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SCHOOL HEALTH
RESEARCH NETWORK

Mental wellbeing and transition to secondary school

School Health & Wellbeing Research Brief, June 2020

Young people's mental wellbeing is a national priority. Of particular concern is the relationship between affluence and wellbeing, where we see young people from more disadvantaged backgrounds reporting lower wellbeing, as this social inequality in wellbeing persists into adulthood. Emerging evidence suggests that school social environments impact on young people's wellbeing, so could transition from primary to secondary school be a key juncture where mental wellbeing can be protected?

What we already know...

During their secondary school years, young people's wellbeing is not only influenced by their home circumstances, but also by the overall level of affluence of their school's intake and their position within their school's social hierarchy.

Transition is a significant milestone where children see close relationships with primary school teachers and friendships dissolve. Secondary schools are usually more diverse than primary schools and many students also experience an abrupt change in their position in their school's social hierarchy as they enter a secondary school with a more or a less affluent social profile to their primary school.



What we did...

- We used data from 39,836 students in years 7 and 8 who took part in the 2017/18 Student Health and Wellbeing Survey in Wales.
- To measure the affluence of schools we used publicly available data on the level of free school meal (FSM) entitlement at each primary and secondary school.
- To measure the affluence of students' home circumstances we used the Family Affluence Scale questions from the survey and to measure mental wellbeing we used the Short Warwick and Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing scale.
- We calculated a score for each student, based on the difference between the level of FSM entitlement at their primary school and their secondary school and analysed the relationship between this score and student mental wellbeing.

In a nutshell

- **Individual student characteristics, such as gender, ethnicity and home circumstances are significant predictors of mental wellbeing at secondary school.**
- **The primary school context from which a student comes, however, and the context of their current secondary school both independently influence mental wellbeing in years 7 and 8.**
- **Students who transition to a more affluent secondary school than their primary school are likely to report worse well being.**



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What we found...

Wellbeing at secondary school

- Most of the variation seen in students' mental wellbeing in years 7 and 8 was explained by differences in their individual characteristics (gender and ethnicity) and their home circumstances.
- Some of the variation in wellbeing, however, was explained by the primary school *and* the secondary school that students attended, with worse wellbeing reported by students who attended more deprived primary or secondary schools.

The impact of transition on wellbeing

- Students who transitioned from a more affluent primary school to a less affluent secondary school

(i.e. they moved to a school with a higher level of FSM entitlement) were more likely to report higher mental wellbeing.

- Conversely, students who moved from a less affluent primary school to a more affluent secondary school at transition were more likely to report worse mental wellbeing.



Issues to consider

The study used data from a large, nationally representative sample of secondary schools in Wales.

It used a validated measure of mental wellbeing in students in years 7 and 8, but did not measure their wellbeing before their transition to secondary school.

School-level characteristics other than FSM entitlement, e.g. level of parental mental ill health, were not included in the analysis.

What does this mean for my school?

- **Transition is a key point in a child's school career where socioeconomic inequality in mental wellbeing is likely to widen. Children from the least affluent homes and primary schools are most likely to experience a decline in their mental wellbeing at transition as their secondary school is likely to have a more affluent social profile than their primary school and their position in their new school's social hierarchy will therefore be lower.**
- **A combination of effective universal and targeted interventions in primary and secondary school, and at the point of transition, may further enhance the work secondary schools already undertake with their cluster primary schools and reduce these inequalities.**
- **Comprehensive transition interventions that are multi-faceted and long term, including involvement of parents and the creation of a sense of community and belonging are likely to be important.**

Read the research paper in full. Download for free here:

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/berj.3616>

Moore G et al (2020) Socioeconomic status, mental wellbeing and transition to secondary school: Analysis of the School Health Research Network/Health Behaviour in School-aged Children survey in Wales. British Educational Research Journal doi: 10.1002/berj.3616