



National Children's
Bureau

Young people's views on gender and mental health

NCB has been exploring how gender relates to children and young people's emotional and mental health and wellbeing. Awareness and media coverage of this topic is growing.

We have reviewed research evidence, looked for examples of gender-sensitive services, and heard what over 100 young people think, including:

- Boys and young men using a youth centre based on a London housing estate
- Members of Young NCB (YNCB)
- 96 young people aged 13-24 who took part in online surveys (71 female, 22 male and 4 trans).

This document aims to feed back to young people on what we learnt from our engagement activities.

If you took part, thank you for contributing!

Why have we asked young people about gender and mental health?

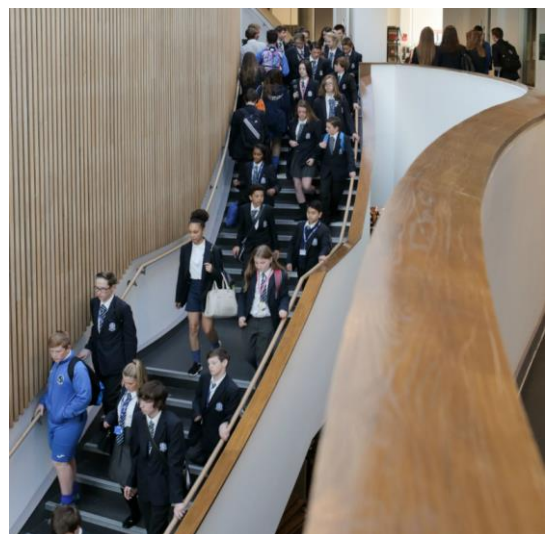
The young people we heard from were aware that the way they experience life is related to gender. They discussed gender differences in:

- the pressures children and young people face – for example, relating to physical appearance, fashion and health
- how young people cope with these pressures
- whether young people seek support when they're struggling, and from where
- how others react to their difficulties, and what support is available.

Many professionals play a role in supporting young people's emotional and mental health and wellbeing. They may work with children and young people directly or may make decisions about the services they receive. We aim to encourage these professionals to explore and consider how considering gender can inform this work. It is important that this includes sharing young people's experiences and opinions in their own words.

'Whether you are male or female you are expected to moderate your behaviour to your environment from a young age.'

Female survey respondent aged 22-24



What ways of managing emotions did the young people find acceptable?

Young people who completed the survey were asked to identify how acceptable a range of behaviours were to them and their same-gender friends (e.g. a girl and her female friends). The behaviours were 'things some people do to deal with stress/difficulties'.

The behaviours that were usually acceptable to the greatest share of young people were the same for females and males:

- Doing an activity for enjoyment (although boys in the London focus group weren't positive about this as a way to relieve stress)
- Being physically active, without strict exercise regimes.



Self-harm was more widely unacceptable to both males and females than any other way of coping.

Here are the main gender differences we noticed:

- 'Using alcohol and/or drugs' to cope with difficulties was much more widely acceptable to males than females
- 'Working towards very strict standards of physical appearance, weight or fitness' was less widely acceptable to females than males. This is interesting given that eating disorders and body image concerns are more frequently linked to girls than boys.
- Overall, females favoured 'Making sure you get enough sleep' over 'Sleeping or resting a lot', whereas responses from males didn't show a strong distinction between **enough** sleep and **a lot** of sleep.
- 'Expressing what's on your mind through writing, music, art etc. (even if you don't share it)' was widely acceptable to females, but the males were divided.

The youngest age group (13-15 years) generally expressed less certainty in their answers than older age group: i.e. answering 'unsure' or 'sometimes acceptable' more and 'usually acceptable' or 'usually unacceptable' less.

'With girls especially, friends influence the way you feel and act, and change as you get older. I once found it "Usually acceptable" to self-harm for example, and had many friends who did it, whereas now I don't.'

Female survey respondent aged 19-21

We were able to involve some trans young people in this project through the survey. 'Trans' is a term used for people who find that their sense of their own gender doesn't match the 'male' or 'female' label they were given at birth. This mismatch can be

experienced in many ways. We had survey responses from three young adults, each with different gender identities, and one young teenager who was questioning theirs.

Trans young people were asked about how much gender stereotypes affected whether they used different ways of coping with difficulties. For example, strictly controlling diet is often seen as feminine, so might an individual trans young person's views on strict dieting relate to feelings about being seen to behave in a feminine way? Some of the young people who answered felt that whether they exercised or managed their diet was affected by gender stereotypes, as well as doing things that are relaxing or pampering.

Do the ways of coping that the young people find acceptable actually help?

Girls and young women who took the survey quite often recognised that behaviours 'help me feel better, but may create other problems'.

Answers from boys and young men were mixed, with numbers too small to note any clear patterns.

'It can become all encompassing, the sleep will often lead to a reluctance to leave my bedroom or do anything else.'

Male survey respondent aged 19-21

What did the young people say about sharing feelings and asking for support?

Young people were asked about how they see other people's expectations of them, in terms of how a young male, female or trans person would or should cope with stress/problems in life. Most young people seemed to be struggling with feeling pressurised by expectations from others – often to 'just get on with it'. Expectations affected them in different ways, but some findings were particularly interesting.

Eighteen boys and young men had quite different views on whether it's OK to seek help from friends, family and professionals. They were more in agreement that it's usually acceptable to share problems with a partner. A slightly larger share of males than females saw 'making sure to appear "fine"' and 'Spending a lot of time alone' as usually acceptable; boys in the London focus group felt that 'shutting down' was a popular way for boys and men to cope.

Females said that seeking help from others was unacceptable less often than males.

Getting support from professionals and 'people with similar experiences' (e.g. online and at support groups) was less widely acceptable to the young people who took the survey than other forms of support.

Girls and young women

Some girls and young women commented on pressure to not come across as 'a typical "young girl"' in terms of being over emotional'. They worried about adults seeing them as 'weak' or hormonal, and putting their distress down to 'boy trouble' or 'a little fall out' with friends. Some reported feeling intimidated when sharing difficulties with adults, and doubting that their problems were 'even that serious to ask for help with it'.

Friends and partners were the sources of support most often seen as 'usually acceptable' by 67 females who took the survey. However, girls and young women expressed some mixed feelings about opening up to female friends. They described some girls being safe to share personal matters with, including strangers ('if they just smile at you, you tell them your life story') and good friends (especially 'the mother of the group' who 'always ends up helping'). In other cases, girls 'might talk about it to other

'Friends expect me to hide it and be there for "banter" ... my female friends are better support.'

Male survey respondent aged 19-21

'The stigma around seeking professional help and admitting you're not "fine" still hits hard [...] I've had professional help and I got isolated for it by a few of my, now old, friends. Mostly we seem to isolate ourselves.'

Male survey respondent aged 19-21

'The things you do have to be approved by your friends'

Young woman in YNCB focus group



girls' or 'accuse them of attention seeking' even if they 'say things such as "I'm always here for you"' and 'expect you to feel supported'. One young woman in the YNCB group spoke about finding it easier to talk to male friends, but feeling judged for her friendships with young men.

Boys and young men

Male survey respondents were evenly split over how acceptable 'Being angry, moody or aggressive' is, whereas this was widely unacceptable to girls.

Many young people in focus groups spoke about barriers to boys and men expressing their feelings, using phrases like 'lock it up', 'keep it to themselves', 'be big and strong' and 'act tough'. One boy said 'when you break a man's pride they will die'. However, a few young men didn't feel that 'men are big and strong and women aren't', or that it was harder to express emotions as a male. Anger was considered one of the easiest feelings to express, either through aggression, sport or punching a wall!



'Men are sometimes just frightened, you'll see them in the streets and they look perfectly fine, like nothing's wrong with them, like if you talk to them for a long time [...] then you'll see the problems'

Young man in YNCB focus group

'You're comfortable with your boys so it's comfortable, innit? Like he's probably going through the same thing or probably went through the same thing. He's probably told you stuff as well.'

Young man in London focus group

Trans young people

Some of the trans young people reported that gender-related expectations had some effect on whether they would 'Spend time with people without talking about it' and 'Make sure to appear "fine"'.

One young person aged 22-24 wrote about being affected by 'my perception of what other people will expect and what things I think are more likely to cause people to see me as my assigned gender' (assigned gender being the one given to you at birth).

'My family don't know my gender identity and I don't wish to try and explain it to them. It's easier to just do what I want with no explanation.'

Non-binary survey respondent aged 22-24

Do the young people want to see change?

The survey asked young people whether greater sensitivity to gender was needed from teachers, other authority figures, and/or health professionals. The areas for improvement listed in the question are shown below, ordered by how many votes each got from 73 young people, with the most popular at the top.

- Information about support available for wellbeing and mental health (e.g. GP, counselling, mental health services)
- Support within settings like schools, youth clubs, youth offending institutions etc.
- How professionals relate to young people
- The atmosphere within services
- How services are set up (e.g. opening times, locations), which got the same number of votes as services only for females/males/young people with diverse gender identities
- Online/phone support.

In the YNCB focus group, young people noted that boys and young support each other in ways that may not be fully recognised: 'a football club may provide you with the same support structure that you get from a community but it's not labelled as a male support structure'.

A gender-fluid young adult described a need for therapists 'to be aware that someone being transgender doesn't necessarily mean they can only be treated [for mental health problems] by a gender specialist': i.e. gender identity is one aspect of a young person's life and emotional well-being, not all of it.

See the quotes for some other ideas from young people.

'It needs to be nipped in the bud early, tell year 7 students it's okay to struggle, to ask for help and prove it! Have older students help them, show them they've been through it too. That they're not alone.'

Male survey respondent aged 19-21

'Teachers need to be more aware of what could be happening, especially among groups of teenaged girls [...] Most of the people I knew (including myself) wouldn't visit professional help or discuss with parents/teachers for fear of being labelled as 'hormonal' and having their problems trivialised.'

Female survey respondent aged 19-21

'Education on gender identity definitely needs to start earlier, it should be mandatory in schools.'

Non-binary survey respondent aged 22-24

What next?

Findings from young people have been published along with a review of research evidence and examples of gender-sensitive work with children and young people. We will share these with professionals, decision-makers and NCB staff working on mental health and wellbeing. We will encourage them to explore and consider these findings, to help them best support children and young people.

More about these findings



There are three important points to bear in mind about our findings:

- This is a sample of a mixed group of young people's views rather than a full picture of 'what young people in general think'. For example, we had far fewer responses to our survey from males than females, and a different age breakdown.
- Young people were asked about their views in general terms; their comments should not be seen as saying, for example, that **all** girls talk to their friends **every** time they have a problem
- Our views about what behaviour is acceptable don't always reflect how we actually behave!

Emily Hamblin, August 2017

Find out more

We have produced a report for professionals called *Just getting on: Young people's views on gender, emotional well-being and mental health*.

This and other resources from this project are available at <https://www.ncb.org.uk/genderandmentalhealth>.

NCB's young people's group, Young NCB, works on a wide range of issues including mental health and well-being. Find out more, including how to join, at <http://www.youngncb.org.uk/>