

# Doing ok? Children and young people's views on what affects their mental health

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## Authors

This briefing was written by Dr Susan Elsley and Christina McMellon. It was based on a project commissioned by NHS Health Scotland from CRFR on consultation with children and young people on a draft framework for children and young people's mental health indicators.

Details of the NHS Health Scotland programme on children and young people's mental health indicators and the full report of the consultation with children and young people are available at

[www.healthscotland.com/scotlands-health/population/mental-healthindicators/children.aspx](http://www.healthscotland.com/scotlands-health/population/mental-healthindicators/children.aspx)

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Centre for Research on Families and Relationships  
The University of Edinburgh,  
23 Buccleuch Place, Edinburgh EH8 9LN  
Tel: 0131 651 1832  
Fax: 0131 651 1833  
E-mail: [crfr@ed.ac.uk](mailto:crfr@ed.ac.uk)

## Doing ok? Children and young people's views on what affects their mental health

This briefing highlights the findings from a consultation which was undertaken with specific groups of children and young people in order to inform the NHS Health Scotland draft framework for children and young people's mental health indicators. The aim was to determine whether these children and young people thought that the framework matched their views of what affects their mental health. The consultation project was carried out by researchers at the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships (CRFR) at The University of Edinburgh.

### Key points

- Children and young people shared many common perspectives on the themes 'fun', 'not fair', 'being heard', 'people', 'places', 'changes' and being 'healthy' as part of the consultation on the NHS Health Scotland draft framework for children and young people's mental health indicators
- This included strongly held views that children and young people were not consistently listened to by adults and wide understanding of what was not fair in children and young people's lives
- Relationships with family and friends were of central importance to children and young people. Professionals such as teachers and youth workers were mentioned by some young people as being supportive
- Children and young people had significant experiences of discrimination, inequality and social exclusion due to being looked after, being young carers, being disabled or being young Gypsy Travellers
- Generally, the areas that children and young people discussed were closely aligned with the constructs (categories) in the NHS Health Scotland draft framework for children and young people's mental health indicators

### Background

The mental health of children and young people in Scotland is an area which is of concern to policymakers. In the Scottish Government's 'Towards a Mentally Flourishing Scotland: Policy and Action Plan 2009-2011 (TAMFS)' (2009), infants, children and young people are identified as a priority group. The plan states that NHS Health Scotland will work with key stakeholders in developing national indicators for children and young people's mental health.

This programme is now underway and it is intended that the indicators will be in place by September 2011. The process of developing the indicators builds on the work on adult mental health indicators<sup>1</sup>. The indicators that will be developed will be structured within a similar framework to that for the adult indicators (see Table 1) under constructs (or categories) which are identified as high level (mental health state) and contextual (risk and protective factors which impact on mental health). The indicators are a set for the general population and as such will not have very specific indicators which are relevant to the unique circumstances of only certain groups.

The development of the draft framework has drawn on a variety of sources including a national advisory group, other expert contacts and through current policy and evidence. It has also considered the views of children and young people on what impacts on their mental health in existing research through a commissioned literature review (Shucksmith et al., 2009). This review showed that the views from some groups of children and young people were under-represented in or absent from the research literature.

These groups included:

- children and young people from black and minority ethnic communities
- disabled children and young people
- very young children
- children and young people with experience of social exclusion

This consultation was therefore commissioned by NHS Health Scotland in order to address these gaps and was part of a wider consultation process undertaken on the draft framework between March 2010 and May 2010 (Parkinson, 2010).

<sup>1</sup><http://www.healthscotland.com/scotlands-health/population/mental-health-indicators-index.aspx>

Table 1. Draft framework for mental health indicators for children and young people

HIGH LEVEL CONSTRUCTS				
Mental wellbeing		Mental health problems		
CONTEXTUAL CONSTRUCTS				
Individual	Family	Formal Learning Environment	Community	Structural
Learning and development	Family relations	Involvement	Participation	Equality
Healthy living	Family structure	Peer and friend relationships	Social networks	Social inclusion
General health	Parental healthy living	Educational environment	Social support	Discrimination
Spirituality	Family members' health	Pressures and expectations	Trust	Financial security/debt
Emotional intelligence			Safety	Physical environment
Significant life events				Violence

**The study**

The aim of the consultation with children and young people was to:

- determine whether the draft framework was appropriate for groups of children and young people whose views were under-represented in the research evidence

It was also intended that the consultation:

- provide additional insights to inform the development of the indicators framework
- help ensure that potential differences and inequalities in mental health among different groups of children and young people were acknowledged in population-wide approaches
- identify additional areas which were specific to the groups consulted and which those working with these groups may want to consider if using the indicator set and for developing their own specific additional indicators

A total of 70 children and young people from 9 groups took part in the consultation which took place between February and May 2010. Participants were aged from 3 years to those in their twenties. Although the age range of the mental health indicators is from pre-birth to 17 years, a small number of young people who took part were 18 years and over. They reflected on their past relevant experiences.

Children and young people were from the following groups:

- children aged 3 to 4 years
- children aged 5 to 8 years
- young people with learning disabilities
- deaf young people
- young carers
- young people with experience of care and moving on from care
- young people with experience of social exclusion
- young Gypsy Travellers
- black and minority ethnic young people.

Children and young people were asked for their views on each of the cross cutting themes which had been used by the mental health indicators project advisory group to inform its discussions. This was in the context of 'the things that make children and young people's lives ok and not ok'. The themes (play, relationships, health, participation, environment, involvement in decisions, finance and transition) were easily adapted to areas which could be discussed with children and young people but related closely both to the constructs and the domains identified in the draft framework. These adapted themes, used to structure discussions, were 'fun', 'not fair', 'being heard', 'people', 'places', 'changes' and being 'healthy'.

The terms 'mental health problems', 'mental well-being' and 'mental health' were not used in the consultation. This was to avoid using adult-centric terms and to use language which was 'true' to that of children and young people (Shucksmith et al, 2009). A large laminated poster, produced to make the framework more accessible to participants, was a focal point for discussion in most of the sessions with 'clouds' filled in with children and young people's responses and attached to the poster.

**The findings**

**Fun**

Children and young people highlighted a wide range of activities including spending time with friends and family, playing outside and taking part in sports. They also had diverse individual interests such as music, cinema, drama, going out on bikes, crafts and dancing. Clubs and other community resources were seen to be important by all the groups apart from the youngest children. Using online media was a popular leisure activity.

There were differences between the older and the younger age groups in the activities they enjoyed. However, being outdoors for play and meeting with friends was an essential part of children and young people's play and leisure regardless of age. The barriers to participating in activities included having enough money, being discriminated against and having places to go. Both young carers and

young people with experience of care emphasised that they wanted the same opportunities as other young people.

**Not fair**

The 'not fair' theme was a major area of discussion for all groups of children and young people and appeared to be easily understood across the age groups. Being bullied, cheating in games and being excluded were identified by many, including the youngest participants, as unjust and hurtful.

A number of children and young people identified experiences of discrimination or inequality due to disability, race, gender or being looked after. Young Gypsy Travellers identified that they experienced racism and discrimination frequently. Young carers pointed out that not many adults knew about their particular situation. Young people who had experience of care, young people with learning disabilities, young carers and young Gypsy Travellers highlighted the unfairness of not having enough money.

**Being heard**

All groups thought it was important that children and young people should be heard although they thought that adults did not listen consistently to children and young people. The majority indicated that family members did listen but not necessarily all of the time. All groups thought that friends were good listeners. Youth workers were mentioned as adults who listened. Deaf young people highlighted that there were challenges around communication because they were deaf. Young Gypsy Travellers and young people with experience of care highlighted that they were not always listened to by adults.

**People**

The central significance of relationships was reflected in children and young people's responses across all the consultation themes. Family members were viewed as being of great significance except for young people who had moved on from care where the focus in discussion was on relationships with professionals. Young Gypsy Travellers' descriptions of family included extended family and friends within the Gypsy Traveller community.

Again, friends were seen to be a crucial part of children and young people's lives, especially close and best friends who provided trusted relationships. Young people also mentioned adults in professional roles including teachers and youth workers who supported children and young people.

**Places**

Homes, outdoors, schools and leisure spaces were seen to be places that were important. However, a home, as a place where children and young people lived, had different and complex meanings for young carers, for young people who had left care and for young Gypsy Travellers. School was an ambiguous place for many children and young people. Particular concerns were identified including the need for learning to be relevant and schools not

being consistently responsive to their needs. Generally, participants highlighted that a variety of places were needed where young people could hang out which were safe and had the right kind of facilities.

**Changes**

Exploring changes in children's and young people lives was a complex area to consider in the scope of this consultation. Participants discussed the challenges of dealing with transitions in education between schools and colleges as well as moving between different informal settings such as youth groups. Young people with experience of care described particular challenges in being prepared for changes in their lives and the need for adequate support when leaving care. Young Gypsy Travellers saw change as a positive factor in their lives. Deaf young people highlighted that it was difficult to move between different school and college environments.

**Healthy**

Children and young people identified positive approaches to healthy living including diet and exercise, showing that public health messages were well known. Three groups highlighted specific issues which affected their health and mental health. These were parental health for young carers, the benefits of moving around for Gypsy Travellers and young people moving on from care being poorly prepared for independent living.

**Policy and research implications**

**Implications for the draft framework for mental health indicators for children and young people**

- The findings suggest that the constructs in the NHS Health Scotland draft framework for mental indicators for children and young people are appropriate for the groups of children and young people
- The experiences of children and young people, as identified in this consultation, can be specific to different individual and collective circumstances. Those working with these groups need to consider and identify whether there should be additional very specific indicators relevant to these groups of children and young people to supplement the final national set of mental health indicators when established
- The findings show that some young people experience difficulties in the transitions to young adulthood, suggesting that some consideration should be given as to how the framework can profile the needs of older young people who experience particular challenges

**General policy and research implications**

- Young Gypsy Travellers, young carers, disabled young people and young people who had moved on from care identified a range of experiences which showed that they experienced, at times, significant levels of discrimination, inequality and social exclusion. This merits further research to see if these negative experiences can be challenged in policy and practice