



SAFEGUARDING UPDATE

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What schools need to know: Lessons from a better start on supporting early child development

A new briefing drawing on the third annual evaluation of A Better Start (ABS), a ten year, £215 million early childhood initiative funded by The National Lottery Community Fund, highlights how inclusive, family-centred support systems can make a lasting difference to children's development. Although ABS is focused on babies and toddlers (0-4 years), its core principles are highly relevant for schools, particularly in early years and transition phases.

1. Early, pro-active, and 'scaffolded' support matters

At the heart of the ABS approach is the idea of scaffolding, providing adaptive, timely, and hands-on support that helps families build new skills and confidence over time. Support isn't just available "on demand"; it's actively offered, responsive to changing needs, and designed to reduce barriers such as transport, poverty, or access difficulties.

What this means for schools:

- **Early years settings and schools can adopt a pro-active stance toward families**, reaching out rather than waiting for families to seek help.
- **Think in terms of scaffolds:** what small, sustained supports can be built around a child (and family) to enable learning and wellbeing? For example: one-to-one mentoring, facilitated parent groups, home-school contact strategies, transport or assistance to attend school events.
- **Understand that access barriers often lie outside school walls** and address them with flexible, tailored solutions.

2. Family voices must be central to practice

One of the strongest themes from the ABS evaluation is the emphasis on listening to families and co-producing services with them. Families were involved not merely as recipients but as partners in shaping what support looked like.

What this means for schools:

- **Strengthen mechanisms for genuine family engagement.** School policies should enable parents/carers to influence how support is delivered, not just be informed about decisions.
- **Use reflective questions in planning** (e.g. "Have we asked families about the barriers they face?" "Are services easy to access and meaningful?") to shape practice.

3. Support must be holistic and context-responsive

ABS partnerships have worked across diet and nutrition, social and emotional development, and speech, language and communication. They acknowledge that development is multi-dimensional and that families' lived circumstances, such as economic hardship, directly affect children's growth.

What this means for schools:

- **Adopt a holistic view** of child development that goes beyond academics to include emotional wellbeing and family context.
- **Be alert to the wider determinants of learning**, food security, housing stability, access to services and ensure information is available for families about local support.

4. Strengthening links beyond school boundaries

A Better Start's success has been built on place-based partnerships, organisations and services working together with families. Schools are often a key node in local support networks.

What this means for schools:

- **Build and strengthen local partnership working** (health visitors, early years providers, charities, local authority early help teams).
- **Share information, training and referral pathways** to create coherent support ecosystems where families don't fall between services.

5. Lessons for school readiness

The first ABS insight report published by the National Children's Bureau, part of the same evaluation project, focuses on school readiness, reinforcing what schools are already feeling: that early foundations in social, emotional and communication skills matter enormously when children arrive at Reception.

For schools:

- **Invest in transition work with early years settings and families** to ensure children starting school have consistent, supportive foundations.
- **Consider joint training and shared approaches** with early years partners on developmental priorities (speech and language, emotional regulation, family engagement).

Read:

<https://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/news-views/2026/january/a-better-start-scaffolding-support-and-prioritising-family-voices-for-child-development/>

Forthcoming free safeguarding webinars for Spring term 1 2026

Knife crime - Tuesday 13th January

Neglect - Tuesday 20th January

FGM - Tuesday 27th January

Eating disorders (Bitesize webinar) - Tuesday 3rd February

Children with a family member in prison (Bitesize webinar) - Tuesday 10th February

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Girls' mental health: What schools must know now

Recent work by The Children's Society in partnership with The University of Manchester highlights urgent issues facing girls' mental health and what schools can do to respond effectively. The findings build on the Good Childhood Report, which consistently shows girls reporting lower wellbeing than boys in key areas such as school life, appearance, and overall happiness, with rising rates of anxiety and low mood attributed to gender norms, social pressures, peer relationships and educational stress.

1. Girls are struggling, and they say schools matter

Girls themselves identify school environments as both a major source of pressure and a place where change can happen. They want stronger:

- **social media education and regulation,**
- **responses to sexual harassment,**
- **challenging of harmful gender norms,**
- **and safe spaces where they can be themselves.**

This means that schools shouldn't treat mental health as an add-on. It must be woven into policies, culture and everyday practice.

2. Whole-school and inclusive approaches work

Research and consultation participants agreed that whole-school approaches that:

- **listen to girls' voices,**
- **involve young people in co-producing policy and practice,**
- **create safe, inclusive spaces,**
- **and recognise different lived experiences,**

are more likely to improve wellbeing than isolated interventions. This aligns with wider professional evidence that schools should be nurturing environments where emotional wellbeing is treated with the same priority as academic outcomes.

3. Barriers exist, and schools can challenge them

The briefing identifies barriers that hold schools back, including:

- **overstretched staff and resources,**
- **a lack of culturally competent support,**
- **systems that still prioritise boys' needs over girls' needs.**

Schools should audit their current support with a gender-lens:

- **Are mental health programmes equally accessible and effective for girls?**
- **Do policies consider how girls experience peer conflict, body image pressures and school culture differently?**

4. Amplify girls' voices in decision-making

Girls want to be heard, not just surveyed. Embedding pupil voice mechanisms into wellbeing planning helps ensure policies reflect their lived experience and priorities. These could include:

- **regular focus groups,**
- **representation on wellbeing councils,**
- **co-creation of key policies.**

This builds trust, improves trust and leads to more effective, relevant policy.

5. Collaboration and connection are vital

One clear takeaway from the Children's Society workshop was that no single school or service can solve these challenges alone. Participants moved from only 7% feeling connected to others working on girls' mental health to 75% by the end, showing how powerful collaboration can be.

For schools, this means strengthening links with:

- **mental health support services (e.g. MHSTs where available),**
- **local community and youth organisations,**
- **specialist services for gender-specific and cultural needs,**
- **parents and carers.**

6. Practical steps for schools

Here are actionable steps schools can take now:

♦ **Adopt a gender-sensitive lens** - Evaluate wellbeing support and policies to ensure they meet the specific needs of girls, including attention to peer relationships, body image pressures, and harmful norms.

♦ **Build wellbeing into everything** - Embed wellbeing across curriculum, pastoral support, safeguarding and behaviour policy rather than treating it as a one-off intervention.

♦ **Explore safe spaces and peer support** - Create dedicated safe spaces for girls to talk about issues like stress, identity, social media pressures and relationships in supportive, confidential settings.

♦ **Strengthen staff training** - Teachers and support staff should feel confident recognising early signs of distress and responding appropriately, ideally with regular, evidence-informed training.

♦ **Listen and act on pupils' feedback** - Use surveys and pupil councils to routinely capture perspectives from girls and act on what pupils say matters most.

Read:

<https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/information/professionals/resources/better-policies-girls-mental-health>