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School students call for mental health education in the classroom

A new report published by the Anna Freud Centre today finds that 93% of over 3,000 young people surveyed in the UK want mental health to be brought into the classroom, and for conversations about mental health to be normalised in schools and FE colleges.¹

The report emerges as the coronavirus pandemic and closure of schools has had a profound impact on children and young people's mental health. In England, the proportion of children and young people with a probable mental health disorder has risen from one in eight in November 2017, up to one in six in July 2020.²

These findings are published as the Anna Freud Centre launches Mentally Healthy Schools for secondary schools and FE settings, the UK's first information and resource hub offering free, quality assured mental health resources and guidance for education professionals. This follows the success of the primary school hub which has been accessed over 1 million times.

The new report highlights the importance of trusted relationships in young people's lives as they face the challenges of growing up and amidst the pressures of the pandemic. Although some say they won't speak to anyone when they are struggling, many will turn to friends. Over 92% of respondents identify friendships as the main factor positively impacting their mental health.

Students said more mental health should be taught in schools as it is important for supporting their own and each other's mental health, because mental health matters, and to encourage people to self-support and avoid being isolated. As one student says: *"It is just as important as physical health and not talked about enough. People feel too ashamed to get help and this needs to change."*

Staff in schools and FE colleges are valued by students as trusted sources of information and support, with 52% of young people saying they would talk to a member of staff about their concerns. So while schools have made great advances in supporting their students, there is more work to be done to open up conversations about mental health. For those who would seek support from someone in school, they are most likely to turn to a trusted teacher.

¹ Age-based breakdowns are available in the report, "Working towards mentally healthy schools and colleges: the voice of students".

² NHS England (2020) [The Mental Health of Children and Young People in England 2020 report](#).

Our Patron: Her Royal Highness The Duchess of Cambridge

Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families is a company limited by guarantee, company number 03819888, and a registered charity, number 1077106.

Nearly a quarter of respondents said the main benefit of discussing mental health at school was that it is easier than talking to family, and one in five young people said that having a friend or peer for support was the main benefit of discussing mental health topics in school. The most important topic areas young people said they would like to learn more about were depression and anxiety, body image and identity.

The new findings are from a survey of over 3,000 young people in the UK aged between 11 and 19, who were asked about their mental health and wellbeing. All are within secondary schools or FE colleges. The survey was conducted between 16 November 2020 and 1 January 2021 by the Anna Freud Centre and its findings are reported in "Working towards mentally healthy schools and colleges: the voice of students".

Jaime Smith, Director of the Schools Programme at the Anna Freud Centre, says: "From these new findings, we hear the voices of students at this critical time for schools. They tell us that the current generation of children and young people, who are living through the pandemic, actively want to learn and talk more about mental health. We should embrace their openness as a genuine opportunity for schools to prioritise mental health and wellbeing".

She adds, "We need to support all school staff, parents and carers, governors, and students to work together to take a whole-school approach to mental health. This has never been more crucial than now, when it is essential that children and young people are able to turn to someone they can trust for support in times of distress – whether that includes their own friendship groups, school staff or the other trusted adults in their lives."

Dr Alex George, recently appointed by the Prime Minister as Youth Mental Health Ambassador, says: "This has been an incredibly challenging time for everyone, and schools and colleges play a critical role. Mental health problems among young people were rising before coronavirus, but successive lockdowns have increased problems".

He continues, "Following the return of schools, we expect many more children will need increased help. Without timely support, mental health distress in children and young people can have a devastating impact on their lives in the years to come. School staff will need help to fully support their students. It is only by all of us working together and talking openly about mental health that we can ensure all schools become mentally healthy. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to put mental health at the heart of schools and colleges."

Throughout the UK, there are already a range of policies in place for mental health education in schools and FE colleges. In England, these include The Green Paper on children and young people's mental health, as well as Health Education and Relationships Education (for primary settings) and Relationships and Sex Education (for secondary settings). These are now compulsory parts of broader PSHE education.

Mentally Healthy Schools was launched in 2018 by the Anna Freud Centre's Patron, Her Royal Highness The Duchess of Cambridge. It has been funded by The Royal Foundation as a legacy project of the Heads Together campaign.

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Notes to editors:

The full survey report, "Working towards mentally healthy schools and colleges: the voice of students" is available on request, embargoed until 00.01 on Monday 15 March.

About the Anna Freud Centre: www.annafreud.org

The Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families is a children's mental health charity with over 60 years' experience. We have developed and delivered pioneering mental health care since 1952. Our aim is to transform current mental health provision in the UK by improving the quality, accessibility and effectiveness of treatment. We believe that every child and their family should be at the heart of the care they receive, working in partnership with professionals. Our vision is a world where children and families are supported effectively to build on their strengths and to achieve their goals in life. The Anna Freud Centre currently reaches over one million children in schools.

About Mentally Healthy Schools: www.mentallyhealthyschools.org.uk

Mentally Healthy Schools brings together quality-assured information, advice and resources to help schools understand and promote children's mental health and wellbeing.

Mentally Healthy Schools was originally developed in partnership between the Anna Freud Centre, Young Minds, Place2Be and The Royal Foundation as a legacy project of the Heads Together campaign. From 1st April 2020 the Anna Freud Centre took full responsibility and ownership of the development and delivery of the Mentally Healthy Schools website including all content and quality assurance of associated resources.

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