Health Select Committee inquiry into children and young people’s mental health – the role of education

Girlguiding response – January 2017

**About Girlguiding**

1. Girlguiding is the leading charity for girls and young women in the UK, with over 500,000 members. Thanks to the dedication and support of 100,000 amazing volunteers, we are active in every part of the UK, giving girls and young women a space where they can be themselves, have fun, build brilliant friendships, gain valuable life skills and make a positive difference to their lives and their communities. We build girls’ confidence and raise their aspirations. We give them the chance to discover their full potential and encourage them to be a powerful force for good. We give them a space to have fun. We run Rainbows (5–7 years), Brownies (7–10 years), Guides (10–14 years) and The Senior Section (14–25 years). Registered Charity No 306016. [www.girlguiding.org.uk](http://www.girlguiding.org.uk)

**About our evidence**

1. Girlguiding’s submission focuses on evidence from our annual [Girls’ Attitudes Survey](https://www.girlguiding.org.uk/social-action-advocacy-and-campaigns/research/girls-attitudes-survey/) – the largest UK survey of girls and young women – which gathers the views and opinions of over 1,600 girls and young women aged 7 to 21, from inside and outside guiding.
2. We also draw from our research report, [*Girls’ Wellbeing Explored – Understanding Pressures and Resilience*](https://www.girlguiding.org.uk/social-action-advocacy-and-campaigns/research/mental-well-being/). Following the troubling findings around girls’ mental wellbeing in our 2015 Girls’ Attitudes Survey, we commissioned ChildWise to undertake this qualitative research with girls and worked closely with youth mental health charity YoungMinds, who provided expert advice throughout.
3. Girlguiding’s response is also influenced by the [*Girls Matter* campaign](https://www.girlguiding.org.uk/social-action-advocacy-and-campaigns/social-action-and-campaigns/campaigns-led-by-girls/girls-matter/) – Girlguiding’s member-led campaign that profiles girls' and young women's calls for change.
4. Our response also includes quotes from members of our Girlguiding Advocate panel - a platform for girls to use their voices and seek change at the highest levels. Our Advocates are a group of 18 Girlguiding members aged 14 to 25 who lead the direction of Girlguiding's advocacy and research.

**Overview**

1. Girlguiding welcomes the inquiry into children and young people’s mental health and its emphasis on supporting wellbeing in school.

Our 2016 Girls’ Attitudes Survey showed that girls’ wellbeing is continuing to decline and gets worse as they get older. Over the past five years the number of girls who say they are unhappy has increased from 9% to 16%. Nearly all feel stressed about school work and many often feel anxious (78%) and like they are not good enough (75%). Despite some assumptions that girls find it easy to ask for help, over half do not because of discomfort about discussing their feelings. Girls aged 11 to 21 say that mental health and wellbeing are the most important issues for them. For many, this is an area where not enough is being done to help them.

Our response outlines our position that, while support for mental health should be available in schools, this must be provided alongside a commitment to tackle the issues that contribute to and cause low wellbeing. We begin by summarising the pressures facing girls. We then describe how we believe their needs can be supported by schools as well as our broader recommendations for making meaningful change for girls’ wellbeing.

Girlguiding is in an excellent position to respond to this inquiry due to our extensive research in this area. Our 2015 Girls’ Attitudes Survey revealed girls’ increasing concerns about their wellbeing. This led us to do further qualitative research, reported in our *Girls Wellbeing Explored* publication, to hear more from girls themselves and better understand the pressures they face.

Girlguiding welcomes the Government’s increased focus on children’s mental health. The Prime Minister’s speech[[1]](#footnote-1) highlighted the importance of tackling the ‘burning injustice’ of mental health needs and inadequate provision. We are delighted to see this on the agenda but would also echo Norman Lamb’s view[[2]](#footnote-2) that this issue impacts girls and young women disproportionately.

**Mental Health**

*‘Too many young people are suffering in silence because they think nothing can be done to help them and no one will take them seriously.’* (Girls Attitudes Survey participant aged 17 to 21)

1. In 2016, girls named ‘supporting young people with their mental health’ the most important way that girls’ lives could be improved (Girls’ Attitudes Survey).

Our 2015 Survey revealed that wellbeing is becoming increasingly important to girls. In 2010, girls chose smoking, binge-drinking and drug abuse as their top three concerns. In 2015, this had been replaced by self-harming, and mental illness/depression. In addition:

* 37% of girls aged 11 to 21 had experienced a mental health problem. This rose to 46% among those aged 17 to 21.
* 62% of 11 to 21 year olds knew a girl who had experienced a mental health problem.
* 82% of 11 to 21 year olds felt adults don’t often recognise the pressures young people face.
* 83% of 7 to 10 year olds said they felt sad or down at least sometimes.

**Pressures contributing to mental health issues**

1. While we welcome the focus on improving support for mental health in schools, this must be done alongside tackling the pressures which contribute to and cause issues. In the following sections, we include findings from our *Girls’ Wellbeing Explored* focus groups.

**Self-esteem and body image**

1. Our focus groups support previous Girls’ Attitudes Survey evidence that pressures around body image intensify with age, but it is striking that even the youngest girls experience the pressure to ‘be perfect’. Our 2016 Girls’ Attitudes Survey showed that:
* 51% of 11 to 16 year olds and 59% of 17 to 21 year olds feel they should lose weight
* 46% of 11 to 16 year olds and 61% of 17 to 21 year olds feel they need to be perfect
* 65% of 11 to 16 year olds and 78% of 17 to 21 year olds feel ashamed about how they look most of the time or sometimes

Although the percentage was less among 7 to 10 year olds, this is evidently still a significant area for them with 17% feeling they should lose weight, 23% feeling they need to be ‘perfect’ and a shocking 40% feeling ashamed about how they look ‘most of the time’ or ‘sometimes’.

**Relationship and sexual pressures**

1. In secondary school, many girls feel pressure to have intimate relationships.

*‘Loads of people our age lose their virginity or whatever. And I think there’s a lot of pressure behind that.’* (*Girls’ Wellbeing Explored* participant aged 16 to 18).

Girls also experience double standards. Our 2016 Girls’ Attitudes Survey showed that 75% of girls aged 11 to 21 feel that girls are judged harshly for sexual behaviour seen as acceptable for boys.

**Sexual harassment**

1. Our 2014 Girls’ Attitudes Survey revealed that 59% of girls aged 13 to 21 had experienced sexual harassment at school. In 2015, three quarters of girls said anxiety about sexual harassment negatively affects their lives, such as their choice of clothing (51%), body confidence (49%) or having the freedom to go where they want (43%). In 2016, girls told us that they change their behaviour to avoid intimidation by groups of boys (55%), unwanted sexual comments (45%) and street harassment (44%).

**Sexism, sexualisation and the media**

1. The widespread objectification of women’s bodies across media channels is shaping girls’ expectations in relation to their own bodies. Although many know that these ideals are unrealistic, they are still highly likely to compare themselves to celebrities and friends, with damaging consequences.

Social media culture typically encourages girls to share only the most exciting and glamorous areas of their lives. Many focus group participants spoke of the pressure they feel to conform to stereotypes and the ‘ideal’ body type. These expectations directly reflect the often sexualised portrayals of women across the media which bombard girls’ lives.

*‘The media is always telling you how to look. You’ve always like got to look good. You feel like you’re in competition with other girls.’* (*Girls’ Wellbeing Explored* participant aged 16 to 18)

**Exposure to inappropriate imagery**

1. Some younger girls (aged 7 to 10) said they were anxious about their safety online and had been exposed to graphic videos by older siblings or peers.

*‘What makes me worried is scary videos and people posting like real videos with people in. My brother makes me watch them.*’ (*Girls’ Wellbeing Explored* participant aged 7 to 10).

**Online harassment**

1. Many of the stresses girls face today weren’t a reality when their parents and teachers were growing up. Social media, while providing new opportunities for communication and social action, also increases pressure on young people.

Our 2016 Girls’ Attitudes Survey revealed that:

* 49% of girls aged 11 to 21 feel less free to express their views online due to their fear of online abuse.
* 23% have had threatening things said to them on social media
* 20% have had unwanted pornographic imagery/film sent to them

**Normalising pressures**

1. These pressures threaten girls’ wellbeing, but our research reveals that they often dismiss or downplay issues.

*‘You shouldn’t go to the doctors just for stress. That’s embarrassing. How are you going to go to the doctor and say I’m having depression in school? You should try and solve it yourself.’ (Girls’ Wellbeing Explored* participant aged 11 to 15*)*

It is especially worrying that girls are normalising the unacceptable, sexist pressures they face in the belief that they are expected to cope with issues such as sexual harassment and bullying.

**Barriers to accessing support**

**Children not wanting to talk at school**

1. Our 2016 Girls’ Attitudes Survey revealed 52% of girls aged 7 to 21 wouldn’t seek help with their mental health because they feel uncomfortable talking about feelings. And, disturbingly, 33% of girls aged 11 to 21 wouldn’t seek help because they think girls are just expected to cope.

Our 2015 survey found that girls find it difficult to discuss their wellbeing at school, with just 44% of 11 to 16 year olds having talked about mental health in lessons. Despite the high numbers of girls who had experienced a mental health problem (37% of 11 to 21 year olds and 46% of 17 to 21 year olds), the majority say that adults – including teachers – often don’t understand/recognise the pressures they face. Our *Wellbeing Explored* focus groups also indicated that some feel there is ‘insufficient support’ at school and that they are more comfortable talking about academic pressures than wellbeing. Furthermore, an inconsistency in how schools respond to the pressures girls face also has an impact on girls’ willingness to discuss issues. For the staggering 59% of 13 to 21 year olds who had experienced sexual harassment at school, just a fifth always reported it (with a further half reporting it ‘sometimes’). Girls attributed their reluctance to schools’ failure to address to sexual harassment. Half stated that school staff ‘sometimes’ or ‘always’ dismiss this behaviour as ‘just a bit of banter’.

Improving teachers’ ability to recognise the pressures girls face – and to deal with them supportively – would help to address these issues and make support at school more accessible. Girls also want to see this, with school being the top choice for where secondary-school age girls would like to receive support (with 58% choosing it) (Girls’ Attitudes Survey 2015).

**Recommendations**

Girlguiding welcomes the increased focus on children and young people’s mental health signalled within the Prime Minister’s speech[[3]](#footnote-3). However, we believe that there must be more emphasis on preventing issues through fostering a school environment which supports young people’s wellbeing and resilience. We support the Children and Young People Mental Health (CYPMH) Coalition’s submission calls and have referred to them in our recommendations, which come from what girls have told us about their experiences.

**In school**

1. Give girls access to the support they need. In line with the CYPMH Coalition, we believe children should receive better school-based support. Schools are well-placed to support children’s mental health through prevention and identification of – and appropriate provision for – issues. Support should be tailored to meet young people’s needs and could include support by trained school staff or signposting to external agencies where this is more appropriate or accessible for the young person. We would also support YoungMinds evidence submission that there must be a whole-school approach to wellbeing.
2. Teach wellbeing through compulsory PSHE. Girlguiding believes that all children should receive support at school for their emotional as well as their physical wellbeing. This should include support to build resilience and understand pressures and how to manage them. Girls and young women tell us they want to learn about gender equality and body confidence to help challenge - and prevent them from normalising – sexism, narrow beauty ideals and pressures to be perfect. **81% of girls and young women aged 11 to 21 say the Government should ensure PSHE is taught in all schools (Girls’ Attitudes Survey, 2016)**
3. Teach respect through statutory Sex and Relationship Education (SRE). Girlguiding has called for quality, modern, statutory SRE since our 2015 *Girls Matter* campaign. This should cover consent, online safety, tackling violence against women and girls and LGBTQ and healthy relationships. This would help to challenge the gender stereotypes and double standards that impact girls’ wellbeing and is key to combatting risk factors affecting young people’s mental health, such as sexual harassment at school.

We welcome the renewed focus on SRE that has arisen from Stella Creasy’s proposed amendments to the Children and Social Work Bill and Maria Miller’s #SupportSSRE campaign. Our research shows that **74% of girls and young women aged 11to21 want SRE lessons at school (Girls’ Attitudes Survey, 2014)**.

**Outside school**

1. In addition to school-based support, young people can benefit enormously from participating in external groups and informal education. Recent research from the University of Edinburgh showed that children who participate in Guiding or Scouting are likely to have better mental health in later life. Researchers found that:
* Former Guides/Scouts tended to have better mental health at age 50.
* Former Guides/Scouts were around 15 per cent less likely to experience anxiety/ mood disorders.
* The activities in Guiding and Scouting seem to remove the relatively higher likelihood of mental illness in those from poorer backgrounds.
* Programmes that help children develop skills such as self-reliance and teamwork, and encourage being active outdoors, may have lifelong benefits.
* It’s expected that the same outcomes for young people’s wellbeing would be the case today.

Girlguiding can play a vital prevention role in relation to girls’ mental health by strengthening resilience and offering a safe, fun and supportive space where they can escape pressures and be themselves. Through Peer Education, Girlguiding 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

**Broader recommendations**

1. In order to fully address this issue we also call on the Government to:
* Demand that schools take a zero-tolerance approach to sexual harassment, which has a hugely negative impact on girls’ wellbeing. Girlguiding welcomed the Women and Equalities Committee’s report[[4]](#footnote-4), which outlined the devastating impact of sexual harassment in schools on girls’ wellbeing and called for it to be acted upon urgently by tackling its causes and consequences. Schools must be safe for all students and should be required to address harassment through effective and clear policies, support for reporting and clear sanctions. As already outlined, statutory SRE should support prevention of sexual harassment in schools.

Girlguiding welcomed the Government’s clear statement in their response to this inquiry that sexual harassment is ‘unacceptable’ and recognition of the ‘serious implications’ it has for young people’s mental health. We were also pleased to see that sexual harassment will be included in bullying guidance (although we believe that allowing schools to implement this to their own timescales and in their own way allows for inconsistency). However, along with others, Girlguiding was disappointed that the Government’s response didn’t mandate statutory SRE to tackle the issue. In a blog in the New Statesman[[5]](#footnote-5), Girlguiding Advocate, Liddy Buswell, described it as a ‘lukewarm’ response which ‘missed a huge opportunity to make schools safe for all young people’. But it’s not too late. Girlguiding welcomes Justine Greening’s assertion that she will consider the issue further as well as Edward Timpson’s statement that the Government will make a statement soon[[6]](#footnote-6). We hope that this will mandate statutory SRE so that young people are given the tools to make informed decisions and manage risk factors affecting their wellbeing.

* (Along with regulators) stop children’s exposure to harmful sexualised content in media to address the damaging consequences it has on them.
* Above all, listen to girls. Acknowledge the pressures they experience, such as sexual harassment and sexism, and recognise that there can be no ‘one-size-fits -all’ approach to supporting their mental health. As the CYPMH Coalition indicates, support must meet young people’s individual needs. Our research shows that, although many young people would find increased support in school easier to access, others would not. Therefore, support should be available in all schools but other options should also be explored so that all children’s needs are met.

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1. May, T. 2017. *Shared Society*, 9 January, Royal Society, London [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Lamb, N. 2017, *Children’s Wellbeing and Mental Health Debate*, 10 January, House of Commons, Westminster, London [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. May, T. 2017. *Shared Society*, 9 January, Royal Society, London [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Women and Equalities Select Committee Inquiry into Sexual Harassment and Sexual Violence in Schools. September 2016, Report and Recommendations [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Buswell, E. 2016. ‘State failure to tackle sexual violence in school tells me my body is not my own’, *New Statesman*, <http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/education/2016/11/state-failure-take-sexual-violence-schools-seriously-tells-me-my-body-not> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Timpson, E. 2017. *Children and Social Work Bill Committee Stage*, 10 January, House of Commons, Westminster, London [↑](#footnote-ref-6)