

Presentation

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Link for Presentation : [Meeting with Lauren Watts \(2507746\)-20260621 202311-Meeting Recording.mp4](#)

The Significance of Mental Health in Children

Introduction

Mental health is increasingly recognised as one of the most important aspects of children's overall health and wellbeing. According to the NSPCC (2025) "mental health is an individual's cognitive, behavioural and emotional wellbeing". It affects how people think, feel, behave, perceive different challenges in life and their relationships. Mental health exists on a "complex continuum, which is experienced differently from. One person to the next" (World Health Organisation, 2022). Although mental health is usually regarded with negative connotations as it is mainly highlighted as a human detriment rather than in a positive light. The World Health Organisation (2022) further argues that positive mental health should be viewed within a wider social and cultural context and includes an individual's ability to function effectively and contribute positively to society.

For young children, mental health is particularly important because the early years represents a critical period of physical, emotional, social and cognitive development. During this stage, children's brains are developing rapidly, and experiences can have a

lasting influence on future outcomes. Research on neurodevelopment highlights that the period from pregnancy to early childhood is characterised by rapid brain growth, synapse formation and neural plasticity, making children particularly sensitive to both positive and adverse experiences (Mendez et al., 2024). Conversely, poor mental health may affect children's behaviour, educational achievement, relationships and physical wellbeing. Howard, Burton and Levermore (2020) argue that children's emotional wellbeing is closely linked to their ability to participate effectively in education, develop positive social relationships and achieve favourable long-term outcomes.

In recent years, there have been rising concerns regarding children's mental health have increased significantly across the United Kingdom. NHS England (2023) reported that one in five children and young people aged 8 to 25 had a probable mental disorder in 2023, demonstrating a substantial increase in mental health difficulties compared with previous years. This rise in mental health disorders have highlighted the need for effective prevention, early intervention and accessible support services.

Mental health in children can be caused by a variety of factors, genetics, home environment, tragedies and

Why is it significant?

Mental health in young people is very significant because it underpins every aspect of a child's development, including their emotional wellbeing, physical health, education and future life opportunities. Promoting young people's wellbeing is a key part of keeping them safe, helping them develop and ensuring they have a positive outcome into adulthood (Department for Education, 2023). The NSPCC (2025) states that mental health in children is caused by a variety of factors including, "abuse and neglect, family circumstances, environment, stress, genetics and social isolation". They further state that "negative experiences can adversely affect a child's mental health, just as positive experiences can improve it".

Kutcher and Venn (2008) emphasise how significant mental health is in children as they state that if it goes untreated, "mental health disorders can impede all aspects of health" and "addressing mental health problems early in life can lead to a decrease in emotional and behavioural problems". When children are impacted with a decline in mental health and not treated, they cannot live their optimal life and can become stagnant in all aspects of their future outcomes.

Research demonstrate that mental health difficulties experienced during childhood often continue into adulthood. The KiGGS longitudinal study found that children who experience internalising problems such as anxiety and depression or externalising problems such as aggression and behavioural difficulties, are significantly more likely to experience poorer mental health, lower life satisfaction and reduced quality of life in adulthood (Shlack et al., 2021). Furthermore, the study concluded that more than half of adult mental health disorders begin during childhood, emphasising the importance of early identification and intervention.

The prevalence of childhood mental health conditions has increased considerably in recent years. The Children's Commissioner for England (2025) reported that the amount

of children with a probable mental health condition increased from 12.5% in 2017 to 20.3% in 2023. This means that approximately one in every five children is likely to experience a mental health condition (NHS, 2025). The report suggests that this increase is associated with several factors, including the COVID-19 pandemic, increasing child poverty, financial pressures related to the cost of living crisis and growing inequalities in access to support services.

Mental health difficulties in children are rarely caused by one single factor. Research suggests they develop through the interaction of biological, psychological and environmental influences. Neurodevelopmental research explains that brain development is highly sensitive during the first few years of life as it is influenced by genetics, maternal health and children's experiences (Subramanyam et al., 2024). The period from pregnancy to the first two years of life is particularly important, as rapid brain growth, neural plasticity, synapse formation and myelination support children's cognitive, emotional and social development. Positive experiences, such as secure relationships and nurturing environments strengthen neural pathways associated with emotional regulation and resilience (Subramanyam et al., 2024). Consequently, understanding how early experiences influence brain development reinforces the need for practitioners to promote children's mental health through early intervention, nurturing relationships and supportive environments.

Family relationships are one of the strongest influences on children's mental health. Attachment theory suggests that the quality of relationships between children and primary caregivers during the first two years of life is fundamental to emotional development (Bretherton, 1992). Children who experience consistent and responsive caregiving are more likely to develop secure attachments, promoting emotional security, confidence and resilience. In contrast, neglectful or inconsistent caregiving can lead to insecure attachment, increasing the risk of anxiety, emotional dysregulation and behavioural difficulties (Bailham and Harper, 2004).

Who tells us

Children's mental health is recognised as a priority by a range of organisations, services and legislations that provide guidance for. Supporting children and families. One of the main specialist services is Child and Adolescent mental Health Services (CAMHS). According to the NHS (2023), CAMHS provides assessments and treatment for children experiencing a range of mental health difficulties such as anxiety, depression, trauma, eating disorders and behavioural difficulties. CAMHS also works collaboratively with families, schools and healthcare professionals to ensure children receive appropriate support based on their individual needs. However, recent increase of mental health diagnosis has resulted in a demand for these services and has longer waiting times, reinforcing the importance of preventative support for young people and children.

Children's mental health is also supported through legislation and educational policy. "Successive Governments have pledged to improve mental health support for children and young people" due to the rising numbers in 2023 showing that 445,000 people were in contact with children and young people's mental health services (Parkin and Long, 2024). The Children's Act (1989) and the Mental Health Act (1983) places a legal duty on professionals to safeguard and promote children's welfare, including emotional wellbeing (Northumberland, Tyne and Wear NHS Foundation Trust, 2016). In addition, the Early Years Foundation Stage (Department for Education, 2024) identifies that practitioners should promote good health for children which includes mental health as

there should be a priority in making sure the wellbeing of children is at an exceptional level in order for children to progress successfully in the future.

Despite the availability of specialist services, access to those services remains a significant concern. The Children's Commissioner for England (2025) reported that one in five children had a probable mental health condition in 2023, yet many children were unable to access treatment following referral due to the outstanding amount in comparison to practitioners available to help. This highlights the importance of early identification and timely intervention to prevent mental health difficulties from escalating and enforcing more practitioners in place to help this wide set of individuals.

Another key organisation that highlights the importance of children and young people's mental health is YoungMinds, which is a UK based mental health charity. YoungMinds (2024) further emphasises that mental health problems among children are increasing and becoming a priority in our society as academic pressure, social media use and family difficulties contribute to these rising levels of anxiety and depression. Due to the struggle of availability within CAMHS it is therefore noticed that there is an increasing need for early intervention, school-based support and increased funding for mental health services. This evidence supports the view that children's mental health is a national priority that requires coordinated action from both statutory services and voluntary organisations.

Application

Promoting children's mental health requires a proactive approach that focuses on prevention, early support and collaborative working. Research suggests that early intervention is one of the most effective ways to improve children's long term mental

health outcomes (Appleton et al., 2025). By using early years practitioners in order to observe children's behaviour, recognise changes in emotional wellbeing and identify concerns before they become more serious allows for children to be diagnosed and helped more effectively and sooner. By responding early and referring children to appropriate services when necessary, practitioners can reduce the long-term impact of mental health difficulties.

Developing emotional literacy is another important strategy for promoting children's mental health. Practitioners can encourage children to recognise, understand and express their emotions through activities such as story telling, role play, emotion cards and everyday discussions. Developing these skills helps children improve self-regulation, build resilience and form positive relationships (Rattigan, 2025). Rees (2013) found that higher levels of emotional literacy were associated with better mental health, greater resilience and improved educational outcomes, highlighted the importance of embedding emotional literacy into everyday early years practice.

Creating positive learning environments also plays a vital role in promoting wellbeing. The early Years Foundation Stage (Department of Education, 2024) highlights the importance of providing safe, inclusive and nurturing environments where children feel secure, valued and supported. Consistent routines, positive relationships and opportunities for play help children develop confidence and emotional security. Research suggests that positive learning environments are characterised by supportive relationships, a sense of belonging and an inclusive culture, all of which contribute to emotional wellbeing and engagement in learning (Rusticus et al., 2022).

Piaget's Cognitive Developmental theory suggests that children progress through distinct stages of cognitive development, meaning they understand emotions, relationships and the world differently as they mature (Madanagopal, 2020). Practitioners should therefore adapt communication, play experiences and emotional support to each child's developmental stage, enabling children to understand and express their emotions effectively.

Where children require additional support, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) provide specialist assessment and intervention for conditions including anxiety, depression, behavioural difficulties and trauma (NHS, 2025). Effective support relies on multi-agency working, with practitioners collaborating alongside parents, health visitors, educational psychologists, SENDCOs and CAMHS to ensure children's needs are met through coordinated care.

Conclusion

Mental health is a fundamental aspect of children's overall health and wellbeing, influencing their emotional, social and cognitive development. As discussed, mental health difficulties can arise from a range of biological psychological and environmental factors, highlighting the importance of recognising risks early. Evidence from research, legislation and organisations such as the World Health Organisation, NSPCC, CAMHS and the Children's Commissioner demonstrates that promoting children's mental health is a national priority. Early years practitioners have a key role in creating nurturing environments, building secure relationships and working collaboratively with families and other professionals. Through early intervention and evidence-based practice, practitioners can help children develop the resilience and emotional wellbeing needed to achieve positive outcomes throughout childhood and later life.

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