Support in tough times
Encouraging young people to seek help for their friends

Summary Report

2014
About the Commission for Children and Young People

The NSW Commission for Children and Young People was established in 1999 as an independent statutory agency to promote the welfare, safety and well-being of children and young people aged 0-17 years. It plays a strong role in promoting the participation of children and young people in the decisions that affect their lives, and makes recommendations to government and non-government agencies to improve policies, programs and services for children and young people.

About the Mental Health Commission of NSW

The Mental Health Commission of NSW was set up in 2012 to review and advise on services and programs, or other issues, affecting people living with a mental illness. It also advocates for policies and practices that support community wellbeing and help people who experience mental illness to live well according to their choices and priorities.

The Commission’s first task was to develop a draft Strategic Plan for Mental Health in NSW, which it delivered to Government this year. The Plan was the result of an extensive community consultation, and it proposes reform of the mental health system built on the values of Respect, Recovery, Community, Quality, Equity, Citizenship, and Hope.

As an independent statutory agency, the Commission will guide, monitor and report on the progress of reform to people who live with mental illness and their families and carers, the community, the Minister for Mental Health or to the NSW Parliament.

It will also bring together agencies and organisations that can contribute to change at state and regional levels, and support them to build positive collaboration focused on producing real, measurable improvements in people’s lives.

And it will ensure its own work and that of others reflects the priorities of people who experience mental illness in their life and their carers by involving them at all stages.

To view the full report, or if you would like to stay involved in future work in this area, visit the Commission’s website:

www.kids.nsw.gov.au
When a person is growing up, any mental health problem that develops can really disrupt their plans for the future. If that young person doesn’t have the right support, their relationships with family and friends, personal goals, financial security or career path can be seriously affected. That’s why we must make sure young people can get the help they need when they need it.

So we are very pleased to be able to share this report with the community. It provides insight into how young people can be supported to help their friends through tough times and we believe it will be a great resource for people looking to support the mental health and wellbeing of young people.

There has been a lot of research into what works and what doesn’t for young people seeking help for themselves, but this is the first time in NSW that research has been carried out into what helps or hinders young people to seek adult help for their friends who may be experiencing a mental health problem.

Since most young people will tend to confide in a friend rather than an adult when they have a problem, this research is an important contribution to understanding how we can make sure young people experiencing mental health difficulties are identified and supported earlier.

One of the most encouraging findings of this research is that schools can make a difference to the number of young people seeking help for a mental health problem. The many schools that have programs and practices to support youth mental health and wellbeing can take heart from this report – what they are doing does have an effect on the lives of their students.

For other school communities still working to integrate positive mental health into school life, this report is a valuable resource in terms of what to consider and what may work for them.

The research also demonstrates that many factors influence young people’s willingness to seek help for a friend. Many of those things may be beyond the control of individual schools. Parents, policy makers and service providers need to listen to what young people say about what supports work for them and why, and to act on that advice and provide the right support sooner.

The comments in this report from the young people who took part in the research are compelling. We would like to thank all of them for their generous participation and for sharing their ideas and experiences. They have made this report rich and enlightening.

Kerryn Boland
Children’s Guardian and
Acting Commissioner for Children and Young People

John Feneley
NSW Mental Health Commissioner
About the research

Adolescence and early adulthood is the peak age of onset for many mental disorders yet this age group is less likely than others to seek professional help. Young people instead prefer to turn to informal sources of support such as family and friends.

As friends become increasingly important during adolescence, a friend is often the first to know if a young person is experiencing a mental health problem. This means that young people are in a position to both support their friends going through a tough time and to seek adult help for a friend in a timely way.

This research looked at the barriers and supports to young people seeking adult help for a friend experiencing mental health problems. It focussed specifically on the influence that schools might have on young people’s propensity to seek adult help for a friend.

The focus on schools makes sense because almost all young people in NSW attend school and are influenced by their school environment and by school practices. Schools also provide a near-universal platform on which to build improvements in the health and wellbeing of young people. For young people without supportive families, schools can sometimes be the first or only place where they can seek and receive the help they need.

Methodology

The research used two online surveys. The student survey was completed by 3,241 students in Years 9 and 10 from 121 schools across the public, Catholic and independent school sectors between August and November 2013. Eighty-nine principals (or principal’s delegates) from those schools completed the principal survey.

Interviews with principals and focus groups with students were undertaken at eleven schools to further explore issues raised in the survey.

The student sample matched the NSW student population well on the comparative measures used. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students were over-represented. Students attending Catholic schools were slightly under-represented.

Key findings

Mental health problems have touched the lives of most Year 9 and 10 students in NSW. Almost three-quarters (71%) of the students in this study reported knowing another person who had experienced a mental health problem and just under two-thirds (64%) had known another young person or had a friend in that situation.

The research demonstrates for the first time important links between student mental health skills and knowledge, social relations in schools, and the likelihood of young people seeking help from adults for friends experiencing mental health problems.

The research shows that the social and emotional barriers young people commonly experience in seeking adult help for their friends are likely to be reduced by school-based actions that are consistent with the role of schools in providing high quality learning environments for young people.

The research also provides a snapshot of the influence of current school practices on student intentions to seek adult help for a friend from the perspective of young people themselves, who are both the beneficiaries of school-based mental health education and promotion, and active contributors to the mental health and wellbeing of the school community.

It is important to note that the research did not involve an evaluation of the effectiveness of mental health programs or education in schools.

Young people supporting their friends

Most students indicated that they would support a friend with a mental health problem in a range of ways that would clearly be helpful. This included listening to their friend in an understanding way (74%), suggesting the friend talk to an adult (48%), and suggesting the friend seek professional help (37%).

Among students who had known another young person with a mental health problem, 94% had performed at least one helpful action to support them and 86% had performed three or more helpful actions:

- **I was a shoulder to lean on and someone to talk to.**
- **Supported them through the situation and reassured them that I was there if they needed someone to talk to.**
- ** Tried to get them to see a counsellor.**

Most young people (87%) correctly identified that a young person was experiencing a serious mental health problem from a given hypothetical scenario.

One-quarter (25%) of young people indicated that they were ‘very confident’ they could help the young person in the given scenario, 59% said they were ‘slightly confident’, and 16% said they were ‘not confident at all’.

Almost one-third (29%) of young people said that they did not know a suitable adult to get help from for a friend experiencing a mental health problem.
Young people seeking adult help for a friend

Just over half of all students said they would seek assistance from an adult to help a friend with a serious mental health problem (52%). A further 27% said they would tell an adult only if they could remain anonymous. Of those who had known another young person with a mental health problem in the past, half (51%) had sought adult help for them.

A small proportion (4%) of young people said they definitely would not seek adult help for a friend, while 16% said they would maybe seek help or did not know if they would seek help.

Barriers to young people seeking adult help for a friend

Young people reported a range of barriers to seeking adult help on behalf of a friend. The most mentioned barriers were: worrying that their friend would be embarrassed and not want an adult to know (72%); feeling unsure about the best thing to do (51%); thinking that involving an adult would make things worse (44%); thinking that going to an adult would break their friend’s trust (40%); and thinking that they would not seek adult help if their friend said they did not want any help (40%).

- It’s mostly embarrassment which wards young people away from getting help.
- It usually gets worse after telling an adult.
- A lot of the time, young people simply don’t know what to do.
- They are scared – they will lose their trust – their friend will hate them.

The strongest influences on young people’s intentions to seek adult help were thinking that involving an adult would make things worse, the perceived seriousness of the friend’s problem, and thinking that going to an adult would break their friend’s trust.

Reducing barriers to young people seeking adult support for a friend

Many factors in the school environment were found to influence student intentions to seek adult help for a friend, either directly or by reducing the barriers young people experience.

The aspects of school environments that had the greatest influence on young people’s intentions to seek adult help for a friend were: feeling comfortable to approach adults at school; feeling there are trusted adults at school; feeling that staff members respect student confidentiality; knowing who to get help from; and feeling that teachers care about the mental health of students.

While these factors were found to be the most influential of those examined, it was the combined and interrelated effects of these and other factors that affected student intentions overall.

Many young people reported that they were more likely to seek adult support for a friend when adults: treat them with respect when they raise concerns about a friend’s mental health; recognise them as competent to help their friends; simply ask young people how they are doing; and take action in ways that are effective and appropriate.

Which adults would young people approach?

Parents were the adults that young people said they were most likely to approach for help for a friend (74%). This was followed by professionals in person such as a counsellor or doctor (49%), and adults at school such as teachers, sports coaches and support staff (46%).

One-third (33%) of the young people who had a friend with a mental health problem in the past said they had approached their friend’s parents.

Diversity

The student responses in this research (for example, their perceptions of their school’s social relations or mental health education) showed much greater variation within schools than between schools. This is despite there also being great variation in the mental health strategies and practices being implemented across the schools in the study. This was overlaid by some broad variations according to student sex and culture:

Sex

Males were less likely than females to report intentions to involve an adult. They were also less likely to have acted to involve an adult in the past, and less likely than females to identify mental health problems as serious.

Culture

Students who spoke East and South-East Asian languages at home were less likely to say they would seek adult help for a friend experiencing a serious mental health problem (unless they could do so anonymously) and were less likely to have sought adult help for a friend in the past.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and students who spoke East and South-East Asian languages at home, were less likely to identify when a person had a serious mental health problem.

Disadvantage

The level of disadvantage of a school’s student population had no statistically significant effect on the intentions of young people to approach an adult for help for a friend.

Implications of the research for schools

The research suggests that if schools across NSW make even small changes to improve social relations in schools and build relevant and practical student skills and knowledge, then significantly more young people are likely to approach adults for help for their friends going through a tough time.
The research supports the idea that providing pathways from peer support to adult help should be considered as an integral part of any school-based strategy to prevent and intervene early in the development of mental health problems in young people. The strategies that schools might pursue in developing these pathways are consistent with the broader role of schools to promote student health and wellbeing and foster high quality learning environments.

The research suggests that students are more likely to seek adult support for a friend going through a tough time in schools that focus on the following things:

### Building trust among young people and adults at school

Students feeling that there were trusted adults at school increased the likelihood of young people feeling comfortable to approach adults at school. It also reduced student reluctance to break a friend’s trust to help them. Students feeling comfortable to approach adults at school, feeling that confidentiality is respected, and not feeling negative at school, reduced the likelihood of students thinking that adults will make things worse and reduced embarrassment.

The factors that contributed to students feeling there were trusted adults at school included school staff respecting student confidentiality, caring about students’ mental health, and being respectful in their dealings with students. Students feeling that they belonged in the school and had opportunities for mental health discussions also contributed to the perception that there were trusted adults at school.

Student responses reflected a range of perceptions and experiences:

*Some adults treat us like kids, so how are we meant to trust them if they don’t treat us equally.*

*The work that is being done at this school is very good and will help a lot of people now and in the future.*

### Recognising young people as competent to provide support to their friends

Another important dimension of building trust between young people and adults at school is how well adults recognise young people as being competent to support their friends going through a tough time. Students in the focus groups said they would be more comfortable approaching adults for help for a friend if they thought the adults viewed them as competent and to be taken seriously. Students were wary of adults taking over the situation:

*You just want advice from them, not to go ahead and do something without you wanting it to happen.*

### Adhering to transparent school policies to protect student confidentiality

Students feeling that adults at school respect student confidentiality was an important influence on student intentions to seek adult help for a friend experiencing a mental health problem.

Schools that respect student confidentiality were more likely to have students reporting that: teachers care about students’ mental health; there are trusted adults at the school; they feel comfortable to approach adults at school; and they feel confident that they know who to get help from. Students were also less likely to report: thinking that telling an adult could make things worse; being reluctant to break a friend’s trust; feeling embarrassed; and having negative feelings at school.

Confidentiality was also a dominant theme in student comments:

*Confidentiality issues, not feeling 100% sure that what they say will be kept secret if they wanted it to be.*

### Showing they care about students’ mental health

It was clear from the comments of young people that they want school staff to care about them as people:

*Teachers being more involved and caring, teachers actually caring about who you are.*

Students feeling that teachers cared about their mental health increased the likelihood of students reporting that they know who to get help from, have trusted adults at school, feel comfortable to approach adults at school, and think the mental health education they receive at school is useful.

Students feeling that teachers care about students’ mental health also reduced the chance of young people reporting that they have no suitable adult to tell, being reluctant to break a friend’s trust to help them, and feeling that an adult could make things worse.

Feeling that teachers care about students’ mental health is influenced by the extent to which students feel they have opportunities for mental health discussions at school and that student confidentiality is respected.

### Teaching practical skills and encouraging discussion of real issues

Student perceptions about opportunities for mental health discussions (including the ethics of breaking a friend’s trust to get them help) and the usefulness of mental health information received at school affected young people’s intentions to seek adult help for a friend experiencing a mental health problem.

More specifically, these factors contributed to students being more likely to say that: they are comfortable approaching an adult at school for help; there are trusted adults at school; teachers care about student mental health; they know who to get help from; and telling an adult would not make the situation worse.

The research confirms that many young people both want to, and do, support their friends going through a tough time. Young people felt that schools should help teach young people practical skills and strategies to help a friend, including who and where to get help from:

*We need to be taught how to deal with such situations and how to help.*
The school curriculum needs a more hands on or interactive way of teaching us about mental health.

It is important this interest and concern is acknowledged and supported in school mental health education, and in the development of school mental health prevention and early intervention policies and practices.

Taking proportionate action when problems are raised

Students believing that telling an adult about a friend’s problem could make things worse was found to be significant barrier to young people’s intentions to seek help from an adult:

Often adult help can interfere and make the problem worse, the adult may not understand, it can make the child feel worse about their problem.

On the other hand, many young people were concerned about adult’s downplaying problems when they are raised:

Sometimes they go to an adult they trust and the adult lets them down and just overlooks the problem as if it’s not serious.

The importance of adults taking, and being seen to take, sensible and proportionate action when problems are raised was an important theme in the research and goes to the core of young people’s trust in adults:

Adults listen but they never really do anything to help. They say they have done all that they can but you know it’s the biggest lie and total bullshit.

Implementing a whole of school approach that accounts for student diversity

The research underlines the importance of adapting strategies to suit both individual schools and the diversity of students within them.

The finding that there were greater differences among students within schools than across schools suggests that current programs and practices (which vary significantly across schools) work well for some groups of students and less well for others.

Given the different personalities of different students, it is likely that the adults at school they may wish to approach will vary accordingly. For the support pathways explored in this report to work for as many young people as possible, each young person needs to feel there is an adult at school that they can talk to about personal matters.

Schools might therefore be encouraged to think about approaches where all adults at school are seen by young people as a potential source of support, underpinned by strategies that help ensure each adult sees themselves as a potential source of support and as competent to perform this role.

In terms of implementing whole school programs more broadly, the clear message from the research is that these need to be flexible enough to allow for different ways of supporting different students if they are to benefit all students. Involving a wide range of students in the development of school mental health practices would help ensure that these practices respond to the diversity of student needs and preferences within a school.

Developing staff skills and knowledge

Implementing the kinds of strategies outlined above depends largely on the skills, knowledge and behaviour of all members of school staff. The research suggests that the core issues relate to communicating effectively with young people, behaving respectfully towards young people, adhering to confidentiality protocols, and knowing what to do when a young person approaches them for help. There is also an important role in providing students with the practical information and skills they need to help themselves and their friends in tough times.

Implications of the research for school-community relationships

The adult that most young people intended to approach, and had actually approached for help for a friend going through a tough time, was a parent.

Schools are in a position to communicate some key messages to parents that the research suggests would be helpful. These include informing parents about: young people often being the first to know if one of their friends is experiencing a mental health problem; the importance of listening to their child when they raise concerns about a friend; and how to handle confidentiality concerns. Schools are also in a position to: inform parents about the school’s role in supporting a young person who is seeking help for a friend; encourage parents to contact the school when their child raises concerns about a friend; and to let parents know who to contact at the school.

Implications of the research for education policy

The capacity of schools to improve the pathways for young people to seek adult help for a friend may also depend on factors that to some extent lie outside the control of individual schools. These include policy level issues such as the quality of leadership within schools, the qualifications and training of school staff, support for the professional judgment of school staff, and recognising the success of schools in terms of student wellbeing as well as educational achievement.

Given that schools across NSW are implementing different mental health strategies in a wide range of settings from which others could learn, there may also be a role for policy in supporting greater knowledge sharing across schools to inform and improve practice in this area.
Implications of the research for mental health policy and practice

While schools can do a lot to support the mental health and wellbeing of young people, there are times when this support needs to be complemented by available and accessible mental health services to which schools can connect young people when and where they need it.

To a significant degree, the ability of young people to access mental health services depends on good partnerships between schools and external services, and on the knowledge and confidence of school staff in making appropriate referrals.

Principal survey responses showed that referral processes and pathways were working well for some schools while others were experiencing difficulties.

A number of school principals, particularly in rural and remote parts of the State, commented that the work they are doing to support the mental health of their students was hampered by a lack of sufficient school counselling hours and basic mental health services in the community.

A significant number of young people also indicated that they did not know who to contact for help with mental health issues, either for themselves or for a friend. Feedback from the focus groups suggested that mental health services need a higher profile among young people in schools and should be more actively promoted:

All these services need to actually make themselves highly known. I only know of them because I have an interest in this line of work but most youth don’t know of these services.

Conclusion

The research contributes new insights on the barriers young people face in approaching adults for help for a friend experiencing mental health problems, and identifies what schools can do to help young people get the support they need at a point when schools themselves can make a difference.

The likely benefits of timely and competent adult help include reduced suffering for the young person experiencing mental health problems, reduced emotional burden for the young person concerned about their friend, and reduced disruption to the school work and learning of both of the young people involved.

At a broader level, the research demonstrates the value of involving young people in the continuing development of evidence based practice, which in turn will improve the lives of children and young people in NSW.