

Social prescribing could support young people's mental health—but calls for a national strategy may be premature

October 26 2023, by Jackie Musgrave



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A [growing number of children and adolescents](#) in England are seeking access to mental health services. But the demand for these services is far

outstripping capacity—and in some areas of England, [children are waiting](#) more than a year for support. It's clear new strategies are needed to address this growing need.

Children's charity Barnardo's has suggested in its recently published report that [social prescribing](#) could be one effective way of addressing this demand. They've called on the government to introduce a national social prescribing strategy to offer [children](#) and adolescents a community-based, non-clinical alternative to traditional [mental health services](#).

[Social prescribing](#) refers to the practice of GPs "prescribing" activities or [community services](#) to a person with the aim of improving their health and well-being. This is usually done with the help of a "link worker"—a person who knows the community well and will identify activities that will best suit the person. A link worker would be able to help a child get involved with a youth club that has activities suited to their interests and needs.

Not a lot of research has been conducted to date on the use of social prescribing for children. As such, we don't really know what specific benefits social prescribing may have for children's [mental health and well-being](#). [More research](#) will certainly be necessary before any national social prescribing program can be rolled out.

But while evidence for social prescribing in children may be limited, we know from research in adults that it can help improve [quality of life](#) and reduce feelings of social isolation.

Social prescribing for children and adolescents may also help to address some of the aspects of the contemporary childhood experience which are partly contributing to [worse mental health](#)—such as children having fewer opportunities to play together outdoors in safe spaces and the pressure to perform well in school.

Social prescribing could provide children with the opportunity to get out, be active and socialize with other children in the community. Research shows that physical activity can have many benefits for [young people](#)—including [supporting their mental health](#). Social isolation is also linked with [depression and anxiety](#) in young people, so having an opportunity to meet friends and [play could be important](#) in supporting the mental health of children and teens.

Challenges to address

There are many aspects of social prescribing that could be beneficial to children's mental health. But before any national strategy is rolled out, there are a number of important factors that will need to be taken into account and addressed.

The role of volunteers appears to be key to the success of social prescribing programs for young people. A study conducted by a team of researchers at University College London investigated the barriers young people faced in accessing [social prescribing](#)—as well as the view of people involved in providing these services. They found that some of the success of social prescribing relies on the skill and qualities of the link worker—with listening skills and empathy being key in gaining the cooperation of children.

Providing additional funding and support to social clubs that already exist in communities could be one way to ensure the success of social prescribing strategies for children. This was evidenced by the success of the [StreetGames charity](#), which provided mental health support for young people aged 5-25.

The charity worked with local community partners to provide activities and support for vulnerable young people and also provided funding for link workers. While an in-depth evaluation is needed to fully understand

the benefit the program had for children's mental health, it's deemed to be a successful model of social prescribing. Its success is partly attributed to the fact that the charity supported existing youth clubs that were run by local volunteers who knew the children well.

A national social prescribing strategy would also need to ensure it accounts for how these activities can be made available to children who most need it—and that it's also accessible to those living in rural or deprived communities. Widening the ways social prescribing can be accessed—for instance through schools, not just a GP—will be critically important. Funding will also be necessary to train link workers that will help with this.

And, because children are unique, it will be important to ensure funding is given to many different types of social prescribing activities. For instance, sports aren't everybody's cup of tea, and the needs of children and young people with disabilities or those who may find fitness challenging needs to be considered.

With increasing numbers of children [waiting for mental health treatment](#), social prescribing is possibly one way of providing support to children while they wait for an assessment. It may also offer alternative approaches to promote mental [health](#) and well-being. But with minimal evidence showing its benefit, more research is needed before any programs can be rolled out.

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