

Primary school children have long-term mental health benefit from counselling in school

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Counseling sessions improve long term mental health in primary-school aged children, according to a new study. The research has implications

for reversing declining mental health in young people in a COVID-19 era.

A team from the University of Exeter and the University of Cambridge worked in partnership with Place2Be to assess the longer-term impact of its school-based service.

The study assessed the impact of Place2Be's program, in which trained counselors operated in 171 schools nationwide in the academic year 2015/16. Under the scheme, children could self-refer to the counselors for any reason, or be referred by parents or teachers.

Researchers analyzed data on 740 children who took up one-to-one counseling, collected before the counseling started, after the sessions finished, and approximately one year after this. The children did not have to have [mental health](#) disorders to take up the counseling, however a comparison with children who were being seen by NHS [mental health services](#) indicated that they had similar levels of poor mental health.

The research, published in *European Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, used data from the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) completed by teachers and parents. One year later, this data showed that the children who spoke to counselors had considerably better mental health than a comparative group of children who had poor mental health yet had not seen a counselor.

Lead author Dr. Katie Finning, of the University of Exeter, said: "We know that children's mental health is deteriorating, while access to child and adolescent mental health services is decreasing. Our research indicates that children who have access to a counselor at [primary school](#) see benefits to their mental health over the longer term compared to children who don't. School-based counseling could help address the urgent need to support children's mental health, and could help reduce

pressure on oversubscribed child mental health services."

Previously published research has concluded that Place2Be's counseling intervention has [economic benefits](#) resulting from higher employment output and lower spending on public services, amounting to over £5,700 per child. However, this amount was based on the intervention having short-term benefits that faded more quickly than the new research suggests. So the savings per child are likely to be an under-estimate, given the new finding that benefits are longer-term.

Professor Tamsin Ford, from the University of Cambridge, who supervised the research, said: "We've previously found that children's mental health has worsened during the pandemic. We need to prioritize the provision of evidence-based mental health support in schools. Early intervention at this young age, before [mental health problems](#) become entrenched in adolescence and young adulthood, may help to prevent the long-term impacts of childhood mental health problems."

Catherine Roche, Chief Executive of Place2Be, said: "This study reinforces our evidence that high quality school-based mental health support not only helps children to get the most out of their education, but can also prevent problems from growing over time—impacting children's life chances. Schools are on the frontline and have the opportunity to make mental health services easily accessible for families. But school leaders and teachers cannot do this alone, they need quality training, easy referral routes and timely access to specialist mental [health](#) services—only when all parts of the system work together will [children](#) get the help they deserve."

More information: Katie Finning et al. Longer-term effects of school-based counselling in UK primary schools, *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* (2021). [DOI: 10.1007/s00787-021-01802-w](https://doi.org/10.1007/s00787-021-01802-w)

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