

Part 1



What Affects Children's and Young People's Mental Health?

In Part 1 of this book, I'll look at various issues that can affect children's and young people's mental health. In the introductory chapter I first look at some key definitions including mental health, wellbeing and disorder. Then each of the main chapters in Part 1 looks at important factors affecting mental health.

In Chapter 1 I look at a range of biological processes which affect children's and young people's mental health including attachment; genes and inheritance; the developing brain; and puberty.

In Chapter 2 I go on to explore lifestyle factors which have a significant impact on children's and young people's mental health, including sleep; nutrition; exercise and movement; technology; bullying and academic pressures; and alcohol and drugs.

In Chapter 3 I discuss the impact of relationships on mental health and look in more detail at family relationships; social and peer relationships; and romantic relationships and sex.

2

A Guide to the Mental Health of Children and Young People

In Chapter 4 I look at a range of issues that increase stress for children and young people, known as **stressors**. These stressors include abuse and neglect; adverse childhood experiences (ACEs); trauma; bereavement and parental separation; and, finally, the impact of COVID and other global public health issues on mental health.

In Chapter 5 I look specifically at vulnerability of special groups who are known to have an increased risk of mental health issues. Although I don't cover all possible vulnerable groups, I examine a few important examples including intellectual disabilities; young people with gender identity difficulties and different sexual orientations; young people with additional physical health needs and illnesses; young carers; and, finally, other vulnerable groups.

Chapter 6 provides a summary of the previous chapters in Part 1 to draw together threads of important factors which have an impact on children's and young people's mental health.

Introduction to Part 1 and Key Definitions

In this section I introduce common terms including **mental health**, **mental wellbeing** and **mental disorder**. I look at how common youth mental disorders are and explain how we assess them. Finally, I consider how to support children and young people with mental disorders.

What Is Mental Health? What about Mental Wellbeing, Mental Fitness and Mental Flourishing?

- **Mental wellbeing**, also often known as **mental fitness**, describes your mental state, i.e., how you are feeling and how well you can cope with day-to-day life, which can change quickly. Mental and physical fitness are of equal importance.
- **Mental flourishing** is the state of experiencing positive emotions, psychological and social functioning, most of the time, and enables you to engage with a meaningful life (1). Its opposite state is **languishing**, where people may describe their lives as ‘hollow’ or ‘empty’.
- **Mental health**, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), is ‘a state of well-being in which the individual realises his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community’ (2). Mental health is a longer-term state than mental wellbeing or fitness and tends to change more gradually.

How Are Mental Health and Wellbeing Linked?

Mental health and wellbeing are linked and are overlapping concepts, but they are not the same.

- **If you experience difficulties with mental wellbeing for some time, you are more likely to develop mental health problems.** For example, children who live in very deprived communities with little support are much more vulnerable to mental health problems than those from well-off communities and with good support from parents and caregivers.
- **If you already have a mental health problem, like bipolar disorder, you are more likely to have periods of low mental wellbeing.** However, it's also worth noting that people with mental health problems can also have times when they experience positive wellbeing. In our example, the person with bipolar disorder can have periods when their wellbeing is very good, for example in between episodes of illness. That's why aiming to improve mental wellbeing is important whatever your mental health status.

Which Factors Can Affect Mental Wellbeing and Mental Health?

Several factors can affect mental wellbeing and mental health:

- **Positive mental wellbeing** is influenced by lifestyle factors like sleep, diet and exercise, positive relationships as well as school and home experiences. Children who develop in lower-stress environments will generally be more able to experience positive mental wellbeing.
- **A mixture of inherited and environmental factors can interact to cause mental health problems.** For example, when a parent has alcohol problems, the child has an increased risk of mental health problems. However, the child's risk of developing mental health problems is also influenced by other factors, such as their genetic makeup and their

available support. This illustrates the complex interplay of both genes and environment which make up an individual's risk of mental health difficulties.

- **Many factors are common to both mental wellbeing and mental health.** For example, severe early attachment difficulties, stress and trauma, and poverty and inherited factors can affect both mental health and mental wellbeing. A 2016 UK study by Patalay and Fitzsimons looked at predictors of mental illness and wellbeing in 11-year-olds (3). It showed that mental wellbeing was predicted by aspects of a child's social life and relationships, such as bullying, and perception of feeling connected to others at school. On the other hand, other factors such as underlying health problems are more likely to predispose to mental health disorders. Mental health disorders are also strongly affected by other important factors, such as inheritance.

What Is a Mental Health Disorder? What about a Mental Condition?

There is often confusion around whether to use the term 'mental disorder' or 'condition'. A good rule of thumb is as follows:

- **A mental health disorder** is a behavioural or mental pattern of symptoms that causes significant **change which can impair functioning**. There is a noticeable step change in functioning from a period of being well to being mentally ill. For example, you can have an episode of depression where you become unwell and struggle to function, after which you recover.
- **A mental health condition** is a term used for **in-born difficulties** such as autism and ADHD **where the brain is wired up differently**. There isn't a significant step change in functioning from being well to being unwell. Instead, the brain is on a different developmental pathway to what is typical, and a condition will evolve over time. There isn't a specific cure for mental conditions such as autism.

What Proportion of Young People Have a Mental Health Disorder?

- **1 in 6 children and young people (aged 5–19 years) in the UK in 2021 had at least one mental health disorder (4).**
- **50% of mental disorders develop by age 14.** This shows why investing in young people's mental health is so important and has long-term implications.

How Do Mental Health Professionals Assess Someone's Mental Health?

- **Mental health professionals are trained to assess a person's mental state.** This includes assessing how someone looks, speaks, understands and behaves. We ask questions about mood, thoughts and the person's ability to understand experiences.
- **Observation of play and behaviour** is often more helpful in younger children than asking direct questions.
- **Taking a history of a child's or young person's difficulties is a core part of a mental health assessment.** There is a systematic format for the process of gathering information which involves getting key information from the young person or child themselves, if possible.
- **Gathering information from significant adults** around the child is a crucial part of the assessment.
- **We also look at a child's or young person's ability to function** or do the activities needed to manage at school, family life or friendships.

How Can You Best Support Children's Mental Wellbeing?

- **You can help children and young people develop positive mental wellbeing and learn coping skills for managing stress.**

- **Firstly, ensure children's basic needs are met**, including offering supportive care and providing them with enough food, shelter, rest, security and warmth. Maslow, a psychologist writing in 1943, famously set out a **pyramid of basic needs**. Food, water, rest, warmth and safety are at the bottom of the pyramid and being able to think creatively is at the top (5).
- **Attend to the child's inner psychological needs**. What makes each child tick? Understanding this is an evolving process and the best approach is to listen to the child and try to make sense of their thinking.
- **Read and understand helpful materials**. By reading this book you are one step ahead. You can also consult useful online resources, for example the Royal College of Psychiatrists' website www.rcpsych.ac.uk to support positive mental health and wellbeing.

KEY POINTS



- We should help our children and young people to aim for a state where their mental wellbeing is flourishing. We can also help equip young people to positively manage mental health difficulties and disorders.
- Mental health and wellbeing are different but overlapping concepts. Mental wellbeing describes your mental state and can change quickly. Mental health describes a longer-term measure of mental functioning. Even if you are mentally unwell you can still improve your wellbeing, for example by looking after your sleep and diet and by developing positive relationships.
- It is common for young people to struggle with their mental health. Half of mental disorders start in adolescence.
- To look after children's mental health, it is important that we meet both their basic psychological as well as their physical needs.

References

- (1) Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand. 2010. Flourishing, Positive Mental Health and Wellbeing: How Can They Be Increased? Available at <https://archive.mentalhealth.org.nz/assets/Flourishing/>

Flourishing-and-Positive-Mental-Health-Dec-2010.pdf#:~:text=Flourishing%20is%20useful%20descriptor%20of%20positive%20mental%20health,and%20positive%20social%20functioning%2C%20most%20of%20the%20time

- (2) World Health Organization. Regional Office for Europe. 2019. Mental Health: Fact Sheet. Available at https://www.euro.who.int/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/404851/MNH_FactSheet_ENG.pdfUnlinked
- (3) Patalay, P., and Fitzsimons, E. 2016. Correlates of Mental Illness and Wellbeing in Children: Are They the Same? Results from the UK Millennium Cohort Study (PDF). *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 55(9), 771–783.
- (4) NHS Digital. September 2021. Mental Health of Children and Young People in England. 2021 – Wave 2 Follow Up to the 2017 Survey. Available at <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/2021-follow-up-to-the-2017-survey>
- (5) Maslow, A. 1943. A Theory of Human Motivation. *Psychological Review* 50, 370–396.

1



Biological Processes Affecting Mental Health

In this chapter we discuss a range of biological processes and factors which affect youth mental health including attachment, genes and inheritance, the developing brain and puberty. We think about how gaining a better understanding of children's biology can allow you to better support your children's mental health.

Attachment

Building strong bonds between children and their caregivers is likely to be the most important factor in protecting children's mental health and wellbeing. Nurturing children through their early years is a crucial but often under-appreciated task. Research shows that attachment difficulties underlie many mental health problems.

Attachment is the emotional bond between baby and parent or caregiver. All baby animals (including our children!) have evolved to attach to their main caregivers to protect themselves from threats. The psychoanalyst

John Bowlby developed the theory of attachment to help explain why infants become so distressed when separated from their parents.

This section on attachment gives a brief overview on the topic. *(Please note, I discuss specific difficulties with attachment in Part 3 of this book.)*

Why Is Attachment Important?

- **A baby needs a strong and supportive relationship with at least one main caregiver for their healthy development.** The caregiver is usually the biological parent but can be another adult who takes on the parental role.
- **A caregiver meeting a baby's needs is not just about providing the baby with food: it is also about providing emotional comfort.** Important experiments with monkeys in the 1950s led by Harry Harlow, an American psychologist who pioneered work on separation anxiety, which separated baby monkeys from their mothers paved the way for humans developing a better understanding of the importance of early attachment relationships. These experiments showed it is the **sensitive response and security of the caregiver** that are more important for the baby's development than the caregiver just providing food. If the caregiver is sensitive to the baby's needs, and is consistently there for them, the baby will use the caregiver as a **secure base** from which to explore in a healthy way, and then follow a path of healthy emotional development.
- As the baby develops, **they learn they will be supported and contained when they express their emotions, rather than abandoned.** No caregiver is perfect and fully sensitive all the time; but the important thing is to be sensitive and consistent with caregiving most of the time. **Hence, a key part of this relationship is helping children to learn to regulate their emotions.**
- **A secure attachment relationship helps our children to develop emotionally and socially, including in their future relationships.** It gives the child an **internal working model of relationships**, which helps them to develop future healthy relationships.