

Exploring the potential of a school-based online health and wellbeing screening tool: Young people’s perspectives

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About the research

Identifying and supporting young people’s mental and physical health needs is a recognised public health priority. Worryingly, we have seen increasing rates of physical and mental health problems among young people.

Despite growing need, many young people who experience health issues do not seek, access or receive required support. This is especially concerning as there is an established relationship between poor mental health and educational attainment, employment outcomes, and future health. There is a growing emphasis on effectively detecting health and wellbeing needs for young people, and the importance of the role of schools in this.

Our research reports on an evaluation of a novel, multi-stage health and wellbeing screening and intervention programme, the Digital Health Contact (DHC). The DHC involves an online health and wellbeing questionnaire which is delivered to an entire secondary school year group. Responses are screened, with face-to-face follow-up and intervention from Public Health School Nurses (PHSN) provided for those where unmet needs are identified.

The research involved in-depth interviews with young people from two schools who had recently taken part in the DHC. Participants from one school had completed the DHC during home-learning when schools were shut due to COVID-19 restrictions. Participants from the other school had the DHC delivered in school once restrictions had been lifted.

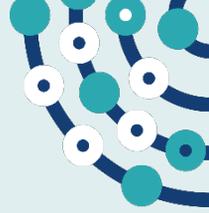
‘I do think it’s a good way to do it and I definitely appreciated it because then, from that, I started meeting the school nurses, so I think it’s a good way for students to get that first step to get help if they need it...this survey gives an opportunity to ask for help without really having to ask for help.’

Young Person (Female, 14)

Practice implications

- The DHC had high levels of acceptability from young people, and was seen as a useful approach for identifying health need and providing support. Therefore, the DHC may help overcome some established barriers associated with help and support seeking in young people.
- To facilitate engagement, honesty and detail in screening responses, it is important to clearly highlight programme processes (e.g., who has access to participant responses, the protections and limits of confidentiality). Consistent messaging from those presenting and delivering public health interventions is also important.
- Whilst knowledge of support options can be increased through ‘screening with linked follow-up’ programmes, the importance of further advertising, promoting and reinforcing how to directly contact support is important.
- Ensuring privacy and time to complete screening questionnaires (through flexibility of delivery context, e.g., at home, or through increased privacy in school settings) may encourage honesty and detail in responses.





'The survey made me aware that there are people that can help you in school if you're feeling down.'

Young Person (Male, 13)

DO YOU REGULARLY FEEL FRIGHTENED, WORRIED OR NERVOUS? *

- Yes
- No

Key findings

- Participants described the DHC as a helpful and **useful way to talk about health and receive support** for issues they are experiencing.
- Young people valued the **online delivery** of the questionnaire and described how this encouraged them to be **more honest and open in their responses**.
- Completing the questionnaire at **home was seen to give more privacy and more time for participants**. In turn, young people perceived this to facilitate greater honesty and detail in responses. However, not all young people have a private space or access to the required technologies at home. Thus, **delivery in schools crucially provides a universal and accessible approach for young people**.
- That the DHC is run, managed and arranged by PHSN (as opposed to school staff) was perceived to be a key facilitator of engagement
- **Knowledge and understanding of the screening process** (including its 'separation' from the school, and who can see responses), was important in engagement and **impacted upon young people's reported quality, quantity and level of openness** when completing the questionnaire.
- The DHC programme was seen to **increase awareness of support options** for young people with health and wellbeing needs, but knowledge of how to directly access support was limited.

'[the DHC] definitely helped me like tell someone about like something that I'm not too keen on sharing and the fact that I wasn't doing it like face-to-face with someone, I think that really helped.'

Young Person (Female, 14)

DO YOU NORMALLY FEEL SAFE AT HOME? *

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Further information

Further information can be found on the SPHR website here: <https://sphr.nihr.ac.uk/research/digital-health-contact-dhc/>

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About the School

The NIHR School for Public Health Research is a partnership between the Universities of Sheffield; Bristol; Cambridge; Imperial; and University College London; The London School for Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM); LiLaC – a collaboration between the Universities of Liverpool and Lancaster; and Fuse - The Centre for Translational Research in Public Health a collaboration between Newcastle, Durham, Northumbria, Sunderland and Teesside Universities.

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