

A photograph of three people (two women and one child) sitting on a rocky outcrop, looking out over a vast valley towards a bright sunset. The sun is low on the horizon, casting a warm, golden glow across the sky and the landscape. The people are seen from behind, looking out over the valley.

Parent & Carer engagement in school based mental health interventions: barriers and facilitators

Evidence review March 2023



MHF

The Mental Health Foundation is the UK's leading charity for everyone's mental health. We are home to Mental Health Awareness Week and, with prevention at the heart of what we do, we aim to find and address the sources of mental health problems so that people and communities can thrive. The Mental Health Foundation (MHF) works in partnership with See Me to deliver its research, learning and evaluation functions. This includes the delivery of primary research, evaluation, evidence reviews and knowledge exchange to inform programme development.



See Me

See Me is the national programme to end mental health stigma and discrimination in Scotland. Guided and supported by people with experience of mental health problems, See Me challenges mental health stigma and discrimination. The programme aims to influence changes in attitudes, behaviours, cultures and systems so that people with experience of mental health problems are respected, valued and empowered to achieve outcomes important to them. A priority for the programme is to better understand and address the mental health stigma that is disproportionately experienced by particular groups of people in Scotland.

Statement on language

See Me recognises that terminology and labels used to refer to groups marginalised by society is ethically and politically complex, can be harmful and is subject to debate and update. Throughout this report we have mirrored the terminology used within the literature we have reviewed. Wherever possible, we have also tried to use the terminology partners themselves have used to refer to the communities they are led by and work with. We are committed to continually engaging with this critical debate to understand and mitigate harm.

Contents

Executive Summary	4
Findings.....	5
Importance of parental engagement.....	5
What have studies into parent and carer engagement found?	5
Barriers to engagement	6
➤ Stigma.....	6
➤ Trust in school/relationships with school	6
➤ Unable to find time, resources and support.....	6
➤ Socio-economic status	7
Facilitators to improve engagement.....	7
➤ Building trust: communication between schools and parents/carers	7
➤ Overcoming stigma: improving knowledge	8
➤ Improving access: online settings to access resources	8
➤ Batyr: a school based mental health intervention that works with parents ...	9
Conclusions.....	9
References.....	11

Executive Summary

Collaboration between parents, schools, and pupils enhances the effectiveness of mental health interventions and leads to better educational and mental health outcomes for children. Parental engagement is therefore crucial for the success and sustainability of school-based mental health interventions, impacting both children's outcomes and the reach of these programs. Understanding barriers and facilitators to engagement helps improve collaboration between families and schools to better support children's mental health.

Barriers to engagement:

- **Stigma:** Stigma and feelings of shame or skepticism about mental health prevent many parents from engaging with school-based interventions, sometimes due to fear of labeling or family disapproval.
- **Trust and relationships:** Low trust in schools or interventions, often from past negative experiences or concerns about data privacy, reduces parental willingness to participate. Strong family-school relationships are essential for positive outcomes.
- **Time and resources:** Parents often struggle to find time, face literacy challenges, or lack childcare, limiting their ability to engage with school programs. These issues are compounded by socio-economic factors.

Facilitators of good engagement:

- **Building trust through communication:** Effective, continuous communication between schools and parents fosters trust, enabling parents to share information and seek support confidently, which benefits intervention acceptance.
- **Knowledge to overcome stigma:** Providing parents with clear, accessible information about mental health and interventions reduces stigma and increases engagement, especially when materials are digestible and tailored to diverse needs.
- **Online access to resources:** Delivering information and programs online improves accessibility for busy or disadvantaged parents, supporting flexible engagement and reaching vulnerable families cost-effectively.

Parent & Carer engagement in school based mental health interventions: barriers and facilitators

A rapid, pragmatic review of the grey and academic literature was carried out by the Mental Health Foundation research and evaluation team in March 2023. The aim of the review was to inform development of See Me's approach to engaging with parents/carers/families as part of the See Me See Change whole school approach. Findings from this review are outlined below.

Findings

Importance of parental engagement

In Scotland, children spend more time in school on average than children in the rest of Europe¹, with the rest of their time tends to be spent at home and with family. Therefore, it is crucial that both educators and families work together to understand how best to support children and young people's learning about mental health to ensure that interventions are effective both at school and at home (Goldberg et al 2019). Ultimately it is the collaboration between parents, school staff and pupils that will ensure that the mental health interventions in place are adequate and appropriate (Marinucci et al 2022).

Parental engagement is important for a number of reasons. Studies into education have found that children who feel more supported by their parents tend to have better educational outcomes. Harris and Goodall (2007) found that 'students were remarkably clear that what mattered to them was that their parents were behind them, supporting them.'

Parental engagement is also important for the overall number of people who the intervention can help. A key barrier for one study was that they were unable to gain parental consent for young people to take part in the intervention (Langley et al 2010). A lack of parental consent means that fewer young people are able to benefit from the intervention. From an evaluation perspective, this also limits the amount of data that can be used to inform any changes that may need to be made for the future. This is one of the key barriers that needs to be addressed.

It has been found that when families engage with school-based mental health interventions, there can be a positive impact on both the mental health outcomes for the students and for the families as a whole (Castine et al 2016). Their engagement can have a direct influence on the sustainability of an intervention (Moore et al 2022) and their involvement is 'critically important to insure maximum public health impact' (Ingoldsby 2010). Therefore having meaningful engagement is fundamental for school based mental health interventions to have continued success and the biggest impact.

What have studies into parent and carer engagement found?

The data on parent and carer engagement in school based mental health interventions is limited. Therefore, some of the data presented is based on studies

¹ <https://www.tes.com/magazine/news/general/teaching-time-higher-average-even-cut>

into parent and carer engagement in school based education interventions. Although these are not directly related, they can tell us more about how parents interact with schools as institutions. Below the key barriers for parents and carers to engage with school-based mental health interventions have been discussed, followed by a discussion about the key facilitators that can be implemented to overcome these issues.

Barriers to engagement

Stigma

Unsurprisingly, a key barrier to parental engagement is the stigma surrounding mental health and mental health support. Studies found that parents and families may not wish to discuss mental health or to engage with interventions because they had feelings of shame, stigma and scepticism (Waid and Kelly 2020). In a study into school based therapy sessions, Crane (2021) found that parents did not want their child participating when therapy was involved. Another study found that there were fears that young people would be labelled if teachers had a role in the mental health intervention (Fazel et al 2014). This again highlighting that stigma was a clear barrier to parental engagement.

The stigma that parents face from family members when accessing mental health services for children may also explain why engagement can be so low. A study in the US found that Mexican American families experienced feelings of shame and disapproval from family members who did not believe that the child had a mental health problem and that treatment would not work (Martinez 2013). Although this is a demographic that we may not see in Scotland, previous studies into the stigma that South East Asian communities in Scotland face could have a similar impact on engagement with school based interventions. This could be an area to explore in the future to gain more Scotland specific data.

Trust in school/relationships with school

Parental engagement in school based interventions may also be low due to low levels of trust that parents have in either the school or the intervention itself. A good family-school relationship is crucial in ensuring that there is a positive child outcome (Williamson et al 2022a). It was found that parents who had had negative experiences with their child's school or formal services were less likely to engage as they did not want their data to be shared (Williamson et al 2022b). This level of trust in the school has been proven to have an impact on whether or not the intervention programme will be deemed acceptable by parents or not (Williamson et al 2022a).

Unable to find time, resources and support

We know that parents are busy and struggle to find time to fit extra work into their day, especially when schools operate during their working hours. Crane (2021) found that one intervention was less successful because the children did not receive support from their parents to complete their therapy homework. Although it was not clear why this was the case, it may be that parents lack the confidence to engage with school based mental health interventions. Smith (2020) found that literacy level was a barrier for some parents. Harris and Goodall (2007) suggested that parents

may not understand how to negotiate the school system. Childcare was also found to be a barrier (Harris and Goodall 2007) as the cost of childcare meant that parents were unable to attend sessions at school in order to gain information.

➤ **Socio-economic status**

Socio-economic status is a barrier that is mentioned in a number of studies. It can be argued that it relates to the previous barriers mentioned, where parents do not feel that they have the confidence or resources to engage meaningfully with the intervention. Having less time and access to resources is an issue for all families, and so it may be particularly felt by those on lower incomes. With this acting like a reinforced barrier, it is an area that is particularly lacking in evidenced solutions for improving parental engagement (Shucksmith et al 2010).

Studies have shown that parents and carers from a lower socio-economic status are less likely to engage with a school-based mental health intervention. Parents from low income backgrounds are disproportionately more likely to not engage (Broomfield et al 2022) and when they do, it has been found that they are more likely to drop out and stop engaging at some stage of the intervention (Chacko et al 2016). It has been found that some of the key barriers that schools face when engaging parents in educational settings are language barriers, childcare issues and literacy issues (Harris and Goodall 2007). The key to understanding the barriers that families face is to have an in-depth knowledge of individual family circumstances and how this may influence their ability to engage with school based programmes (Williamson et al 2022a).

Facilitators to improve engagement

When looking at all of the barriers as a whole it becomes clear that there is an overall theme: lack of knowledge. It can be argued that this lack of knowledge may be because parents are not engaging due to issues relating to trust and stigma or they are unable to engage with schools due to a variety of lifestyle pressures. Therefore, in order to tackle these barriers it is crucial that steps are taken to overcome these.

➤ **Building trust: communication between schools and parents/carers**

The quality of the relationship between the school and the parents can have a big impact on the trust levels that parents have in the school to provide support for their children (Childs-Fegredo et al 2021). A study into early identification of mental health difficulties in primary school found that parents who had familiar relationships with the teachers were able to work with the teachers to share information about their child (Childs-Fegredo et al 2021). These strong relationships can also allow for parents to feel like they can ask for support when they need it and that when they do so they will be listened to (Harris and Goodall 2007).

One of the most important factors in improving parental engagement is effective communication between school-based staff and parents and carers. Having continuous communication that is effective is crucial in order to ensure that parents and carers have the most up to date information (Longhurst et al 2021). This communication will allow schools to build stronger relationships between school

staff and parents which may lead to more trust. In fact, Williamson et al (2022a) argue that the intervention itself can serve as a way to strengthen the trust and relationship between the school and the parents. Overall, it is important that schools work in partnership with parents, carers and families to develop their skills to support their children's mental wellbeing (McHale 2015).

➤ **Overcoming stigma: improving knowledge**

We know that one of the best ways to overcome mental health stigma and discrimination is by providing people with a good knowledge and understanding of mental health. By providing parents with knowledge about mental health and about the intervention itself, they may be more likely to want their child to get involved as they may no longer hold stigmatising views.

Strong communication is critical when delivering the information that parents need to understand the intervention programme. When parents can trust the school then they will have more trust that the information they are receiving is accurate. Having access to this information can give parents the confidence and trust that they need to then encourage their children to engage in the intervention.

In a study into parental engagement with a programme to treat trauma related symptoms in schools, Santiago et al (2013) found that parents wanted two things: more parent information sessions and more tangible information materials such as flyers, brochures or a parent package. It was also found that parents from lower-income backgrounds wanted information that was available in smaller, more digestible chunks and they preferred to have the information presented in a way that was easier to follow (Broomfield et al 2022). Therefore it is important to equip parents with more means to access the knowledge that they need.

➤ **Improving access: online settings to access resources**

A key way to ensure that parents engage with interventions is to make the information that they need easier to access. Some of the key reasons why parents may struggle to attend parent sessions is because they worked long hours, could not access transport or had childcare issues (Santiago et al 2013). A number of studies have found that the best way to tackle this is to make information available is through an online setting. This can widen the access of the information as parents can fit the learning into their own schedule which can lead to parents digesting the information in a way that suits them best leading to increased effectiveness of the intervention. In fact parents themselves have expressed that they prefer for mental health information be delivered online (Sim et al 2022). Using this method can address the issues that parents face with time, which we know is one of the main reasons why parents fail to engage with school based interventions.

Sim et al (2022) also found that this was an effective way to reach vulnerable families and disadvantaged communities. Smart phones could also be used as a way to share information with parents (Smith 2020) as these are more widespread and may be the only way to get online for some people from low income families. Therefore having parental programmes online is a good way to tackle the barrier of reaching parents from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Online interventions can also be a more cost effective way to communicate information to parents as it requires less support from professionals and less overall resources in the long term meaning that it has good scope for scalability (Sim et al 2022). This can mean that the intervention is more sustainable over time.

➤ **Batyr: a school based mental health intervention that works with parents**

There were few examples of interventions in action to tackle mental health in schools that include parents and carers. The best we could find is the Australian *batyr@school* intervention, which is a suite of resources to educate young people about their own mental health and to give them guidance on how to access support.

The aim of the programme is ‘for school communities that are free from stigma, have open and supportive conversations about mental health, and are equipped with the tools to promote mental health’². Using a peer to peer model a variety of topics relating to mental health are discussed. They also include follow up sessions on topics that include ‘looking out for mates’, stress and anxiety and the transition out of high school. The intervention is delivered face-to-face or online, with one programme delivered to a cohort each year and a follow up each year after. They also provide programmes for student leaders and teacher development sessions. The intervention has had a positive outcome, with 78% of young people more likely to seek help after seeing a batyr programme and 85% of students rating the programme as highly engaging³.

The intervention is successful in part because of the way in which parents are involved. The programme offers information sessions for parents, invites them to attend sessions with their children and provides follow up information after the session has ended on how to support their children if they are dealing with mental health conditions. The parent information forums are delivered through a lived experience speaker, followed by a Q&A session with a panel of experts. Batyr have found that parents leave with a better understanding of mental health and how they can support their children as well as a greater understanding of what services are available.

Conclusions

Parental engagement is key to the sustained success of school based mental health interventions. Parent and carer engagement leads to more positive outcomes for the children who take part in the interventions. This review explored barriers and facilitators of parental engagement in school-based mental health interventions.

The review identified several key barriers to engagement including stigma, poor relationships and trust between parents and schools, the ability to find time and resources to engage and socio-economic status. Feelings of shame, scepticism, and fear of labelling prevent many parents from participating in school-based interventions. Concerns about family disapproval and cultural stigma, such as those observed in some ethnic communities, further reduce engagement.

² <https://beyou.edu.au/resources/programs-directory/b/batyr-school>

³ <https://www.batyr.com.au/batyr-school/>

Low trust in schools or intervention programs, often stemming from previous negative experiences or worries about data privacy, diminishes parental willingness to engage. Positive family-school relationships are crucial for acceptance and success of mental health interventions.

Parents frequently face challenges such as limited time, literacy barriers, and lack of childcare, which restrict their ability to support school mental health initiatives. Families from lower socio-economic backgrounds are disproportionately affected by such barriers, and are less likely to engage or sustain involvement in interventions as a result.

By improving knowledge, building trust and making information accessible it is possible to increase parental engagement in school-based interventions. Providing accessible, clear information about mental health and intervention programmes reduces stigma and increases parental engagement. Strong, continuous communication between schools and parents fosters trust, enabling parents to share information and seek support confidently. Familiarity with school staff encourages collaboration and helps parents feel heard and supported. Parents value information sessions and resources presented in accessible formats. An example was shared of batyr@school in Australia, which demonstrates the importance of knowledge in building meaningful parental engagement into the intervention. This is done through building trust by keeping parents informed through parent forums where they can access expert information in a safe environment.

Online delivery of information and programmes addresses barriers related to time, transport, and childcare. Parents appreciate flexible, digital access to mental health resources, which also effectively reaches vulnerable and disadvantaged families. Online interventions can also be more cost-effective and scalable, supporting long-term sustainability.

References

- Broomfield, G.; Brown, S.D.; Yap, M.B.H. Socioeconomic factors and parents' preferences for internet – and mobile –based parenting interventions to prevent youth mental health problems: A discrete choice experiment, *Internet Interventions*, 2022, 28
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S221478292200029X>
- Castine, E.; Flanagan, S.; Howard, K.A.S. Family Engagement in School-based Mental Health, *Critical Issues in School-Based Mental Health: evidence-based research, practice and interventions*, Holt, M.K; Grills, A.E. 2016
- Chacko, A.; Jensen, S.A.; Lowry, L.S.; Cornwell, M.; Chimklis, A.; Chan, E.; Lee, D.; Pulgarin, B. Engagement in Behavioral Parent Training: Review of the Literature and Implications for Practice, *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, 2016, 19
<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10567-016-0205-2>
- Childs-Fegredo, J.; Burn, J.M.; Duschinsky, R.; Humphrey, A.; Ford, T.; Jones, P.B.; Howarth, E. Acceptability and Feasibility of Early Identification of Mental Health Difficulties in Primary Schools: A Qualitative Exploration of UK School Staff and Parents' Perceptions, *School Mental Health*, 2021 <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12310-020-09398-3>
- Crane, M.E; Phillips, K.E.; Maxwell, C.A.; Norris, L.A.; Rifkin, L.S.; Blank, J.M.; Sorid, S.D.; Read, K.L.; Swan, A.J.; Kendall, P.C.; Frank, H.E. A Qualitative Examination of a School-Based Implementation of Computer-Assisted Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy for Child Anxiety, *School Mental Health*, 2021, 13, 2
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8223963/>
- Fazel, M.; Hoagwood, K., Stephen, S. Ford, T. Mental health interventions in schools 1: Mental health interventions in schools in high-income countries, *Lancet Psychiatry*, 2014, 1, 5 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4477835/>
- Harris, A.; Goodall, J. Engaging Parents in Raising Achievement: Do Parents Know They Matter?, Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2007
<https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/6639/1/DCSF-RW004.pdf>
- Goldberg, J.M.; Sklad, M.; Elfrink, T.R.; Schreurs, K.M.G.; Bohlmeijer, E.T.; Clarke, A.M. Effectiveness of interventions adopting a whole school approach to enhancing social and emotional development: a meta-analysis, *European Journal of Psychology of Education*, 2019, 34 <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10212-018-0406-9>
- Langley, A.K.; Nadeem, E.; Kataoka, S.H.; Stein, B.D.; Jaycox, L.H. Evidence-Based Mental Health Programs in Schools: Barriers and Facilitators of Successful Implementation, *School Mental Health*, 2010, 2 <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12310-010-9038-1#Sec20>
- Longhurst, P.; Sumner, A.L.; Smith, S.; Eilenburg, J.; Duncan, C.; Cooper, M. 'They need somebody to talk to': Parents' and carers' perceptions of school-based humanistic counselling, *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research* 2021, 22, 3
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/capr.12496>
- Ingoldsby, E.M. Review of Interventions to Improve Family Engagement and Retention in Parent and Child Mental Health Programs, *Journal of Child and Family Services*, 2010, 19
<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10826-009-9350-2>
- Marinucci, A.; Grove, C.; Gartoulla, P. Mental health literacy and interventions for school-aged children, *Australian Institute of Family Studies*, 2022

<https://aifs.gov.au/resources/short-articles/mental-health-literacy-and-interventions-school-aged-children>

Martinez, J. Psychoeducation and parental engagement in mental health services for youth, UCLA Electronic Theses and Dissertations, 2013

<https://escholarship.org/content/qt3rp5q5m2/qt3rp5q5m2.pdf>

McHale, K. Promoting and improving emotional health through building resilience in children and young people using whole school approaches, Public Health Suffolk, 2015

<https://www.westsuffolkccg.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/APPENDIX-5B-Improving-Emotional-Health-Building-Resilience.pdf>

Moore, A.; Stapley, E.; Hayes, D.; Town, R.; Deighton, J. Barriers and Facilitators to Sustaining School-Based Mental Health and Wellbeing Interventions: A Systematic Review, International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 2022, 19

https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10146012/1/Town_ijerph-19-03587-v2.pdf

Santiago CD, Pears G, Baweja S, Vona P, Tang J, Kataoka SH. Engaging parents in evidence-based treatments in schools: Community perspectives from implementing CBITS. School Ment Health, 2013, 5, 4 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3833723/>

Shucksmith, J.; Jones, S; Summerbell, C. The Role of Parental Involvement in School-Based Mental Health Interventions at Primary (Elementary) School Level, Advances in School Mental Health Promotion, 2010, 3, 1

https://www.academia.edu/3110484/The_Role_of_Parental_Involvement_in_School_Based_Mental_Health_Interventions_at_Primary_Elementary_School_Level

Sim, W.H.; Jorm, A.F.; Yap, M.B.H. The Role of Parent Engagement in a Web-Based Preventive Parenting Intervention for Child Mental Health in Predicting Parenting, Parent and Child Outcomes. Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health 2022, 19, 2191.

<https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19042191>

Smith, L.T. Identifying factors of parent engagement in a school-based mental health intervention : an mHealth approach, UT Electronic Theses and Dissertations, 2020,

<https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/handle/2152/86504>

Waid, J.; Kelly, M. Supporting family engagement with child and adolescent mental health services: A scoping review, Health and Social Care in the Community, 2020, 28, 5,

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/hsc.12947>

Williamson, V.; Larkin, M.; Reardon, T.; Ford, T.; Spence, S.H.; Morgan, F.; Cresswell, C. Primary school-based screening for childhood mental health problems and intervention delivery: a qualitative study of parents in challenging circumstances. Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties 2022

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13632752.2022.2122285> (a)

Williamson, V.; Larkin, M.; Reardon, T.; Pearcey, S.; Button, R.; Green, I.; Hill, C.; Stallard, P.; Spence, S.H.; Breen, M.; McDonald, I.; Ukoumunne, O.; Ford, T.; Violato, M.; Sniehotka, F.; Stainer, J.; Gray, A.; Brown, P.; Sancho, M.; Morgan, F.; Jasper, B.; Creswell, C. School-based screening for childhood anxiety problems and intervention delivery: a codesign approach, BMJ Open, 2022, 12 <https://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/12/6/e058089>

See Me is managed by SAMH and MHF Scotland, and is funded by Scottish Government.



Brunswick House, 51 Wilson Street, Glasgow G1 1UZ

Phone: 0141 530 1111

Email: info@seemescotland.org



[seemescotland](https://www.facebook.com/seemescotland)



[@seemescotland](https://twitter.com/seemescotland)

SAMH is a company limited by guarantee in Scotland No 82340. Scottish Charity No SC-008897.