

# Addressing the evidence gap in children's mental health services: A longitudinal evaluation of a UK primary school-based counselling intervention

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(Finning, K., White, J., Toth, K. et al. Longer-term effects of school-based counselling in UK primary schools. *Eur Child Adolesc Psychiatry* (2021))

**Introduction:** Children's mental health has deteriorated over the last decade, this decline has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, while access to statutory mental health services is limited.

50% of those with lifetime mental health problems first experience symptoms by the age of 14<sup>i</sup>

Schools are an optimal setting for accessible mental health provision

Whilst most research to date has focussed on adolescents, in this study Children's mental health charity Place2Be joined up with University of Cambridge and University of Exeter to evaluate the long-term benefits of intervening early

## Aims

- To evaluate the longer-term impact of a primary school-based counselling service
- To compare outcomes of the children who received counselling (intervention group) with the outcomes of similar children who did not receive counselling support (comparison group)

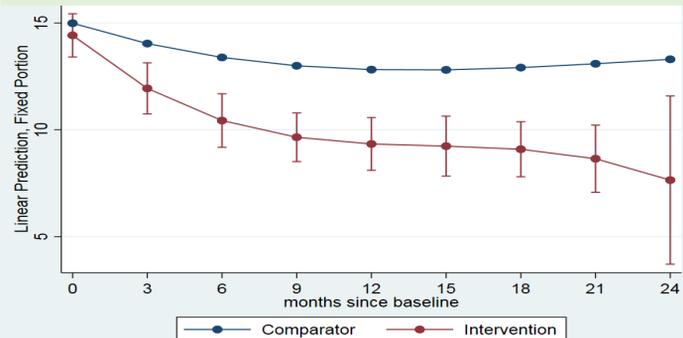
## Results

- In the intervention group, teacher and parent SDQ total difficulties scores were lower at post-intervention and longer-term follow-up compared to baseline
- The reduction in SDQ scores was greater in the intervention compared to comparator group for two years post-baseline (see Figure 1)

## Methods

- ✓ 1,149 Children and young people (CYP)
- ✓ Age 5-10
- ✓ Measures: 740 teacher SDQs<sup>ii</sup> and 360 parent SDQs completed before and after counselling and one year after the end of counselling
- ✓ Paired t-tests compared post-intervention and follow-up SDQ scores with baseline values
- ✓ Propensity score matching used to select a comparison group of 362 CYP from the 2004 BCAMHS<sup>iii</sup> survey
- ✓ Linear mixed effects models compared trajectories of SDQ scores in the intervention and comparator groups

Figure 1: Model-predicted SDQ scores



## Discussion

- Findings support other research highlighting benefit of school-based counselling on children's mental health
- First evidence – from an early intervention perspective - to suggest mental health improvements might persist long term
- Benefit of the comparison group – answering the 'research counterfactual'

**Conclusion: Improving access to school-based counselling may help address the progressive decline in children's mental health**