

Calls for resilience training, more extra-curricular activities in schools to help prevent mental health disorders

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Clinicians are calling for coping and social skills training and more extra-curricular activities in schools to help prevent increasing mental health

problems in children, according to a new study.

The research, led by the Murdoch Children's Research Institute (MCRI) and published in *PLOS ONE*, found clinicians were also pushing for more effective ways to upskill educators in mental health prevention, identification and early intervention including [peer support](#) for school psychologists and mental health literacy education for teachers.

The study involved 143 Victorian and South Australian clinicians who were interviewed about their views on how the education system could better support student's mental health and improve access to [support services](#).

The clinicians, involving psychiatrists, pediatricians, psychologists and GPs, believed the education system could play an important role in improving access to [mental health services](#) by harnessing existing staff or co-locating mental health clinicians.

They also suggested schools could identify at risk children, use prevention and early intervention strategies, and implement coping and social skills programs.

MCRI researcher Kate Paton said some clinicians felt that schools were well placed to identify students with mental health problems as systems existed within the education sector for monitoring such as access to attendance and academic records.

"Schools as buildings act as a trusted physical space where mental health clinicians could offer services that are otherwise challenging to access," she said. Clinicians believed teachers can offer prevention by supporting children through [school](#) wide psychoeducation, sport and social skills and coping programs."

Ms Paton said given [clinician](#)'s voices were frequently missing from the debate, she hoped the findings would help to address the need for mental health support in schools.

"Whilst educators have identified many challenges to providing this support, including perceived stigma, lack of resources and an overcrowded curriculum, understanding clinicians' views on the role of educators and schools and how they could work together to achieve good mental health outcomes are important questions," she said.

"It's important to understand whether different perspectives may exist between educators and mental health clinicians which need to be bridged if these professionals are to work successfully together to achieve both good education and mental health outcomes."

The research builds on MCRI's efforts to establish mental health support in schools. A pilot mental health program, developed by the MCRI in collaboration with the University of Melbourne and the Victorian Department of Education and Training was expanded to a total of 100 schools in 2022, after being trialed in Victorian primary schools.

The program was piloted in 10 primary schools in 2020 with feasibility results encouraging, strong support from schools and indications that it could improve care pathways for children with emerging mental health issues.

The initiative embeds a child mental health and wellbeing coordinator within schools to help identify and manage emerging mental health issues in students and provide connections between education, social and health services.

MCRI Professor Harriet Hiscock said the prevalence of mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression, which were the major source

of disease burden, had remained unchanged for the past 20 years.

"With about 50 percent of mental health disorders beginning before the age of 14 years, prevention and [early intervention](#) are paramount if we want to reduce lifetime prevalence of mental health disorders and allow children to live their best possible lives," she said. Improving mental [health](#) for children and adolescents has therefore become an international priority."

Professor Hiscock said [mental health problems](#) have such a large adverse effect on children's [education](#) progress that academic potential couldn't be achieved unless schools address student [mental health](#).

Researchers from the University of Melbourne, The Royal Children's Hospital, Institute for Social Neuroscience, University of Adelaide and the Women's and Children's Health Network in Adelaide also contributed to the study.

More information: Kate Paton et al, How can the education sector support children's mental health? Views of Australian healthcare clinicians, *PLOS ONE* (2022). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0261827](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0261827)

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