CHILD FRIENDLY CITIES & COMMUNITIES

unicef
UNITED KINGDOM

CHILDREN'S RIGHTS IN THE NEW NORMAL
2. MENTAL HEALTH

THE CHANGE

The mental health of the UK's children and young people was deteriorating before Covid-19, but the pandemic has taken a devastating toll on their mental wellbeing. Referrals to mental health services are hitting record highs, with unprecedented waits for care at overstretched and underfunded services.

This is particularly true for children who were living in family homes with risk factors during lockdowns, disconnected from protective factors such as school, and often digitally excluded. For children who experienced abuse at home and reduced opportunities to connect with supportive adults, the negative impact of the pandemic on their mental health could be experienced for the rest of their lifetime.

THE CHALLENGE

It will be years before the impact of the pandemic on mental health is fully understood. What we do know, is that the pandemic represents just "the tip of the iceberg" when it comes to poor mental health outcomes for children and young people (The State of the World's Children Report, UNICEF 2021).

As mental health services reach tipping point, councils and their partners face enormous challenges to ensure local children get the urgent help they need.

Against this backdrop, it is key that local government, services and professionals frame good mental health as a basic human right; one all children and young people are entitled to.

NEW NORMAL

A UK COMMITTEE FOR UNICEF (UNICEF UK) SERIES FOR COUNCILS AND THEIR PARTNERS

THE STARTING POINT: CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

2 NO DISCRIMINATION — All children under 18 should enjoy all the rights set out in the UNCRC **without discrimination**, including those with mental health conditions.

6 LIFE, SURVIVAL AND DEVELOPMENT — Every child and young person should enjoy the **same opportunities to grow and develop** in conditions that don't impact negatively on their mental wellbeing.
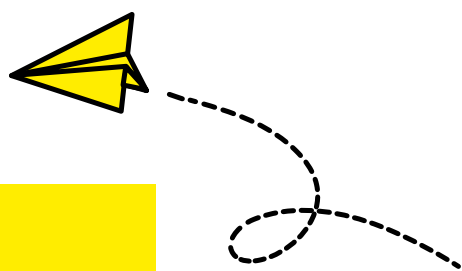
19 PROTECTION FROM VIOLENCE — Every child has **the right to protection from all forms of violence,** including the neglect of their mental health, self-harm and suicide.

24 HEALTH, WATER, FOOD, ENVIRONMENT — Every child has **the right to the best possible health** and to healthcare services that will help them attain this, including mental health.

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THE UNCRC

The full list of children's rights as set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) can be found here.

In 2013, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child adopted the General Comment on the Right of the Child to the Enjoyment of the Highest Attainable Standard of Health which can be found here.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1 Prioritise effective partnership working at the strategic level, with multiple agencies sharing the same approach and outcomes. This will create clear leadership, accountable for children's access to mental health services at all times. Make sure that there are opportunities for local youth governance structures to inform and influence these decision makers.

2 Assess the mental health needs of the local child and youth population and ensure that there are appropriate and responsive services to meet those needs. This should include breaking the silence and stigma around mental illness, listening to children and young people, and taking their experiences seriously.

3 Be mindful of the fact that the impact of the pandemic on mental health is not yet fully understood, and that there may be children and young people who have been negatively impacted who were not previously known to targeted or specialist services. Improve data, research and evidence, to build a better understanding of the local impact of this global crisis.

4 Invest in community-wide prevention, promotion and care for children and young people's mental health, including evidence-based interventions across health, education and social care. Ensure services recognise the integral role parents and carers play in supporting children and young people's positive mental health, while acknowledging that they too may need more support.

5 Think creatively about how children can access mental health services and meaningfully engage. Explore innovative solutions which might include continuing to engage with young people online, or promoting Covid-safe outreach for children and young people keen to participate in person.

6 Provide training for individuals who work with children and young people to build their capacity to support meaningful, child rights-based participation and engagement.

CASE STUDY

REDBRIDGE: MAPPING MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

When the **London Borough of Redbridge** surveyed its youth population in May 2020 – through a survey drafted and distributed by local children and young people – it found more and more children were beginning to experience mental health conditions for the first time as a result of being in lockdown

To help these children find ways to express themselves before they got to the point of needing specialist support, the council began to map its mental health and wellbeing assets. The map, which is now available online, goes beyond specialist support to also include local services that benefit children's broader mental health (art clubs, sport provision etc.).

Redbridge Council is one of six cities and communities across the UK taking part in the **UNICEF UK Child Friendly Cities & Communities programme (CFC)**.

Read our interview with a mental health professional in Redbridge who is drawing on children's rights to guide her work.

FURTHER READING AND RESOURCES

- *The State of the World's Children 2021; On my mind: promoting, protecting and caring for children's mental health*: UNICEF's flagship annual report and its most comprehensive look at the mental health of children and adolescents
- *What's on your mind? Help break the stigma around mental health*: Tips for young people from UNICEF's Voices of Youth youth-led platform on reaching out, providing support and breaking the stigma around mental health
- *Child rights impact assessment:* Child Friendly Cities & Communities template and guidance for local authorities

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This document is one in a series of recommendations for councils and their partners published monthly by the UNICEF UK Child Friendly Cities & Communities team.

Continue the series: unicef.org.uk/child-friendly-cities/new-normal