

Written Evidence Submitted by Place2Be

Summary

Place2Be is the UK's leading children's mental health charity providing expert in-school mental health support. For three decades we have worked with school communities; giving us an extensive evidence base demonstrating the relationship between mental health and education. This is based on our day-to-day delivery in schools, backed up by clinical supervision and expert evaluation by our Research Advisory Group. It is upon this experience that we base this submission.

Benefits of mental health support in education

There are clear connections between mental health and experience and engagement with education. Place2Be's model of mental health support pioneered the 'whole school approach.' Through this model, we support schools to embed wellbeing into the school culture, creating an inclusive, mentally healthy environment.

When schools commit to promoting a positive ethos, backed up with an on-site expert mental health service, there are widespread benefits for school communities. Place2Be research, based on our services in schools, shows that:

- Intervening early with mental health support and increasing connection, belonging and enjoyment of school, is associated with decreased rates of persistent school absences.¹
- Mental health support is associated with reduced school suspensions.²
- Our services are also key to supporting academic progress.
 - Children between Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 who received counselling keep pace academically with their peers.³
- Consistently we see an improvement in pupils' attitude to learning: teachers reported an improvement in classroom learning for 64% of children who had one-to-one counselling with Place2Be.
- After Place2Be's support, 65% of pupils caused fewer problems to their teacher or class.⁴
- Independent experts at Pro Bono Economics found that Place2Be's one-to-one support could generate an average of £8,700 in economic benefits over the lifetime of the individual child, through higher employment prospects and wages, decreased truancy, school exclusion, smoking and criminal behaviour.⁴

We recommend that mental health support is available in every school, so that more children and young people can see these benefits, in their mental health and consequently in their education.

¹ Education Select Committee, [Written evidence submitted by Place2Be](#), 2023

² Toth, K., Golden, S., et al, [From a child who IS a problem to a child who HAS a problem: fixed period school exclusions and mental health outcomes from routine outcome monitoring among children and young people attending school counselling](#), 2022

³ Place2Be, [25 years' learning from practice and evaluation](#), 2021

⁴ Place2Be, [Impact Report 2023](#), 2024

“He absolutely loves coming to see you and I have noticed that he seems much happier these days, much more settled with his friends. I’m so thankful for having the support, it came at a crucial point for us as a family.” – Father of boy supported with Place2Be’s Personalised Individual Parenting Training

Overcoming barriers in supporting boy’s mental health

Our services have shown that more needs to be done to encourage boys to reach out for support and access help that is available to them. Tackling mental ill health among boys is key to addressing the attainment and engagement gap.

Stigma around mental health is a huge barrier in getting help, especially for men. Even with younger-aged children, there is evidence that boys feel unable to seek help with their mental health, even when services are available.

This is shown in the clear gender gap in use of Place2Be’s school services:

- In 2017/18, we found that in primary schools, more boys (57%) than girls (43%) on average were referred to and used our one-to-one counselling (suited for more severe or multiple issues). However since the pandemic we have seen a rising number of girls being referred with more severe issues in need of one-to-one counselling, reducing the gap to 51% and 48% for boys and girls in primary schools in 2022/23.
- In 2022/23, we found that in secondary schools, only 33% of the one-to-one counselling service users were boys.
- For Place2Talk (a self-referral service to speak with a counsellor), boys are under-represented as users in both primary (36%) and secondary (31%) schools.

This evidences that, particularly as boys get older, they are not accessing, or being referred, to our services at a same rate as girls. This demonstrates the need to destigmatise reaching out for mental health support, and design services that overcome barriers in access for boys and men. Place2Be provides [training for school staff](#) and [advice for parents](#) to help overcome negative attitudes around mental health which can be passed to the child and contribute to stigma. This training forms part of a whole school approach.

By understanding the links between behaviour, mental health and education, and by providing mental health support early, we can give boys a greater chance to achieve their potential.

Q. What can be done to improve male pupils’ engagement with the school system?

As a leading provider of school-based mental health support, we have seen first-hand the impact that poor mental health can have on children and young people’s experiences at school. This impact can lead to many withdrawing from school altogether.

The University of Cambridge and Place2Be analysed data from pupils who were supported with one-to-one counselling, to understand whether this was associated with improved school attendance and reduced persistent absence.⁵ The data includes 7,405 pupils, of whom nearly one quarter were persistently absent.

⁵ Education Select Committee, [Written evidence submitted by Place2Be](#), 2023

Findings indicated that consistently poor mental health over time was associated with higher levels of persistent absence, whereas improving or consistently good mental health was associated with lower levels of persistent absence. The findings also suggested that strengthening children's engagement and enjoyment of school over time was associated with reduced persistent absence.

Our Recommendations: To improve male pupils' engagement with the school system and reduce persistent absence, we recommend:

- Delivering mental health interventions including one-to-one counselling in school settings. Mental health interventions need to be age appropriate and effectively equipped to meet a wide range of mental health difficulties.
- Mental health support should take a whole school approach focusing on building positive relationships between parents and carers, school staff and other professionals. Mental health professionals play a crucial role in working with families and offering time and space for them to build positive relationships at home and school.
- We need an increased focus on creating positive school environments, with interventions tailored for each individual's needs and focused on wellbeing rather than punishment.
- Students need to have a voice and be able to easily access the support they need.
- Interventions to promote pupils' engagement and enjoyment of school may result in reduced persistent absence, though this finding would need to be replicated in a sample with a control group.

"I was angry and annoyed coming back to school, these sessions have helped me to be less angry and annoyed" – Boy, age 9

Q. What can be done to reduce the exclusion and suspension rates of boys from school?

DfE data shows that boys have almost double the rate of suspensions than girls, and nearly three times the number of permanent exclusions.⁶ School exclusions disproportionately affect children with poor mental health.⁷ School exclusions also worsen mental health, showing the need to provide support to pupils affected by this.

Research carried out by Place2Be alongside the University of Cambridge in 2022 explored the relationship between mental health and school exclusion for a cohort of children and young people receiving Place2Be's one-to-one counselling.

Analysing data on over 6,712 four to sixteen-year-olds from 369 schools, researchers compared fixed period school exclusion rates between the academic year before and the academic year in which the child attended counselling. The research also used data from the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) completed by teachers and parents.

⁶ Department for Education, [Permanent exclusions and suspensions in England](#), 2023

⁷ Place2Be, [From a child who is a problem to a child who has a problem](#), 2023

The study found that despite more complex and severe initial difficulties, and facing greater adversity, children and young people identified in the study who had experienced school exclusion prior to counselling demonstrated a significant reduction in school exclusion in the academic year that the counselling took place.

- 74% of the students who had a fixed period exclusion before counselling had fewer reported exclusions in the year they attended counselling.
- More than half (56%) did not have any further subsequent exclusions.
- Students also had better mental health, measured by the teacher reported SDQ.

These findings indicate that challenging behaviours for these children were a direct expression of their emotional distress. From our services in schools and in previous research, boys were more likely to present to Place2Be with issues around behaviour, impulsivity, mood swings, anger and self-destructive thoughts or acts.⁸ We also see more boys (62%) than girls (38%) involved with our Personalised Individual Parenting Training (PIPT) which is designed to support parents in managing a child's challenging behaviours.

“When I get angry now I try and move so that I don't feel as angry in my head... I haven't been in trouble now for two and a half weeks so my head feels quiet.” – Boy, age 10

This therefore suggests that through one-to-one mental health counselling and parenting interventions, these behaviours can improve. As such, this shows the benefit of school-based counsellors being available, on site, to support children who are experiencing school suspensions and exclusions.

In 2023 Place2Be convened a roundtable of leading experts to identify measures needed to prevent and reduce school exclusions.⁹ Solutions include:

- Ensuring each child is viewed as an individual, whose needs are assessed more quickly and comprehensively, through a mental health lens. This assessment should help to identify which children are at a higher risk of exclusion;
- Involving parents and families, supporting them to help their children to move forward, through mental health training and advice;
- Building and developing a school workforce with a better understanding of child development, mental health and risk factors. This includes incorporating mental health into all teacher training, as well as in training for teaching assistants and school support staff;
- Ensuring Alternative Provision is high quality and regulated for children who are not in mainstream school, where they receive the right support to enable them to return to mainstream education.

“At the start of my sessions I felt really angry all the time and I was losing my temper a lot both at home and at school. Now I am a lot calmer and happier.” – Boy, age 7

⁸ Toth, K., Golden, S., et al., [What issues bring primary school children to counselling? A service evaluation of presenting issues across 291 schools working with Place2Be](#), 2020

⁹ Place2Be, [Inclusion not Exclusion](#), 2023

Q. What steps should the Department for Education be taking to improve academic outcomes for boys?

Research from the EBPU in 2019, carried out among 15,000 Year 7 pupils in England, showed that those who had mental health difficulties were more likely to have lower attainment when it came to educational outcomes, and were more likely to be persistently absent from school.¹⁰

Evidencing the benefits of providing mental health support in improving attainment is challenging as, without a control group, it is difficult to distinguish whether the mental health support, or improvement, leads to improved attainment where there are many other influential factors on attainment.

However, a paper from Place2Be in 2024 aimed to evidence the link between academic attainment and progress, and school-based one-to-one counselling.¹¹ By comparing academic outcomes of primary school pupils who received one-to-one counselling, against a control group of pupils with similar characteristics, the research demonstrated these pupils kept pace academically with their peers.

This is despite the Place2Be group including boys, ethnically diverse pupils, those eligible for free school meals and with SEND status - which are risk factors for lower attainment. The research suggests that these pupils who received counselling kept pace with their peers academically, despite being known to have mental health difficulties. While further research is needed, this indicates that school-based one-to-one counselling may be helpful as an intervention for supporting vulnerable children's academic progress and emotional wellbeing.

These benefits from counselling can support young people throughout their educational journey: a study carried out with the University of Cambridge compared pupils who had received counselling from Place2Be with pupils who had not. Both groups had similar mental health difficulties at baseline. The research found that after Place2Be's counselling, these pupils had fewer difficulties than the comparator group both immediately, after a year, and up to two years after Place2Be's intervention.¹²

We therefore believe that in order to improve academic outcomes for boys, providing mental health support could be an effective measure. We recommend that the Department for Education works with the Department for Health and Social Care to expand mental health provision to every school in England.

Q. What are the wider social implications of boys' underperformance and under engagement with education?

This written evidence serves to highlight the relationship between mental health, experience and engagement with school; and make the case for investing in mental health provision in schools as a means to address disparities in outcomes among boys and girls.

¹⁰ UCL, [Study links poor mental health to educational outcomes](#), 2019 (accessed May 2024)

¹¹ Toth, K., Golden, S., [Investigating the academic attainment and progress of children in receipt of individual counselling: A matched comparison study of primary school age children in England](#), 2024

¹² Finning, K., et al., [Longer-term effects of school-based counselling in UK primary schools](#), 2021

Research by independent experts Pro Bono Economics aimed to highlight the cost benefit of Place2Be's mental health services, through the improved social outcomes for children who benefitted from our one-to-one counselling.¹³ Pro Bono Economics analysed the research on children's mental health and outcomes in adolescence and adulthood. They found that mental ill health in childhood was linked to lower employment and earnings, and a higher risk of committing crime, exclusion/truancy, and smoking.

School based services such as Place2Be's have proven to be effective in improving mental health, particularly for young people experiencing more severe issues.¹⁴ As such, Pro Bono Economics estimated that the one-to-one counselling service provided by Place2Be in primary schools across the UK generates up to £36 million in long-term benefits each year, at an average cost of £4.5 million each year. This amounts to an average spend of £1,100 per child, which generates benefits of up to £8,700 per child.

Therefore, through providing mental health support early to young people, especially boys, we can turn the tide on their outcomes and see long-lasting benefits to society.

Conclusion

"I am so thankful. We cannot thank you enough. It is like a miracle has happened. My child's anxiety has gone down. He has 3-4 friends now; he began coming back home on his own from school whereas before he was afraid to go on the street even with an adult. He is open, positive and willing to try new things." –

Mother of boy who received Place2Be's support

For 30 years, Place2Be has worked with pupils, families and staff in schools across the UK. We currently provide an embedded mental health service in around 520 primary, secondary and high schools, supporting a school community of nearly 300,000 children and young people. Our services to schools include targeted one-to-one counselling, self-referral sessions to speak to our counsellors, group work and assemblies. We also work with the adults around a child to build their confidence and understanding of mental health – we do this through our family practitioners, training and guidance for school staff, and online tools.

By giving every school access to an expert, evidence based, embedded mental health service, we can bring about transformational change to wellbeing, engagement and experience in education. We urge the Government to fulfil their commitment to expanding school-based mental health services, and give every child the support they need.

In order to truly improve educational attainment and engagement among boys, as this inquiry seeks to understand, it is fundamental that we address poor mental health at its cause. By intervening early, we can turn the tide and ensure every boy and child achieves their potential.

May 2024

¹³ Pro Bono Economics, [Place2Be's one-to-one counselling service in UK primary schools: an updated cost-benefit analysis](#), 2022

¹⁴ Place2Be, [Impact Report 2023](#), 2024

