

Barnardo's Scotland Briefing for Members' Debate on Mental Health Education

29th September 2016

Key Points

- **Good mental health and wellbeing is key to improved attainment in children and young people.**
- **Everyone needs to be able to speak the 'language of mental health' in order to increase the emotional literacy of children and young people.**
- **Children and young people need to be aware of the importance of good mental health; be supported to self-identify issues and know where to seek help.**
- **Supporting parents to develop positive attachments is key to ensuring that children and young people are school ready.**

Introduction

We welcome this timely Members' Debate on Mental Health Education. **Good mental health is integral to children and young people's ability to achieve and reach their full potential in education.** Addressing the ways in which improving mental health can impact on educational attainment and how services and initiatives aimed at closing the educational attainment gap work with those focussed on improving mental health is crucial.

We believe that improving mental health in Scotland is not simply the job of health services. We want to see a Scotland where there is a **whole system approach to improving mental health and wellbeing**. This would mean that support for children and young people is readily available and easily accessible. Parents and young people should feel comfortable talking about mental health; schools should be ready to support children and young people where necessary; and there should be an awareness of the importance of mental health in the wider community. Overall we want to see a Scotland where **mental health is everybody's business**. This will mean a shift from the current medical model to one where there is an increased role for schools, the third sector, parents, and children and young people themselves through increased awareness and good self-management. The role of schools and the curriculum is central to driving forward this change.

Speaking the language of mental health

We must build the skills of people working in universal services, schools and parents with a concerted effort to increase the emotional literacy of children and young people.

The World Health Organisation recently reported that there was increased awareness amongst school staff about the level of stress among young people. Our work in schools supports this. However teaching staff feel there are very few options on where to send a child or young person experiencing difficulties other than referring to CAMHS. **Increased awareness amongst young people themselves of the importance of good mental health may lead more of them to seek help. Young people experiencing mental health problems can require support to engage and engagement is based on establishing good relationships.** School based counselling has an important role in in this respect. A referral to CAMHS has become the 'default' option when it comes to who should offer support. This is exacerbated by a lack of services at Tier 2 offering support, a lack of knowledge and skills to address mental health needs amongst those working in universal services and a lack of confidence and skills to enable parents to respond in the right way when their child is in distress.

Actions require to be set out which aim to promote good mental health. This should include putting in place initiatives to **improve the mental health literacy of children, young people, parents and professionals.** This should be focussed on ensuring that problems can be identified early, and proportionate and accessible support is put in place. 'Ask Once, Get Help Fast' should apply to children and young people as well as adults.

In England, Barnardo's runs a website called **Upside Online** which offers information to young people, parents and professionals, including online chat and 1-1 online counselling. The website is designed to be easily accessible and offer advice and support. ¹

Attachment based approaches & support for parents

For many children the result of **poor attachment** in the early years is that they start school with a significant disadvantage to other children and are at **increased risk of developing a mental health problem.** In terms of speech and language development for example, 38 per cent of children referred to child psychiatric services met one or more criteria for previously identified language impairment. Even at this stage there will be a **gap between the attainment** of these children and those from less disadvantaged backgrounds.

Improving the mental health of children and young people often means **supporting their parents,** particularly for families living on low incomes where they have limited access to leisure, poorer housing and poorer life chances generally. Barnardo's Scotland supports a large number of families in this situation. We would like to see an emphasis on **positive attachment based approaches in the early years.** Barnardo's Scotland uses the 'Five to Thrive' approach - an accessible approach aimed at promoting and nurturing positive

¹ <https://www.upsideonline.co.uk/>

attachment between parents and children. The factors which lead to many young children failing to reach developmental milestones, including good mental health, can be addressed by **teaching parents and those working with children such as early years practitioners and teachers how to take simple measures to improve attachment and thus the child's development.**

Our work

In Scotland Barnardo's Scotland undertakes capacity building work in schools such as our Edinburgh Community Support Service (BECSS) which works to build the capacity of parents and teachers around emotional literacy and our PATHS services in Renfrewshire which work to improve emotional literacy in schools. Our Early Intervention Family Support Services focus on supporting parenting pre-birth to 3 years for parents with a range of mental health needs and our Family Nurture Hub in Fife supports parents to address their own needs and improves infant mental health. Our work also has a focus on tackling the impact of trauma, bereavement and loss all of which have an impact on children and young people's mental health.

Conclusion

We welcome the continued focus on mental health and the acknowledgment from all parties that more can and should be done to support the positive mental health and wellbeing of our children and young people.

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