

# Children in England unhappier in school than their peers elsewhere

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Children in England, one of the richest countries in the world, are unhappier at school than those in almost all of the other 14 countries surveyed, according to a Children's Society report.

Overall, the report concludes that only children in South Korea, a country with a record of high levels of stress among its children and young people, are unhappier than children in England.

The report makes disturbing reading, confirming the findings of numerous other reports about the deteriorating levels of the well-being and mental health of children and young people in Britain today.

The Children's Society set up the Good Childhood Inquiry, an independent commission, in 2006 to examine the impact of unacceptable levels of disadvantage, poverty and social exclusion on children. The commission's annual report, *Good Childhood 2015*, was based on a survey of 53,000 children aged 10 and 12 in England, Germany, Norway, South Korea, Poland, Estonia, Spain, Turkey, Romania, Algeria, South Africa, Israel, Ethiopia, Colombia and Nepal.

The report found that around half a million 10- and 12-year-olds are physically bullied at school. Some 38 percent of children surveyed had been hit by classmates in the last month.

Children in English schools were also the most likely to feel left out by classmates, with half of those surveyed complaining of feeling excluded. Children bullied frequently, the report notes, are six times more likely to have a low sense of well-being than children who had not been bullied.

The study also shows that children in England are particularly unhappy about their appearance, with girls expressing greater dissatisfaction with their appearance and self-confidence, compared with girls elsewhere except in South Korea.

The report found declining levels of children's

enjoyment of school. Just 61 percent of children in year six, the top year of primary school, enjoyed school, compared with just 43 percent in year eight in secondary school.

Matthew Reed, the Children's Society's CEO said, "It is deeply worrying that children in this country are so unhappy at school compared to other countries, and it is truly shocking that thousands of children are being physically and emotionally bullied, damaging their happiness. School should be a safe haven, not a battleground."

The psychological impact of this is reflected in the increased levels of stress that children are experiencing.

According to Young Minds, a leading children's mental health charity, today's children face pressures from family breakdown, the emphasis on having plenty of money, the perfect body and lifestyle and constant access to 24-hour social networking where bullying is rife. There are also increasing sexual pressures, violence and the fear of crime in many communities, and the constant pressure of exams in schools, where even children in primary schools can be branded "failures."

But as Andy Bell, chief executive of the Centre for Mental Health, explained, "Children's mental ill health is largely invisible; disguised as bad behaviour or missed because there are so many other pressures on schools."

Indeed, national data on children and young people's mental health is woefully out of date. The most recent survey was carried out in 2004 by the Office for National Statistics and published by the Health and Social Care Information Centre (HSCIC). Since then, the situation has declined as the recession and austerity measures have taken their toll on family life. But without reliable data, it is difficult if not impossible to make adequate provision for children and young people's mental health services.

The absence of statistics is no accident. If there are no official statistics, then as far as the government is

concerned the problem does not exist and funding is not required. Bell said that services are “not even close” to being able to cope with the situation that was revealed in a 2004 survey, let alone the situation today.

Lucie Russell, director of media and campaigns at Young Minds, said not enough was being done to support children facing enormous pressures.

The Chief Medical Officer’s annual report said that “cyber-bullying” through digital media “may now be the most common type of bullying.” It highlighted that child psychiatrists and paediatricians had reported an “alarming rise” in self-harm presentations at paediatric departments, particularly among girls.

Over the past few years, the Childline charity has received record numbers of approaches from children and adolescents concerned with examination and workload-related stress and anxiety.

Childline’s counselling sessions for potential suicide cases rose by 18 percent in 2013-14. There was a 200 percent increase in the number of students of all ages seeking counselling services during the examination period this spring and summer, according to the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children.

Among university students, there was a rise of 58 percent in the number of diagnosed mental conditions between 2010-11 and 2013-14.

Students at Goldsmith’s, the London School of Economics and Kings College London have called for university administrations to pay greater attention to mental health issues. They have campaigned for the hiring of additional therapists and counsellors and for the removal of caps on the number of available therapy sessions.

Ruth Caleb, head of the counselling service at Brunel University, explained the major problem for university students, saying, “The problem is living expenses. Many students have to work very long hours to survive.” She added, “the fear of unemployment is real and combined with the reality of debt can lead to punitive self-expectations.”

Recent research by the HSCIC confirms the impact of economic hardship, social problems and deprivation on well-being and mental health. It shows that 20 percent of families with neither parent in work see a child developing a mental disorder, compared to 8 percent of families where both parents work.

Homelessness was also identified as significantly increasing the chance of a mental illness in the family. The number of households facing homelessness in

February of this year was 280,000, up a third since 2009. Unemployment remains at over five percent—nearly two million people. Real wages have fallen six percent since 2008.

The effects of this deprivation fall heavily on the young: 2.3 million children currently live in poverty, with the number expected to rise to nearly 5 million in 2020. Moreover, the corrosive effects of social deprivation stay with these children throughout their early lives.

Meanwhile, austerity measures have gutted already historically underfunded mental health services. According to the charity MQ: Transforming Mental Health, even before government cuts, only £9.75 was spent on research per mentally ill patient. The figure falls to a pitiful £1.55 per patient with depression and 21 pence per patient with an eating disorder.

Since 2010, the budget for Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) has been cut by nearly £50 million or 6 percent in real terms, despite rising numbers of cases. According to Freedom of Information requests by Young Minds, 74 out of 96 National Health Service Clinical Commissioning groups froze or cut their CAMHS budgets between 2013/14 and 2014/15. This was a result both of the drive to find so-called “efficiencies” within the National Health Service and its gradual privatisation.

More than half of all local authorities have frozen or slashed their CAMHS budget since 2010. Labour-run Birmingham City Council is reported to have slashed spending by a massive 94 percent.

The government’s planned austerity cuts have barely started. Based on the forecasts of 41 mental health trusts interviewed by the BBC, funding for both child and adult mental health services is likely to see a further 8 percent drop by 2018/19.



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