INCLUDING STUDENT VOICE IN SCHOOL-BASED MENTAL HEALTH PROGRAMS

**FOR MENTAL HEALTH, EDUCATION, TRAINING AND POLICY PROFESSIONALS**

"Young people are a powerful source for change, and they are the experts of their own experience. Involving them directly is the best way to create programs that will really work."

KATE KNUDSEN, YOUNG PERSON

Young people should be active participants in making decisions about their mental health, including at school. Growing evidence suggests that student receptiveness to school-based mental health programs may be a key part of supporting positive program outcomes.(2)

This toolkit provides an overview of why including student voice in school-based mental health programs is important and what to consider for meaningful involvement in program design and rollout. It is aimed at professionals who have a role in supporting the mental health of young people in secondary school, including health or mental health professionals, educators, school leaders, policymakers, funders, commissioners and researchers. Students thinking about getting involved in their school mental health program might also find this toolkit useful.
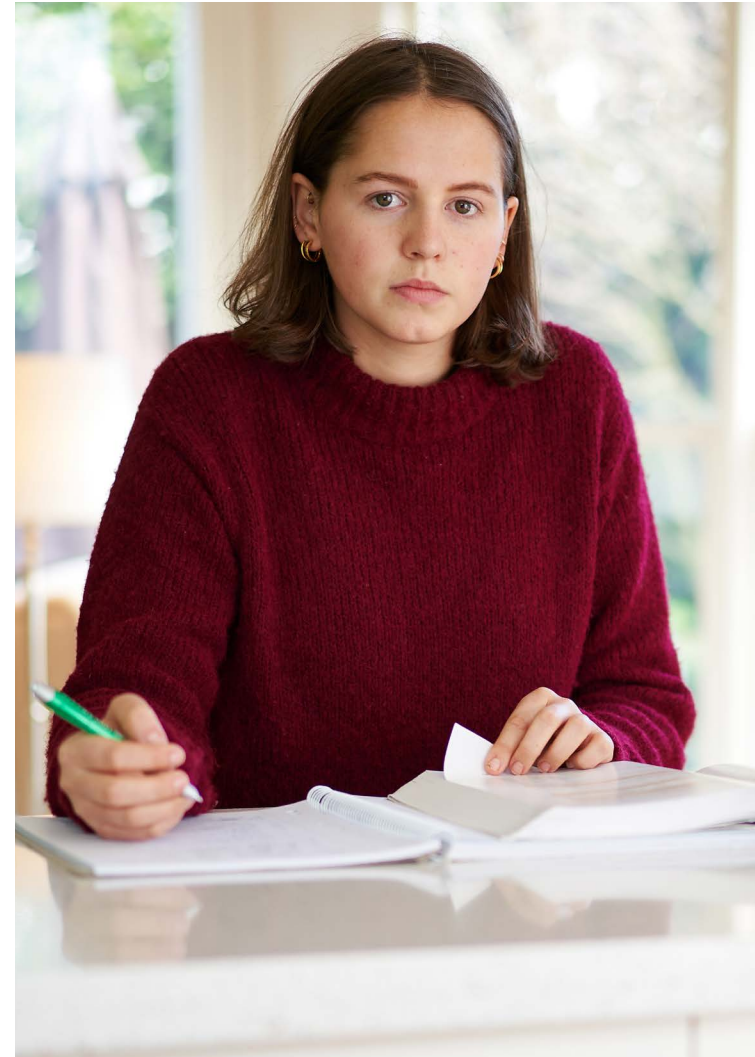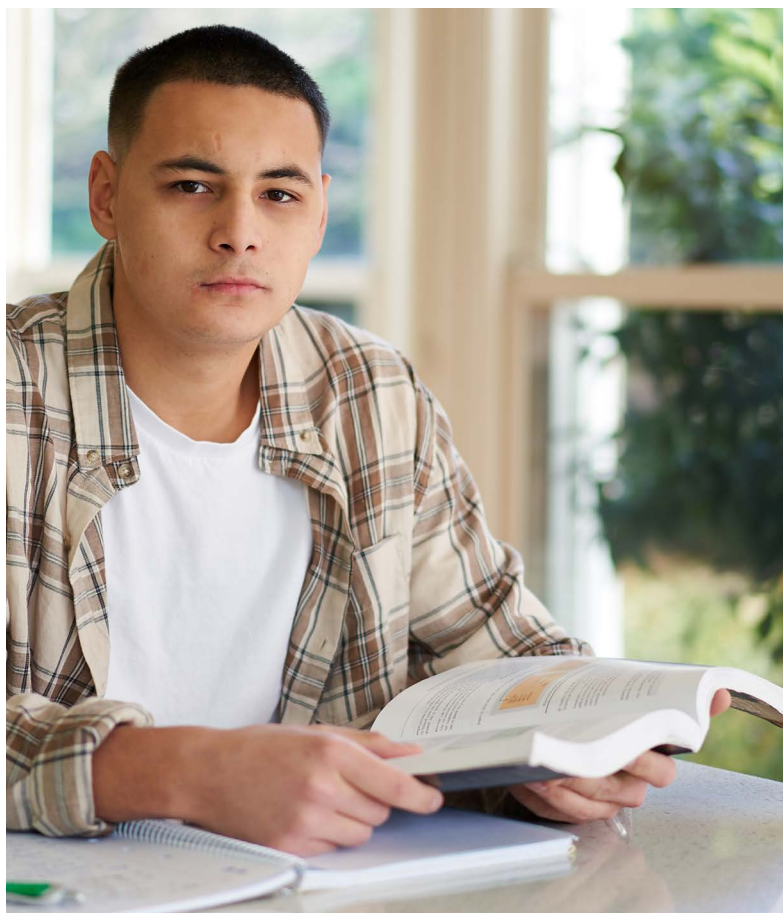
> "Let's all work together to improve the health and wellbeing of current and future young people. Once you engage young people in the process you'll never want to go back; so give it a go and see how positive and empowering it is for the school community."

**BRIDGET MOORE,
ORYGEN YOUTH ADVISORY COUNCIL MEMBER**

## WHAT ROLE DO SCHOOLS PLAY IN YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH?

Schools are a natural environment for supporting the wellbeing of young people. Young people spend more time in school than in any other formal institution. Many schools have the opportunity to reach large numbers of young people, including those from marginalised communities or more challenging home environments who may not readily access mainstream mental health support. Additionally, secondary school is a time of significant personal, psychological and biological development during which it is easier for young people to implement changes to enhance their wellbeing. However, whilst schools can be a place of safety and support, they can also become an environment in which young people experience distress. Students may experience a range of preventable negative experiences at school – such as peer victimisation and relational violence, social exclusion, academic failure and performance stress – each of which can exacerbate or contribute to the development of mental ill-health. This makes schools an ideal setting to prevent mental ill-health and support positive mental health in students.

WHAT ARE SCHOOL-BASED MENTAL HEALTH PROGRAMS AND DO THEY WORK?

School-based mental health programs are implemented in schools to support student mental health and wellbeing. There are many different types, but broadly they aim to either improve student development and wellbeing (e.g. by promoting social inclusion or building problem-solving and social and emotional skills) or prevent mental ill-health.

School-based mental health programs can vary widely in terms of the type of intervention, how they are delivered (e.g. face-to-face, online, individual, group) and who delivers them (e.g. teachers, psychologists).

Just as these programs vary widely, so too does the evidence for them. For a detailed account of the evidence, see the Orygen evidence summary, A review of secondary school-based mental health prevention programs. Broadly though, whilst the overall evidence supporting school programs is unclear, they have great potential to be effective.
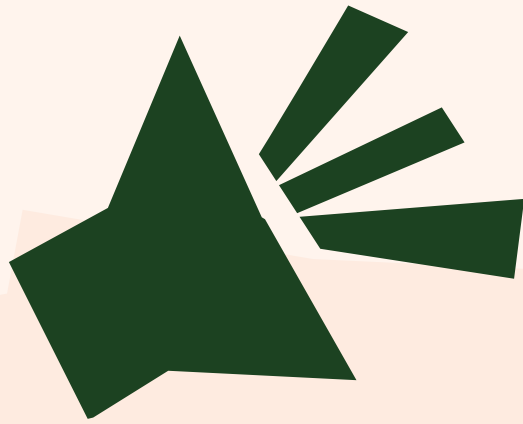
WHY IS STUDENT VOICE IMPORTANT?

Student voice is valuable across the development and delivery of school-based mental health programs. It is important for producing interventions that are relevant, accessible and usable.(3)

Youth mental health programs that have been co-designed by young people can have benefits for young people who design and participate in the program. These include:(3-5)

- program designs that are more flexible, responsive, human-centred and adaptable;
- increased program participation;
- decreased rates of program early dropout;
- increased program satisfaction;
- improved recovery focus;
- development of professional skills;
- development of coping skills;
- improved relationships between young people and those delivering the program; and
- better program outcomes.

Despite these benefits, it's not clear whether most school-based mental health programs are designed with input or consultation from their target audience – young people. This means that young people are not having a say in decisions that affect them, and that their unique voice and lived expertise are often not heard in this context.

Research shows that some young people feel they do not have a choice in whether to participate in school-based mental health programs, and may experience concern about stigma, lack of confidentiality and missing classes as a result of attending programs.(6-8) Growing evidence suggests that student receptiveness to a program may be a key part of supporting positive outcomes.(2)

There needs to be a sense of trust and safety before young people will talk openly about their difficulties within school-based mental health programs.(9) This should be supported by a school culture that values student voice and universal openness about mental health.

The Australian Student Wellbeing Framework emphasises the importance of authentic student participation, as well as involvement of school staff and families, in school-based wellbeing support.(10) As research on student voice grows, education and mental health sectors will benefit from strengthened evidence for youth participation in developing school-based mental health initiatives, as well as how best to build student leadership capacity in this area.(11, 12)

"Society is evolving and so is the need for programs developed for young people by young people. Until people acknowledge and see the importance of working with young people, the programs will not have near as much impact or positive outcomes as they should."

BRIDGET MOORE, ORYGEN YOUTH ADVISORY COUNCIL MEMBER

THE IMPORTANCE OF INCLUSIVENESS

It is important to ensure not only that student voice is represented in school-based mental health programs, but that it is comprehensively and inclusively represented, and that everyone who is affected by a program can have some ownership in it. There is no prototypical 'student'. Students are a diverse group of people, each with their own mix of collective and unique challenges and life experiences. If it is to be meaningfully implemented, student voice needs to be as representative and inclusive as possible.

Students from diverse backgrounds, such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, culturally and linguistically diverse and LGBTIQ+ identities face a range of barriers to seeking help for their mental health and have unique mental healthcare needs, and these should be represented in the programs aimed at helping them.(1) For further information about these barriers and needs, refer to Orygen's toolkit: Implementing school-based mental health prevention programs.

For this reason, decisions about program design, delivery and implementation need to be made with input from a representative range of voices to ensure the needs of diverse experiences are considered. This ensures cultural sensitivity and safety, and will lead to improved engagement and outcomes.

HOW SHOULD STUDENT VOICE BE INCLUDED IN SCHOOL-BASED MENTAL HEALTH PROGRAMS?

The keys to successfully and meaningfully involving student voice in school-based mental health programs are flexibility, open-mindedness and respect. It requires careful planning and ongoing balance to be maintained between the requirements of students and other stakeholders such as funders. It is important to be prepared for, and responsive to this.(3, 5, 13)

"We all need to work together to create programs and appropriate services within the school community. Young people have a lot to give - experiences and expertise that are invaluable. Schools need to create an environment where all voices are valued, heard and understood. It has to be a team not a hierarchy."

BRIDGET MOORE, ORYGEN YOUTH ADVISORY COUNCIL MEMBER

KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR INCORPORATING STUDENT VOICE

TIP Plan for sufficient budget and timelines. This will allow for attrition and reuptake by student consultants, as well as for thoughtful and meaningful (rather than tokenistic) incorporation of advice.

TIP Before designing a program for students, take the time to invest in partnerships with schools and student groups. This may substantially improve student participation.

TIP Be aware that there is no prototypical 'young person'; young people vary widely in terms of their demographics, knowledge, skills and life experiences. Involve a representative sample of student consultants, ensuring a voice for all students in the target population (e.g. age-diverse, LGBTIQ+, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, and culturally and linguistically diverse students). Also, ensure the consultations themselves are delivered in a culturally safe manner and allow adequate resources for things like interpreters to ensure that all students have equal opportunity to meaningfully contribute. This makes the program more likely to benefit the entire target population, and is likely to increase cultural sensitivity, general acceptability and program participation.

TIP Be transparent and realistic with student participation expectations, and ensure goals are concrete, meaningful and achievable. This will allow students to form a clear idea of what is expected of them and may lead to better overall outcomes.

TIP Ensure that students are involved in every step of program development, rollout and evaluation. Rather than involving students at a few key points or in a few focus groups, involve them at every step of the process to allow the program to evolve and remain relevant and effective for the students using it. This improves program quality and positive outcomes for both student consultants and students undertaking the program.

TIP Be prepared to listen to, understand and meaningfully respond to students' expectations of the participation process. As well as fostering an environment of mutual respect, this can increase student investment in their participation and the quality of the results.

TIP Ensure that efforts to involve student voice are genuine and not tokenistic. Foster a sense of ownership over the program in student consultants, and plan for students to have decision-making roles in the process. Ensure that students are rewarded for their time where appropriate and are praised for their contributions. This will allow students to feel that their voice is truly valued and is likely to engender a sense of trust and enthusiasm for the program. This may make participation more likely and meaningful.

TIP Plan for an iterative process. Allow for evaluation and reflection, and be prepared to meaningfully incorporate feedback from students at every step. This will ensure that all important feedback is captured and meaningfully incorporated and is likely to lead to much better programs and outcomes.

TIP Allow for flexible models of student engagement that will account for non-attendance, unreliability and attrition. This may mean having to do things like using an ongoing recruitment model, and leaving space for contributions and changes to be accepted into the program design at any point in the process. Be aware that this will often require flexibility in project timelines. This will reduce the barriers that students may face when trying to balance program participation with things like changing school workload and mental health and life challenges, and will ensure that a range of student voices is captured.

TIP Be flexible in how consultation takes place. This may mean being flexible with meeting times, content, and modalities (e.g. online, via telephone, via email, etc.), and doing simple things like providing students with public transport tickets. This will create a safe space for student participation and is likely to increase participation and investment.

FURTHER INFORMATION

More information on collaborating with young people can be found in the Orygen resources: Co-designing with young people, and Youth partnerships in research.

RELATED RESOURCES

Evidence summary, A review of secondary school-based mental health prevention programs

Toolkit, Implementing school-based mental health prevention programs

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