
Peer Education Project



Information sheet for
parents and carers



What is the Peer Education Project?

The Peer Education Project is made up of five mental health and wellbeing lessons, delivered to younger pupils by their older peers. The lessons introduce the idea of mental health as existing on a spectrum that changes over time and in response to life experiences. The lessons also give pupils the skills to improve and maintain their own wellbeing, while supporting their friends with their mental health.



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Project overview

How was the project developed?

The project began in 2015 and was inspired by the idea that young people with mental health problems often feel the best support and advice comes from their school peers.

Since then, we have developed and updated the lesson materials in consultation with pupils and school staff in schools around the UK. We frequently review the project content to make sure it reflects the most up-to-date knowledge about mental health.

Why is the project needed?

Recent studies suggest that 1 in 6 children and young people (5-16 years) are identified as having a probable mental health disorder. Alongside this, we know that 50% of all mental health problems start before the age of 14, and 75% by the age of 24.

While there are many things that can affect a young person's mental health, having negative beliefs about seeking help around mental health can make it difficult for young people to ask for the right support. Making sure that mental health is taught in school can help young people understand how and when to seek help for their mental health, and learning from older pupils can help them feel more comfortable opening up if they have worries or concerns.

How does the project work?

Schools taking part in the Peer Education Project will select a group of Peer Educators from amongst their older pupils. Peer Educators will receive training from school staff in the mental health content, as well as how to deliver the five lessons to younger pupils or "Peer Learners". Peer Educators work in pairs or small groups to deliver the lessons to Peer Learners, with supervision from a class teacher.

Each Peer Educator receives a digital and/or printed handbook with detailed lesson plans for each session. Peer Learners can receive a workbook that contains activities and information to support the lessons.



How do pupils benefit?

The Peer Education Project has been evaluated in each year that it has been running. The project evaluations have consistently found that both Peer Learners and Peer Educators benefit from taking part in the project.

An evaluation carried out in 2016/17 by the Anna Freud Centre for Children and Families found that:

- Peer Learners reported significant improvement in their knowledge and understanding of key mental health words and phrases after completing the peer education lessons.
- Both Peer Educators and Peer Learners reported improved knowledge about seeking help for their mental health when it is needed.
- 98% of Peer Educators and 88% of Peer Learners said they would 'definitely' or 'maybe' recommend that other students take part.
- 88% of Peer Educators and 79% of Peer Learners said that the topics covered were 'definitely' or 'somewhat' relevant for them.



What does the project teach?

The project lessons introduce the topic of mental health and wellbeing, including:

- What 'mental health' is and how it can change depending on our circumstances and experiences.
- Why mental health problems happen, including risk and protective factors, and the common myths around mental health.
- What the tips for good mental health are and how they can improve our mental health and wellbeing.
- What mental health 'first aid' skills we can use when we are not feeling our best.
- How we can support those around us and where we can ask for help if we need it.

Each of the five lessons follows the same structure.

1. They begin with a short **mindfulness exercise**, followed by an **icebreaker**.
2. After an **introduction to the topic** by the Peer Educators, the bulk of the lesson time is devoted to an interactive activity.
3. Pupils are encouraged to think about how they can **share the learning**, before finally taking part in a **reflection** on the lesson.
4. Finally, each lesson finishes with another short **mindfulness exercise**.



How can I support good mental health at home?

Once the project ends, pupils should have a better understanding of what mental health is, how to stay well, and some ideas for how they can get help when they or their peers need it.

However, they might still have questions about mental health. There will also be stressful situations throughout their school journey, such as exams and friendship breakdowns, when they might need extra help to feel happy and healthy.

Parents and carers can support their children with their mental health in all sorts of ways. What a child needs will be different depending on a range of factors, including their age, any recent changes in their life, their personality, etc.

You might like to familiarise yourself with some of the main messages your child will have learned in the project and remind your child of them occasionally, for example:

- **Mental health is not fixed throughout our lives.** Just like physical health, mental health can change depending on what is happening to us and as we move through different stages of life.
- **Being mentally healthy does not mean we never experience problems or difficulties.** Instead, it means we are able to cope with difficult experiences and that we feel able to enjoy the good times.
- **There are things we can do to maintain and improve our mental health**
- these “tips for good mental health” can become part of our daily routine at home.



What are some practical ways to build good mental health habits?

Our everyday habits are important to our mental health, just as they are to our physical health. Here are a few suggestions to help your child develop good habits.

- **Model good habits yourself** - children often learn from copying what they see around them. If you are taking care of your own mental health, it's easier for them to see what good habits look like.
- **Think about phone usage** – both theirs and yours. We don't fully understand the impact of social media on our mental health, but using phones and laptops seems to have an impact on our sleep, which is important to our mental health. We're also more likely to be actively listening to one another if we're not distracted by technology.
- **Think about different ways that young people tell us how they're feeling** – it's not always verbal. Building up a picture of what is normal for your child makes it easier to notice when things are changing, and if this might be a sign that they're struggling.



When times get tough...

Sometimes we might worry about our child's mental health. Whilst you can always speak to your GP to get the right help, here are a few things you can do if you're worried.

- **Let your child know that you're concerned.**

Explain what makes you feel that way, e.g. if you've noticed they haven't been interested in things they usually like.

- **Use the activities that you do together to have conversations about how they are doing.**

Talking whilst doing something together, side-by-side, such as cooking, can make sharing their feelings easier than a face-to-face conversation.

- **Let them know that it's normal and nothing to be ashamed of.**

It might help to remind them that mental health exists on a spectrum and it is common for young people to experience mental health problems at times; there are ways to manage and support good mental health and wellbeing.

- **Use their language.**

If they describe "feeling down" rather than "depression", try and relate on those terms.

- **Talk to your doctor.**

If you're worried about your own mental health, or your child's, your GP is the first point of contact to get more help.

These are just a few suggestions to help you think about how to support your child. You can find out more about the topics covered in this guide, as well as getting help and support from the links on the 'Find out more' page of this booklet.



Find out more...

- The **Mental Health Foundation** website has a useful A-Z of information on key mental health topics: <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/a-to-z>.
- **Mind** have a whole range of information and support for children and parents on their website: <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/for-young-people>. They offer an infoline phone service and an online support community.
- **Young Minds** provide information for young people and their parents about mental health, seeking treatment, and the mental health system: <https://youngminds.org.uk>. They also have the Young Minds Crisis Messenger text service that can be reached by texting YM to 85258 if you need urgent help.
- **Time to Change** is a national campaign to tackle mental health stigma: <https://www.time-to-change.org.uk>.
- The **NHS** website is a useful place to find out about all kinds of illnesses, including mental health problems such as anxiety and depression: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression>.
- **Mind Ed by Health Education England** is a hub for teachers, families, and other professionals that brings together e-learning materials about the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people: <https://www.minded.org.uk>.
- **The Royal College of Psychiatrists** has factsheets with videos and case studies about different mental health problems: <https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mental-health/parents-and-young-people>.
- **Headspace** has information about the benefits of mindfulness and some mindfulness exercises that you can access for free at: <https://www.headspace.com>. Their YouTube channel also has some useful audio and video clips about different conditions and people's experiences: <https://www.youtube.com/user/Getsomeheadspace>.





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