



Advice and information about additional support for learning

A Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy for Scotland

Enquire response

September 2022

Enquire is the Scottish advice service for additional support for learning. We are funded by the Scottish Government and managed by Children in Scotland. Our vision is that all children in Scotland are supported, included, and listened to throughout their education.

Our contribution to making this a reality is to provide advice and information to children, young people parents, carer and professionals about children's rights to additional support for learning and how to work together to get the right support in place.

Part 9

Children, Young People and Families' Mental Health

9.1 What should our priorities be when supporting the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people, their parents and families?

Enquire welcomes this updated Mental Health Strategy consultation. Based on the experiences of the families and professionals we hear from our priorities are as follows:

- Immediate increase in capacity for supporting children with additional support in school to avoid mental health issues escalating. What specific support is needed should be decided at local level to meet the needs of individual school's pupil population.
- Consideration of the impact of COVID on children and young people and the support that can most effectively support them.

- Increased capacity for CAMHS services to support children experiencing mental health difficulties and to reduce waiting times for CAMHS treatment.
- Support for families of children struggling with mental health issues
- Regarding the specific needs of autistic children missing school due to anxiety and other mental health difficulties we would recommend consideration is given to the nine calls contained in the Not Included, Not Engaged, Not Involved (NINENI) report from 2018. The NINENI report outlined improvements needed to address the substantial number of autistic children missing school – many of them due to anxiety and mental health issues.

9.2 Is there anything else you'd like to tell us about this, whether you're answering as an individual or on behalf of an organisation?

As the Scottish advice service for additional support for learning we regularly hear from parents and carers about the challenges children are experiencing because of mental health difficulties. We hear from families of children whose mental health difficulties are impacting their learning, families whose children may have other additional support needs (such as Autism and ADHD) and who are struggling with their mental health and families who feel an aspect of education is causing or part of their children's mental health difficulties.

Our concerns

- The number of children experiencing mental health difficulties is increasing.

Statistics from the Scottish Government show a record number of pupils are being identified as having additional support needs. (232,753 + 92% since 2012) This represents 33% of the pupil population. Of those, the number of children reported as having additional support needs due to mental health issues is rising exponentially. Twelve in every 1,000 pupils are reported as having additional support needs due to mental health issues – this is four times more than the number in 2012. Following the COVID pandemic, the number of children struggling with mental health difficulties is likely to be significantly higher than reported.

- Lack of support

Whilst these figures may highlight that more children and young people's additional support and mental health needs are being identified, we are aware that too often families who contact us are struggling to access mental health support for their children and themselves.

- Children with additional support needs such as autism are missing school due to the lack of support with mental health issues

We are aware from our own enquiries and those of other support services that a substantial number of autistic children are missing school due to a range of factors but that mental health issues are often cited as a primary cause of a child not attending school. The NINENI report in 2018 highlighted that from a sample of 1,417 children 34% were missing school. We do not believe that this picture has improved following COVID.

What we hear

Our helpline receives a considerable number of calls where mental health is a factor. In the last year (2021/22), Enquire's helpline team responded to enquiries about 1,836 children and young people via our phone, webchat and email helpline service. Of these enquiries:

- 304 (16.4%) enquires mentioned anxiety as one of the factors giving rise to the child's additional support needs. A total of 219 enquiries (12%) mentioned a mental health issue as a factor¹.

- In 10% of our enquiries, callers raised issues of a child's school attendance being impacted by their mental ill health. In 18% of our enquiries, an issue around a child's attendance due to school-related anxiety was raised.

- Of the 502 enquiries we had where a child was out of school², 33% (167) of these children were experiencing anxiety and 25% (124) had a mental health issue. After autism, anxiety and other mental health issues were the second and third most common reasons for a child out of school's additional support needs.

Common themes in calls concerning mental health

Several common themes have emerged from the enquiries we receive. These apply to children struggling with mental health issues alone, as well as those with other additional support needs such as autism.

We often hear about:

- children who are struggling to cope in school or are so anxious they are unable to attend school

¹ Anxiety was the second most common factor for additional support need in our calls after autism (898/ 49% of calls) and Mental health issue 5th. It's important to be aware in our recording that some young people may have multiple factors giving rise to their additional support needs. For example a child may be recorded as having mental health issues, anxiety and autism.

² We record a child as 'out of school' where they are out of school but not formally excluded. For example: a child is unlawfully excluded, on part-time education, school refusing, absent through ill health or not in school due to suitability of placement

- children who are self-harming and, in some distressing situations, feeling suicidal
- children who are unable to attend school due to their mental health but who are not deemed sufficiently mentally unwell to receive support from CAMHS services
- children being accepted for CAMHS treatment but having to wait for extended periods before support is put in place
- lengthy delays for diagnosis of autism and ADHD and children being mentally unwell during this time.
- parents and carers experiencing mental health difficulties including anxiety and depression due to the situation with their child's education.

Whilst the number of children experiencing mental health issues is concerning in and of itself, we are particularly concerned about the frequency of enquiries where a child's experience in school appears to be causing or adding to a child's poor mental health. The type of issues that are frequently mentioned in enquiries of this nature include:

- children and families feeling that the school does not understand their needs
- children becoming upset or distressed in class and inadequate support being offered by the school
- sensory overload for pupils attending mainstream schools leading to inability to attend school due to anxiety
- bullying
- children being taught in isolation
- an upsetting incident that the child finds difficult to recover from
- a child being sent home (unlawfully excluded) or being put on a part-time table and being too anxious to return.
- children have found it difficult to return to school after lockdown due to anxiety.

Summary

Whilst we fully support the development of the longer-term mental health strategy, we feel immediate action is required to enhance services for children with mental health issues and provision of support for families whose children are not able to access school due to mental health issues to avoid family breakdown, parental mental health difficulties and employment issues.

We are concerned that there is not sufficient capacity within schools to meet the individual needs of pupils with additional support needs including mental health issues. The Additional Support for Learning Review published in 2020 highlighted that there is a disconnect between the aspirations of additional support for learning legislation and the lived experience of children and young people and their families. We are also aware that the COVID

pandemic has, in some situations, exacerbated pre-existing difficult situations. Some children's anxiety levels increased due to changes that took place during the pandemic including the closure of schools and the introduction of safety measures. Consideration should be given to additional support being offered to children and young people in this situation.

We are also concerned about the impact of the lack of services or extended waiting times for treatment for children and young people. In extreme cases, where children are unable to attend school for extended periods due to their mental health, we hear from parents and carers who are unable to work which can impact their mental health and the well-being of other children in the family. There should be a focus on early intervention and support with children and young people in crisis having access to immediate help and support.

We hear about a lack of awareness and training about how to support the mental health needs of autistic children and young people and other additional support needs such as ADHD, including how their anxiety may manifest itself and how to support them. This is particularly difficult if the child is masking their behaviour in school or is not attending school. We often hear from parents that they are asked to "just get the child into school and support will be provided" but the child is not well enough to manage into school.

We also hear of a lack of support for families whose children are struggling with mental health. Families feel they are left to cope with the situation on their own and do not know how to support their children.

Case studies from our helpline illustrating the key themes raised in our response

Case study 1

Parent called the helpline as they are concerned about their child (5) who is undiagnosed autistic and has anxiety about school. Child has missed a lot of Primary one and the parent wants their child to repeat the year due to this. Parent says the school have said no and while not offering any support themselves advised the parent takes a course, to help the parent with their child's needs. According to the parent school said that they do not offer behavioural/emotional support and said that parent should arrange that privately. School also said that even if the child gets a diagnosis, nothing will change. Parent says child masks distress at school and said "[child] is absolutely broken at home", "[child] holds it together at school and after school just cries the whole time".

Case study 2

"Carer called about their young person who is 14 and has been struggling with their mental health since before the pandemic. They suffered from bullying before the pandemic and are now self-harming and experiencing depression. They do not leave their room. They have not been in school for some time. Parent raised concerns earlier in the year but says school were not interested and did not offer any support or work to do at home. In the past few months, the young person has been working with CAMHS and their CAMHS worker has been trying to contact the school multiple times, but no one at the school has been responding. Now the school term has started and again, the young person has not attended, the pastoral care teacher has finally phoned and asked for a meeting with the carer. "

Case study 3

Parent of autistic 15-year-old who is struggling to attend school contacted the helpline. The parent explained the young person is very quiet and masks constantly at school - which the school say they are aware of. The young person struggled with their mental health, suicidal ideation and addiction due to anxiety, much of which is around school. The caller says currently school are insistent the young person has access to support - but only if the young person ask for it. However, parent explained due to their anxiety, their young person cannot ask themselves for support when they are in school and class. Parent said they felt 'gaslighted' by the school as they keep offering their child support which they are unable to access as they are too anxious to ask for.

Case study 4

Caller's child is in P6 and really struggling at school. On waiting lists for autism assessment and CAMHS support for anxiety. Child's school attendance is around 70%. They are losing weight as not eating when anxious. Parent explained school has recently referred the family to social work due to child's attendance issues. Parent has been asking for meeting for some time with the school (they've never had an in person meeting out with a parents evening). One was finally arranged for before the Oct break, but school cancelled as the deputy head teacher was sick and there has been no offer to rearrange the meeting. Parent says they feel school have no time or availability to discuss their child's needs.

Case study 5

Caller phoning about a CAMHS report that said their child requires full time 1:1 supervision to keep the child and others safe. Caller explained school have told them this is not possible as 'no child in the school has 1:1'. They also said that although there is a learning support worker in the class, due to covid and the need for staggered breaks, they will not always be there.

Case study 6

Caller was a parent of a child in P1 with anxiety, behaviour challenges, experience of bullying in nursery, home life issues with parental mental health and moving homes due to neighbour issues. Caller explained they have been struggling as a family with their child being on part-time timetable for some time now. Also, even when in school, parent is repeatedly being calling to come collect them. After feeling they were not getting anywhere with school parent had contacted Educational Psychology to explain she's struggling to cope and they had arranged a meeting with them and school for 4 weeks time. Parent feels that's too long to wait as their child is missing out on their education in the meantime and the parent is still struggling to cope.

Case study 7

Call from a parent seeking advice about their child who is in S4. The caller explained that prior to covid their child was already struggling with anxiety. Over the covid school closures and then the return to school their child's anxiety has gotten significantly worse. Caller explained that despite CAMHS and others involvement the young person is missing out on a significant amount of their education and is falling further and further behind.

9.3 What things do you feel have the biggest impact on children and young people's mental health?

The Inclusion Ambassador Network was established to ensure the views of young people with additional support needs are heard in discussions about education policy. The Ambassadors are a group of secondary school-aged pupils who have a range of additional support needs and attend a variety of school provision.

In various consultations they have been involved in (ASL Review, GTCS and Pupil Support Staff standards) the Ambassadors have made very clear the importance children and young people place on feeling seen, listened to and understood. It is important that they are involved in both service development more broadly and in decisions about their own support in school.

The Ambassadors highlighted that having a positive relationship with trusted school staff who understand their individual needs can make an enormous impact on their mental well-being. Friendships and relationships with their peers also play into how secure and confident they feel in school.

9.4 Is there anything else you'd like to tell us about this, whether you're answering as an individual or on behalf of an organisation?