

The important role school nurses can play in identifying and supporting young people with eating disorders

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The vital role school nurses can play in addressing the rising number of eating disorders among children and young people has been outlined by a Kingston University student in a leading nursing journal.

Third year children's nursing student Emmie Hopkinson's evidence and practice article in *Nursing Children and Young People* has drawn on current research and her own clinical experience from placements to provide recommendations for the profession that could inform delivery of care.

Her article reflects on some of the most common types of eating disorders—defined as a [mental illness](#) by The National Institute of Mental Health—including anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa and binge eating disorder.

Drawing on data from NHS England, she highlighted how there had been a 185 percent increase in eating disorder diagnoses in children and young people between 2016 and 2022, and explored some of the factors that may have contributed to this rise.

"There is an urgent need to address the lack of early intervention, prevention and accessibility to help young people living with eating disorders and those who may potentially develop eating disorders," she said.

The impact of the COVID-19 on people's mental health had led to almost double the number of urgent and routine referrals to children and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) in 2021, Emmie explained. She also set out how the school nurse had an important role to play in supporting prevention and early intervention for eating disorders, with limited education of these conditions in schools found to be a possible contributing factor.

"The school nurse, who is already skilled in identifying these issues, can help by advocating for regular sessions on mental health to be implemented into the curriculum," she said. "They can educate teachers on some of the misconceptions around eating disorders and how best to

approach and support a child and young person who may be going through diagnosis or treatment."

Highlighting research into the negative impact social media can have on [body image](#), Emmie detailed changes she believed could help decrease the risk of young people developing eating disorders.

"Implementing [positive changes](#) such as greater restrictions on the age limit to join [social media](#) and preventing the use of photo manipulation and filters could make these platforms safer for children and young people to use," she said.

Within the article, the 25-year-old student set out some of the barriers to accessing children and adolescent [mental health](#) services (CAMHS) and early intervention services. Citing a need for further funding, she also explored regional differences in the number of young people being diagnosed with eating disorders in recent years, referencing research that found those from a low socioeconomic status or ethnic minority background were less likely to be identified.

Associate Professor in children's nursing at Kingston University and Emmie's personal tutor, Zoe Clark, said the nursing student was raising awareness of an important public health issue and the challenges children and [young people](#) face in accessing support and treatment. "Emmie is making a valuable contribution to the increasingly complex challenges around eating disorder treatment and support which could help educate nurses who are not necessarily trained in dealing with these issues," she said.

Emmie is one of 55 students around the country currently enrolled in the Council of Dean of Health's Student Leadership program, which supports students to develop [leadership skills](#) and become advocates in their respective fields. The scheme pairs students with academic

mentors, outside of their respective university and from across the country.

Julia Petty, senior lecturer in children's nursing at the University of Hertfordshire, who is Emmie's mentor and worked with her on the article, praised her dedication to children's nursing. "This is a very important health topic that requires attention," she said. "Emmie has demonstrated exemplary leadership as a [student](#) nurse by increasing public knowledge and understanding of these serious, life-threatening conditions to a wide range of audiences."

More information: Emmie Hopkinson et al, Why eating disorders in children and young people are increasing: implications for practice, *Nursing Children and Young People* (2022). [DOI: 10.7748/ncyp.2022.e1445](#)

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