

Helping to read the vital signs...

Around one in five children and young people are thought to experience some kind of mental health problem, yet it remains a cruelly under-rated issue.

Today marks the start of *Read the Signs*, a Department of Health initiative to raise awareness of mental health issues among young people. Sabrina Golding and Jasmine Stewart, from the news service *Children's Express*, look at the problem and the support available.

Thirteen year-old Ben has had much to cope with in his young life. Ben worries about leaving his mum alone – on two occasions she has attempted suicide.

His dad works away from home several days at a time and his mum is clinically depressed. Ben worries about leaving his mum alone because on two occasions he has come home from school to find she has attempted suicide.

Research published today shows 86 per cent of young people aged 15-21 know someone with a mental health problem. Ben is part of a growing trend of young people who not only have to worry about themselves but also about their parents. Unfortunately, the whole question of mental health for young people is still a difficult subject to address.

It is estimated 20 per cent of children and young people have mental health problems. That is not mental illness, that is having problems coping with everyday life.

Ben's case may be extreme but all young people lead stressful lives with exam pressures and high expectations placed upon them. To have the worry of parents with difficulties leads to additional stress, such as concern about leaving parents for an extra hour-and-a-half at the end of the day for extra-curricular options.

Jane Sedgewick is North Sheffield co-ordinator for the Behaviour Improvement Programme, a government-funded multi-agency initiative aimed at improving the welfare of children. She used to be part of the Young People's Mental Health Project and recognises the problem - and the stigma - will not go away.

"There are a lot of words that describe people's mental health in a negative light, like 'you're mad', 'you're a nutter', that don't help," she says.

Chelsea Fields, 14, of Firth Park, agrees. "Young people can be the worst offenders. They should think before they say mean stuff like that. They often don't know whether there's a mental health problem in the family or not."

Jane Sedgewick recognises the invisibility problem of those experiencing mental health problems, and says the media does not help. She says: "A lot of publicity is very negative, that people with mental health problems will go and stab someone. It's worth saying that people with mental health problems are more likely to hurt themselves than others."

But perhaps the real difficulty is the need to acknowledge there is a problem. A lot of young people are trying to cope on their own with no support.

One way to break this cycle of ignorance is to accept that mental health issues affect us all. Self harm, eating disorders and schizophrenia may dominate headlines, but highlighting the extreme end of mental health should not hide the fact that positive mental health programmes should be available to all young people.

Briony Nicholls, 15, of Grimesthorpe, has her own views. She says: "Schools should offer weekly relaxation classes or yoga sessions for students who are doing exams, or going through any kind of stress. There should also be therapists available."

School are beginning to tackle the subject. As Jane Sedgewick says: "A lot of teachers are realising that there is more to the kids than just whether or not they learn in the classroom. There's a lot of other things like self-esteem building, like trust and relationships."

She feels the key is 'emotional literacy' beginning in primary schools. "Children talking about feelings, saying that feelings are OK, even negative feelings, like feeling angry or upset."

One such programme was piloted last year between the Young People's Health Project and Firth Park Community Arts College when a group of young people who had carers or parents with mental health difficulties worked with the college's learning mentors in support strategies. The programme was designed to give help to cop and time out from a stressful situation at home.

Learning mentor Emily Pickles gives an example and says: "Sarah's confidence and self-esteem have improved considerably. She has regularly commented to me that she feels a lot better now that she knows there are other students at the school whose mum or dad has the same problems as her mum does."

One youngster in the initiative, Paris, agrees: "It gets us out of the house and the people are friendly. It helps you make sense of things at home."

Whether or not such schemes will be taken up by other schools remains to be seen. What is clear is that the mental health of all young people and, in some cases the parents they care for, must become an increasing priority for those that claim to be caring institutions.

Fact file

97% of 15-21 year-olds feel that young people know relatively little about mental health.

61% felt that young people were likely to be dismissive of people with mental health problems.

55% of young people wouldn't want anyone to know if they or their family had a mental health problem.

Derogatory language about mental health is common: 61% of young people admitted to using words like 'psycho', 'nutter' and 'loony' in relation to mental health.

Young people find it more difficult to cope with:

Being repeatedly separated from parents when they go into hospital.

Feeling unsure of their relationship with their parent.

Not being looked after properly.

Having to look after an ill parent or other brothers and sisters.

Regular attendance at school and doing school work.

Being worried, upset or ashamed of their parent's illness or behaviour.

People teasing them about their ill parent.

Source: Department of

About the team

This story was produced by Sabrina Golding and Jasmine Stewart. 15. It was published in the [Sheffield Star](#).

To find out more about the Department of Health campaign, visit www.readthesigns.org

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