



How can we prevent poor mental health outcomes in autistic mainstream secondary school pupils?

A recent all-party parliamentary group report suggested fewer than half of autistic children were happy in school.

Previous research also indicates many autistic young people begin to develop serious mental health issues during adolescence.

It is important to understand how we can best prevent poor mental health and promote wellbeing for autistic pupils. As a lot of previous training and research around autism has been conducted and led by non-autistic people, it is also vitally important to understand and centre the experience and perspectives of autistic young people themselves.

"I got involved because I want to give my views as a high school student. I thought that a lot of people who are a part of research were older and that people my age weren't listened to by anyone really. I think it's really important to involve young people if the research is about them."

- Quote from a young co-investigator

What was the aim of the project?

We aimed to 1) explore autistic young people's experience in mainstream secondary schools and 2) understand factors that impact upon mental health.

What did we do?

We co-developed and carried out peer-led focus groups (n=17) and a participatory workshop (n=9) with neurodivergent young people aged (11-19) who had experience of attending a mainstream secondary school within the North East and North Cumbria.

How were people involved?

This was a participatory, peer-led project. The topic area was identified as a priority by neurodivergent young people and the research was led by a team of neurodivergent young people and researchers, neurotypical researchers and public involvement professionals. Neurodivergent young people were co-investigators on the project from the outset throughout every stage of the project. Peer researchers co-led focus groups and workshops, contributed to data analysis and interpretation and write up.



What did we learn?

Many participants described a **lack of understanding from school staff and peers**, disproportionate **negative impacts of existing policies and procedures**, minimal ability to access **meaningful support** and overwhelming **sensory challenges** throughout the school day as negative influences of mental health.

“Every second at school I had anxiety about teachers, students and feeling trapped.”

These stressors increased school-based anxiety and distress, with pupils feeling additionally punished when needing time out, or time away from school, to recover.

“Blaming parents when you can’t go in [is difficult]. Parents getting fined puts a lot of pressure on us and doesn’t help us to get better or trust them.”

Participants suggested **acceptance** from school staff and peers, as well as **feeling heard** had a particularly positive impact on

how they felt. Some individuals highlighted differences in how they were treated between school and sixth form, feeling such approaches could result in better outcomes across year groups.

“...there’s definitely a different model to teaching in terms of how you approach students from sixth form....It felt much more I was being treated like a human and not a student.”

Young people and peer researchers developed recommendations to support wellbeing, focused on development of **neuro-affirmative, co-created** approaches to **increase belongingness** and **safety** within schools.

What next?

The research team are currently developing a report detailing the project’s full findings which we aim to share with school leadership teams, SENDco’s and others working in education, training providers, parents/carers and more.

Who are we?

The NIHR Applied Research Collaboration (ARC) North East and North Cumbria (NENC) is one of 15 NIHR ARCs in England.

We bring together six regional universities, health and social care providers, local authorities, the VCSE sector and public and community groups, to support ‘better fairer health and care at all ages and in all places’.

Who was involved in this work?

North East and North Cumbria ARC
Young Person’s Advisory Network;
Newcastle University; Durham University; CNTW NHS Foundation Trust; Children North East; Gladstone Terrace Centre for Young People.

For more information:

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