



# Joint Statement on Children and Young People's Mental Health and Wellbeing: November 2025

*Public Health Wales (PHW) brought together experts in children and young people's mental health to review data and evidence on the patterns of mental health difficulties among children and young people in Wales, the UK and globally. The expert group considered evidence on what might be contributing to changing patterns and have jointly developed this statement. Young people were involved through engagement with members of Cardiff University's Wolfson Centre Youth Advisory Group who provided a lived experience review and feedback on what matters to them.*

## Why does children and young people's mental health matter?

The majority of life-time mental health disorders are established during adolescence.<sup>1</sup> Understanding patterns of poor mental health among children and young people, and factors driving them, is essential for taking effective action to reduce risk factors and providing support for those that need it.

Good mental health and wellbeing is essential for the overall health, development, and prospects of all children and young people. Giving every child the best start in life ensures they not only thrive today but lead the strong, resilient communities of tomorrow.

Every child has the right to grow up in environments that protect them from harm, help them flourish and build strong foundations for a healthy, fulfilling adult life.

## What trends are we seeing in youth mental health?

Over the past two decades, many countries have seen rising mental health difficulties among children and young people, particularly in emotional difficulties such as anxiety and depression. Wales is no exception.

Around 1 in 5 children and young people aged 8 to 24 in Wales were estimated to have a diagnosable mental health condition in 2023<sup>2</sup>, compared with 1 in 10 in 2004<sup>2</sup>. Prevalence rises with age and equates to an estimated 135,500 eight to 24 year olds in Wales in 2025:<sup>3</sup>

- 1 in 6 aged 8 to 10 years
- 1 in 5 aged 11 to 16 years
- 1 in 4 aged 17 to 24.

If prevalence remains the same the numbers of children and young people with diagnosable mental health conditions is likely to increase to 145,000 by 2035.

<sup>1</sup> Solmi M, Radua J, Olivola M, Croce E, Soardo L, Salazar de Pablo G, et al. Age at onset of mental disorders worldwide: large-scale meta-analysis of 192 epidemiological studies. *Mol Psychiatry*. 2022;27(1):281–95. doi:10.1038/s41380-021-01161-7. PMID: 34079068; PMCID: PMC8960395.

<sup>2</sup> <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-great-britain-2004>

<sup>3</sup> Based on findings from on the School Health Research Network survey from Wales 2014-2023 and the Mental Health of Children and Young People in England Survey from 2004 and 2023.



Emotional difficulties are now emerging earlier and persisting into early adulthood<sup>4</sup>. The COVID-19 pandemic worsened this trend, but the decline began before this – with big increases in emotional difficulties since at least 2010.

### **What additional mental health difficulties are being observed?**

Increases have also been seen in behavioural difficulties. In addition, there are growing concerns about body image, eating disorders, and self-harm—further signs of distress among children and young people.

While there is growing awareness of neurodevelopmental conditions, such as Autism and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, population studies suggest rates have remained relatively stable over time.<sup>5,6</sup> This continues to be an area of focus for researchers and health services given increasing demand for diagnosis and support for these conditions.

### **Who is most affected?**

Children and young people from any background can experience mental health difficulties. However certain groups are disproportionately affected. Higher rates of mental health difficulties are seen among particular groups, including those who experience life stressors such as poverty, bullying or maltreatment, racism or discrimination, are neurodivergent, trans or gender-diverse, care-experienced or have a parent with mental health problems.

Inequalities in mental health outcomes have deepened in recent years, with a larger growth in mental health difficulties among children and young people from less affluent backgrounds.<sup>7,8</sup>

The increase in emotional difficulties has been seen across all genders, with the greatest need among females and minority gender identities.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Armitage JM, Kwong ASF, Tseliou F, Sellers R, Blakey R, Anthony R, et al. Cross-cohort change in parent-reported emotional problem trajectories across childhood and adolescence in the UK. *Lancet Psychiatry*. 2023;10(7):509–17. doi:10.1016/S2215-0366(23)00175-X.

<sup>5</sup> Polanczyk GV, Willcutt EG, Salum GA, Kieling C, Rohde LA. ADHD prevalence estimates across three decades: an updated systematic review and meta-regression analysis. *Int J Epidemiol* [Internet]. 2014 Apr;43(2):434–42. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ije/dyt261>

<sup>6</sup> Martin AF, Rubin GJ, Rogers MB, Wessely S, Greenberg N, Hall CE, Pitt A, Ellis Logan P, Lucas R, Brooks SK. The changing prevalence of ADHD? A systematic review. *J Affect Disord* [Internet]. 2025 [cited 2025 Aug 22]; <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0165032725008638>

<sup>7</sup> Collishaw S, Furzer E, Thapar AK, Sellers R. Brief report: a comparison of child mental health inequalities in three UK population cohorts. *Eur Child Adolesc Psychiatry*. 2019 Nov;28(11):1547-1549. doi: 10.1007/s00787-019-01305-9. Epub 2019 Mar 8. PMID: 30848392; PMCID: PMC6800845; <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC6800845/>

<sup>8</sup> Hiam L, Klaber B, Sowemimo A, Marmot M. NHS and the whole of society must act on social determinants of health for a healthier future *BMJ* 2024; 385 :e079389 doi:10.1136/bmj-2024-079389

<sup>9</sup> Page, N., Angel, L., Borgia, S., Reynolds, C., Zubizarreta, D., Young, H., Ashton, M.R. and White, J. (2025), Emotional and behavioural difficulties in gender minority compared to cisgender adolescents: identity specific findings from a contemporary national study. *J Child Psychol Psychiatr*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.70050>



## What's driving these changes?

The causes of mental health problems among children and young people are complex, and multiple factors are likely to be influencing population outcomes.

Published evidence identifies increases in schoolwork pressure as a potential driver of change, particularly in females<sup>10</sup>. Evidence also points towards increasing levels of poverty and inequality and parental mental health difficulties,<sup>11</sup> highlighting the need for mental health services to consider the needs of families when supporting individuals in their care.

Other known risk factors like friendship quality, bullying and experiencing abuse or neglect remain important for individual mental health, but they don't appear to explain the changes in adolescent mental health seen over time.<sup>8</sup>

Sleep plays an important role in emotional regulation. There are concerns that sleep patterns are worsening in young people but there is a lack of long-term data to assess whether changing sleep patterns correlate with increases in emotional difficulties in children and young people.

Technological developments provide both benefits and challenges for mental health. Research evidence highlights the importance of moderating use of social media and streaming platforms. Recent studies found significantly increased risks of poor mental health outcomes amongst young people classed as "Broadcasters" - those who engage in frequent sharing of content and messaging.<sup>12</sup>

The expert group shared concerns regarding the impact of materialism and uncertainties young people face regarding their futures, including work, housing insecurity and climate change<sup>13</sup>. Barriers to accessing mental health services and inequalities in community-based opportunities for young people to connect with others and engage with hobbies and interests to help protect and improve mental wellbeing<sup>14</sup> were also areas of concern.

Young people from the Wolfson Centre Youth Advisory Group echoed these concerns, identifying unregulated digital technology, excessive social media use,

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<sup>10</sup> Armitage JM, Lewis G, Page N, et. al. Change overtime in perceived schoolwork pressure and associations with emotional problems among 11-16 year old: A repeat cross-sectional study in Wales, UK. *JCPP Adv.* March 2025. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcv2.70005>

<sup>11</sup> Armitage, J.M., Collishaw, S. & Sellers, R. Explaining long-term trends in adolescent emotional problems: what we know from population-based studies. *Discov Soc Sci Health* 4, 14 (2024). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s44155-024-00076-2>

<sup>12</sup> Winstone L, Mars B, Haworth CMA, Heron J, Kidger J. Adolescent social media user types and their mental health and well-being: Results from a longitudinal survey of 13-14-year-olds in the United Kingdom. *JCPP Adv.* 2022 Mar 10;2(2):e12071. doi: 10.1002/jcv2.12071. PMID: 37431459; PMCID: PMC10242896.

<sup>13</sup> Isham A, Morgan G and Kemp AH (2023) Nurturing wellbeing amidst the climate crisis: on the need for a focus on wellbeing in the field of climate psychology. *Front. Psychol.* 14:1205991. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1205991

<sup>14</sup> Global Perspectives on Organized Activities: Challenges and Future Directions to Supporting Young People's Health and Well-Being. Hallingberg, Britt et al. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, Volume 77, Issue 3, 340 - 341

and climate anxiety as important stressors. Access to ‘third spaces’, trusted adults, opportunities for nature connection and engagement with sport, music and creativity were considered important protective factors.

Timely, accessible services where records are shared between services to improve patient experience were highlighted as crucial, particularly for those with co-existing mental and physical health conditions, transitioning between services or studying away from home.

Young people also highlighted the importance of “supporting the supporters”, - ensuring those who are supporting children and young people through difficulties are themselves supported to stay well.

### **What needs to change?**

Mental health concerns disclosed by children and young people must be taken seriously, simply being more open in talking about their mental health difficulties does not mean the difficulties are less severe or young people are “softer” than in the past. Validated measures of mental health difficulties from multiple sources show a worsening picture of child and adolescent mental health.

Wales has outlined actions for a strategic, system-wide response in the [Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2025-2035](#), with a vision that shares responsibility across sectors and prioritises prevention and early intervention. The strategy ambitions move beyond treating symptoms to addressing the root causes of mental health difficulties, with equity of access and outcomes at the heart.

Reducing social and economic inequalities is fundamental to improving mental health outcomes. This means breaking cycles of disadvantage by tackling disparities in education, employment, housing, and access to services. It means making sure that children living in poverty aren’t priced out of the protective factors, like sport, social and creative opportunities available to their peers.

Enhancing educational, extra-curricular and job opportunities, addressing poverty, and fostering inclusive environments are essential steps toward creating a fairer society where all children and young people can thrive.

The Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2025-2035 sets clear ambitions for Wales to ensure:

- The building blocks are in place to support good mental health and wellbeing
- Everyone has the knowledge, opportunities and confidence to protect and promote good mental health and wellbeing
- There is a connected system where all people receive the appropriate level of support wherever they reach out for help
- There are seamless mental health services – person-centred, needs led and guided to the right support first time, without delay

All public sector bodies in Wales need to focus efforts and resources on making the ambitions of the strategy a reality for babies, children and young people.

The expert group and young people supported the Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy ambitions, highlighting that implementation should prioritise:

- Delivering timely, collaborative and positive support in a way that is accessible to all children and young people, irrespective of background, alongside early identification and diagnosis of more serious mental health symptoms.
- Delivering targeted support shaped by lived experience, particularly for groups disproportionately affected by emerging trends.
- Expanding mental health services, community-based and non-specialist provision, including equipping schools with the resources, training and capacity to identify and support mental health needs.
- Recognising the foundational importance of support in the early years, including the promotion of nurturing environments and ensuring equitable access to high-quality early years services—particularly for families facing disadvantage.
- Addressing the factors that evidence highlights as contributing to the increase in emotional problems in young people (school pressure, parental mental health, poverty and inequality).
- Strengthening national monitoring, data collection, and insight to track progress and identify persistent inequalities. This must include a deeper understanding of diverse lived experiences—so that responses are informed, inclusive, and equitable.

### **What is Public Health Wales doing in response to growing population needs?**

PHW are working closely with Welsh Government, NHS partners and wider organisations to support the implementation of the strategy including:

- Developing a detailed report on the mental health and wellbeing needs of babies, children and young people
- Supporting NHS partners to develop equitable, evidence-based open access services and support for mental health and wellbeing
- Overseeing a programme of work to support schools to implement Whole School Approaches to Emotional and Mental Wellbeing<sup>15</sup>
- Working with partner organisations to implement the Early Years Framework for Action<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> [Whole School Approach to Emotional and Mental Well-being \(WSAEMWB\) - Public Health Wales](#)

<sup>16</sup> [Parents' Voices at the Heart of new Early Years Framework for Action - Public Health Wales](#)



- Supporting organisations and communities to understand and respond to trauma, helping to break intergenerational cycles of violence and adversity through the Trauma Informed Wales Framework<sup>17</sup>
- Supporting evidence-based action to reduce child poverty and the health harms it can cause, including through implementation of the Child Poverty Strategy for Wales 2024<sup>18</sup>
- Enabling a national conversation on mental wellbeing and sharing evidence-based information on mental health and wellbeing through Hapus<sup>19</sup>
- Working with partner organisations to increase access to wellbeing-promoting activities, such as engagement with arts and nature-based initiatives.

### **What can children, young people and their supporters do?**

Children and young people should talk to a trusted adult if they're experiencing mental health difficulties.

Parents, carers, and all those working with and supporting children and young people should take individuals seriously when they share they are struggling and respond in a kind, non-judgemental way. Support and further information can be accessed from trusted helplines and websites.

**If you need to talk to someone about your mental health, or you're concerned about a family member, contact [NHS 111](#) (option 2) for urgent access to a mental health professional. The service is available for people of all ages, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week in all areas of Wales**

**CALL helpline is open 24/7 which can offer confidential emotional support and advice to both an individual and their family. It will help you contact support available in your local area. The Freephone number for CALL is 0800 132 737. There is also information about looking after your mental wellbeing on the CALL website: [www.callhelpline.org.uk](http://www.callhelpline.org.uk)**

Information, advice and support is also available from local [Mind](#) services and the [Young Minds](#) website.

Schools, carers and young people can learn more about looking after mental health from [the Mental Health Foundation](#).

Adults looking to take action to protect and improve their own mental wellbeing can access [Hapus](#), an evidence-based resource from [Public Health Wales](#).

<sup>17</sup> [Trauma-Informed Wales](#)

<sup>18</sup> [Child Poverty Strategy for Wales 2024 \[HTML\] | GOV.WALES](#)

<sup>19</sup> <https://hapus.wales/mental-wellbeing>



## Key Terms

- Childhood: defined as the period from prenatal development to ten years of age, encompassing early physical, emotional, cognitive, and social development. This stage lays the foundation for lifelong health and wellbeing<sup>20</sup>
- Adolescence: the phase of life stretching between childhood and adulthood, encompassing elements of biological growth and major social role transitions. The age range of 10–24 years corresponds closely to adolescent growth and popular understandings of this life phase<sup>21</sup>
- Children and young people: a broader term encompassing infancy (0-2 years), childhood and adolescence (10-24 years)<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Adapted from: World Health Organization (2012). *Early Childhood Development and Disability: A Discussion Paper*. Geneva: WHO. Available at: <https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/75355>

<sup>21</sup> Sawyer SM, Azzopardi PS, Wickremarathne D, Patton GC. The age of adolescence. *Lancet Child Adolesc Health*. 2018;2(3):223–8. doi:10.1016/S2352-4642(18)30022-1.

<sup>22</sup> World Health Organization. Adolescent health [Internet]. Geneva: WHO; [cited 2025 Jul 16]. Available from: <https://www.who.int/health-topics/adolescent-health>



GIG  
CYMRU  
NHS  
WALES

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