Insights into experiences of children and young people when talking to adults and professionals about their mental health

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Anna Freud
National Centre for Children and Families
This booklet was co-produced by a Young Champion and staff at the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families as part of a coproduction project.

Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families (the Centre) is a registered charity committed to improving the mental health of children, young people and their families. The Centre has been driving pioneering research, evidence-based clinical interventions, teaching and training programmes for over 65 years.

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Why Lingo?

This booklet is to provide insights into the experiences of children and young people when they talk about their mental health to adults and professionals (pages 3–8). This booklet also provides insights into the experiences of the adults and professionals that children and young people come into contact with (pages 9–12).

Some children and young people I have spoken to who have had difficulties with their mental health have said they sometimes feel the adult they are talking to does not understand what they are saying or no one understands how they feel. Similarly when speaking to parents and professionals, some have said they do not know the best way to talk to their child about their mental health. Even some professionals are unsure about how to engage in conversation about mental health. This made me reflect that there can be misunderstandings of language and potential barriers when talking about mental health.

After 51 young people and 150 professionals/adults filled in our survey, we hope this booklet provides some useful and valuable insight into what children and young people as well as adults are telling us about what they think works well and what does not work so well when communicating about mental health. Discussion points for each question have been added to help you or your organisation think about how you can improve communications between children, young people and adults in talking about mental health. Useful resources as recommended by the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families can be found on pages 15 and 16.
What is Lingo?

The Lingo project was developed over six months through the creation of a survey and young people’s artwork; the overall project was separated into two parts.

Survey

The first half of Lingo was the survey to produce this booklet and provide insights into the experience of children and young people when they are talking about their mental health to adults. Similarly it was also to provide insights into the experience of adults regarding what approach they take and what they find challenging about children and young people talking to them about their mental health. It was hoped that the insights would provide valuable information into whether there are any communication barriers between children and young people when talking about their mental health to adults. The insights would also gather whether there were any common or major themes.

Children and young people completed a survey with questions aimed towards them. Whereas adults completed a survey with questions aimed towards them. A majority of adults who completed this survey were responding as parents or carers. However, there was also representation from education and health professionals, counsellors, therapists and youth mental health workers.

‘To understand that mental health is like physical health, you can have up and down days and you need time to recover from bad mental health days just as much as you would from days where you aren’t physically feeling your best.’

Artwork

The second half of Lingo was artwork that was done with the help of Young Producers at the National Gallery with the aim of showing how we express and communicate our mental health, feelings and emotions through non-verbal communication, but it also aimed to address stigma. The artwork was created by numerous children and young people who wanted to express their mental health, feelings and emotions through art. The front cover of this booklet is an example of some the Lingo artwork produced.

‘They don’t know how to respond and so will respond in the wrong way, preventing you to want to talk in the future.’
What do you think some of the reasons are that makes it difficult for adults to understand you when talking about mental health?

The majority of children and young people have told us that they think the main reason that adults find it difficult to understand them when they talk about their mental health is due to adults finding the topic of mental health difficult to talk about. Another key reason that emerged was that children and young people have said adults do not ask the right questions.

**Discussion points**

» What could be done to help adults and professionals further understand the young person’s situation and experiences of mental health?

» What could be done to train adults and professionals in understanding what the right questions are to ask when a child or young person is talking about their mental health?

» What is unhelpful about how adults ask children and young people about their mental health?

What prevents you talking to an adult about mental health?

The majority of children and young people have told us that they think the main reason that prevents them talking to an adult about their mental health is due to fear or worry about the adults reaction. Another key reason that emerged was that children and young people felt that adults will not understand what they are trying to say or understand the language they are using to talk about their mental health.

**Discussion points**

» What could be done to ensure children and young people are not worried about the reaction of adults and professionals when they talk about their mental health?

» What can be done to help adults and professionals understand the language children and young people use to talk about their mental health?
What helps you feel comfortable talking to an adult about mental health?

The majority of children and young people have told us that they think that what helps them feel comfortable when talking to an adult about their mental health is when they know and feel the adult understands and listens to them. Another key point that emerged was that children and young people felt comfortable talking to an adult about their mental health when the adult had the time to listen to them.

What helps you feel comfortable talking to an adult about mental health?

- When the adult provides me space
- When the adult listens to and understands me
- When an adult has the time to listen to me
- Nothing (I can’t think of anything that helps me to feel comfortable)
- Other

"When adults (especially health professionals and teachers) approach mental health in a similar way to how they approach physical health; and when they show that they aren’t there to judge but want to learn more about it ("I may not understand/know much about it, but I’m here to listen to you explain it and that may make me learn more about it/change what I think about it")"

Discussion points

» How can adults and professionals support a child or young person in helping them to feel understood and listened to?

» How can adults and professionals provide time to listen and understand children and young people?
What do you think adults could do to better support you to talk about your mental health?

The majority of children and young people have told us that they think adults could benefit from support in further understanding and further awareness of the issues and pressures that affect children and young people and how these issues and pressures affect children and young people (e.g. social media and exams). Another type of support they think adults could benefit from would be further education and training in mental health awareness.

Discussion points

» What support is available and how can adults and professionals be further educated in mental health awareness?

» How can adults and professionals be made aware and understand the pressures facing children and young people?

‘Be more inquisitive and curious about it by asking more questions, and not being afraid to do so’

Insights from adults and professionals

‘Having creative resources to engage without pressure’
What do you find effective when communicating with a young person about their mental health?

A majority of adults and professionals have told us that an effective method for communicating with a young person about their mental health is having the confidence to approach sensitive discussions about mental health. Another method that adults and professionals have told us is effective for communication is knowing the young person as an individual person.

Using technology
Relating to the subject to something the young person is interested in
Understanding the language used by young people
Having confidence in approach to talk about mental health
Knowing the young person
Other

‘Having the young person’s trust by building a relationship with them’

Discussion points
» How can confidence be increased in adults and professionals when a young person is talking to them about their mental health?
» How can adults and professionals understand young people as individuals and further understand what matters to them?

What do you find most difficult when talking to a young person about their mental health?

The majority of adults and professionals have told us that the biggest difficulty they face when a young person is talking to them about mental health, is that they fear they might say the wrong thing or say something that could trigger further negative emotions and feelings. Another difficulty adults and professionals have told us they face is that they sometimes do not know what to say to a young person.

Lack of confidence
in approach to talk about mental health
Not knowing what to say
Fear that you might say something that is a trigger
Not understanding the language used by young people
Other

‘Not wanting the young person to “shut down” if they identify mental health as the topic of conversation’.
‘Not knowing or having resources locally to signpost to’

Discussion points
» How can adults and professionals be supported or trained in having confident conversations around mental health?
» How can adults and professionals be supportive of children and young people when they talk about their mental health?
What would assist you to feel more comfortable talking to young people about their mental health?

The majority of adults and professionals have told us that having knowledge and awareness of what pressures young people face today would assist them in feeling more comfortable when a young person is talking to them about their mental health. Another key area that would assist adults and professionals to enable them to feel comfortable is through supporting them to feel confident about talking about mental health.

What would assist you to feel more comfortable talking to young people about their mental health?

Discussion points

» How do we raise awareness and understanding amongst adults and professionals of the pressures facing young people?

» What resources are available locally and how do we ensure adults and professionals are equipped with knowledge of these and have tools to enable them to feel confident about having conversations around mental health?

Conclusion

The results thus far have shown much cross over in responses from children, young people and adults, these mainly being:

» Adults and professionals lacking confidence in talking about mental health.

» Adults and professionals not understanding the language used by children and young people which they use to express their mental health.

» Adults and professionals not being aware of the pressures or fears of children and young people today.

» Adults and professionals not knowing what to say or fearing that they might say the wrong thing and make the situation worse.

...
As a final thought, there is one very simple but powerful question that makes children and young people feel heard and listened to, which also offers the opportunity for adults and professionals to further understand the child or young person as an individual. This question is simply “what matters to you?”. This question can allow for the child or young person to be straight to the point what matters to them in their life and whether they are facing any struggles or difficulties. It can also allow for the adult or professional to understand the pressures that the child or young person might be currently facing, understand how they are feeling and even build trust between the adult or professional and the child or young person.

‘Fear from young person that I will communicate with parents about what they say’
Teachers

- Mentally Healthy Schools is an easy to use website where schools can find a range of expert and practical information and resources to help all staff understand, promote and deal confidently with children’s mental health issues: www.mentallyhealthyschool.org.uk
- ‘Supporting mental health and wellbeing in schools’ is a booklet for primary and secondary schools to support all staff to understand how best to help children and young people in their care: www.annafreud.org/tmhbooklet/
- ‘Supporting mental health and wellbeing in secondary schools’ is a booklet for teachers that offers an introduction to some of the mental health issues that children in secondary schools may face: www.annafreud.org/tmhsecondary/
- The ‘Talking Mental Health’ animation and accompanying teacher toolkit is aimed at primary school pupils: www.annafreud.org/tmhtoolkit/
- The ‘We all have mental health’ animation and accompanying teacher toolkit is aimed at key stage 3 secondary school pupils (Years 7–9): www.annafreud.org/wahmhtoolkit/

Parents

- ‘Talking Mental Health with young people at secondary school: some advice for parents and carers’ talks about how to make conversations about their child's feelings part of everyday conversation: www.annafreud.org/tmhparentssecondary/
- ‘You’re never too young to talk mental health: tips for talking for parents and carers’ talks about how to make conversations about their child’s feelings part of everyday conversation: www.annafreud.org/tmhparentsprimary/
Thank you to all the children, young people, adults and professionals who contributed to the research.

Thank you to the Young Producers at the National Gallery for their creative contributions in supporting the Lingo Artwork.

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