Education for Wellbeing:

headline findings from a study trialling universal mental health interventions in schools



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Background

Education for Wellbeing was a large-scale research programme, funded by the Department for Education, involving two randomised control trials.

Through Education for Wellbeing, we evaluated a range of mental health and wellbeing interventions being delivered in primary and secondary schools. Our aim was to examine the impact of these approaches on children and young people's mental health.

The programme ran between 2018 and 2024. Across England, 32,655 pupils across 513 schools participated in Education for Wellbeing.



Key points

The large-scale research trials we describe in this report highlight **three interventions that show promise for use in schools**:

Strategies for Safety and Wellbeing, for both primary and secondary schools

Relaxation Techniques, for primary schools only

Mindfulness-Based Exercises, for secondary schools only.

Our findings show that **implementation matters**: most of the promising interventions were only effective if implemented completely, sticking to the intended model of delivery. Where overall effects were positive, these were substantially boosted by good implementation. However, for some of the interventions (Mindfulness-Based Exercises in primary schools and Relaxation Techniques in secondary schools) higher levels of implementation actually revealed negative impacts. This emphasises the importance of **choosing interventions that are evidence-based and appropriate for the phase of education** (i.e., primary or secondary school).

On the whole, the promising interventions had a modest impact on children and young people's mental health. There is also potential for some of the interventions to be unhelpful unless complementary mental health strategies are in place. As such, it is important to **embed these kinds of interventions within a wider holistic approach** to supporting mental health within schools.

Some interventions appear to risk unintended consequences under some conditions or with some populations of pupils. When implementing new approaches to support pupils' mental health, **monitoring is important to understand any benefits and check if any groups were negatively impacted.**

The trials

INSPIRE (Interventions in Schools for Promoting Wellbeing: Research in Education)

This trial explored three initiatives, based either around techniques to support mental wellbeing or approaches to encourage intended help-seeking and allied strategies. We tested the interventions with pupils in Years 4 and 5 (aged 8–10) in primary schools and students in Years 7 and 8 (aged 11–13) in secondary schools.

The three interventions were selected because they are similar to the kinds of approaches schools might implement routinely to support pupils' mental health. They were developed specifically for the study and had not been trialled previously. The interventions were Mindfulness-Based Exercises, Relaxation Techniques and Strategies for Safety and Wellbeing (SSW).



Mindfulness-Based Exercises

Mindfulness-Based Exercises is a light-touch intervention. It involves training teachers to deliver daily five-minute mindfulness-based sessions in class over a school term.



Relaxation Techniques

Relaxation Techniques is a similarly light-touch approach involving training teachers to deliver daily five-minute relaxation-based sessions in class.



Strategies for Safety and Wellbeing (SSW)

SSW is a curriculum-based approach involving training teachers to deliver eight lessons on how to look after your mental health, knowing when help from others is needed and being aware of support networks.

AWARE (Approaches for Wellbeing and Mental Health Literacy: Research in Education)

This trial explored established school-based initiatives that focus on improving mental health awareness in Year 9 students (aged 13–14) in secondary schools.

Specifically, it tested the effectiveness of two school-based curriculum interventions that have been developed and trialled elsewhere in the world: Youth Aware of Mental Health (YAM) and The Mental Health and High School Curriculum Guide (The Guide).



YAM

YAM is a five-session mental health awareness programme. It brings in trained professionals from outside the school to guide discussion and role-play around mental health topics, including common mental health problems, self-harm and suicide.



The Guide

The Guide is a mental health literacy programme. It involves training teachers to deliver a six-session curriculum outlining common mental health problems, tackling stigma and improving knowledge of sources of support for mental health.

YAM and The Guide were randomly allocated to schools in the trial and other schools were randomly allocated to a ‘control group’. This control group was asked to simply continue with their usual practices.

Outcomes investigated

Education for Wellbeing tested whether the five interventions improved outcomes for young people. For some of the interventions the main outcome investigated was changes in intended help-seeking, and for others it was changes in emotional difficulties.[1] Outcomes were measured in the short (3–6 months post-intervention) and longer term (9–12 months after delivery began).

We also explored whether better implementation of the interventions led to improved effectiveness and whether findings differed for particular groups (such as pupils with special educational needs and those eligible for free school meals).

A series of qualitative studies investigated school staff and pupil experiences of the interventions.

In addition, we conducted cost-effectiveness analysis using:

1. young people's own reports of their quality of life (QoL)
2. information about costs incurred to deliver the intervention
3. information about other costs based on young people's reports of service use for problems relating to mental health or wellbeing.[2]

The QoL measure asks the children and young people in the study about their health-related QOL in several areas, such as worry, sadness, pain, tiredness and ability to take part in activities.

This QoL measure was used in the cost-effectiveness analysis, rather than the primary outcome measures related to intended help-seeking or emotional difficulties which were used for the main impact findings. Because of the different measures used, an intervention might not be shown to be effective in terms of the primary outcomes but may have had an impact on quality of life, which would mean it appears cost effective on this measure. In these cases, we would not recommend the intervention because of its lack of impact on the primary intended outcomes.

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[1] The term 'emotional difficulties' in this study relates to low mood and depressive symptoms.

[2] These findings are only reported for interventions that are recommended based on the impact and implementation analysis.

Findings

This report summarises the key findings across the two trials, drawing out the implications for school-based practice.

A full description of the studies and their findings can be found **online**.

Individual interventions:

Strategies for Safety and Wellbeing (SSW)



SSW improved intended help-seeking for mental health difficulties in primary schools, and had a high probability of being cost effective in the longer term. In secondary schools, SSW only improved intended help-seeking when the full number of sessions were delivered. It also had a high probability of being cost effective in the longer term.

Based on these findings, **SSW is a recommended intervention for primary schools**, although it may require 'refresher sessions' in subsequent years to sustain effects.

SSW also shows promise as an intervention in secondary schools, only if it is implemented in full.

Relaxation Techniques



Relaxation Techniques only reduced emotional difficulties when delivered frequently and consistently in primary schools. It also had a high probability of being cost effective in the longer term. However, in secondary schools the intervention had no overall effect and it negatively affected emotional difficulties when delivered frequently and consistently.

Based on these findings, **Relaxation Techniques shows promise as an intervention in primary schools if it is implemented consistently and regularly** on an ongoing basis. Relaxation Techniques is **not** a recommended intervention for secondary schools.

Mindfulness-Based Exercises

Mindfulness-Based Exercises led to reduced emotional difficulties when delivered very frequently and consistently in secondary school settings. The intervention also had a high probability of being cost effective in the longer term.

In primary schools, under some conditions, the intervention was associated with more emotional difficulties including for pupils with special educational needs and for pupils with higher levels of prior mental health symptoms. Emotional difficulties also increased in primary schools where the intervention was delivered with high frequency and consistency.

Based on these findings, **Mindfulness-Based Exercises shows promise as an intervention for secondary schools if it is implemented consistently and regularly** on an ongoing basis. Evidence from this study **does not recommend** Mindfulness-Based Exercises as an intervention for primary schools due to potential adverse effects with some groups of pupils or at high levels of implementation.

Potential negative effects for both relaxation techniques in secondary schools and mindfulness-based exercises in primary schools warrant further research exploration.



Youth Aware of Mental Health (YAM)



While there was some evidence of YAM reducing emotional difficulties when delivered in full, there were indications that it might increase emotional difficulties in the longer term. In addition, in schools where similar mental health programmes had not previously been available, YAM was associated with increased emotional difficulties.

Evidence from this study does not recommend YAM due to a lack of overall impact and the small longer-term increases in emotional difficulties observed.

These potential long-term negative effects require further exploration in future research studies. If schools implement this intervention, they should monitor the impact on participating young people carefully and ensure adequate support is available in the longer term.

The Guide



Although The Guide led to an initial improvement in intended help-seeking, there were indications that it might increase emotional difficulties in the longer term. Furthermore, there was not a high probability of cost effectiveness for The Guide.

As such, **evidence from this study does not recommend The Guide as an intervention for young people in secondary schools.**

As with YAM, the potential long-term negative effects warrant further research exploration. If the intervention is implemented, school staff should carefully monitor the impact on participating young people and ensure adequate support is available in the longer term.

Implementation

Many schools in this programme implemented the interventions well. In most cases, **high levels of implementation boosted the effects of interventions**. This boosting effect means that for promising interventions, poor implementation significantly undermined impact but high levels of implementation provided the maximum benefit.

In contrast, high levels of implementation actually led to worsening emotional difficulties in some cases (Mindfulness-Based Exercises in primary schools and Relaxation Techniques in secondary schools).

In the qualitative findings, school staff cited the importance of consistent and regular delivery of the interventions to maximise their impact and to embed them well. They noted the difficulties of trying to fit the interventions into busy school timetables. Children and young people preferred interactive, creative or practical activities related to the interventions. They liked having a variety of mindfulness exercises or relaxation activities to try and felt that having a quiet, calming atmosphere in the helped them engage with activities.

These implementation findings highlight that **it is crucial for schools to select interventions that are evidence based**. Furthermore, 'what works' can vary depending on the age of the pupils (primary versus secondary) so **care should be taken to select interventions that are age-appropriate.**

Different approaches to mental health knowledge and awareness

Several of the interventions included in this programme aimed to improve knowledge and understanding around mental health (YAM, The Guide and SSW). The approaches taken by these three interventions varied considerably.

The approach that achieved the most positive outcomes (including a lack of negative outcomes) focused less on discussion of mental disorder and severe mental health problems and more on normalising everyday emotions, identifying support networks and knowing where to get help if mental health problems become more difficult to manage. These kinds of approaches to mental health literacy warrant further investigation.

Embedding universal interventions in schools

Generally, the impact associated with these kinds of universal interventions is small and, in isolation, they are unlikely to achieve the shift needed to improve the outlook for children and young people's mental health.

In some cases, rolling out these kinds of interventions without complementary mental health strategies in place (e.g., access to appropriate mental health support for those who need it) may have unintended negative consequences. Therefore, we recommend such **approaches are not implemented in isolation but as part of a comprehensive and holistic approach to mental health support** and efforts to enable children and young people to thrive.

Findings from this study suggest that interventions may have different impacts at different ages and stages of development.

When selecting interventions to be used in schools, it is important to **check the evidence base to identify interventions that are known to be effective for the specific age and stage of education**. Given that educational settings, pupil populations and implementation can vary significantly from one school to the next, it is important to **monitor the impact of interventions to check they are providing the expected benefits.**



Conclusions

Education for Wellbeing was a large-scale research programme that examined the impact of five school-based interventions on children and young people's mental health.

Of the interventions tested, three show promise for use in schools: Strategies for Safety and Wellbeing in primary and secondary schools; Relaxation Techniques for primary schools and Mindfulness-Based Interventions for secondary schools. Our research highlights the importance of starting by selecting evidence-based and age-appropriate approaches, monitoring interventions in situ, to understand benefits as well as unintended consequences.

The research also shows that implementation can have a significant bearing on the effectiveness of interventions, and that individual interventions should be considered as one part of a wider picture of support available in schools.

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