

News story: One of the largest mental health trials launches in schools

Hundreds of children and young people will learn how to use a range of innovative techniques to promote good mental health through one of the largest studies in the world of its kind.

To mark Children's Mental Health Week (4-10 February), the Education Secretary Damian Hinds announces that up to 370 schools in England will take part in a series of trials testing different approaches to supporting young people's mental health.

Children will benefit from mindfulness exercises, relaxation techniques and breathing exercises to help them regulate their emotions, alongside pupil sessions with mental health experts. The study will run until 2021 and aims to give schools new, robust evidence about what works best for their students' mental health and wellbeing.

Mr Hinds also confirmed the nine areas across the country that will trial new high-quality mental health assessments for young people entering care, helping them get the support they need to meet their individual needs at a time when they are more vulnerable.

Education Secretary Damian Hinds said:

As a society, we are much more open about our mental health than ever before, but the modern world has brought new pressures for children, while potentially making others worse.

Schools and teachers don't have all the answers, nor could they, but we know they can play a special role which is why we have launched one of the biggest mental health trials in schools. These trials are key to improving our understanding of how practical, simple advice can help young people cope with the pressures they face.

To support this, we're introducing compulsory health education in all schools, within which children will start to be introduced gradually to issues around mental health, wellbeing and happiness right from the start of primary school.

We are rolling out significant additional resources to schools to improve mental health provision at an earlier stage through the Government's Green Paper proposals, including awareness of 'mental health first aid' techniques and teams of trained mental health staff to work with and in schools.

Led by the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families in

partnership with University College London, the school study is now in its second wave and recruiting more primary and secondary schools to join.

The trials are designed to explore the impact of different approaches at school, in recognition of the significant time children spend at school and the important role teachers can play in recognising changes in pupils' behaviour or mood.

Health Secretary Matt Hancock said:

I want to see all children and young people have the opportunity to flourish – and protecting their mental health is vital to this.

I'm incredibly excited by this initiative, which will help young people better understand their mental health and identify when they need to ask for help sooner.

To explore what works in schools to support young people's mental wellbeing, the trials will test five different approaches. These include:

- Two approaches focused on increasing awareness in secondary schools through short information sessions either led by a specialist instructor or by trained teachers. These include a set of tools to increase understanding of mental health and mental disorders among both pupils and teachers.
- Three approaches in primary and secondary schools that focus on lighter-touch approaches such as exercises drawn from mindfulness practice, breathing exercises and muscle relaxation techniques and recognising the importance of support networks including among their own peers.

The mental health assessment pilots, also run by the Anna Freud Centre, will look at providing improved mental health assessments for children entering the care system. Currently an estimated half of all children in care meet the criteria for a possible mental health disorder, compared to one in ten children outside the care system, so these pilots – backed by £1 million announced last year – will identify the mental health and broader wellbeing needs of these children, including whether a referral to a more specialist service is needed.

The areas include two of the Government's Opportunity Areas Doncaster and the North Yorkshire Coast, where the programme will examine which professionals should be involved in the assessment and develop best practice that ensures every child's individual needs are at the centre of the process.

Dr Jessica Deighton from the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families said:

We know schools have a strong commitment to supporting children's mental health and wellbeing but have had little clear guidance about the best ways to approach this. We want children and young

people, parents and teachers to be confident that mental health in schools has an absolutely robust evidence base.

This world leading research which, we at the Anna Freud Centre are proud to be leading, will provide that and has the potential to transform mental health promotion in schools across England. We also need to better identify the mental health needs of the most vulnerable children in society, particularly children in the care system, and an improved mental health framework will greatly help.

The announcements build on the Government's wider investment in support for children's mental health in schools, including bringing in specialist support teams with the mental health trailblazers programme, to ensure every young person is given the tools to thrive despite challenges they may face growing up.

Catherine Roche, Place2Be CEO said:

We welcome these trials in continuing to build an evidence base of effective ways to make a real difference to children's mental health. We know from Place2Be's work in schools across the UK the importance of working not only with children and young people, but in partnership with teachers, parents, and the wider community to promote mental health and life-long resilience.

Action for Children's director of policy and campaigns, Imran Hussain, said:

Every day our frontline services see children and teenagers struggling to get to grips with how they fit into the increasingly complex modern world – contending with things like intense pressure at school, bullying or problems at home, all while being bombarded by social media.

It's really encouraging to see the Government taking action to tackle the children's mental health crisis by trialling different approaches in schools. We know from our own school programmes how vital it is to step in early with support to stop problems in their tracks. Crucially, services like these can lessen the anxiety, pain and anguish that some teens go through, but also reduce their need for intensive support further down the line.