Tackling disadvantage in education

A toolkit for governing boards

A whole child, whole school approach to mental health and wellbeing

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Contents

NGA is the national membership association for governors, trustees and governance professionals in England's state schools and trusts.

We empower those in school and trust governance with valuable resources, expert support and e-learning. Together, we're raising standards and shaping stronger governance to ensure every pupil can thrive today – and tomorrow.

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With thanks to Well Schools for their expertise and support in the production of this toolkit. Well Schools is an initiative led by the Youth Sport Trust that focuses on placing wellbeing at the heart of education. It encourages schools to prioritize the physical and mental health of pupils and staff, fostering a culture where everyone can thrive.

Through its online community, Well Schools offers resources, tools, and a supportive network to help schools embed wellbeing into their culture and curriculum.

With thanks to **Place2Be** for providing their expertise and support in the production of this toolkit. Place2Be is a children's mental health charity providing school-based support and in-depth training programmes to improve the emotional wellbeing of pupils, families, teachers and school staff.

How to use this toolkit

This toolkit is part of a series aimed at tackling disadvantage in education. It identifies the link between pupil mental health and wellbeing and educational disadvantage, signposts resources to support pupils and includes questions for governing boards to explore.

We recommend that you first read our Widening the lens guidance which explains how to identify key areas of disadvantage in your organisation. Other toolkits in this series cover **special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)**, **poverty**, **vulnerability** and **ethnicity**.

Making the link

Research highlights the significant impact of children's physical and mental health on their ability to engage in learning. Concerns about the health and wellbeing of children and young people continue to grow, yet the education system is often not fully equipped to address the scale of this crisis. This challenge is further compounded by reductions in wider support services, while schools are also tasked with developing the skills and characteristics young people need to thrive in today's society and the workforce.

2023 NHS statistics show one in five children and young people struggle with mental health. Children who struggle with their mental health can present symptomatic challenging behaviours at school such as aggression, emotional outbursts or a lack of engagement. This behaviour is often wrongly interpreted, leading to children and young people either being punished and/or missing out on receiving the support they need.

Evidence shows that there is a clear link between higher levels of wellbeing, academic attainment and other educational outcomes particularly with those pupils facing the greatest disadvantage.

This can result in the following over time:

- increases in progress and attainment

- improvements in physical and mental health

- increased attendance

- higher self-efficacy

- increased motivation and engagement

- improved behaviour and reduced exclusions

- increased staff retention and job satisfaction

1. What the evidence shows

- Overall rates of children and young people with probable mental health conditions have increased substantially in recent years, from about 1 in 8 (12.5%) in 2017 to 1 in 5 (20.3%) in 2023 (Children's Commissioner, 2024)

- There is a strong link between school absences and those struggling with their mental health. In 2022, children experiencing mental health issues were seven times more likely to have missed at least 15 days of school (in a single term) compared to those without (NHS, 2022).

- Children with poor mental health are more likely to be excluded (Timpson Review, 2019).

- 79% of young people and 87% of parents and carers agree a young person's behaviour is linked to their mental health (Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition, 2022).

- 41% of young people enrolled in schools say that pupils at their school are not at all accepting or not very accepting of LGBTQ+ people. The study found that mental health concerns for these pupils were much greater than for LGBTQ+ young people who had an accepting school environment (The Trevor Project, 2024)

- 41.2% of young people who identify as lesbian or gay reported a high level of emotional difficulties (e.g. worrying a lot, feeling unhappy, having problems sleeping). This figure rose to 44.5% for young people who identify as bisexual or pansexual. This is compared to 12.1% of heterosexual young people (BeeWell, 2024)

- Girls and young women of colour (aged 11 to 16) were more likely to think that the pandemic will have a long-term negative impact on their mental health (63% compared to 58% of White girls and young women) (Girl Guiding, 2022).

- [Parent Voice Report](#) 2024 found that as many as 96% of parents deem that a mental health and wellbeing focus in the school curriculum is important (Parentkind, 2024).

- 53% of parents say their child has experienced a mental health challenge in the last 12 months. Almost two-thirds (63%) of families eligible for free school meals (FSM) shared this sentiment (Parentkind, 2024).

- Children who were supported with counselling in school were less likely to be persistently absent, and could be most beneficial for primary aged pupils and children of parents/carers with no educational qualifications. (University of Cambridge and Place2Be, 2024)

- Pupils with mental health difficulties are more likely to have lower academic attainment. However, Place2Be compared academic outcomes and found that children who received their support kept pace academically with their peers from a control group (Place2Be, 2024)

2. A whole 'Well School' approach

Addressing and reducing the educational disadvantage of those struggling with mental health should be part of a wider whole-school approach to wellbeing. A whole school approach focuses on promoting pupil mental health and wellbeing as well as ensuring the early identification, support and, where needed, referral of those experiencing poor mental health. It also focuses on promoting the mental health and wellbeing school staff, ensuring they are equipped and supported in carrying out all aspects of their role.

A 'Well School' embodies these principles by placing as much emphasis on health and wellbeing as it does on academic performance. It understands that children and young people are more effective learners when they are happy and healthy, and that fostering a culture of care and support for both staff and pupils enables everyone to reach their full potential.

Visit well-school.org/about-us for more information on the well school initiative.

Guidance for governing boards

NGA's pupil wellbeing guide for governing boards and resources on staff workload and wellbeing supports boards in their role of achieving a whole school approach.

The following themes and questions are provided to prompt discussion between boards and senior executive leaders. This should focus on how your organisation supports pupils experiencing educational disadvantage due to mental health and identify priorities.

3. Mental health and wellbeing in your context

Governing boards and leaders need to understand the mental health and wellbeing needs of their school or trust community and who is at increased risk of experiencing poor mental health.

Considerations include:

- **the demographics of your school community** (such as ethnicity, SEN status, socio-economic status) and the overlap with disadvantaged pupil groups

- **types of mental health issues** pupils are facing and how these may present (such as anxiety, conduct disorders, eating disorders and self-harm)

- the **wellbeing** of those at different ages and school phases

- **local context** — socio-economic factors, issues the community is facing such as low employment, poverty and high crime rates

The mental health spectrum

Recognising mental health and wellbeing as a spectrum is important when creating an environment that promotes good mental health, prevents poor mental health and offers the right level of support to those that need it.

The Centre for Mental Health has advice on Mental health for all: working across the spectrum.

healthy   coping   struggling   unwell

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Questions to explore:

- What are the wellbeing needs of our pupils? Are these school-related? Are these typical of local, regional or national issues?

- How do we measure wellbeing and identify those in need of support?

- Are there any concerns about the wellbeing of pupils from particular groups (such as pupils with SEND or other disadvantaged groups)? How are concerns addressed?

- Does the board collect data on pupil mental health and wellbeing and evaluate the behaviour, attendance, exclusion rates and safeguarding concerns for these children? Is there a correlation? What interventions are in place to support these children?

- How is the mental health and wellbeing of staff and pupils reflected in your culture, policies and school improvement plans?
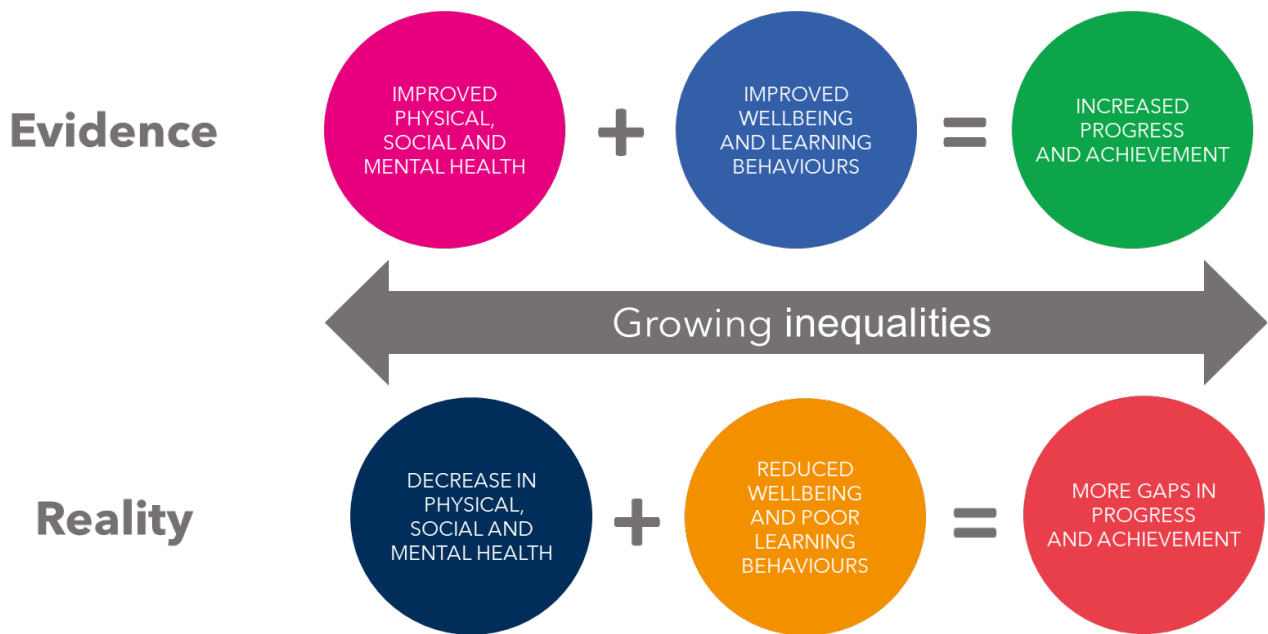
  NGA's pupil mental health and wellbeing guidance provides advice on measuring wellbeing and how governing boards can monitor pupil wellbeing data.

4. School culture and curriculum

A Well Culture supports and promotes positive health and wellbeing through the school's ethos, policies, and curriculum, extending into the wider community. In a Well Culture, there is a strong sense of belonging. All members of the school community work together, guided by a strong purpose, shared values, and common goals.

Wellbeing may promoted through whole school events such as assemblies or participation in Children's Mental Health Week and other relevant awareness days.

The culture should also be evident across the whole curriculum, both in personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education, relationships and sex education (RSE) and other subjects that can have a positive impact on pupil wellbeing such as PE and school sport.

Evidence

IMPROVED PHYSICAL, SOCIAL AND MENTAL HEALTH **+** IMPROVED WELLBEING AND LEARNING BEHAVIOURS **=** INCREASED PROGRESS AND ACHIEVEMENT

Growing **inequalities**

Reality

DECREASE IN PHYSICAL, SOCIAL AND MENTAL HEALTH **+** REDUCED WELLBEING AND POOR LEARNING BEHAVIOURS **=** MORE GAPS IN PROGRESS AND ACHIEVEMENT

The health, wellbeing and learning continuum (Well Schools, 2024)

Questions to explore:

- Is our approach to wellbeing reflected in our vision, values and ethos?

- Is our school a place where pupils and staff feel safe and listened to? Does every pupil feel included and like they belong? How do we know? How aware is the school community of the importance of promoting good mental health?

- Does the curriculum provide opportunities for mental health and wellbeing to be discussed in a safe and constructive way?

- How does the school utilise lessons proven to have a positive impact on pupil mental health (such as PE and school sport, food education, music and other arts subjects)?

- Are there opportunities for all pupils to engage in PE, together with school sport and other physical activity, as part of pupils' wider development including their mental health and social wellbeing?

- Does our school have a way of measuring the wellbeing of pupils and take action from these results?

- Does our school engage with health, sport and community partners to complement our school provision?

Relevant resources

- Place2Be has free resources for schools to support mental health and wellbeing across the whole school community.

- Youth Sport Trust (YST) has produced a range resources centred around physical and mental health to help tackle complex and demanding challenges across the whole school.

- Well Schools is an online community for school and trust staff and leaders. It is free to sign up and brings together useful tools and resources to help schools put wellbeing at the centre of their culture.

- Well Schools have produced a practical guide to measuring wellbeing in schools. It can be accessed by signing up to the Well Schools community for free.

- YST's suite of free Active in Mind resources support targeted groups of pupils who are struggling to engage with learning and school life and with their physical and mental health

NGA has produced guidance for governing boards on their role in ensuring the curriculum supports mental health and wellbeing:

- PSHE education

- Relationships and sex education

- PE and school sport

- Cultural education

5. Policies

Governing boards and school leaders should consider whether school policies adequately explore the link with pupils being educationally disadvantaged through mental health and wellbeing issues. It is important to look through the lens of mental health and wellbeing when developing and reviewing the below policies:

Policies to consider

- Behaviour
- Safeguarding
- Attendance
- Uniform
- Anti-bullying
- SEND
- Equalities

Top Tip

Schools are not required to have a standalone mental health policy.

Refer to existing policies that help staff respond to mental health and wellbeing issues, for example the safeguarding policy.

Questions to explore:

- How is mental health and wellbeing incorporated in our safeguarding policy?
- Do we have a standalone mental health policy? Do staff feel confident that they understand the policy and know how to implement it?
- How does the behaviour policy consider the underlying causes of pupil's disruptive behaviour and pastoral interventions that may be implemented in response?
- How is mental health considered in other policies such as behaviour, attendance, anti-bullying and SEND? Do these policies need updating?

NGA's pupil mental health and wellbeing guidance provides further information on governing boards' role in reviewing how wellbeing is embedded in school policies.

6. Staff training and CPD

School staff are on the front line of promoting the wellbeing of pupils and identifying and supporting those in need. School leaders and governing boards should consider how they ensure staff have the knowledge, skills, and training to effectively support pupils and evaluate how they support staff wellbeing.

Questions to explore:

- Have staff been trained to recognise and respond to mental health issues?

- Are you confident the training needs of staff have been met to ensure targeted support is available for pupils, such as for pastoral teams, and for those responsible for leading a whole school approach?

- How aware is the school community of the importance of promoting good mental health?

CPD resources

- Place2Be offer a free Mental Health Champions Foundation Programme, an online training course which aims to enhance education professionals' understanding of children's mental health: Children's mental health training course (place2be.org.uk)

- Further information on ensuring all staff and school leaders receive the right level of training to carry out their can be found in NGA's pupil mental health and wellbeing guidance.
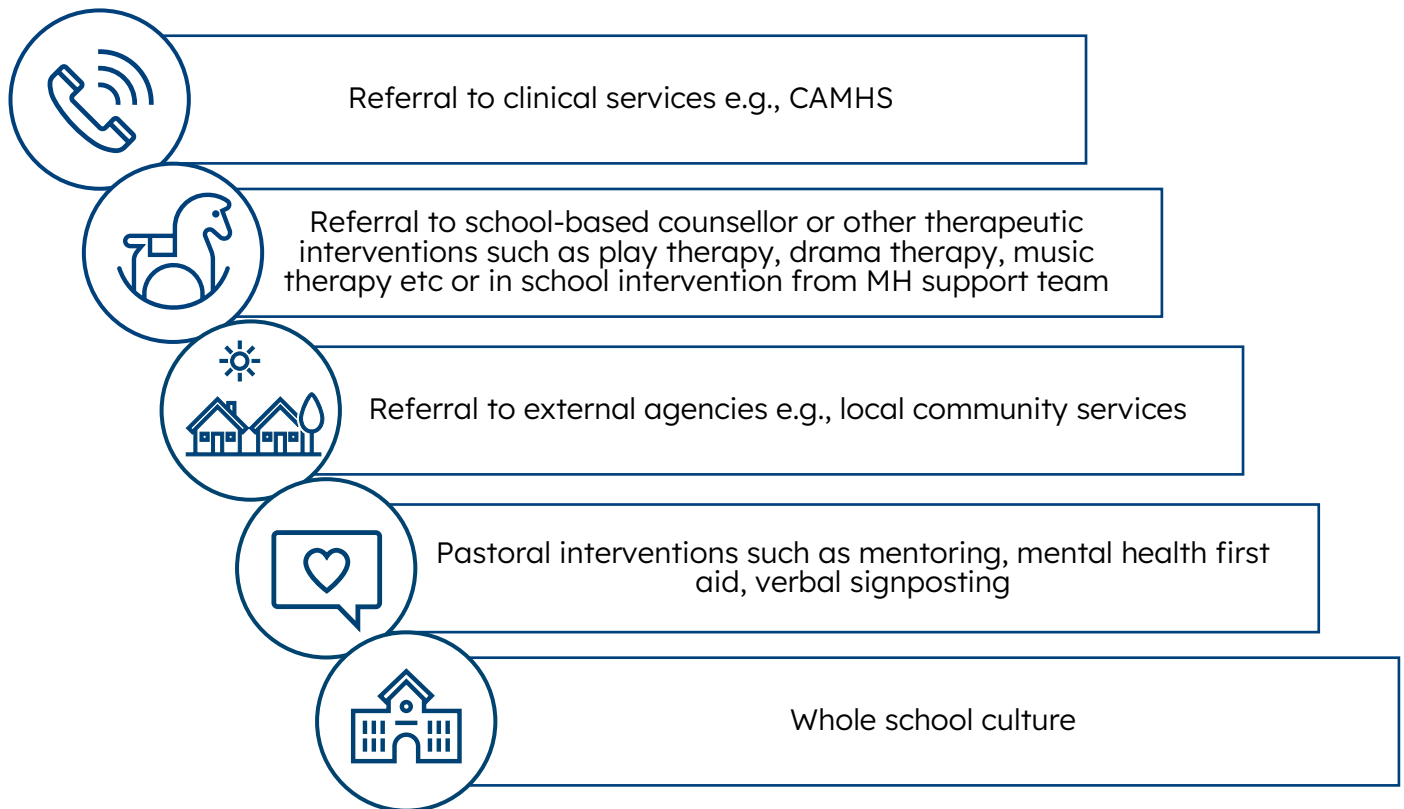
7. Interventions and support for pupils

Governing boards and leaders should ensure that the appropriate systems are in place to identify and support those pupils at risk of or struggling with poor mental health.

Questions to explore:

- What assurances do you have that you are effectively measuring pupil wellbeing and identifying those in need of additional support?

- Do we have targeted support available for pupils on site such as counselling?

- Is there evidence of the impact of school based interventions on pupil mental health and wellbeing?

- Have we pooled our knowledge of local support and services?

Creating a tiered approach to addressing pupil mental health and wellbeing can ensure pupils gain the right and appropriate level of support at the right time:

Referral to clinical services e.g., CAMHS

Referral to school-based counsellor or other therapeutic interventions such as play therapy, drama therapy, music therapy etc or in school intervention from MH support team

Referral to external agencies e.g., local community services

Pastoral interventions such as mentoring, mental health first aid, verbal signposting

Whole school culture

Relevant resources

- Well Schools practical guide to measuring wellbeing in schools can be accessed by signing up to the Well Schools community for free.

- The Department for Education (DfE) has published guidance on Mental Health and Behaviour aimed at school leadership and governing boards.

- There are many local and national organisations that offer additional support to schools and trusts. The Youth Wellbeing Directory of services can be filtered by name or region.

- In partnership with the DfE, Anna Freud has worked with a range of education and mental health experts to create the Mental Health Lead resource Hub. The hub provides practical resources and tools that support schools and colleges in embedding a whole-school or college approach to mental health and wellbeing.

8. Pupil physical health

Prioritising pupil mental health and wellbeing requires recognising the strong connection between physical health and overall wellbeing. Movement, sport and physical activity should be embedded throughout the curriculum and school day, supported by high-quality physical education as a key priority.

A holistic approach to health education includes promoting balanced and healthy lifestyles through lessons on nutrition, the importance of sleep and fostering positive mindsets. Opportunities for outdoor learning and activities beyond the classroom also enhance wellbeing, resilience and engagement.

Questions to explore:

- Does our school provide high quality physical education for every pupil each week?
- Do we provide a range of extracurricular activities which reflect the needs, interests and voices of young people?
- Are we providing opportunities for pupils to move for at least 60 minutes throughout the school day?
- Are all pupils getting the chance to take part in school sport competitions during their time at our school?
- How are you using school budgets to develop the PE, sport and physical activity offer for your school?

Relevant resources

- The DfE have produced statutory guidance on the delivery of physical education for schools to consider
- The Youth Sport Trust have produced a blueprint for the delivery of relevant, high quality experiences of PE, sport and physical activity.
- You can access the Sport England physical literacy consensus statement here.

9. Stakeholder engagement

Engaging with families is fundamental to identifying pupils who are at an educational disadvantage due to challenges with their mental health and wellbeing. Creating links with parents and carers and encouraging them to share thoughts and opinions is proven to have a positive impact on the pupil's wellbeing and wider educational journey.

Collaboration with external organisations can bring in expertise to support schools/trusts with any stage of their intervention model. This includes working with the police and other local organisations to get a broader understanding of community issues that may have an impact on mental health and wellbeing. Key to the approach will be an understanding of the nuanced relationship between these organisations and the communities in your schools. For example, there may be a strained history between the police and particular pupils.

Questions to explore:

- Is there evidence of appropriate interventions in place that support pupil mental health and wellbeing, including external stakeholder engagement?

- Have we considered how best to work with parents and the wider community?

- How does the school engage with the local authority, mental health services, children's services, voluntary sector providers and others?

- How do you know your engagement with families is working and effective?

Relevant resources

- Joint guidance from the National Governance Association and Parentkind combines extensive knowledge on engaging with parents effectively

- The Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families have practical resources for schools and trusts on engaging with parents and carers as part of a whole school approach to mental health and wellbeing

- NGA's collection of resources on staff workload and wellbeing offers guidance for governing boards in their role of creating a healthy working environment.

Further reading

- [The Good childhood report 2023](#) from The Children's Society
- [Mental Health of Children and Young People in England 2023](#): Official NHS statistics report
- [Timpson Review of School Exclusion](#)
- [School behaviour policies](#): advice from Children & Young People's Mental Coalition
- Research paper: [From a child who IS a problem to a child who HAS a problem](#) — Place2Be
- Mental Health Foundation: [One in ten children have no one to talk to in school when they are worried or sad](#)
- [I am Whole](#): the stigma faced by young people experiencing mental health difficulties
- [Just-Like-Us-2021-report-Growing-Up-LGBT.pdf (justlikeus.org)](#)
- [Centre for Mental Health and the Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition: School for All: Solutions for School Attendance](#) from Place2Be
- [School for All: Solution for School Attendance Report](#) from Place2Be

Place2Be services and support

Place2Be is a children's mental health charity offering offers a variety of different mental health and counselling services for schools. Services include targeted and universal interventions, in-school support, expert training and resources. Their free Mental Health Champions – Foundation programme enhances professionals' understanding of children's mental health.

In 2023/24 Place2Be worked with a school population of over 350,000 children and young people in 650 schools. They directly supported over 45,000 pupils, including 10,000 who benefitted from their targeted clinical services.

Last year Place2Be continued to work with young people who are more vulnerable: 43% of young people were eligible for Pupil Premium, 27% had a special educational need (SEN), 4% were looked after young people and 4% were eligible for a child protection plan.

[View Place2Be services](#)