



WISDOM
Research Network

NIHR | Oxford Health Biomedical
Research Centre

Spring Term 2025 Newsletter

ISSUE 2

Welcome to the SPRING 2025 newsletter of the WISDOM Research Network!

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Our Termly Newsletters include:

WISDOM Network Updates

From Beyond the Network

For example:

- Updates from schools
- Interviews with experts
- Spotlight on CYP mental health issues

Research Opportunities for Schools

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Please get in touch!

We welcome input from schools to understand better what you'd like to read about here going forwards.



Working In Schools to Deliver On Mental Health



WISDOM: Network Updates

Exploring Character Strengths in Autistic Children and Young People: Changing the Narrative and Embracing Neurodiversity

We know that the prevailing narrative around Autism can sometimes be very deficit focused, which in turn can negatively impact autistic young people's self-identity, increase their propensity to mask and hide their autistic traits, all of which can have negative long-term consequences for their mental health outcomes.

In our study, we embrace a strengths-based model that recognises everyone has strengths and abilities, and it is important for key stakeholders around the autistic young person to take responsibility in changing the narrative towards a model that truly embraces Neurodiversity.

One strengths framework that acknowledges everyone has potential and celebrates individual differences is the Character Strengths Framework. Stemming from Positive Psychology that evaluates what builds resilience and maintains wellbeing, the Character Strengths Framework describes 24 qualities (e.g., Love, Humour, Creativity, Humility) that transcend time and culture to describe core values we all hold as human beings.

To date, research in Character Strengths in Autism has remained limited. In our research, we focus on working with autistic young people, their families, teachers, and clinicians to:

- Build awareness of young people's Character Strengths profile through standardised assessments and personal reflections
- Explore the unique ways that autistic young people embody different Character Strengths in their everyday life, taking moments to notice and celebrate individual strengths at play.
- Creating opportunities in the environment to support autistic young people to apply their Character Strengths and build positive self-esteem.

In our research, we are inviting both autistic and non-autistic young people aged 12-15 years old and their parents/carers to understand how young people make use of their Character Strengths in everyday life.

[Learn more or express an interest in participating HERE](#)

We deliver **BESPOKE WORKSHOP TRAINING SESSIONS** to support schools, mental health workers, and parent/carer groups to better understand how to support autistic young people through Character Strengths.

If your school is interested to find our more details please email Dr. Jiedi Lei at: jiedi.lei@psych.ox.ac.uk.

"Our young people have many strengths. To celebrate this and help them to recognise to build their self-esteem."
Parent of autistic Young Person

"I enjoyed that it was a very positivity-focused workshop. We are very good at seeing and addressing negatives so it was nice to recognise the positives and learn how to best use these for ourselves and for others."
Mental Health Professional

We are deeply grateful for the time and effort contributed by our Youth and Carer and Parent Advisory Groups and community stakeholder partners to help us shape our research and workshops. We remain committed to using this information to change the narrative around Autism, embrace Neurodiversity and celebrate strengths and individual differences!

"Now that I've seen the list [of Character Strengths], if I do something, it could be like 'oh, that was my creativity showing or maybe that here is where I need to use more of perseverance that I know I've got this, maybe here I need to use more honesty, maybe here I need to use less kindness', that sort of thing."
Autistic Young Person

"When situations at school happen, we come home or on the way home we talk about them, we can talk about 'ok what happened today but...' we can then maybe say 'but what strengths did you use for that, or what strengths could you have used or what have you got out of that?'"

Parent of autistic young person

From Beyond the Network

Eating Disorder Awareness in Schools

This year's theme for Eating Disorder Awareness Week (24th February - 2nd March) is Anyone Can Be Affected by an Eating Disorder.

Eating disorders are serious mental health conditions that can affect people of all ages, genders, ethnicities, classes, body shapes, and sizes. While there are many reasons someone might develop an eating disorder, disordered eating behaviours are often used to cope with difficult emotions and situations. Early identification of eating disorder symptoms is crucial in helping young people and their families access timely, evidence-based treatment, leading to better recovery rates and overall well-being.

What to look out for

- **Changes in appearance or clothing:** Have they lost or gained weight? Is their uniform noticeably baggier or tighter than usual?
- **Changes in eating habits:** Are they eating alone, skipping meals, avoiding lunch areas, or restricting certain food groups?
- **Physical complaints:** Do they report feeling faint, dizzy, fatigued, constipated, bloated or cold hands? Have they mentioned trouble with hair loss, sleeping or losing their period? Does their face appear swollen?
- **Behaviour around the bathroom or mirrors:** Have they been using the bathroom more frequently, possibly to make themselves sick or due to drinking excessive amounts of water. Do they frequently check their appearance in mirrors?
- **Changes in activity levels:** Are they exercising more during lunch or break times? Do they seem restless, often standing up or walking around?
- **Increased focus on body or food:** Are they talking more about their body, appearance, or food?
- **Social withdrawal:** Are they isolating themselves from friends?
- **Academic impact:** Do they appear to struggle to concentrate? Are their grades slipping? Are they missing more school than usual?
- **Concerns from others:** Are other people expressing concern about this young person?

What to do next

- **If you notice signs of an eating disorder, share your concerns with your line manager and relevant staff on a 'need to know' basis.**
- **Address concerns directly with the young person:** do not be surprised or deterred if the problem is denied – be vigilant and monitor the situation.
- **Check if the young person's parents are aware and if they've arranged a GP visit.** If not, ask if the young person can inform them or if you can help. The school health nurse can assist if needed.
- **Be aware of the need for confidentiality and the situations in which it may be overridden.** Parents should be informed at an early stage.
- **The family should be encouraged to take the young person to the GP for a medical check-up.** The check up with the GP may also lead to referral to mental health services. School nurses are also able to make a referral to CAMHS.
- **If parents deny the issue, remain curious about their reasons, consult the local policy and discuss with the relevant care team within the school.**
- **The Access and Waiting Time Standard for Children and Young People with Eating Disorders (1) requires treatment to begin within 4 weeks for routine cases and 1 week for urgent cases,** after first contact with a healthcare professional.

Ideas of what to say

"You can speak to me confidentially, but the school is responsible for keeping your parent(s) informed about serious issues"

"I have noticed that you have not been quite yourself recently, is there a problem? You seem to be very sad/unhappy this term."

"Would it help if I spoke to your parents, or if we did it together? Or, would you like me to write to them?"

"Could we ask your parents to come into school? Would you like to be with us when we talk to them?"

What NOT to say

"You look as though you have put on weight", "You look well" or "you look better" can be misinterpreted as "you look fatter"

Do not comment on the amount or type of food being eaten. Comments such as "You have eaten all your food, well done" are unlikely to be taken as encouragement

It is generally best to avoid any comments about eating, weight or shape.

For more information on eating disorders and training for school professionals, visit [Beat](#) or consult your local CAMHS team.

This resource has been written by the Oxford Child and Adolescent Eating Disorder Service, under the guidance of Dr. Jasmin White, Clinical Psychologist.

Research Opportunities

Age Group	Research Title	Page No.
Primary & Secondary 6th Form Colleges Further Education (Aged 8 - 18 years)	Understanding Grief and Social Relationships in Children and Young People	5
Secondary (Aged 12 - 15 years)	Supporting Autistic and Non-Autistic Young People and their Parent/Carer to Identify and Explore Signature Strengths: A Qualitative Study	6
Secondary (Aged 13 - 14 years)	Classroom Relationships and Mental Health	7
Secondary 6th Form Colleges Further Education (Aged 14 - 18 years)	Social Emotions Project (2 current studies: one in-person study and one remote)	8
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