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**Nearly half of parents say their child is experiencing mental health difficulties
– a third more than at the start of the pandemic**

**Parents feel they have been left fend for themselves
when it comes to their children’s mental health.**

- **Downloads of stem4’s NHS-approved mental health apps to manage the urge to self-harm, and symptoms of anxiety and depression have reached 650,000 since the start of the pandemic.**

As children and young people return to school, nearly half (45%) of parents say that at least one of their children is experiencing probable mental health difficulties – 32% more than at the start of the pandemic (45% compared to 34%). Only one in four parents of a child whose difficulties arose in the course of the pandemic can access the expert mental health treatment or other relevant support needed for the child’s recovery. These are the findings of a new survey by youth mental health charity stem4.

One in five parents now say that at least one of their children has symptoms of an anxiety disorder (19%); one in six (16%) specify depression; the figure is one in eight (12%) for a conduct disorder and the same for an eating disorder (12%). One in seven (14%) say they have witnessed at least one of their children showing signs of self-harm and suicidal behaviours since the start of the pandemic.

With mental ill health rising as a consequence of the pandemic’s devastating effect on the economy and families, parents whose child has developed mental health difficulties over the past 12 months are just half as likely to be able to access appropriate mental health treatment as parents whose child was suffering from a pre-existing mental health condition at the start of the pandemic (11% vs 34% with a pre-existing condition).

11% of parents report that their child has developed a mental health condition since the start of the pandemic. Less than a quarter (23%) of those parents say they have been able to access face-to-face or online counselling through the school or GP, and only 27% report that their child has been successfully referred for assessment and treatment to specialist NHS Children and Young People’s Mental Health Services (CAMHS). The comparable proportions for the 34% of parents whose children had a pre-existing mental health condition are that 48% have access to school and GP counselling and 58% for access to CAMHS. 5% of all parents say they have paid to see a private therapist in the past year, and 42% were left to search online for help.

Of the 700 parents surveyed, three out of four (77%) say that their child’s mental health has suffered negative effects of the pandemic over the past eight weeks. Parents say their children are experiencing friendship worries (30%), low self-esteem and confidence (27%), lack of motivation (31%), disengagement with schoolwork (37%), loneliness and withdrawal (14%), difficulty regulating behaviour (13%), and picky selective eating (9%).

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stem4’s own operational evidence supports the findings of this parents’ survey: that mental health difficulties have grown since the start of the pandemic in children and young people, and that young people are experiencing difficulty in accessing effective mental health treatments. Just 17% of stem4’s app users say they are receiving treatment.

stem4 has closely monitored the impact the pandemic is having on the mental health of teenagers. Dr Nihara Krause, Consultant Clinical Psychologist and CEO and Founder of stem4, has created a comprehensive range of digital tools and literature - translated into Bengali, Urdu, Turkish, Polish, Arabic and Lithuanian to help:

- Young people with their treatment and recovery from their mental health difficulties
- Family and friends supporting a young person with mental health difficulties
- Schools to provide mental health support promote understanding and awareness

Since the start of the pandemic, over 650,000 young people have downloaded and used stem4's evidence-based and NHS-approved mobile phone apps as they seek to overcome their urge to self-harm and to deal with anxiety and depression. Over the past two months **stem4** has recorded a 33% increase in the number young people downloading and accessing all of its apps:

- **Clear Fear**, which uses the evidence-based treatment Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) to help manage the symptoms of anxiety;
- **Calm Harm**, which uses the basic principles of an evidence-based therapy, Dialectic Behaviour Therapy (DBT) to help manage the urge to self-harm;
- **Combined Minds**, which uses a Strengths-Based approach that has been shown to be effective in recovery, providing practical strategies for families and friends to support teenage mental health;
- **Move Mood**, which uses Behavioural Activation Therapy to help improve low mood and manage the symptoms of depression.

Helping parents so they are not left to fend for themselves

Many parents (72%) say they feel ill-equipped to deal with their child or young person's mental health difficulties. With such limited referral pathways available, most parents say they are being left to fend for themselves.

To help parents create a network of support for young people facing mental health challenges, stem4's phone app **Combined Minds** uses a Strengths-Based approach, prompting people around a young person to effect their own change. When a teenager or young person has a diagnosed mental health condition, families and friends want to support them in the best way they can, but they also need to know when to step back. Combined Minds helps families and friends to provide a positive impact on their loved one's mental health. by focusing on their own and the young person's positive attributes to build up resourcefulness and resilience, which has been shown to aid recovery from mental health difficulties.

The app provides helpful information, strategies, and practical advice to tackle a range of commonly occurring mental health difficulties, including anxiety, depression, self-harm, eating disorders and addiction.

Dr Nihara Krause, Consultant Clinical Psychologist, founder of stem 4, and creator of apps Calm Harm, Clear Fear, Combined Minds, and Move Mood says:

"In July 2020 NHS Digital found that one in six 5-16-year-olds had a probable mental disorder, an increase of a third in three years – from one in nine in 2017. 400 teachers told stem4 in December that five students in a class of 22 (one in five) were experiencing mental health difficulties – an increase of 20% in just ten months – and that referrals to CAMHS were being routinely rejected. And this survey now finds that parents are reporting mental health distress in their children on an unprecedented scale.

“With children and young people now returning to school, for many it will provide the social interactions and environment needed to achieve positive mental health and wellbeing. But as our surveys show, many children and young people will need expert specialist support, and parents and teachers tell us that they don't have the skills, resources, or access to the services needed.

“Stem4 welcomes the government's commitment to investing an extra £79 million for improving whole school mental health approaches. But to prevent further impact on specialist CAMHS services, which are already stretched in supporting young people with pre-existing mental ill health issues, we first need to urgently focus on what kind of mental health support children and young people affected by the pandemic are more likely to need.

The evidence should dictate whether that's a shift from the 2017 Government Green Paper on School Based Mental Health Teams (SBMHT) provision to more community crisis support, or an acceleration of the SBMHT strategy, moving it from the current pilot stage to extend its reach.”

NOTES TO EDITORS

Contact

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References

1. UK general population survey of 2,000 adults, including 800 parents with children aged between 5 and 19 years of age, carried out by Survey Goo between 15 and 20 February 2021

About stem4

stem4 is a Wimbledon-based, award-winning charity that supports teenage mental health through mental health promotion. It provides evidence-based mental health education, builds resilience, enhances motivation to change and signposts the way to early intervention. **stem4** focuses on commonly occurring mental health issues in teenagers, including eating disorders, anxiety, depression, self-harm and addiction. The charity works with students, parents and teachers in secondary schools, and with health professionals such as GPs and school nurses through its conference programme and through digitally delivered workshops suitable for PHSE in schools. **stem4** is also included in the Royal College of GP toolkit.