Children's mental health and wellbeing

Findings from the 2018 Annual Parent Survey

Parentkind

Bringing together home & school

Contents

About Us

Parentkind is the new name for PTA UK. We are a charity that champions parents so that they can participate in their child's education and school life to the full. We are also the largest membership body of Parent Teacher Associations and other parent groups in England, Wales and Northern Ireland with over 13,700 members, and present in over 50% of schools. Parentkind offers training and toolkits to head teachers, school staff, governors and parents to build successful home-school relationships.

See more at www.parentkind.org.uk

1. Summary of key findings

- Mental health and emotional well-being is high on parents' list of concerns about their child's experience at school; 60% are concerned about their child's emotional well-being and mental health and 53% are worried about the school having too high expectations of their child
- Stress related to homework (42%) or exams (41%) and anxiety (38%) are by far the most common mental health issues experienced in school by children and young people
- Although older pupils in secondary school and further education are significantly more likely to experience a number of mental health issues and emotional challenges, a considerable proportion of parents report experience of these issues at primary school level (e.g. 27% of primary school parents say that their child has experienced anxiety either at school or as a result of something that happened at school)
- Some of the most commonly experienced mental health issues (homework-related stress, anxiety and depression) are also the ones which schools are offering the least satisfactory support on, with less than half of parents being satisfied with the support received and one in ten not receiving any support at all
- The majority of parents think self-confidence is one of the key attributes children should leave primary (64%) and secondary school (57%) with
- 55% of parents identified children being happy as one of the top three traits of a successful school; this is followed by children enjoying learning (44%) and children learning positive behaviours such as resilience and self-confidence (41%)
- Only a quarter of parents, on the other hand, believe being rated good or outstanding by school inspectors (24%) or pupils achieving Government attainment targets (26%) is one of the main signs of a successful school

2. Overview

Parentkind's Annual Parent Survey (previously PTA UK's Annual Parent Survey), gives a yearly snapshot of parents' behaviour and attitudes towards their children's school and education. This is the fourth wave of the survey which tracks views of parents in England, Northern Ireland and Wales over time on a number of key topics including:

- Parents' attitudes to their child's school and schooling, including their views on supporting their child's learning, how the school takes their views into account and how effectively the school communicates with them on a range of issues affecting their child
- Whether or not they believe their voice is heard by education policymakers at all levels, local and national

- The different ways in which parents involve themselves in school life, from completing surveys to being part of governing bodies, and their awareness or otherwise of parent groups
- The cost of education and school funding and how parents' donations to the school fund change over time

As well as this, the 2018 wave of the survey explores parents' views on a number of other topical issues such as:

- Parents' attitudes towards and engagement in supporting their child's education outside of school in a range of ways
- Children's experience of issues related to their emotional well-being and mental health as reported by parents and satisfaction with the level of support offered by schools
- What attributes children should leave primary and secondary school with according to parents and what they think defines a successful school

About this report

This document is one of a series of mini-reports looking in-depth into specific topics of the survey. Here we look at the importance of children's emotional well-being and mental health at school from the point of view of parents.

This is an important topic subject to much debate. As the media has grown increasingly rich with stories on the rising number of children and young people affected by anxiety, depression and eating disorders linked to increased pressure to do well at school, body image issues and the influence of social media, it is clear schools and parents are at the front-line as mental health directly impacts on educational outcomes.

The last nationwide survey of children's mental health conducted in 2004 suggests that around one in ten children aged 5 to 16 have a mental health disorder. However, more recent data from a number of different sources highlights that incidence of mental health issues amongst children and young people is increasing. Recent data from the NHS, for instance, suggests that almost 400,000 children and young people aged 18 or under are in contact with the health service for mental health issues, with the number of active referrals from GPs in April 2018 being a third higher than those in the same period two years prior[1].

Mental health budgets within the NHS are under huge pressure with the rising demand for mental health services. A report by the Children's Commissioner in England (October 2017) highlights how the vast majority of mental health funding for young people is geared towards in-patient mental health care

[1] M. O'Hara, The Guardian "Young people's mental health is a worsening crisis. Action is needed", July 2018 https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/jul/31/young-people-mental-health-crisis-uk-us-suicide

(38%) and CAMHS[2] community services (46%), despite being accessed by a minority of young people; only 16% of the funding, on the other hand, goes to providing universal services targeted to those not accessing CAMHS and those with low level needs for whom early intervention is often key and very cost effective in preventing long term illness.[3]

Given the scale of the issue and its pressing nature for children and their families, our Annual Parent Survey this year looks in more detail at parents' attitudes towards children's mental and emotional health in school, their concerns and their direct experience of issues. It also seeks to understand the extent to which parents think attributes such as self-confidence and resilience are important in relation to other competencies learned by children at school. Finally, it asks parents to reflect on what makes a successful school and how factors such as children's happiness, enjoyment of learning and the ability to acquire positive behaviours score against other traits such as pupils achieving the Government's expected attainment levels. The next sections of this report present key findings from these questions.

3. Detailed findings

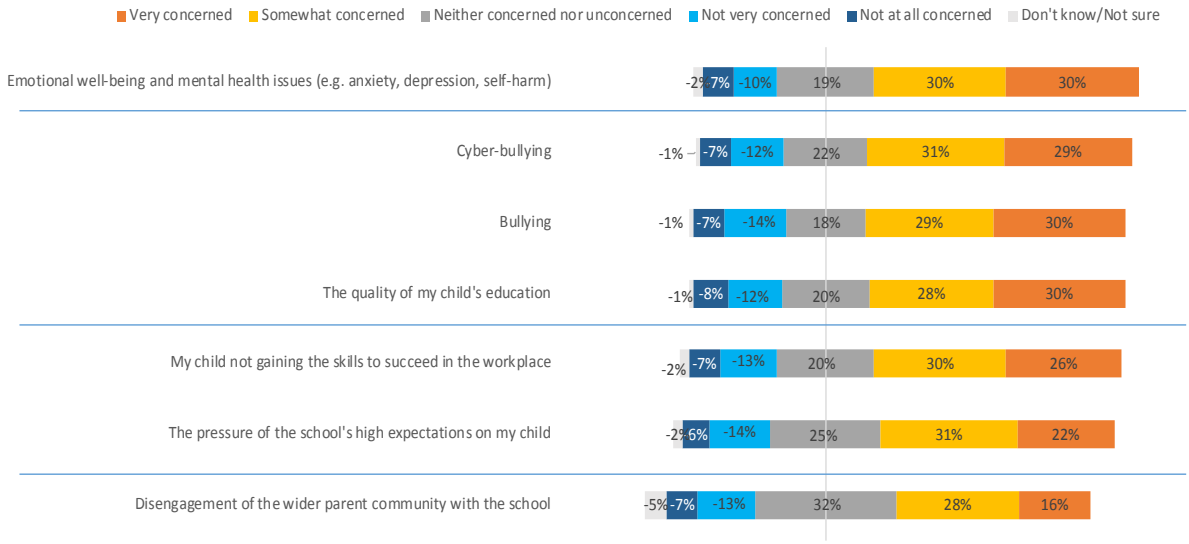
Parents' concerns

When prompted with a range of issues affecting their child's experience at school, emotional well-being and mental health issues are the top concern for parents, with 60% reporting that they are either very concerned or somewhat concerned about this. A similar proportion of parents say they are concerned about cyber-bullying (60%) and bullying (59%), both issues that, in turn, are likely to impact on children's mental health and well-being. Just over half of parents (53%) also report that they are worried about the impact that a school having high expectations has on their child, with more than one in five being very concerned about this.

Across all issues that we prompted, younger parents appear to be significantly more concerned than older parents. For instance, 40% of parents under 35 say that they are very concerned about their child's emotional well-being and mental health issues compared to 30% of all parents. Similarly, 42% are very concerned about bullying (compared to 30% of all parents) and 40% about cyber-bullying (compared to 29% of all parents). One factor that may help explain this is that this group of respondents is at an earlier stage of their parenting journey and could, therefore, be more apprehensive about issues that may affect their child's experience in school, or it may be a reflection of a growing awareness of mental health matters in society as a whole.

[2] Children and Adult Mental Health Services
[3] Children's Commissioner, "Briefing: Children's Mental Health Care in England", October 2017

Nearly 2 in 3 parents are concerned about their child's mental health and well-being at school



Sample: 1500 parents in England (1200), Northern Ireland (100) and Wales (200) who have children aged 5-18 in state school
Base: All respondents
Question: "Thinking about your child's experience at school, to what extent are you concerned about the following issues?"

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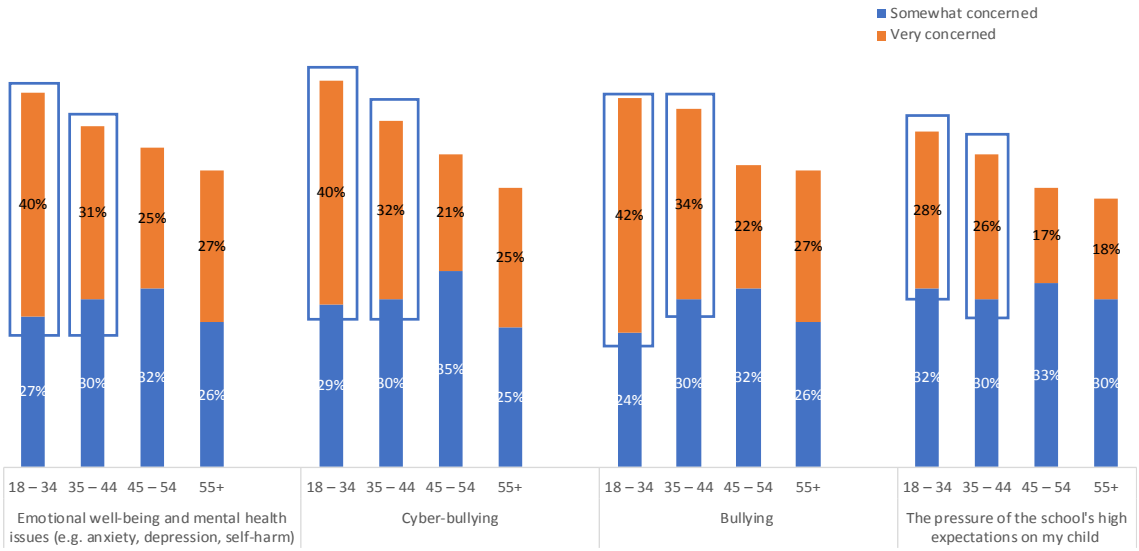
Younger parents are more likely to be concerned about mental health and well-being



Sample: 1500 parents in England (1200), Northern Ireland (100) and Wales (200) who have children aged 5-18 in state school
Base: 18-34 (254), 35-44 (533), 45-54 (512), 55+(202)
Question: "Thinking about your child's experience at school, to what extent are you concerned about the following issues?"

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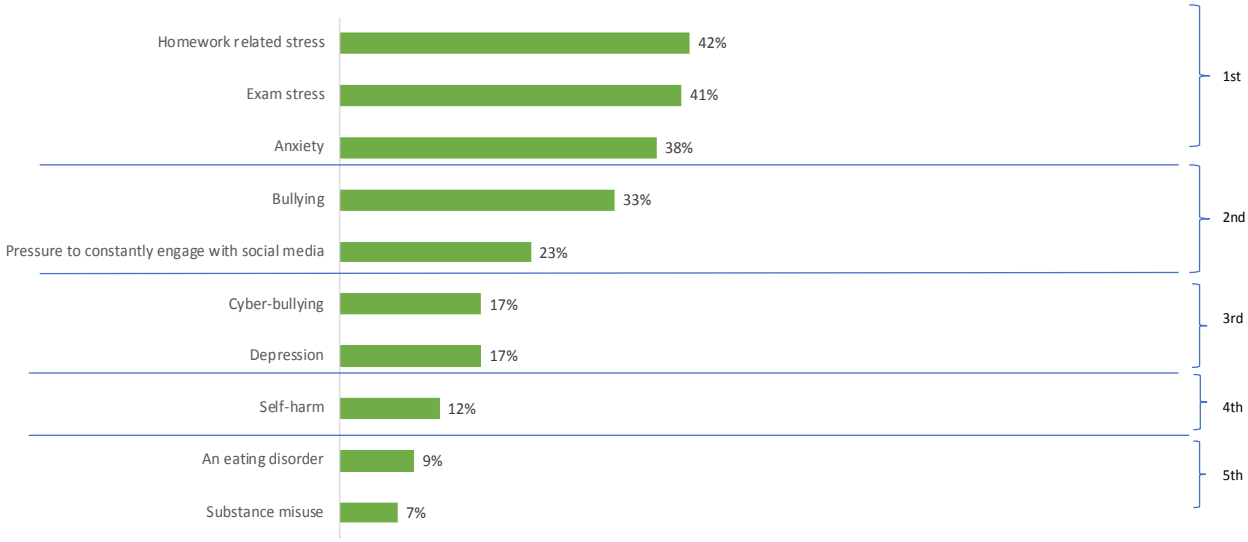
Children's experience of issues

As well as exploring parents' concerns, we also asked about the extent to which their children experienced a range of issues that can affect their emotional well-being. By far, stress related to homework (42%) and exams (41%), together with anxiety (38%) are the issues which are most commonly reported by parents to affect children at school. This is in line with recent media reports[4] which have highlighted the extent of a real "epidemic" of children and young people's mental health issues, which stress and anxiety related to school performance seem to be at the heart of.

Homework/exam related stress and anxiety are the most common issues amongst school children



Sample: 1500 parents in England (1200), Northern Ireland (100) and Wales (200) who have children aged 5-18 in state school
Base: All respondents
Question: "Has your child ever experienced any of the following, either at school or directly as a result of something that happened at school?" **Yes**

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In addition, issues such as bullying (reported by 33% of parents) and pressure to constantly engage with social media (reported by 23% of parents) are also common. Although more serious mental health conditions such as self-harm (12%), eating disorders (9%) and substance misuse (7%) are rarer, they remain significant within the overall picture.

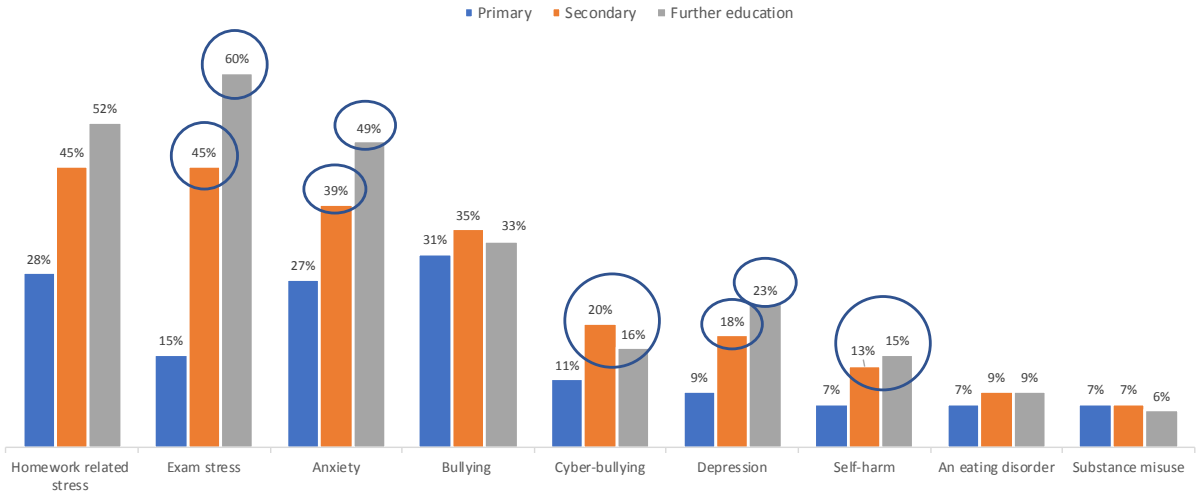
Exam and homework related stress reach their peak amongst older pupils; 45% of secondary school parents and 52% of parents with children in further education report that their children experienced homework-related stress, whilst 45% of children in secondary school and 60% of those in further education experience exam-related stress, according to parents. This is perhaps unsurprising, given that more is likely to be asked of them when it comes to homework and exams compared to younger pupils in these areas.

[4] D. Campbell, The Observer "Children face mental health epidemic, say teachers", June 2018

Anxiety also grows substantially with school phase and is significantly higher for pupils in secondary school (39%) and further education (49%); nevertheless, it's worth noting that more than a quarter of primary school parents (27%) still report that their children experience anxiety at school, a proportion which is remarkably high. Although the concept of anxiety encompasses a range of mental states, from milder to more intense ones which the survey did not capture, these results still highlight the scale of the issue which seems widespread and affecting children from a very young age.

While older pupils are more likely to have experienced most issues, bullying seems to be the exception, with around one in three parents reporting their children experiencing this across the three school phases (31% Primary, 35% Secondary, 33% in Further Education), highlighting how this, not only remains a common challenge for children in school, but also one equally affecting children of different age groups.

Pupils in Secondary and Further Education are more likely to experience a range of mental health challenges



Sample: 1500 parents in England (1200), Northern Ireland (100) and Wales (200) who have children aged 5-18 in state school
Base: Primary (397), Secondary (747) , Further Education (355)
Question: "Has your child ever experienced any of the following, either at school or directly as a result of something that happened at school?"

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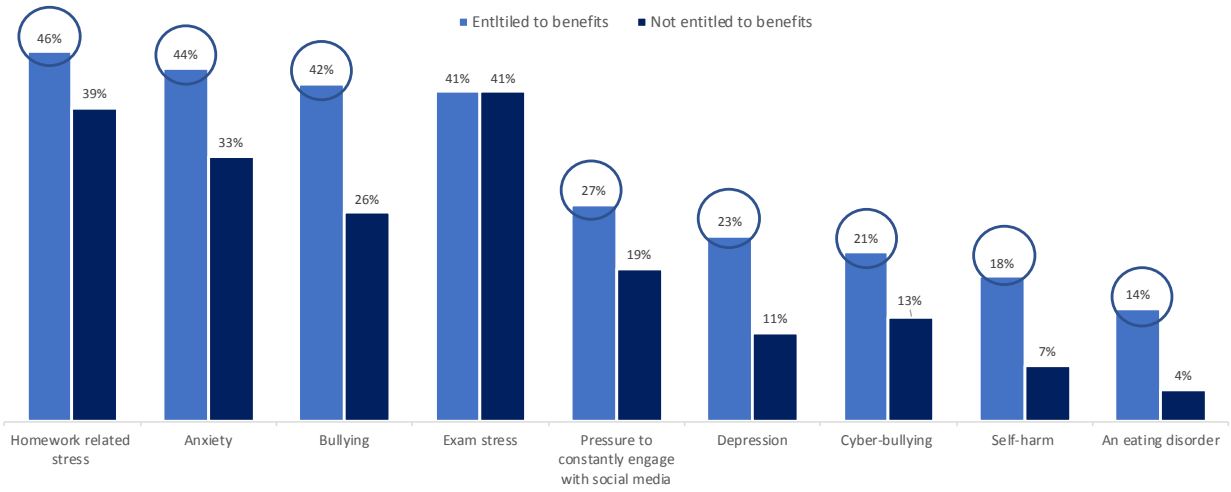
From a socio-economic point of view, parents who are receiving at least one of a range of state benefits[5] are significantly more likely to say that the issues we prompted have affected their children at some point than parents who are not receiving benefits. This is particularly true for bullying (reported by 42% of parents on benefits compared to 26% of parents who are not on benefits), anxiety (44% vs 33%) and

[5] These include: Income Support, Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance, Income-related Employment and Support Allowance, Support under Part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, The guaranteed element of Pension Credit, Child Tax Credit, Working Tax Credit run-on, Universal Credit

depression (23% vs 11%), highlighting how children from less affluent families are likely to be more prone to experiencing a range of emotional and mental health challenges compared to those from more affluent backgrounds. This is in line with what we know are the risk factors of experiencing mental health issues for children, which, in turn, go hand in hand with disadvantage (e.g. living in poverty)[6].

Geographically, some of these issues also appear to cluster in big cities; parents from London, for instance, are more likely to say that their children have experienced a number of issues at school than parents in other English regions, including exam stress (46%), pressure to constantly engage with social media (32%) depression (28%), self-harm (29%) and eating disorders (23%).

Parents who are entitled to state benefits are more likely to report their child experiencing a range of mental health issues at school



Sample: 1500 parents in England (1200), Northern Ireland (100) and Wales (200) who have children aged 5-18 in state school
Base: Entitled (659), Not entitled (757)
Question: "Has your child ever experienced any of the following, either at school or directly as a result of something that happened at school?"

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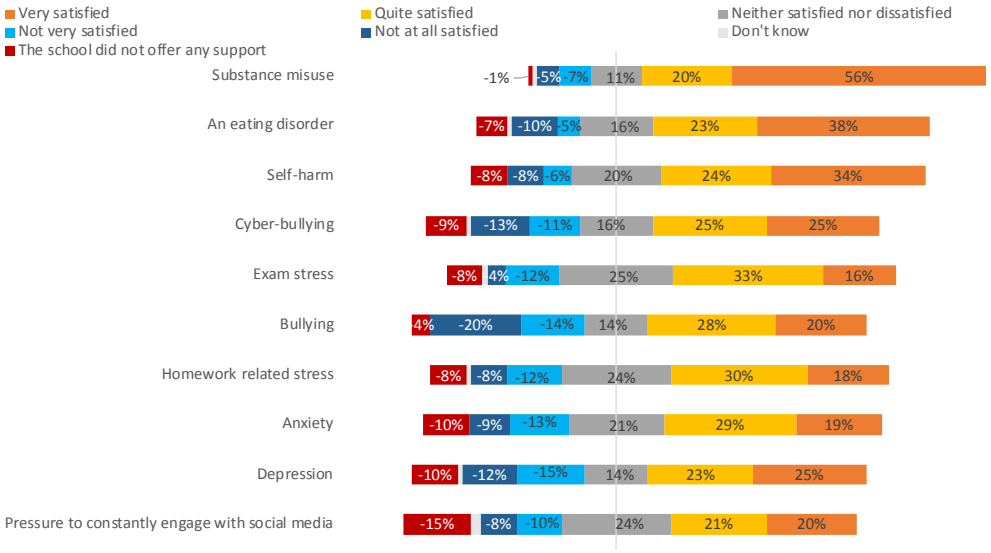
[6] Mental Health Foundation: https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/a-to-z/c/children-and-young-people

Parents are most satisfied with the support offered by their child's school when it comes to rarer issues/conditions such as substance misuse, eating disorders and self-harm



Sample: 1500 parents in England (1200), Northern Ireland (100) and Wales (200) who have children aged 5-18 in state school
Base: All respondents who reported their child experiencing the issue/condition
Question: "How satisfied were you with the support offered by your child's school in relation to each of these issues?"

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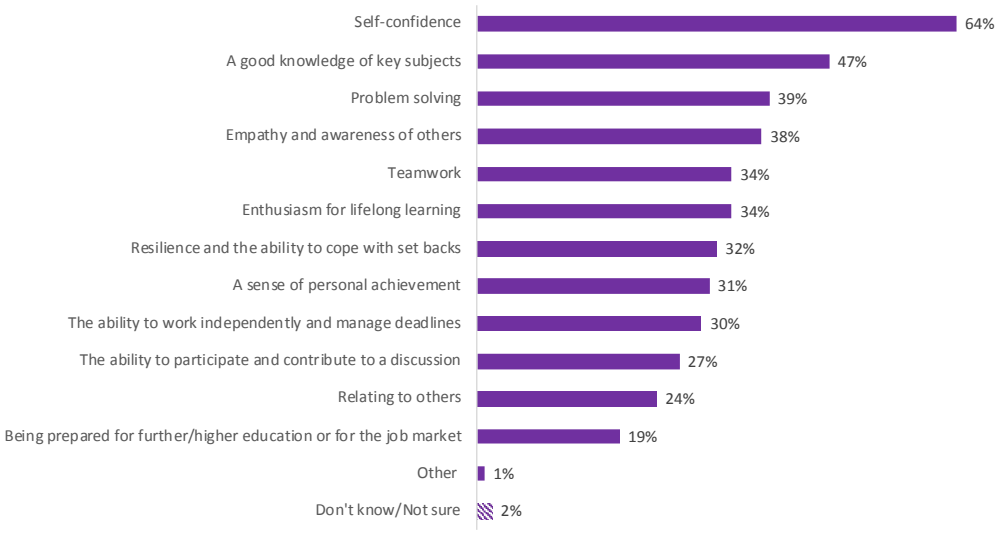
Overall it appears that schools are more effective at supporting parents with issues that are rarer such as substance misuse (56% of parents whose children experienced this are very satisfied with the support received), eating disorders (38%) and self-harm (34%). This may be because schools have more services to refer pupils to, given that, as mentioned in previous sections of this report, NHS provision of mental health services tends to be focused on these types of conditions rather than on pre-emptive or lower level support.

Interestingly, the most common issues experienced (homework-related stress, anxiety and depression) have some of the lowest rates of satisfaction (below 50%) and a number of parents (around 1 in 10) report that the school did not offer any support. This is concerning, and is worthy of further exploration to understand why this is the case.

Moreover, there are very high levels of active dissatisfaction amongst parents in relation to support offered by schools on certain issues. One in five parents, for instance, are not at all satisfied by the support received from their school in relation to bullying, by far the highest figure highlighting dissatisfaction. Again, this suggests that there are more opportunities for schools and parents to work together to improve the support offered to pupils on some of the most common issues.

Skills and attributes children should leave school with

Self-confidence tops the list of key attributes parents think their children should leave primary school with



Sample: 1500 parents in England (1200), Northern Ireland (100) and Wales (200) who have children aged 5-18 in state school
Base: All respondents
Question: "In your opinion, which of the following are the most important skills and capabilities a child should leave primary school with? Please select up to 5 that you think are most important"

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When asked about the most important attributes, skills and abilities that children should have developed by the time they leave school, the majority of parents identify self-confidence as the main one, both in primary (64%) and secondary (57%) school.

For children in primary school, hard skills such as a good knowledge of key subjects (47%) and problem solving (39%) are also important, counterbalanced by empathy and awareness of others (38%) and teamwork (34%). More "grown up" skills such as working independently and managing deadlines (30%), resilience (32%), being prepared for further/higher education work (19%) come lower down the ranking (however, between one third and one fifth of parents still prioritise them).

...and secondary school too

Sample: 1500 parents in England (1200), Northern Ireland (100) and Wales (200) who have children aged 5-18 in state school
Base: All respondents
Question: "In your opinion, which of the following are the most important skills and capabilities a child should leave secondary school/post-primary school with? Please select up to 5 that you think are most important"

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Ideal attributes for secondary school children are, unsurprisingly, much more geared towards the world of work and adulthood than those of primary school children; being prepared for further/higher education and the job market is the second most important attribute, with 44% of parents selecting it. Resilience and the ability to cope with setbacks and the ability to work independently/manage deadlines (both at 41%) and a good knowledge of key subjects (37%) follow closely.

Attributes of a successful school

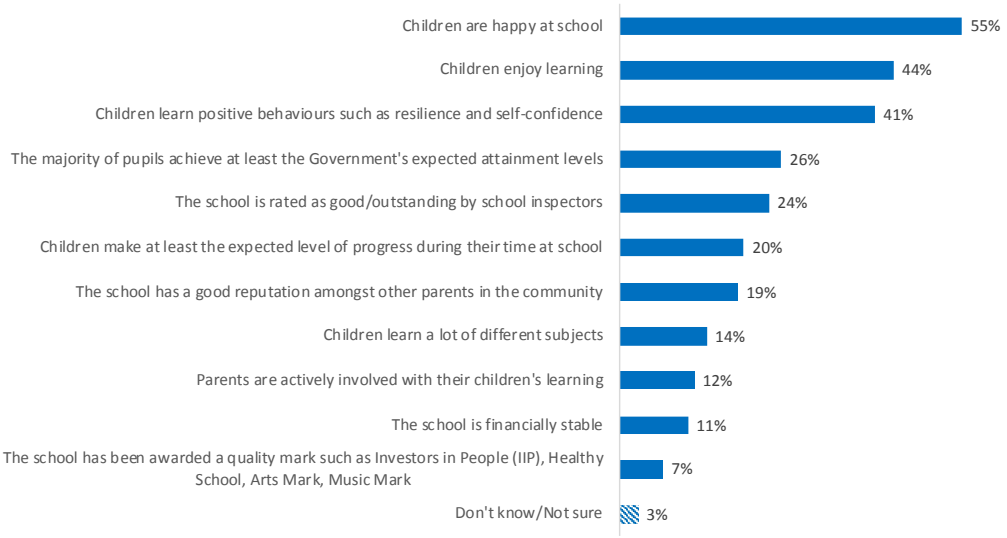
Happiness tops the bill for parents when looking for signs of a successful school – 55% of our sample identified this as one of the top three traits of a school; it is followed by children enjoying learning (44%) and children learning positive behaviours such as resilience and self-confidence (41%). This echoes data from previous sections of this report which showed how children's emotional well-being at school is a key concern for parents, above many other practical matters. Interestingly, only a quarter of parents say that being rated good or outstanding by school inspectors (24%) or pupils achieving Government attainment targets (26%) is in the top three signs of a successful school.

Mothers are more likely to consider children's happiness as a sign of a successful school (58% vs 51% of fathers) alongside children learning positive behaviours such as resilience (45% of mothers vs 38%

of fathers). Fathers, on the other hand, alongside parents living in London are slightly more likely to point at the school's financial stability and quality marks as important.

Children's happiness is also more important to older parents (45+) and those from lower socio-economic groups (C2DEs). Regionally, Welsh parents are more likely to identify children's happiness as a trait of a successful school (61% vs 55% of parents overall) than their counterparts in the rest of the country, while parents in Northern Ireland are more likely to think that children learning positive behaviours (51% vs 41% of parents overall) is a sign of a successful school.

A successful school is one where children are happy, enjoy learning and develop positive behaviours



Sample: 1500 parents in England (1200), Northern Ireland (100) and Wales (200) who have children aged 5-18 in state school
Base: All respondents
Question: "In your opinion, which of the following best describes a successful school? Please select up to 3"

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4. Recommendations

In light of these findings we make the following recommendations:

- Parents should be included in reforms to mental health provision in schools – parents and schools must work in partnership to safeguard every child's well-being and mental health.
- Schools should ensure effective parent engagement strategies exist so every parent's voice is heard, allowing issues to be identified early and the right professional support to be put in place. Some conditions which may be seen as milder such as homework-related/exam stress and anxiety are relatively common amongst children but have the lowest levels of satisfaction amongst parents in terms of school support; here there is scope for schools and parents to work together to prevent and, if necessary, manage the issues in a more coordinated way, both at primary school level where these issues may first appear and at secondary school level where they seem to become more acute.

- Parents should be signposted to up to date and timely advice and resources to help them support children with mental health issues. Charities such as MindEd, Place2Be, Fair Education Alliance and YoungMinds offer such resources.
- Overall, funding strategies for schools should ensure sufficient investment in school-based mental health and wellbeing support.

5. Methodology and Sample

Parentkind's Annual Parent Survey is conducted online by Research Now. Respondents were recruited through their UK panel and took part in the survey from 13th August to 7th September 2018. It involved a sample of 1,500 parents from England (1,200), Northern Ireland (100) and Wales (200) who have at least one child aged 5-18 attending state school. The sample is representative of the parent population by gender, age and social grade. Sub-samples in Wales and Northern Ireland were boosted to achieve a large enough base of respondents to compare findings across the three regions of England, Northern Ireland and Wales.

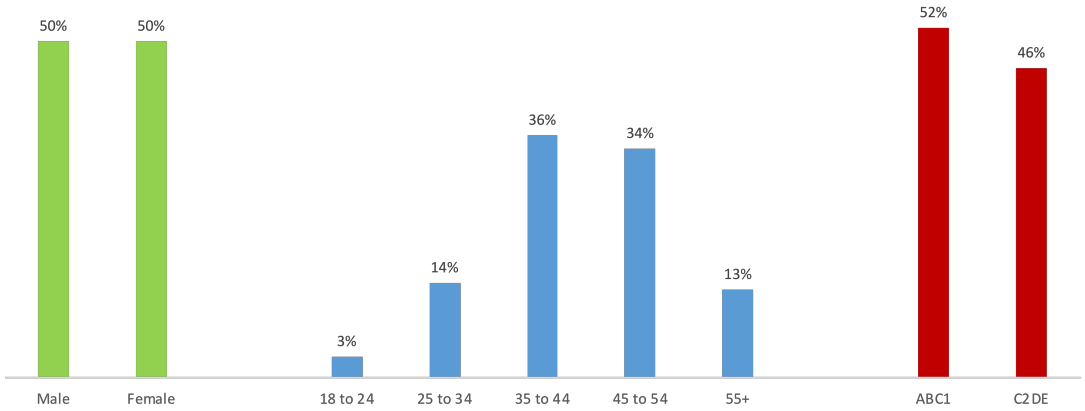
As the survey is not polling the entire population of parents in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, but rather a sample, results are subject to a margin of error which is estimated to be between 0.5 and 2.5 percentage points for the whole sample. The exact margin of error varies with the proportion considered. This means that, if for instance, according to the survey, 59% of respondents strongly agree that they would like a say on their child's education, in reality the proportion is likely to be between 61.5% and 56.5% (i.e. the margin of error would be +/-2.5%).

Demographics

To ensure the survey truly reflects parents' views, its gender, age and social grade make-up mirrors the one of the parent population in England, Northern Ireland and Wales with children in school age. This means that respondents are equally split between mothers and fathers and that most (70%) are between the ages of 35 and 54. The sample is also made up of slightly more parents belonging to high social grades ABC1 (that is, in managerial, administrative or professional occupations) than there are parents belonging to lower social grades C2DE (manual, casual workers, pensioners, retired and full time students).[7]

[7] The NRS social grades are a system of demographic classification originally developed by the National Readership Survey to classify readers but are now used by many organisations and have become a standard market research classification tool. It is based on the occupation of the head of the household and the categories are as follows:
A – Higher managerial, administrative or professional
B – Intermediate managerial, administrative or professional
C1 – Supervisory or clerical and junior managerial administrative or professional
C2 – Skilled manual workers
D – Semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers

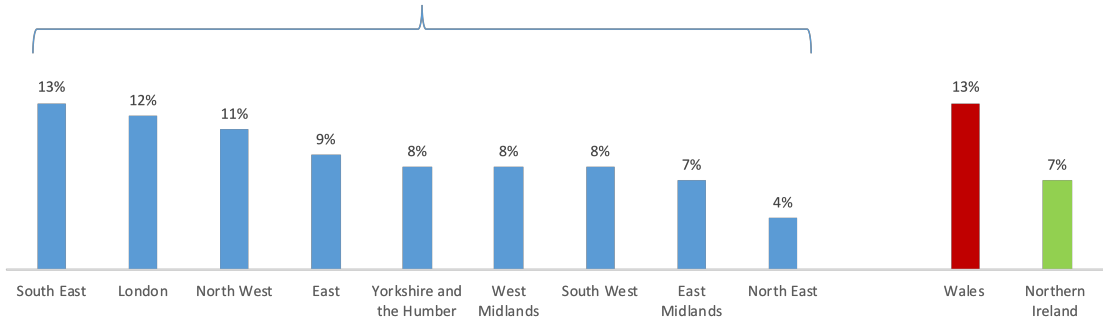
Demographics



Sample: 1500 parents in England (1,200), Northern Ireland (100) and Wales (200) who have children aged 5-18 in state school
Base: All respondents

The majority of the sample (80%) is comprised of parents from England and is representative of the parent population by English regions. Subsamples for Wales and Northern Ireland have been boosted over and above natural fall-out of respondents to ensure each sample base was large enough to allow cross-regional comparisons.

Demographics



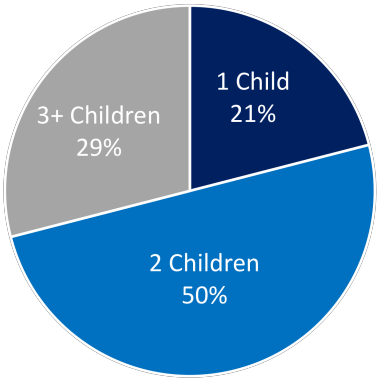
Sample: 1500 parents in England (1,200), Northern Ireland (100) and Wales (200) who have children aged 5-18 in state school
Base: All respondents

E – Casual or lowest grade workers, pensioners and others who depend on the welfare state for income

Half of parents in the sample have two children, while just over one in five have one and nearly one in three have more than three. The largest school phase represented is secondary (50%) followed by primary (26%) and Further Education[8] (24%).

Demographics

Number of children in the household



School phase of eldest child

Primary	26%
Secondary/Post-primary	50%
Further/Third Level Education	24%
Don't know	1%

Sample: 1500 parents in England (1,200), Northern Ireland (100) and Wales (200) who have children aged 5-18 in state school
Base: All respondents

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[8] This includes post-16 education in secondary schools and Further Education Colleges