

Young people say they most value the support of friends and peers, but they don't always feel confident to offer it

Helping them to help each other

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We know from ONS data that some 8.3% of Scottish young people have a mental disorder.¹ There is, however, limited information about what works in terms of promoting the mental and emotional well-being of young people.

It has been suggested that peer support in schools can create the kind of culture wherein young people are encouraged to talk about their problems and to seek help as soon as they need it, which can improve emotional well-being.² Many schools are, therefore, beginning to introduce peer support programmes to supplement the support available from pastoral care and/or guidance staff. However, there has been very little research into young people's views of peer support in Scotland, and very little systematic evaluation of formal peer support programmes.

We know that support and advice from adult professionals is not always what young people want or need. They have their own coping strategies, and the first person many of them turn to for support is a friend, because they are more likely to identify with other young people.³⁻⁵ Information from other young people is perceived to be credible and believable, whereas information from adults is often treated with suspicion, not least because young people question whether what they tell adults will remain confidential. Peers understand where young people are at and have a better understanding of youth culture and the prevailing trends and difficulties of growing up. Peer support systems build on young people's natural support systems.

This article reports findings from a research study of the role of formal and informal peer support in schools. The study was carried out by Barnardo's for the Scottish Executive, with funding from the National Programme for Improving Mental Health and Well-being, through its Small Research Projects Initiative. The research focused on S1 pupils (equivalent to year 8 pupils in

England and Wales), aged 12-13, in the first year of secondary school, which is generally seen as a time when young people are facing particular stress in a new school environment. Three secondary schools in three different local authorities in Scotland were selected as study sites. In two of the schools, Barnardo's projects were involved in providing peer support. The other school had no connection with Barnardo's, but had its own peer support arrangements in place. The main system of peer support was a buddy system, where older pupils are attached to individual pupils or to a class of pupils to provide support.

Data were collected via four methods: focus groups with 55 S1 pupils, focus groups with 23 older pupils who were providing peer support in the three schools, interviews with teachers and Barnardo's project workers, and questionnaires, which were completed by 314 (75% response rate) S1 pupils. This article draws on findings from the S1 pupil focus groups and responses to the pupil questionnaire to explore in particular the kinds of support that young people find accessible and acceptable.

Sources of stress

We first asked S1 pupils in the focus groups to tell us what made them happy, as an ice breaker before moving on to consider what made them stressed or worried. The S1 pupils reported that their friends made them most happy, followed by their football team, playing football and their family. These responses were similar to those of young people in previous studies.^{6,7}

We next asked the focus groups what made them stressed or worried. The young people told us they were most likely to worry about exams and schoolwork, followed by bullying and teachers, brothers/sisters and science. That only very small numbers of young people talked about being stressed or worried about family issues or other personal issues may have been because

they felt safer talking about school worries in a focus group situation. As found in previous research,⁶ boys were far more likely than girls to say they worried about their football team losing. Another concern commonly raised by boys was losing on their PlayStation 2.

Table 1 shows the top ten sources of stress reported by the 314 pupils who completed the questionnaire. Pupils were asked to select five items from lists drawn from previous research and consultation with young people when the questionnaire was piloted.

Girls were significantly more likely than boys to worry about falling out with their friends, and about their weight (although more than a fifth of boys reported that they were worried about the way they looked and boys were more likely than girls to worry about physical changes to their bodies). Boys were significantly more likely than girls to worry about the future.

Coping strategies

We asked the S1 focus groups how they coped with stress or worry. As in previous studies,^{3,6} the young people's coping strategies varied according to gender. Boys were most likely to say they would cope by engaging in activities such as playing football, playing PS2/PC games or watching tv. Girls were more likely to say they would tell someone – either their friends or their mum. None of the young people said they would talk to a peer supporter, even though all of the young people in the focus groups had been assigned a buddy.

S1 pupils were also asked about their coping strategies in the questionnaire. They were asked to tick the three things they would be most likely to do if they were stressed or worried. The list was again drawn from previous research and consultation with the young people with whom we piloted the questionnaire. Table 2 presents the top ten most frequently ticked items.

There were some differences in the ways that boys and girls reported that they coped with stress or worry. Boys were significantly more likely to say they would play sport (more than a quarter of boys reported that they would play sport, compared with under 12% of girls), or fight (almost 14% of boys said they would fight with someone compared with three per cent of girls). Girls were significantly more likely to say they would talk to their friends (half the girls reported that they talked to friends compared with less than a quarter of boys), or cry. Girls were also significantly more likely to say they would go shopping (18% of girls said they would go shopping; no boys said this).

Only around a fifth of the young people said they found it easy to talk about their worries. Interestingly, there was very little difference in the girls' and boys' responses. However, only 14% agreed with the statement: 'There is no point trying to talk to anyone about your worries.' Boys were more likely to say there was no point trying to talk to anyone (17% compared with 11%).

Where do S1 pupils seek help?

The young people's coping strategies were explored in depth in the S1 focus groups through an activity that involved young people talking about where they would and would not seek help if they were worried about bullying, family problems, school problems, or falling out with their friends. The S1 pupils were asked to rank

a range of sources of help by giving them 'great', 'ok' or 'rubbish' stickers, and to place a gold star next to their best source of support. Mums, dads, other family members (but not siblings) and friends were considered to be the most useful sources of support for all four problems. Opinion was divided as to whether guidance teachers, ChildLine, other young people – for example, buddies – and siblings were useful. Other teachers, doctors and school nurses were not generally viewed as useful sources of support for any of the problems.

Young people identified friends as particularly useful sources of support when they had fallen out with other friends, or if they had school problems. Some girls said friends were particularly useful to talk to if they were worried about 'girls' stuff'. The young people said they were less likely to confide in their friends if they had family problems.

Friends were viewed as useful sources of support because young people found them easy to talk to, said they listened, said they could tell them anything →

Table 1: What worries young people?

Issue	Total %	Male %	Female %
Exams	47.1	51.9	42.2
School work	38.6	42.9	34.4
Falling out with your friends	37.3	23.4	51.3**
Someone dying	35.1	35.1	35.1
The future	33.1	42.2	24.0**
Money	29.5	30.5	28.6
Being talked about	25.0	20.8	29.2
Your weight	24.4	18.2	30.5**
The way you look	24.4	20.8	27.9
Bullying	22.4	23.4	21.4

**shows significant difference between males and females using Pearson chi-square test (p<0.01)

Table 2: How S1 pupils cope with stress and worry

Ways of coping	Total %	Male %	Female %
Talk to Mum	51.0	53.2	48.7
Talk to friends	37.0	24.0	50.0**
Talk to Dad	28.2	36.4	20.1**
Play sport/do an activity you enjoy	19.5	27.3	11.7**
Go out with friends	15.6	11.7	19.5
Stay in your room	15.3	17.5	13.0
Do something relaxing	14.9	15.6	14.3
Slam doors/smash things	14.9	18.2	11.7
Cry	13.3	5.8	20.8**

**shows significant difference between males and females using Pearson chi-square test (p<0.01)

Policy context

The policy context in Scotland emphasises the importance of positive mental health and well-being across all age groups. Children and Young People's Mental Health: a Framework for Promotion, Prevention and Care (FPPC)¹ describes how a range of agencies can contribute to the improvement of the mental health of children and young people, and includes as one of its key service elements: 'Provision of support for schools in developing and delivering activities to promote peer support, especially at times of transition.'

To take forward the FPPC recommendations, and those of the Scottish Needs Assessment Programme (SNAP) report on Child and Adolescent Mental Health, HeadsUpScotland was established by the Scottish Executive in April 2004, as part of the National Programme for Improving Mental Health and Well-being.

Education policy also recognises the link between physical, mental and emotional well-being and good educational outcomes for children and young people. Ambitious Excellent Schools² outlines an agenda for action to enable all young people to have the self-esteem to be confident, happy and ambitious. Standard 3 of Happy, Safe and Achieving their Potential,³ a framework of principles to develop personal support in Scottish schools, includes the following specific outcomes:

- pupils are active in peer support and other forms of pupil participation
- children's and young people's achievements and efforts in citizenship activities, in school and in the community to which the young person belongs, are recognised, and where appropriate, accredited.

Delivering a Healthy Future: an Action Framework for Children and Young People's Health in Scotland,⁴ published earlier this year, similarly underlines the opportunities through education to support and promote the good mental and physical health of children and young people. All Scotland's schools are working towards becoming Health Promoting Schools by 2007, which supports the idea that school policies, services, extra-curricular activities and the wider community are all relevant factors in fostering the health and well-being of children. This approach targets not only physical health but also emotional well-being

and mental health through the development of the self-awareness, resilience, confidence and skills by which these can best be safe-guarded.

Delivering for Mental Health⁵ sets the benchmarks for forward action on mental health service delivery across the spectrum of age groups and at all levels of intervention. Specifically in this context, it calls for the appointment of primary mental health workers to link to every school, for which new guidance has been recently published.⁶ Part of their role will be to provide a school-based mental health information and education resource for young people and education staff.

These policy initiatives, with their targets and milestones, all timetabled and subject to ongoing monitor and review, underpin the message that attention to the child and young people mental health agenda is for all agencies and partners, and not the NHS alone. The approaches also underline the need to involve children and young people so that informed decisions are made in the design of services that better match needs and allow for the earliest possible supportive intervention, while also maintaining that attention through care and agency transitions.



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- 2 Scottish Executive. Ambitious, excellent schools. Edinburgh: Scottish Executive, 2004. www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2004/11/20176/45852
- 3 Scottish Executive. Happy, safe and achieving their potential: a standard of support for children and young people in Scottish schools. The report of the National Review of Guidance. Edinburgh: Scottish Executive, 2004. www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2005/02/20626/51543
- 4 Scottish Executive. Delivering a healthy future: an action framework for children and young people's health in Scotland. Edinburgh: Scottish Executive, 2007. www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2007/02/14154246/0
- 5 Scottish Executive. Delivering for mental health. Edinburgh: Scottish Executive, 2006. www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2006/11/30164829/0
- 6 Scottish Executive. Child and adolescent mental health services: primary mental health work guidance note for NHS boards/community health (and social care) partnerships and other partners. Edinburgh: Scottish Executive, 2007. www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2007/02/26111857/0

→ and, most important of all, considered them to be trustworthy. Some young people, mostly boys, had reservations about talking to friends because they felt they might laugh at them, might give them bad advice, or might tell someone else.

Only a few young people in the focus groups considered it would be useful to discuss their problems with other young people who were not their friends, such as buddies or peer supporters. A number of reasons were given: they did not know them well enough and would prefer to speak to someone they knew – for example, a brother or sister or cousin in the school; they would prefer to speak to someone of the same sex; they thought it would be 'embarrassing' to speak to them; they thought they might laugh at them; they did not like them; they would not be able to find them, or there was no allocated time when they could see them. That said,

many of the young people responding to the questionnaire (all of whom had been allocated a buddy) were not aware they had a buddy or peer supporter.

The questionnaire asked pupils to choose from a list of other forms of support that they thought would be useful or that they thought other young people would find useful. Boys were most likely to say they would prefer to receive support in the form of videos or DVDs. Girls were most likely to favour peer support in the form of a website for young people, run by young people, providing advice on issues of concern to young people. Drop-in facilities where young people could go and talk to other young people were also popular.

Support needs

S1 pupils' willingness and ability to support their friends was explored in the focus groups through the use of

scenarios. The young people were divided into groups and given a card with one of a number of scenarios in which a friend confided in them about a problem they had: not eating, substance misuse, parents divorcing, bereavement, domestic abuse, and bullying. For each scenario young people were asked to consider what their friend might be feeling, and how they could help or support him or her.

Confidence emerged as a major theme. The focus group pupils said they would not be confident about providing information or advice if they had not been in the same situation themselves, because they would have insufficient knowledge. However levels of confidence varied according to which issue was being discussed. All three focus groups (most of whom were girls) who considered the not eating scenario said they would feel confident about helping their friend. In contrast, none of the young people who discussed the bullying scenario said they would be confident to help or offer advice, mainly because they felt they might also get bullied if they supported their friend. Overall, the young people who considered the drugs scenario and domestic abuse scenario tended to say they would not feel confident offering advice. Opinions were divided in the groups that considered divorce: some young people said they would not feel confident providing support because the situation had not happened to them. In the case of bereavement, some young people said they would not know what to say to their friend.

We found that the young people would generally be very supportive if their friends approached them. Asked what their reaction would be if their friend told them about a problem, many of them said they would feel sorry for their friend or said they would be sympathetic. Girls in particular told us they would try to say nice things, and would comfort their friend. Boys frequently stated that they would not really know what to say but would try to cheer their friend up and get them to forget about their problem or take their mind off it. But they tended to be less sympathetic if they felt that their friend had actively played a part in causing their problems. For example, many of the young people who looked at the drugs scenario said they would be angry with their friend for taking drugs.

The questionnaire included questions designed to find out how good the S1 pupils were at supporting their friends' well-being. Nearly all the young people (91%) who filled in the questionnaire reported that they would feel able to listen to their friends. Boys were slightly less likely to say they would listen (85% of boys, compared with 97% of girls). Overall, levels of confidence were found to be high: more than three quarters of the young people (88% of girls, 72% of boys) agreed with the statement: 'I feel confident about helping and supporting my friends.' Boys were a little less likely not to feel confident.

However less than a third of the young people (32% of girls and 30% of boys) said they would know what to say. More than half said they wished they knew how to help their friends if they talked to them about their problems (59% of boys and 54% of girls). Less than half the young people who filled out the questionnaire said they would encourage their friend to talk to someone about their problems (40% of girls and 46% of boys).

The questionnaire attempted to find out if there were any further supports young people felt they needed in order to be able to support their friends. Overwhelmingly, these young people wanted more information so that they could help and support their friends better. Only 13% said they did not want any more information about where to get advice in order to be able to provide better support to their friends. Again, videos or DVDs, websites for young people, and a drop-in service in schools where young people could talk to other young people came top of the list, followed by befriending/buddying support, training on self-help and helping others, and information leaflets.

Conclusions

The young people we spoke to favoured the informal support of friends and family above the formal peer support arrangements that were available in their school. But they also felt they needed more information in order to be able to support their friends.

However, although these young people were less keen on accessing formal peer support systems, they were certainly not averse to the idea of peer support as part of a whole package of supports in school. From this we conclude that a range of support should be available to young people in schools. This would include peer support – buddying/befriending support, drop-in facilities, young people's websites and information sources using new technologies. All young people could benefit from peer support training, which might be provided, for example, in social education classes. The full report includes suggestions on how to set up peer support structures and training that would enable young people to support each other's mental well-being more effectively and in ways that this age group finds most acceptable and accessible. Perhaps above all, young people's views about the kinds of support they require need to be taken into account by education staff and policy makers. Those who are designing peer support systems could learn much from the strengths of young people's own informal support networks. ■

Raising awareness and promoting positive mental health and well-being among young people: the role of peer support. A synopsis is available at www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/156886/0042196.pdf The full report can be obtained from Sharon.vincent@ed.ac.uk

- 1 Office for National Statistics. The mental health of children and young people in Great Britain, 2004. London: ONS, 2005.
- 2 Cowie H, Wallace P. Peer support in action: from bystanding to standing by. London: Sage, 2000.
- 3 Scott Porter Research and Marketing. Young people and mental well-being: a qualitative research report. Edinburgh: Health Education Board for Scotland, 2000.
- 4 Scottish Executive. 'It's everyone's job to make sure I'm alright.' Report of the Child Protection Audit and Review. Edinburgh: Scottish Executive, 2002.
- 5 Vincent S, Daniel B. An analysis of children and young people's calls to ChildLine about abuse and neglect. *Child Abuse Review* 2004; 13: 158–171.
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