



CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH AND PLAY

Introduction

The current state of children's mental health in England

The rates of mental health problems for children living in England are evaluated on a regular basis. Major surveys were conducted in 1999, 2004 and 2017 and more recent surveys have examined how those who took part in the 2017 survey have fared during the pandemic. Mental health problems include emotional disorders like anxiety and depression, behaviour disorders, hyperactivity disorders and other, less common disorders.

The different mental health problems that children experience

Anxiety refers to when a child feels scared or worried, beyond what would be expected in a specific situation. Some children might be anxious about leaving their parents, others might worry about the future or about family members, some children might have fears of dirt, animals, or heights. As with anxiety, depression is different for different children. Some may feel sad a lot of the time, others might not be interested in doing anything and have low energy. Behaviour disorders are related to behaviour which violates the rights of others or violates social norms and expectations. This behaviour is often violent or disruptive and would need to happen repeatedly to be considered a disorder. Hyperactivity disorders include significant problems with attention or being excessively hyperactive or impulsive. For all of these, the symptoms that the child is experiencing or expressing must be having a real impact on their day to day lives for a diagnosis to be given.



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Between 1999 and 2017 mental health problems in children aged 5-15 increased from 11.8% to 13.1%

Between 1999 and 2017, the overall rate of mental health problems in children aged 5-15 increased from 11.8% to 13.1%. The greatest increase was in emotional problems; between 2004 and 2017 there was a 49% increase in the number of children with emotional problems. In 2017, older children were much more likely to have a disorder than younger children. Disorders were more common in children who were white British rather than from other white backgrounds or ethnic minorities and mental health problems were more common in children growing up in low-income homes. Rates were higher in children whose parents had poor mental health, when children had experienced adversity such as parent separation or financial problems at home, when the child has a smaller social network and does not participate in clubs or organisations and when they child's family generally have poor functioning. Mental health was also linked to poor physical health, long-term illness and special educational needs.



Strikingly, the most recent survey of those who took part in 2017 shows that 18% now have a likely mental health disorder. These children are now aged 7 to 16 years. The comparable rate for 2017 was 12.1%, another 50% increase. This jump in mental health problems was first recorded in 2020 after the start of the Covid-19 pandemic but has remained stable since, showing that children have not simply 'bounced back' after the lockdowns ended. Of course children and families are now facing additional pressures due to the cost of living crisis and the latest mental health figures show that children are more likely to have a mental health disorder if they live in households that could not afford to keep the house warm enough or where they haven't been able to buy enough food or had to use a food bank.

These are sobering statistics and demonstrate quite clearly how children's mental health problems have been increasing over time, with a particularly striking increase since the start of the pandemic. It is also clear that there is significant inequality in mental health problems, with children who are already disadvantaged in a number of ways, being the most likely to experience difficulties with their mental health.

How can play support children's mental health?

These mental health statistics are relevant to play for two main reasons

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The first reason is that these statistics give you information about the likely state of mental health of the children you are working with. If you're working at an adventure playground for example, where many of the children are from low-income families then it is likely that at least 1 in 5 children will be experiencing a significant mental health problem, possibly more. Furthermore, as the cost-of-living crisis continues, you may find more children having difficulties with their mental health.

The second reason is that play, and particularly staffed play provision, might be able to help prevent mental health problems and support those who are having difficulties with their mental health.



How can play support children's mental health?

Children often use play as a way of making sense of what is going on around them

Play, particularly free play, where children choose for themselves what to play, when to start, when to stop and who to play with, offers children an opportunity to express themselves and to take control of an aspect of their lives. Children often use play as a way of making sense of what is going on around them as we saw during the pandemic when an estimated 1 in 3 children brought themes related to the pandemic into their play. Play can offer children a vital release and expression of emotions, which is particularly important if the emotions are hard to put into words.

Adventurous play, when children experience thrill, excitement and potentially some fear, might provide children with important learning experiences that support their mental health. For example, Kathryn Lester and I describe in our model that adventurous play gives children opportunity to learn about uncertainty, arousal and coping. We recently found that children who spent more time playing adventurously had lower levels of emotional problems and, importantly, that these effects were stronger for children growing up in lower income families. There is still lots of work to do, but this provides some evidence that adventurous play opportunities might help support children's mental health.



Of course, staffed play provision supports children in ways that go beyond facilitating play. For example, many provide practical support such as food, as well as positive adult role-models, a safe haven for children, a place to feel welcome and at home, and a place where they are not expected to be anything other than a child. All of which support children's positive development and mental health.

Key references

2017 survey results regarding children's mental health in England (includes trends over time): <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/2017/2017>

Most recent (2022) data on children's mental health in England: <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/2022-follow-up-to-the-2017-survey>

Dodd & Lester (2021) model of adventurous play and the prevention of anxiety: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10567-020-00338-w>

1 in 3 children bring pandemic themes into their play: <https://www.mic.ul.ie/news/2020/mic-research-reveals-impact-of-covid19-restrictions-on-children>

Play reduces negative emotions: He and colleagues: <https://doi.org/10.1111/jan.12608>

Websites and resources

<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/childrens-mental-health/>

<https://www.place2be.org.uk/our-services/parents-and-carers/supporting-your-child-s-mental-health/>

<https://www.barnardos.org.uk/what-we-do/helping-families/mental-health>

<https://www.camhs-resources.co.uk/websites>

<https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/for-children-and-young-people/>

About the author

Helen Dodd is a Professor of Child Psychology at the University of Exeter Medical School and trustee of Play England. She is an expert in child mental health. She has received awards for her research, most recently from the British Psychology Society for her outstanding contribution to developmental psychology. She has also received funding from a range of organisations including the Royal Society and British Academy. She currently holds a UKRI Future Leaders Fellowship, which funds a program of work examining the relationship between children's adventurous play and mental health.