Public Petitions Committee
Inquiry into mental health support for young people in Scotland
Girlguiding Scotland

Introduction

Girlguiding Scotland welcomes the opportunity to the Public Petitions Inquiry into mental health support for young people in Scotland. As the leading charity for girls and young women in the country, we are committed to empowering our young members and speaking out on the issues that matter to them. Girls frequently highlight mental health as a key concern and tell us it’s an area where they want further information and support.

Our research at both a UK and Scottish level show a complex picture of girls’ wellbeing, highlighting that mental health isn’t an isolated issue. We know girls face a myriad of pressures in their day to day life including anxiety around body image, online bullying and harassment, sexual harassment in schools, sexism in the media and in daily life. We want to see a holistic approach to mental health support and services that recognises young people’s complex lives and takes their experiences and voices seriously.

As a girl-only organisation our research focussed exclusively on the lives of girls and young women. We hope our research and experience will therefore be one of many sources providing useful context for this inquiry.

What are girls’ views & experiences of mental health?

Figures from Girlguiding’s Girls Attitude Survey 2018 (UK-wide) found that:

- Girls’ happiness declines as they get older. While 43% of girls age 7-10 describe themselves as very happy, this drops to 18% of girls age 11-16 and 14% of girls age 17-21.
- Girls’ happiness appears to be declining over time with more girls describing themselves as unhappy now, than 10 years ago (17% of girls described themselves as ‘not happy’ in 2018 compared to 8% in 2009).
- 81% of girls age 11-21 said they felt adults don’t recognise the pressure young people are under.
- 63% of girls said they wasn’t enough mental health support at their school or in their community.
- 43% of girls said they needed help with their mental health before.

New research by Girlguiding Scotland into the lives of girls and young women age 7-25 in Scotland, mirrors a lot the findings at a UK-level. Our Girls in Scotland Survey with girls age 7-25 found that:

- 77% of girls (13-25) knew a girl their age who has experienced depression
- 68% of girls (13-25) knew a girl their age has experienced anxiety
- 63% of girls (13-25) knew a girl their age has experienced self-harm
• 55% of girls (13-25) knew a girl their age has experienced an eating disorder

The same research found nearly 1 in 3 (31%) girls age 13-25 found mental health uncomfortable to talk about with adults

**What affects girls’ mental health?**

Research from our Girls in Scotland survey found that girls & young women age 7-25 worry about:

• What other people think of them (54%)
• The pressure to do well at school (51%)
• Pressure to look a certain way (40%)
• Getting on with friends (34%)
• Pressure to have the latest clothes, phone etc. (24%)

**What does this mean for girls’ everyday lives?**

Girlguiding’s Girls’ Attitudes Survey 2018 found that feeling unhappy affects many aspects of girls’ lives including:

• Confidence: 61%
• Health: 50%
• Relationships with family and friends: 49%
• Learning at school, college etc.: 39%
• Having fun with friends: 38%
• Doing activities like hobbies and sports: 33%

**How can we promote positive mental health?**

Our research with girls in Scotland asked girls what they do to relax and feel positive.

They told us they:

• Spend time with friends 67%
• Spend time with family 54%
• Do something creative 40%
• Go outdoors 37%
• Play sport or exercise 35%
• Spending time on social media 35%

Encouragingly 84% of girls said they knew where to go for advice and support on mental health and 59% said they felt they could speak to a teacher or staff member at their school if they felt worried or sad.

**What would young people like to see in terms of health provision?**

Mental health is a complex issue but Girlguiding Scotland feels there are a number of steps decision-makers can take to support wellbeing and resilience among girls and young women. These include:
For young people to be taken seriously & listened to:

Girls told us they often feel the pressures they face are down-played – a third of girls age 11-21 told us they wouldn’t seek help because ‘they felt girls are just supposed to cope’ (Girls’ Attitude Survey 2016). Our research has shown girls feel that lots of pressures are just a part of everyday life – like dealing with body image or putting up with sexual harassment.

Similarly, our Girls in Scotland Survey 2018 found that a third of girls age 12-25 felt uncomfortable talking to a trusted adult such as a parent or teacher about mental health.

A first step to improving mental health and promoting wellbeing is to ensure all young people feel confident in seeking help and know that their voices & experiences will be taken seriously.

A holistic approach:

We think it’s important mental health isn’t treated as an isolated issue – we know mental health can be connected to a wide range of pressures girls face including anxiety around body image, online bullying and harassment, sexual harassment in schools, sexism in the media and in daily life. All of these pressures can impact how girls & young women feel about themselves.

For example, our Girls in Scotland Survey found that 77% of girls age 12-25 felt they were treated differently because of their gender, with 28% saying this happened often or always.

Our survey highlighted a variety of ways gender inequality affects girls’ everyday experiences including having less freedom to go outside by themselves, concerns around sexual harassment in their community, schools and online and the pressure to conform with gender stereotypes and unrealistic beauty standards.

We believe all of these pressures can have a knock-on effect on girls’ mental health and therefore support a holistic approach to promoting well-being & resilience, rather than viewing mental health in isolation.

Education is key:

Our Girls in Scotland 2018 survey found that nearly 1 in 2 girls (47%) age 12 to 25 said they would like to learn about mental health and resilience in school but currently don’t.

We believe high quality personal and social education that covers mental well-being and well as contributing factors like harassment, healthy relationships & body image has a vital role to play in ensuring all young people can feel happy and healthy, at school and in the future.

How does Girlguiding promote positive mental health?

We believe the youth sector and organisations like Girlguiding have a vital role to play in promoting resilience and wellbeing. Girlguiding is well placed to support young people’s wellbeing. Here are some of the ways we promote wellbeing:
• Research from Edinburgh University showed that children who participate in Guiding or Scouting are likely to have better mental health in later life. Our young members regularly tell us that having a girl-only space, away from the pressures like school and social media is one of the things they value most about Girlguiding.

• Our new programme with more than 800 badges and activities for girls age 5-18 features a wide range of activities on mental well-being and resilience, each tailored to be relevant and accessible to each specific age group including our Healthy Mind badge for Rainbows, Mindfulness badge for Brownies, Meditation badge for Guides and Self Care badge for Rangers.

• Through Peer Education, Girlguiding also delivers programmes that enable girls to think and talk about issues that are important to them:
  - Think Resilient builds girls’ wellbeing through resilience-building techniques and planning how to manage difficulties and recognise and apply positive coping strategies and support
  - Free Being Me helps girls grow body confidence and self-esteem and challenges unrealistic beauty ideals
  - Healthy Relationships which helps to ensure girls can develop and identify safe and healthy relationships

• Listening to girls - Above all, it’s vital for those in positions of power to include girls’ voices in the decisions that affect them. We support girls to make their voices heard on the issues that matter to them, from mental health to education.

About our research:

Girls Attitudes Survey: Girls Attitude Survey is a UK-wide survey conducted every year by Childwise on behalf of Girlguiding. It surveys the views and experiences of more than 1,600 girls and young women age 7-21 from across the UK, covering a range of topics including mental health, physical wellbeing, personal safety, education, gender stereotypes, and aspirations. It is the largest study of its kind in the UK.

You can read the full Girls’ Attitudes Survey 2018 and previous year’s surveys here.

Girls in Scotland: Girls in Scotland 2018 was conducted by Childwise on behalf of Girlguiding Scotland. The survey explores the lives of girls & young women age 7-25 in Scotland covering a wide range of themes including education, aspirations, physical wellbeing and mental health. The survey was conducted with more 500 girls from across the country.

You can read the full report here.