factors increased a young person's chance of developing mental health problems. These were: if they were on a child in need plan; had experiences of trauma; identified as transgender, non-binary or as questioning their gender identity; or had special educational needs. It's important to remember that just because a young person has these factors, does not mean that developing mental health problems is unavoidable.

Factors that help protect us from harm are known as **'protective factors'**. These things act as buffers against developing mental health problems.

Through our HeadStart research, we found that protective factors for young people included:

- having supportive friendships and trusted relationships
- a young person's ability to manage their emotions
- a young person's awareness of their own strengths and struggles
- a young person's ability to use coping strategies when needed.

Having strong protective factors in life can act as a shield against mental health difficulties and while they won't always completely protect a young person from harm, the more they have, the better chance they have of coping through difficult experiences.



What we learned from HeadStart about understanding 'what works'

While we have been able to show good practice within HeadStart, we have also seen that **not everything offered to young people to support them actually improves their mental wellbeing**. Being able to test out new approaches and learn from young people is an important process in finding 'what works'.

It is **important to keep an eye on how well the support provided is working** and how it is being received. This includes trying out new ways of helping young people, seeing whether they work, making changes to the support offered if needed and sometimes deciding to try something different altogether. This 'test and learn' process can be greatly improved by including young people's voices throughout. Professionals should ensure that they include young people's experiences and opinions on how to improve any services for young people and their families.

How these findings can make a difference

- The information in this leaflet will give young people an overall picture, on a national level, about the mental wellbeing of their age group and the kinds of things that affect it.
- These findings will be especially of interest to young people in HeadStart schools, and those who took part in the HeadStart survey.
- This leaflet contains a summary of the kinds of things that young people have told us can help them to cope with mental health difficulties. We hope that other young people might find this useful. More detail on these strategies can be found at <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/children-policy-research/how-i-cope-young-persons-guide>
- Learning from HeadStart will help inform the way services that support young people's mental wellbeing are developed. This includes tackling underlying risk factors, and ensuring multiple sources of support are provided over an extended period where needed.
- This leaflet will reinforce to the adults working with young people the importance of continuously evaluating programmes to improve mental wellbeing support for children and young people.

Want to know more? Visit our website to read about the Headstart findings in full: <https://www.annafreud.org/research/past-research-projects/the-headstart-learning-programme/>

Acknowledgements: We would like to thank the members of the HeadStart National Young People's Group for their time and input into this leaflet.

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