

Written evidence submitted by HBSC England study team, Centre for Research in Primary and Community Care (CRIPACC), University of Hertfordshire (CMH0054)

About the University of Hertfordshire

The University of Hertfordshire is the UK's leading business-facing university. It is innovative and enterprising and challenges individuals and organisations to excel. We educate students from a wide range of backgrounds and from all over the world. With a student community of 25,300 including 2,800 overseas students from 100 different countries, the University has a global network of over 195,000 alumni.

The University of Hertfordshire's modern, award-winning campus is an exciting and secure environment in which our students can live and learn. Outstanding research in emerging fields adds to the sense of enquiry we encourage in our students. We are one of the region's largest employers with 2,700 staff and a turnover of over £250 million.

Written evidence from HBSC England study team, Centre for Research in Primary and Community Care, University of Hertfordshire

Executive summary

- Educational settings play a crucial role in promoting emotional wellbeing in young people and preventing the development of mental health problems. Research and further analysis of the Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children (HBSC) England study data strengthens the argument that greater support should be offered to schools to implement prevention and early intervention measures that can establish and protect good mental health.
- Our findings, published in the *International Journal of Public Health*, show young people are nearly seven times more likely to self-harm if they have a low sense of belonging to school than those who feel attached to it. This highlights the importance of education providers embedding a positive ethos and culture of community within schools to tackle the growing problem of self-harm.
- Our findings published in *Youth and Society* showed a strong association between school sense of belonging (SSB) and experiences of cyberbullying. Those with high SSB have 32% and those with medium SSB have 42% of the odds of being a victim of cyberbullying experienced by those with low SSB.
- Our research emphasises the important role teachers can have in protecting young people from being victims of cyberbullying, with increasing levels of teacher support associated with lower chances of victimisation.

- Our HBSC England study showed that PSHE education has a positive impact on the health and wellbeing of children and young people. Nearly three quarters of boys and girls felt that PSHE classes helped them to look after their own health. The findings strengthen the call for greater resource to extend PSHE teaching in schools to further promote emotional wellbeing in young people and contribute to the debate over whether PSHE should be made a statutory subject in English schools.

About the authors

1. Fiona Brooks is professor of adolescent and child health at the Centre for Research in Primary and Community Care (CRIPACC), University of Hertfordshire, and primary investigator for the Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children (HBSC) England study. Also based in CRIPACC, Dr Ellen Klemmer is a senior research fellow in adolescent, child and family health; Dr Josefine Magnusson is a research fellow in child and adolescent health; Kayleigh Chester is research assistant in adolescent, child and family health.
2. The four researchers are part of the HBSC England study team. The HBSC study is an international World Health Organization collaborative study, which explores the determinants of young people's health and wellbeing, and health behaviours. The study collects data from school students aged 11, 13 and 15 years, from 42 countries, through anonymous self-completed questionnaires which young people complete during class time. The University of Hertfordshire leads the HBSC survey for England.

Scope of the submission

3. This submission presents evidence of the crucial role that educational settings can play in promoting emotional wellbeing in young people and preventing the development of mental health problems, based on further analysis of the 2014 HBSC England study data published in September 2015. The full HBSC England study findings can be accessed [here](#).
4. This submission highlights the importance of the school environment in acting as a 'protective health asset' to address the issues of self-harm and cyberbullying among young people.
5. Overall, the evidence set out in this submission strengthens the argument that greater support should be offered to schools to implement prevention and early intervention measures that can establish and protect good mental health.

The importance of 'school connectedness' for young people's mental health

6. School connectedness refers to an academic environment in which students believe that adults in the school care about their learning and about them as individuals. School connectedness in relation to liking school, and feeling safe in school appears to function as a protective asset for sustaining life satisfaction and high self-efficacy.
7. If young people have a teacher they can connect with on a personal level – a teacher who they feel cares about them as a person – then this has been demonstrated nationally and internationally to be a protective health factor for young people's wellbeing.

8. Moreover, teacher connectedness also appears to function in a compensatory way to protect health and wellbeing even when young people lack parental support.

The relationship between school connectedness and self-harm

9. The latest HBSC study in England revealed worrying levels of self-harm among 15-year-old survey respondents. Just over one fifth (22%) of this age group reported that they had ever self-harmed. Nearly three times as many girls as boys reported that they had self-harmed; 11% of boys compared to 32% of girls. Out of those young people who reported they had self-harmed, the majority (43%) said they self-harmed once a month. Girls were more likely than boys to report self-harming on a more frequent basis.
10. In the first study of its kind, we carried out further modelling of the HBSC England study data to explore to what extent the school environment, family life and neighbourhood factors act as 'protective health assets' for young people in relation to self-harming behaviour. Self-harm was measured by the question: "Have you ever deliberately hurt yourself in some way, such as cut or hit yourself on purpose or taken an overdose?"
11. Our findings, published in the International Journal of Public Health (full open access paper [here](#) and accompanying infographic [here](#)) highlighted a strong association between young people's feeling of connectedness to their school and self-harming behaviour.
12. The findings showed young people are nearly seven times more likely to self-harm if they have a low sense of belonging to school than those who feel attached to it. Those with low 'school sense of belonging' (SSB) have 6.70 times greater odds of reporting self-harm as those with high SSB, and 3.16 times greater odds than those with medium SSB. Those with medium SSB are estimated to have approximately 2.12 times greater odds of reporting self-harm as those with high SSB.
13. Those 15-year-olds who feel a weak connection to the neighbourhoods in which they live are around three times more likely to self-harm than those who feel a sense of belonging. The odds of self-harm among those that struggle to communicate with their mothers are two-and-a-half times higher.
14. The results present an opportunity to focus prevention and early intervention measures on the places where the biggest difference can be made. The data on school sense of belonging is particularly striking and emphasises the importance of education providers embedding a positive ethos and culture of community within schools as a means to tackle the growing problem of self-harm among young people.

The relationship between school connectedness and cyberbullying

15. According to the HBSC study data, 18% of young people – nearly one in five – reported they had been cyberbullied in the last two months. Younger adolescents were most likely to report experiencing traditional forms of bullying, while cyberbullying was more common among older adolescents.
16. Findings published in the journal Youth and Society (full paper [here](#)) showed a strong association between school sense of belonging (SSB) and experiences of

cyberbullying. Those with high SSB have 32% and those with medium SSB have 42% of the odds of being a victim of cyberbullying experienced by those with low SSB. Those with high teacher social support (TSS) have 42% and those with medium TSS have 59% of the odds of being a victim of cyberbullying experienced by those with low TSS. Those with high TSS have 71% of the odds of being a victim of cyberbullying experienced by those with medium TSS.

17. Although traditional bullying is often confined to the school grounds and constricted by school hours, cyberbullying extends beyond the school environment. Despite this, our findings highlight the important role that feeling connected to school and having a sense of belonging in the school community can play in protecting young people against cyberbullying. School belonging has been found to be higher in schools where pupils feel safe and where the school has taken steps to create lower levels of bullying overall, suggesting that schools that develop a positive supportive culture and ethos may also be providing a protective function against the perpetration of cyberbullying, even if the bullying behaviours occur online and outside of the school environment.
18. The findings also emphasise the important role teachers can have in protecting young people from being victims of cyberbullying, with increasing levels of teacher support associated with lower chances of victimisation. Positive TSS has not only been linked to students reporting that they are experiencing bullying but also seeking help for other peers who are being victimised (Eliot, Cornell, Gregory & Fan, 2010). Moreover, poor teacher support has been identified as a significant predictor of the perpetration of cyberbullying (Wei, Williams, Chen & Chang, 2010).

Positive impact of PSHE education on young people's health and wellbeing

19. One way of promoting health and wellbeing in children and young people is through personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education – a non-statutory subject in English schools. Findings from the HBSC England study showed that PSHE education has a positive impact on the health and wellbeing of children and young people.
20. The majority of young people who attended PSHE lessons, both boys and girls, (74%) felt that PSHE classes helped them to look after their own health, and improved their skills and abilities to consider the importance of their own health. However, this decreased with age, falling from 85% (boys) and 88% (girls) at the age of 11 to 63% (boys) and 60% (girls) at the age of 15. The majority of young people (70%) agreed or strongly agreed that PSHE lessons had improved their skills and abilities to care for other people's health.
21. Among those who had attended PSHE lessons, 57% of young people said that the issues of health and wellbeing were very well covered. Overall, boys were more likely to report that health and well-being issues were well covered than girls (60% v. 55%). The gender difference increased among 15 year olds, with girls being the least likely to agree among all groups. One 16-year-old girl consulted during the study said she thought PSHE "should cover mental health, sexual identity, consent, sexuality, gender identity and dealing with stress."
22. Further analysis of the HBSC England study data (full publication [here](#)) identified young people with positive perceptions of the PSHE lessons they received were more likely to report good relationships at school and a feeling of school belonging.

23. Our findings suggest that greater resource for PSHE teaching in schools could further promote emotional wellbeing in young people and prevent the development of mental health problems. They also suggest renewed consideration should be given to making PSHE a statutory subject in English schools.