



Too Much Too Soon?

The Emotional and Mental Health Issues of the UK's High Learning Potential Children

Potential Plus UK

July 2015

Acknowledgements

Potential Plus UK (the operating name of The National Association for Gifted Children) would like to thank those children and their families who participated directly in our research in 2010 and in 2015. We would also like to thank all those who indirectly contributed to providing evidence for this evaluation through the hundreds of telephone calls taken on our Helpline and through our Webchat service; through the many discussions at our Family Weekend events and through the closed Facebook group (Parenting High Potential) we run, as well as through the evidence provided through our assessment service. Their contributions have been vital in building up a picture of the issues facing high learning potential children in the UK today.

We would also like to thank Esme Chapman, the student intern who carried out all of the desk research in 2010 and without whom this research could not have been started.

All of the information provided in this report has been given on a confidential basis and following Potential Plus UK's ethical research policy. Where there has been a risk of identifying a particular child or parent/carer, any identifying factors have been changed to preserve anonymity. However, ultimately Potential Plus UK is responsible for any reporting errors contained in the document.

**Potential Plus UK
Challenge House
Sherwood Drive
Bletchley
Milton Keynes
MK3 6DP**

Tel: 01908 646433

Email: amazingchildren@potentialplusuk.org

Website: www.potentialplusuk.org

Charity Number: 313182

Executive Summary

The number of children with emotional and mental health issues is increasing. Potential Plus UK believes that many of these cases are amongst children with high learning potential, particularly those who find it difficult to cope with:

- increased stress levels exacerbated by their perfectionist traits
- isolation and loneliness caused by lack of friends and understanding within the classroom and beyond
- rigid structures within some school environments, which do not address their needs.

Using surveys of children and parents conducted in 2010 and 2015, along with discussions held with hundreds of parents/carers and teachers whose children or pupils had some kind of emotional or mental health issue, our research sought to explore:

- i) whether there were any differences between 2010 and 2015 in terms of experiences, as identified by the children themselves
- ii) whether there were any differences in the age these issues were first recorded by the children (and by the parents) between 2010 and 2015
- iii) whether there were any differences between 2010 and 2015 between boys and girls
- iv) whether there were any differences between those who had been identified as 'gifted' or not. We recognised the limitations of this particular approach at the time (i.e. just because the child hadn't been formally identified as having high learning potential it didn't mean that they didn't have high learning potential). Notwithstanding, we have reported any significant differences between the two groups in the report
- v) the views of parents and carers both in terms of the issues facing their children with high learning potential and their solutions for tackling this problem in the UK
- vi) the recommendations we would make to turn our findings into future policy and practice.

We presented our early findings at the World Conference for Gifted and Talented Children at Odense in Denmark in August 2015. Our aim is to seek further discussion about the way forward for our research and recommendations in order to turn these results into future policy and practice which improves the support provided to high learning potential children with emotional and mental health issues.

Our conclusion is that children in general are becoming more stressed in the UK. A key contributing factor in this is increased pressure from within the school system. This is occurring for a combination of reasons, including the growing emphasis on attainment and progress, sometimes at the expense of a holistic approach towards learning which takes into account the social and emotional needs of children. Whilst many children at all ends of the spectrum face mental health issues as a result of this increased pressure, a child with high learning potential, can be more vulnerable because of:

- **their high levels of perfectionism**, which can impact on their sense of self-worth and self-confidence. An environment that recognises the impact of perfectionism and actively nurtures a perfectionist child's resilience, whilst at the same time encouraging them to take risks and to be stretched and challenged, is extremely important for these children. In an environment which does not work to support any of these things, it can lead to a number of problems.

- **their sense of isolation.** Children with high learning potential, by their very nature, may not have the opportunity to develop friendships within their class of children with the same 'quirkiness' or who are 'on the same wavelength'. Time and time again, parents and carers accessing Potential Plus UK's services are amazed to find that their children – and they- are not alone. Being the only one in a class, year group or even school means that many of these children stand out. They can become victims of bullying, ostracised or isolated with no friends with whom to share issues or act as a 'reference point' on some of the feelings and incidents of growing up and as a result they can suffer.

*“As Mum drops me off she looks at me and says,
“Robert, will you try something for me today?”
“Okay,” I say, checking that I’ve packed my maths set. “What?”
“Just don’t put your hand up so much,” she says.” Mrs Ashcroft says you
might be getting picked on because you always put your hand up and
always know the answers and she thinks it might look like showing off.”
I look at her, confused. “What do you mean? They always beg me to
do their homework,” I say. “They nick my books at break. They want
the answers off me.” Mum sighs. “Just keep your hand down. Just
try it, today.”*

Interview with 'Robert' from 'Being Me', Potential Plus UK's anti-bullying leaflet

Both of these issues must be addressed as a matter of national priority in the UK.

Summary of recommendations.

- A national programme should be developed specifically for high learning potential children to help improve their understanding about, and resilience for, being a high learning potential child in today's world. This should be piloted in one Local Authority area or federation of schools and the results evaluated area.**
- A guide should be put together and shared across schools, local authorities and other bodies to ensure that all those with a vested interest in supporting these children benefit from the many excellent initiatives which exist.**
- More support should be given to parents and carers in the form of an increased Information and Advice Service (such as Potential Plus UK's Helpline) supplemented by face to face workshops and parenting programmes and distance learning programmes and webinars.**
- A bottom-up approach to family support should be encouraged wherever possible and good practice shared to ensure that families of children with high learning potential benefit from sharing experiences and learning from each other. Potential Plus UK should build on its successful track record in this area and seek to increase the volumes accessing such networks.**
- Specific support should be provided for families who are home educating to help remove any barriers to learning for their child. This should include the development of hybrid models of learning using a combination of different methods of learning.**

- vi) **There should be a greater understanding amongst parents/carers, health professionals and schools about the needs of children with high learning potential who have emotional and/or mental health problems and, wherever possible, partnerships based mutual trust and understanding between all those involved these children's emotional health and wellbeing. In particular, all local Child Adolescent and Mental Health Services (CAMHS) should have access to good practice advice to enable them to understand and support children with high learning potential.**
- vii) **A training programme for teachers and other professionals in school should be implemented either within schools or during initial training to ensure that all aspects of high learning potential which can impact on these children's emotional and mental health are clearly understood and the skills developed to support them. A whole school approach should be piloted within a number of schools or through a teaching school.**
- viii) **Specific changes to the school system should be considered such as introducing into the league tables the assessment of the emotional health and wellbeing of a school and the impact on its pupils.**
- ix) **Further research should be conducted on the emotional and mental health of the UK's population of children and young people with high learning potential and a database created to share good practice both nationally and internationally in this area.**

“ My son told us that he wanted to commit suicide things had got so bad. We know that he self harms; he says it is a release from what he is feeling when the pressure builds up. We feel useless as parents as we just don't know what to do. Please help.”

Parent of child, aged 8.

The Mental Health of Children and Adolescents in the UK

According to the children's mental health charity, Young Minds (using the latest ONS Child and Mental Health Survey 2004):

- 9.6% or almost 850,000 children and young people in UK aged between 5-16 years old have a mental health disorder
- 3.3% or approximately 290,000 children and young people have an anxiety disorder
- 0.9% of children or about 80,000 children and young people are seriously depressed
- 5.8% or just over 510,000 children and young people have a conduct disorder

In the recently published 'Promoting children and young people's emotional health and wellbeing: a whole school and college approach' produced by Public Health England and the Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition, it states that in an average class of 30 15-year-old pupils:

- 3 could have a mental disorder
- 7 are likely to have been bullied
- 6 may be self-harming.

Concern about the growing number of children and young people in the UK with emotional and mental health problems is growing. It has now reached the public's attention, particularly after a number of recent high profile suicides or suicide attempts by children and young people.

There is reason to believe that many of these children and young people may have high learning potential (the term Potential Plus UK prefers for 'gifted and talented' or 'more able' within school environments). Certainly, Potential Plus UK's experience with children and young people with high learning potential and their parents and carers suggests that an increasing number of these children are experiencing more severe mental health issues (including self-harm, eating disorders and depression) the impact of which includes underachievement, self-exclusion from school and a range of professional mental health interventions.

We have been concerned about the scale of this potential epidemic for some time. In the last five years in particular we believe that we have started to see an increase in the number of more serious cases coming to us from parents (and also sometimes from older children and schools) and also an increased number of more serious cases coming to us at a younger age.

This report outlines our early findings from the research we have conducted amongst children and young people as well as their parents and carers in the hope that we can suggest a way forward for those whose lives are affected by these issues and effect real changes to policy and practice in this area in the United Kingdom.

It makes grim reading.

"My daughter had an appointment at the hospital but got very distressed and ran away. She won't go to any professionals and is now so anxious that she refuses to go to school. I'm desperate and don't know what to do. I feel so alone."

Parent of child, aged 8.

Results of the Research

1. Background to the research

i) About Potential Plus UK

Potential Plus UK (formerly known as The National Association for Gifted Children) is a UK charity which was established in 1967 to support the social, emotional and learning needs of children with high learning potential (the term we prefer to 'gifted and talented' and which we sometimes shorten to HLP). We do this by supporting the children and young people themselves, their parents and carers and the professionals who work with them. Our aim is to ensure that the potential of every HLP child is recognised and nurtured so that they thrive and achieve personal success.

Within this broader aim, we specifically support 6 groups of children and young people; those who:

- need more stretch and challenge in their learning
- are underachieving, for a variety of reasons
- might have social, emotional or other issues
- are Dual or Multiple Exceptional (also called Twice Exceptional in some parts of the world) where they have a special need or learning difficulty as well as high learning potential
- are from disadvantaged families where one or more factors (such as income levels) can prevent a realisation of the child's potential
- are profoundly gifted.

Whilst membership of each group may not be mutually exclusive, we work hard through the services we offer and through our holistic approach to try and remove or reduce any barriers to a child maximising his or her potential and thriving.

ii) Potential Plus UK's 2010 study

Although we have always supported families experiencing issues at home or at school, over the past few years, staff at Potential Plus UK have felt that we have been seeing more and more difficult cases, as well as cases where the child is younger than ever before.

We wanted to test whether this view had validity or whether we were merely a focus for these issues given the nature of our work. Therefore, in 2010 we commissioned some desk research to answer one simple question:

“Are gifted youth at greater risk of developing mental health disorders than their non-gifted peers?”

The desk research was conducted by Esme Chapman, an intern who came to work with us from Cambridge University.

Chapman identified the all too common misconception that gifted children will, with little or no help, sail effortlessly through the education system, achieve exemplary exam results and continue to progress through life comfortably and successfully. In doing so, they will supposedly remain elusively unaffected by the mental health disorders which burden approximately 10% of young people (Green et al, 2005).

In her summary, Chapman wrote:

“Having reviewed current literature related to mental health in gifted individuals, this report supports Peterson’s assertion (2009, pp 280) that “collectively, research findings have not concluded that gifted individuals are more or less likely than others to have mental health concerns.”. There is currently insufficient evidence to conclusively support the experiences of those who live and work with gifted children, who believe that this unique group is at increased risk of mental ill health.

However, it can be surmised with some certainty that whilst the risk of developing mental health disorders may not be evidenced as elevated in gifted youth, they are at least as susceptible as their average ability peers. This is a notion which has been difficult to establish for a long time due to the unrepresentative findings of Terman and colleagues. Terman’s work first emerged in the 1920s and for a long time remained the only source of information regarding the social and emotional health of gifted youth. This report highlights that since these early studies, there have been a great number of more representative studies concerning the mental health of gifted youth. Many of these studies do not support the early suggestion of Terman and colleagues that by their nature, gifted children are both physically and emotionally healthier than their peers.

In particular, the likely association between perfectionistic tendencies in gifted youth and the development of eating disorders requires special consideration. Whilst there is at present only partial support for a direct correlation between the two (Blanz et al, 1997), the situation must be considered with seriousness and more research conducted.

In the case of depression, there is currently evidence to support both the view that gifted children are at greater risk, and the contrary view that they are at reduced risk due to enhanced social adjustment. Whilst more research is clearly required in this contentious area, it remains the observation and belief of many involved with gifted children that they are inherently predisposed to detrimental experiences of anxiety and depression. Such qualitative, observational evidence should not be disregarded. Instead it should be considered as a reliable reflection of the personal experiences of gifted children, and accordingly utilised for the improved provision of appropriate educational programmes.

Regardless of whether it can be conclusively determined that the gifted cohort are at increased vulnerability to mental health disorders, what is clear is that the unique needs of this group must be assessed and met to mitigate any potential risk, no matter how small. Only then will it be possible to truly unlock the great potential which these gifted children have to offer. It seems that appropriate academic challenge, avoidance of educational and social ostracism in school, and participation in extra-curricular activities for the gifted are vital in ensuring that these amazing children are able to access the “meaningful spiritual, emotional and intellectual exchange” (Peterson, 2004; pp 179) which they both crave and wholly deserve.”

Chapman’s findings helped to lay the foundations for this report.

iii) Methodology for this research

This research results from surveys involving 338 children and parents conducted over a six year period. Two surveys were conducted in 2010. The first of these involved 91 children aged between four and sixteen years old. The second survey had 179 responses from children aged between two

and sixteen years old. This work was followed up by a further two surveys in 2015, the first of children aged four and sixteen which had twenty eight responses and the second a survey of parents and carers of such children which had forty responses. This latter survey was further supplemented by hundreds of discussions with parents and carers contacting our Helpline and Webchat services as well as discussions about emotional and mental health issues at our family events.

We believe that this is one of the most comprehensive surveys of these issues amongst children and young people with high learning potential, certainly in the United Kingdom.

The first piece of research carried out in 2010 amongst the young people themselves (with their parents' permission) was entitled 'What does it feel like to be you?' Although it was never published, this provided a valuable insight into how the children and young people were feeling in themselves over a short period of time (one week). We decided on this simple approach to explore in more detail whether children were experiencing feelings of isolation, depression and anxiety, particularly relating to perfectionism.

The second survey of children carried out in 2010 (again with parents' permission) was entitled 'Measuring Personality Traits'. This survey allowed children and young people to measure how they felt about certain issues provided in the form of statements on a five point scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Again the results of this survey were not published at the time and some of its results have been used in this report, where appropriate.

Over the past six years, we have also been collecting case studies from parents who were concerned about their child's emotional and mental health. We have also assessed a number of children at our centre in the UK whose parents had mentioned, or who we have recognised, were at risk of emotional or mental health problems. Finally, at our Family Weekend events (regularly involving over three hundred children and parents) we have held discussion sessions to obtain the views and experiences of parents and carers on these issues.

In June 2015, we decided to supplement this research by duplicating the original children's survey (minus the 'Measuring Personality Traits' questionnaire), as well as sending out a questionnaire to parents. It must be noted that the parent responses and those of the children are entirely separate and so the experiences highlighted cannot be compared with each other.

The results of the surveys conducted or the comparisons made are not claiming to be statistically significant. The sample sizes are too small for that (270 children and young people in 2010 and 28 children and 40 parents in 2015). Nor are they necessarily the same children filling in the questionnaires in 2010 and 2015; that was not the objective of the research. These are two snapshots of different sets of children, most of whom have high learning potential in the UK at two (largely the same) moments in time in 2010 and 2015.

iv) The aims of this study

Our specific objectives of this research were to explore:

- i) whether there were any differences between 2010 and 2015 in terms of experiences, as identified by the children themselves

- ii) whether there were any differences in the age these issues were first recorded by the children (and by the parents) between 2010 and 2015
- iii) whether there were any differences between 2010 and 2015 between boys and girls
- iv) whether there were any differences between those who had been identified as 'gifted' or not. We recognised the limitations of this particular approach at the time (i.e. just because the child hadn't been formally identified as having high learning potential it didn't mean that they didn't have high learning potential). Notwithstanding, we have reported any significant differences between the two groups in the report
- v) the views of parents and carers both in terms of the issues facing their children with high learning potential and their solutions for tackling this problem in the UK
- vi) the recommendations we would make to turn our findings into future policy and practice.

We presented our early findings at the World Conference for Gifted and Talented Children at Odense in Denmark in August 2015. Our aim is to seek further discussion about the way forward for our research and recommendations in order to turn these results into future policy and practice which improves the support provided to high learning potential children with emotional and mental health issues.

2. Summary of key findings from the children's research

i) Age of reporting emotional and/or mental health-like issues

2010

In 2010 the youngest child completing the questionnaire reporting how they felt was four years old. This is feasible as the questionnaire was simple to complete and many of our children are highly computer literate. Five four year olds completed the questionnaire and in most respects they had fairly positive experiences of life. Areas in 2010 causing the most concern for them were:

Friendships

- 60% of the four-year-olds completing the survey said they had had no fun at all playing with friends the previous week.
- 100% said that they felt as if other children they knew weren't friendly or didn't want to be with them.
- 100% said that people didn't like them.

Tiredness

- 100% of the four year-olds said that they had been tired a lot of the time the previous week.
- 100% felt they had been quieter than usual during the previous week.

By contrast, the oldest young people completing the survey in 2015 were 16, all of whom were girls and all of whom had been identified as having high learning potential. Although there were only two of them in the sample, so we cannot do anything but note the results, both of them felt that they:

- were not as good as other children their age;
- were not at all excited about anything they were going to do in the future;
- had not slept a lot in the last week;
- had done nothing they were interested in in the last week;
- had cried a lot in the last week.

These results certainly correspond with Potential Plus UK's own experiences from parents/carers on the Helpline where we are hearing about a greater number of young people, mostly but not exclusively girls who:

- are highly perfectionist;
- fear failure;
- are stressed about their home/school life;
- are demotivated.

Some of these end up as 'school refusers' or 'self-excluders' and further work needs to be done both to investigate how widespread this issue is in the UK in 2015 and to support these children to ensure they thrive.

“Whenever she is stressed or anxious she stops eating. Homework is bad enough as she spends hour and hours trying to make it perfect. She gets so upset when she gets something wrong. I am really worried about exam time, if she hasn't left school by then.”

Parent of child, aged 13.

2015

We cannot provide a direct comparison in 2015 with the children in 2010. This was an opportunity sample and the youngest children completing the questionnaire in 2015 were six years old. Only three children who were six years old completed the survey. Areas in 2015 which were causing these children the most concern were:

Friendships

- 100% of the six-year-olds completing the survey felt they had had no fun playing with friends during the previous week.
- 66% felt that their peers were not friendly or didn't want to be with them.
- 100% of the children felt that people didn't like them.

Perfectionism/sadness

- None of the children felt they were as good as other children.

- None of the children felt there was anything to look forward to in the future.
- 66% (two thirds) felt that something they had done before hadn't turned out right in the past week..
- All of the girls had felt sad a lot during the previous week.

The oldest children filling in the questionnaire in 2015 were 11/12 and there were three of these children.

The issues they reported which concerned them were:

Friendships

- 100% felt they had no fun playing with friends during the previous week.

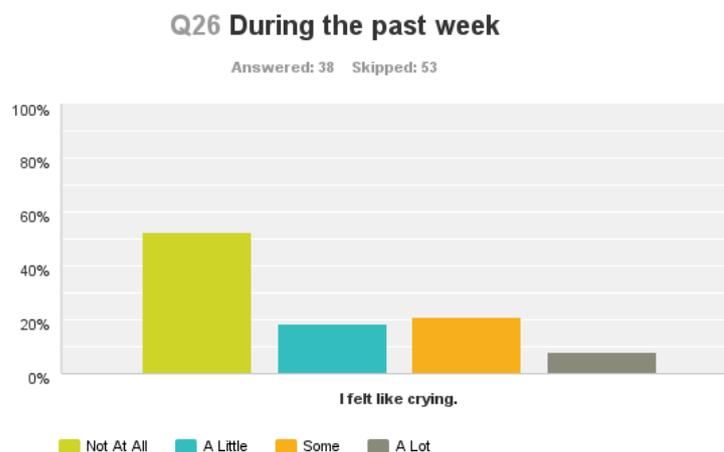
Anxiety/sadness

- 67% (two thirds) felt sad a lot in the previous week.
- 67% felt like crying a lot.
- 67% were bothered a lot by things.

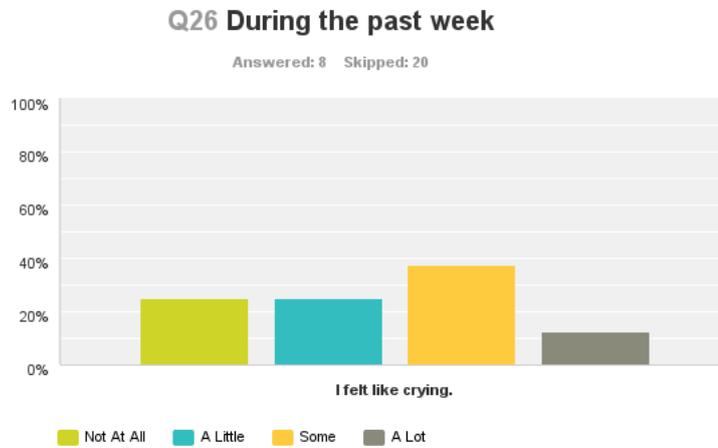
ii) A comparison of different children in 2010 and 2015

Anxiety/worry/sadness/anger

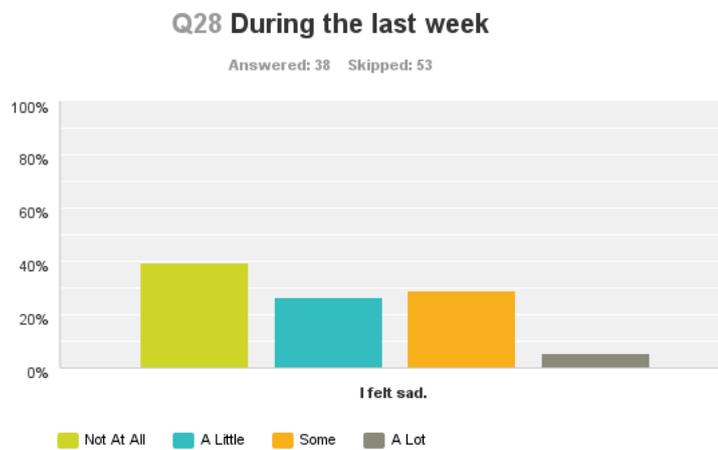
Children in 2010 – “ I felt like crying.”



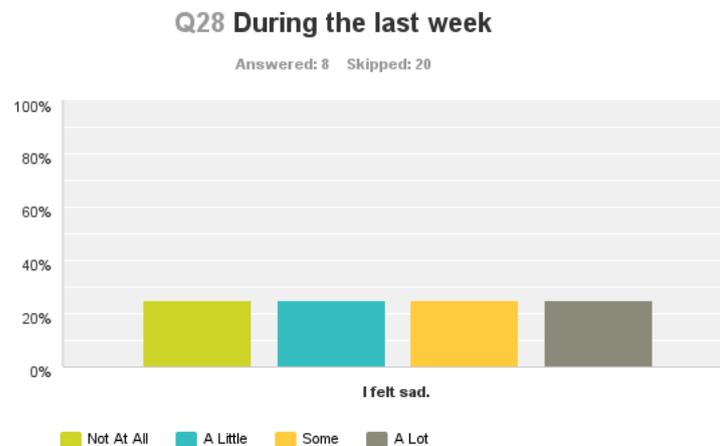
Children in 2015 – “I felt like crying.”



Children 2010 – “I felt sad.”



Children 2015 – “I felt sad.”



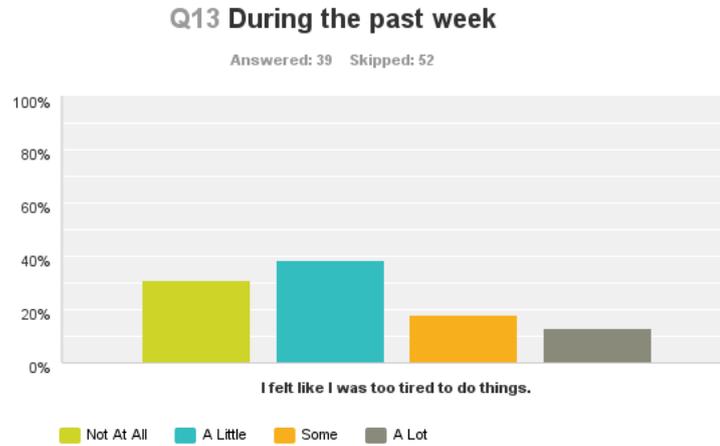
- In 2010, 7% of children were extremely bothered about things that in the past hadn't bothered them. By 2015, that figure had risen to 30%.
- For those children who had been identified as gifted, 8% were bothered by things a lot in 2010 rising to 22% in 2015.
- In 2010, during the previous week 8% of children had felt a lot like crying. By 2015 that figure had jumped to 13%. However, in 2010 53% of children had not at all felt like crying. By 2015, only 25% of children had not felt like crying at all.
- In terms of crying, boys had been particularly affected by this with no boys saying they had cried a lot in 2010 increasing to 33% saying they had cried a lot in the previous week in 2015.
- In 2010, 5% of the children interviewed had felt very sad the week before. By 2015, 25% of children had felt very sad. This was particularly prevalent for girls where 6% said they felt sad a lot in 2010 rising to 20% in 2015 (contrasted with 5% of boys who felt sad a lot in 2010 reducing to 0% in 2015).
- In 2010 6% of gifted children said they felt sad. By 2015 this had risen to 29% (no children who had not been identified felt such extremes of sadness).
- In 2010, 70% of boys said they were happy a lot. By 2015, that figure had reduced to 33%. By contrast, in 2010 56% of girls said they were happy a lot whilst in 2015 more than 71% said they were happy a lot.

“There was an annoying five year old and an eight year old who wouldn't leave me alone. I get annoyed very easily.”

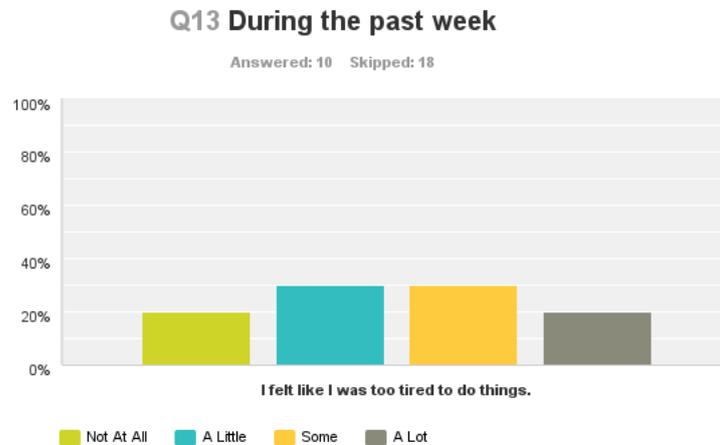
Child

Tiredness

Children's survey 2010 – "I felt too tired to do things."



Children's survey 2015 – "I felt too tired to do things."



- In 2010, 13% of children said that they felt too tired. By 2015, that figure had risen to 20%. This was particularly true for boys where 10% had said they were tired a lot in 2010 rising to 33% in 2015; whilst the corresponding figures for girls had reduced (in 2010 19% said they were tired a lot; 2015 14%).
- In 2010, 15% of children who had been identified as gifted said that they had been tired during the previous week. By 2015 this had risen to 22%. The number of gifted children saying that they were not tired at all fell from 34% to 23%. Four out of five children saying they were at all tired in 2015 is concerning to Potential Plus UK. Further work needs to be done to explore the potential reasons for this. Many would have us believe that it is because of the number of 'out of school' activities

children are doing. However, more often, on the Helpline, parents report that their child might be tired because of school itself.

“ He is a little angel at school, or so his teachers say. The problems arise when he leaves the school gates. He’s like a little pressure cooker. It seems to be like he has tried so hard to fit in at school that this pressure has to go somewhere, first in his behaviour at home and when that’s gone he is just extremely tired.”

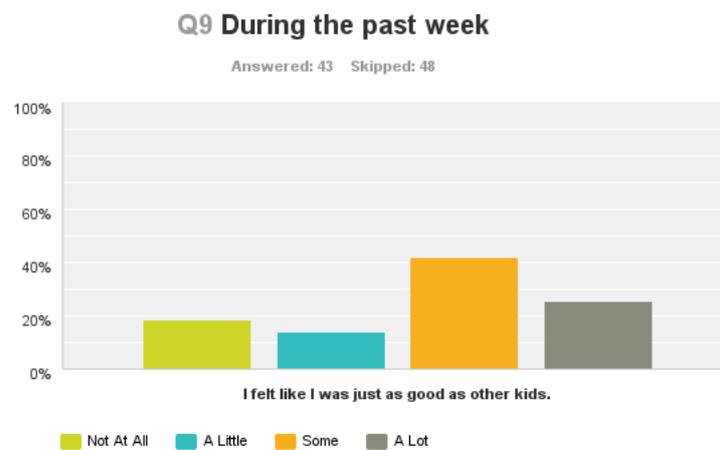
Parent

Views like this from parents are extremely common and could be the result of one or more factors, including:

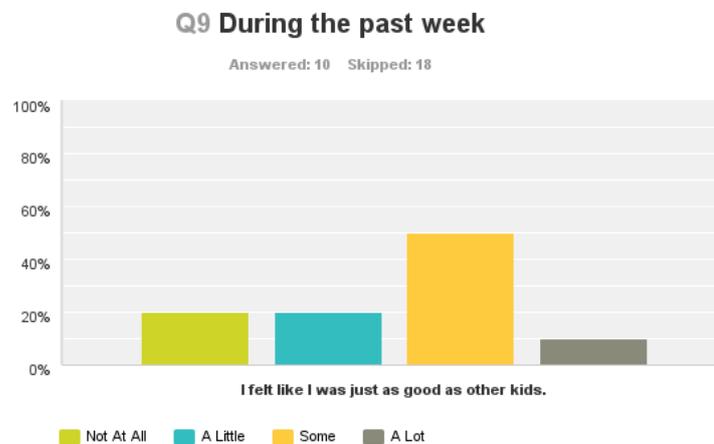
- the environment within which the child learns
- a poor fit between what the child needs and what the school is able to deliver
- individual issues relating to the child such as hypersensitivity.

Perfectionism

Children’s survey 2010 – “I felt just as good as other kids.”



Children's survey 2015 – "I felt just as good as other kids."



- In 2010, 24% of children said they felt they had done something really well the previous week. By 2015, that figure had dropped to 13%.
- Girls were particularly affected by this, up one percentage point from 19% of girls who felt they had not done anything at all well in the previous week in 2010 to 20% in 2015. 1 in 5 girls who felt like this is too high and needs to be addressed as a matter of priority.
- Even boys, who are often more optimistic, were affected by this with 16% saying they had done a lot of things really well in 2010 to none saying this in 2015.

Evidence of high levels of perfectionism, where the world is 'black and white' is further substantiated by the 'Measuring Personality Traits' research. In this, 29% of respondents said that they agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'If I do not set the highest standards for myself, I end up as a second rate person.'

"I try to do the best I can in all subjects but if I get one of the lowest levels in the class I feel like a complete and utter failure."

12 year old girl identified as gifted, 2010

In addition, almost 70% of respondents (69.23%) in the same survey agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'It is important to me that I am thoroughly competent in everything I do'.

Whilst almost 58% (57.69%) of children recognised that 'people seem to accept lower expectations of me than I do of myself', 27% said they felt strongly or extremely strongly that 'If I fail at school I am a failure as a person.'

Evidence from children and young people, parents/carers and sometimes the schools themselves is that many of these perfectionists, rather than being pushed by parents or encouraged by teachers, have an internal mechanism that drives their thirst for 'perfection'. When they cannot live up to their often impossibly high standards, this is when meltdown occurs.

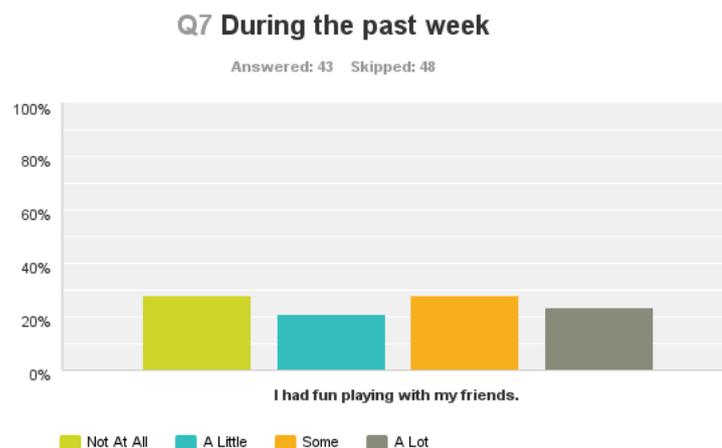
It is our belief that that an increased focus on outcomes achieved within a highly stressed environment of testing and re-testing and exams can fuel the increased stress of a perfectionist leading, in many cases, to emotional and mental health problems.

Fun/excitement/motivation

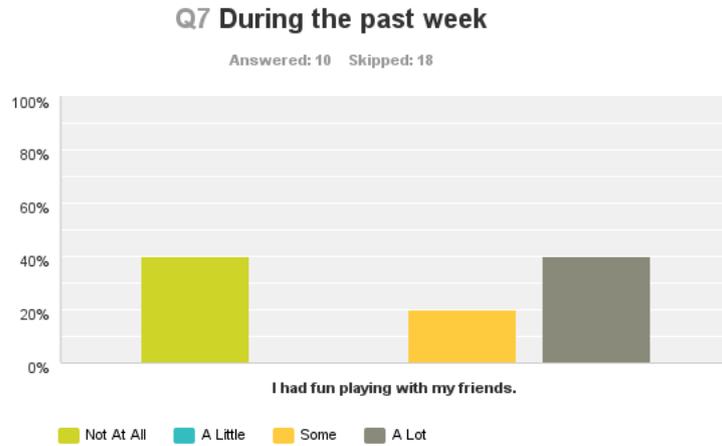
- In 2010, 28% of children had experienced no fun at all during the previous week playing with other children. By 2015, that figure had risen to 40%.
- In 2010, 63% of children said they had experienced a really good time during the previous week. By 2015, that figure had dropped to 50%.
- In 2010, 8% of children said they found it really hard to get started to do something. By 2015, that figure had increased to 13%. Boys were particularly demotivated with none saying they found it difficult to get started in 2010, rising to 33% in 2015.
- In 2010, 50% of boys said that they felt excited about something the week before (girls 38%). By 2015, this proportion of boys had fallen to 33% whilst the percentage of girls had increased to 43%.
- In 2010, no girls said they had lots to look forward to in the future. By 2015 1 in 5 girls (20%) said they had nothing to look forward to in the future.

Friendships

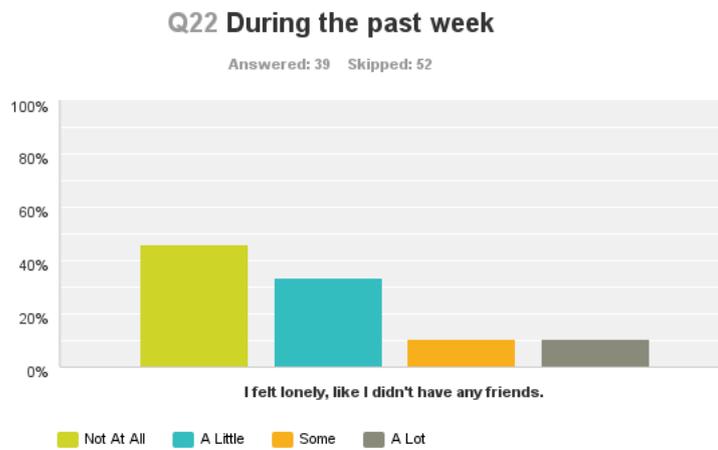
Children's survey 2010 – "I had fun playing with my friends."



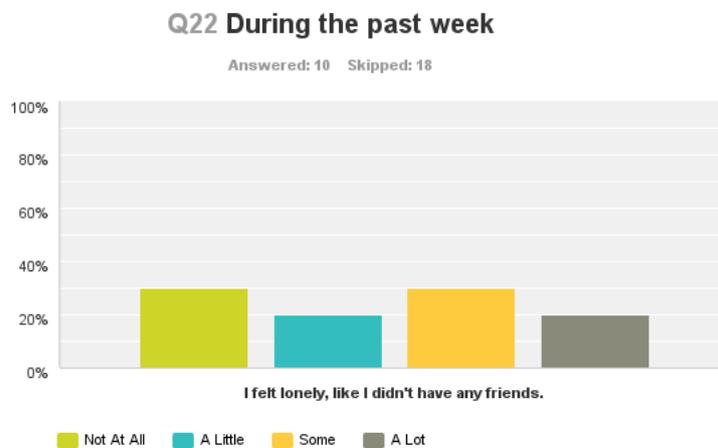
Children's survey 2015 – "I had fun playing with my friends."



Children's survey 2010 – "I felt lonely like I didn't have any friends."



Children's survey 2015 – "I felt lonely like I didn't have any friends."



- In 2010, 10% of children felt they were lonely a lot, as if they had no friends. By 2015, that percentage had doubled to 20% of children.
- In 2010, 6% of girls said they felt lonely a lot and had no friends. In 2015, 29% of girls said they felt lonely a lot.
- In 2010, 12% of children who had been identified as 'gifted' said they were lonely a lot in the previous week. This had risen to over 22% by 2015. The percentage of children who said they were not at all lonely fell from 47% in 2010 to 33% in 2015.
- In 2010, 31% of children who had been identified as 'gifted' had experienced no fun at all during the previous week playing with friends. This had risen slightly to 33% by 2015 (0% in each case for those who had not been identified). Regardless of the differences, one in three children who have not had any fun playing with friends is not acceptable. This is corroborated through talking to parents.

"He has no friends in his class. He does have friends at home but often they are older children and sometimes younger. We have tried everything, play dates the lot. Someone in the class had a birthday party and everyone was invited except for him. I know that this breaks his little heart and mine."

Parent

- In 2010, 15% of boys said they felt lonely a lot but by 2015 no boys said they felt lonely, although the percentage of boys saying that they didn't feel lonely at all fell over the same period from 55% to 33% (girls 38% in 2010 to 29% in 2015).
- About the same number of girls said they that they felt that nobody liked them (18.75 – 20%) but at 1 in 5 girls of the children sampled that is worrying. Boys were generally more resilient about not being liked (no boy felt that they were not liked at all in either 2010 or 2015). However, over the

same time period, the percentage of boys who felt they were liked a lot had dropped from 53% (2010) to 33% (2015).

If anything, many of these results could be under-estimating the scale of the issue in the United Kingdom as the weeks that were chosen (similar in both years) were towards the end of the school academic year when some schools might have already finished for the summer holidays.

“I was not at school so maybe I felt a little different than usual. I do not get on with people a lot at the moment at school. I think I interacted with others better because I was not at school and a little bit more relaxed.”

Boy aged 10, 2010

3. Summary of parents' views and experiences

i) Methodology.

In April 2015, we sent out a 35 question survey to parents who were members of Potential Plus UK. The questions replicated the questions asked in the children's survey but asked them from the parent point of view. At the end of the survey, parents were asked for their recommendations about the issues they had raised.

In total, 40 parents answered the questionnaire. Whilst some of them could be the parents of the children completing the question, their responses were kept separate for analysis and both groups completed the questionnaire confidentially which has meant that we have not sought to link the children's responses to those of their parents.

We have supplemented this through evidence of parents' concerns from our Helpline and Webchat services, as well as discussions (both formal and informal) held about the emotional health and wellbeing of their children at our Family Weekend events.

ii) Key issues of concern from the 2015 parent survey

The key issues of concern for parents completing the 2015 survey appear to be:

Perfectionism

Parent survey 2015 - "I don't feel they felt as good as other children."



- 19% of parents believed their child felt they were not as good as other children.
- 14% of parents believed their child felt things didn't work out all right for them a lot. Only 16% of parents believed their child felt things did turn out all right most of the time.

"She finds it difficult when she is not immediately great at something. For example, she has recently started a mixed ability guitar group and her teacher says she is a natural, but she was upset this week because she doesn't find it as easy as people who have been learning for a couple of years....Generally she is happy, but sometimes she gets into a trough where she thinks that she isn't good enough in some way. A few weeks ago she was worrying that she wouldn't always find it easy to learn new things. She lacks self confidence sometimes. I thought maybe she was back to not being able to work effectively at school (that was the case last year, but it has been better this year), but I was reassured by the teacher who said that in one subject in particular she was "off the chart."

Parent of girl, aged 9

"At the moment he seems to fixate on impossible tasks and will talk endlessly about them. He asked for a sheet of metal so he could make a car. Last week he was going to form a club that was going to save endangered animals by making leaflets to post to houses. This week he says he will be a billionaire when he is daddy's age so he can build his own Tracy Island and Thunderbirds so he can save people."

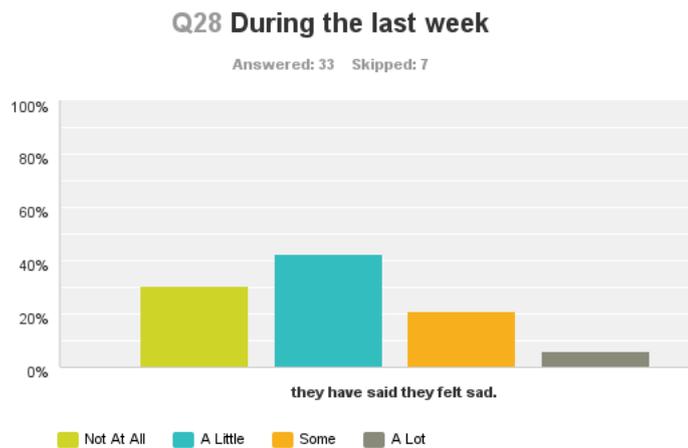
Parent of boy, aged 6

“She is extremely anxious, worried and stressed. Low self esteem and feelings of guilt and not being good enough. Feeling overwhelmed by her feelings and not able to understand or express them. Extreme jealousy towards her younger sister. Loneliness and isolation.”

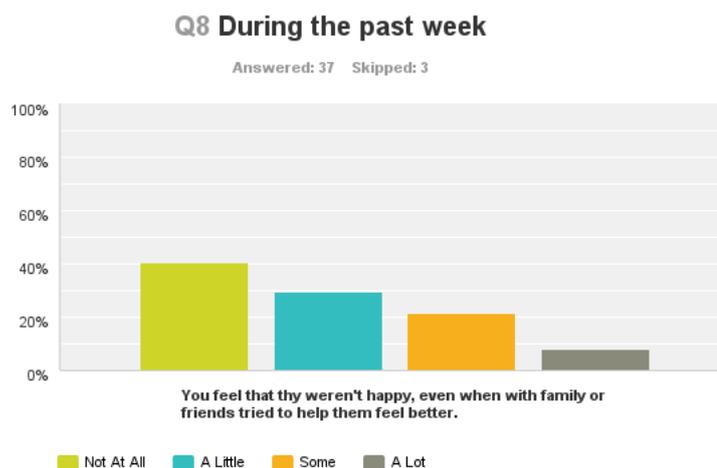
Parent of girl, aged 11

Stress/anxiety/sadness

Parent survey 2015 – “They have said they felt sad.”



Parent survey 2015 – “I feel they weren’t happy.”



- 11% of parents were concerned that their child was bothered ‘a lot’ about issues that didn’t normally bother them. Only 24% of parents said they felt their child was not bothered by anything at all.

- 11% of parents felt their child was 'down' or unhappy a lot during the previous week. Only 11% believed their child did not feel down or unhappy at all.
- 14% of parents said they felt their child had been scared a lot during the previous week. Only 19% of parents said their child had not been scared at all.
- 18% of parents said their child had felt like crying a lot in the previous week. Only 9% said their child had not felt like crying at all.
- Only 15% of parents said their child had reported looking forward to something good at all.

“On the whole we feel he is a very emotional child. He takes many things to heart that other children would just brush off - for example, he would feel very upset even though he has done nothing wrong, possibly to the point of tears. He remembers these types of incident a long time afterwards. He can be very anxious, needlessly on many occasions, which leads him to display anxious behaviour in the form of hair pulling and nail picking/chewing - often he does not even realise he is doing these things.”

Parent of boy, aged 12

“Volatile. Answering this survey on any week would give completely different answers. Emotional intensity means that her feelings often roller coaster between highs and lows. Feelings of loneliness and difference are high in lots of settings but disappear completely at times when she gets to spend time with her other hlp (high learning potential) friends but that is not every week. Feelings of anxiety are high whenever a new challenge is presented and perfectionism kicks in or when she is bored. It is hard to keep a sustained level of challenge which is what she seems to need in order to sleep well, feel calm and focused and good about herself”

Parent of girl, aged 6

“My son is unhappy as he has been out of school for some time and he feels isolated. His first school experience was terrible and almost at the end of year 2 we still haven't settled in school.”

Parent of boy, aged 6

“She is very anxious, mainly because of the current tests in school that start today. She is very frightened about them, feels she "goes blank" at times when being tested, and has spoken of not even writing her name on the test, and leaving it all blank. The other factor in her stress and anxiety at the moment is that she is often excluded by other children in her class and has no close friends in school. She luckily does have good friends not at her school, but doesn't see them more than a handful of times a month.”

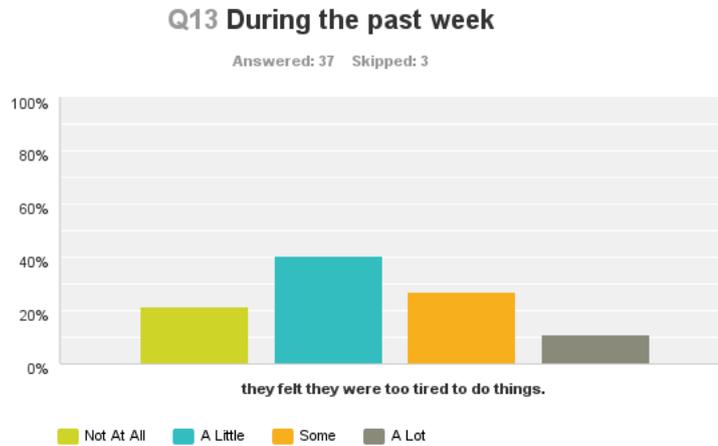
Parent of girl, aged 10.

“He is about to do his SATs so school are pushing the whole class. He has dyslexia and he does not respond well to pressure. I worry about how he will cope with the tests. We as parents have a very poor relationship with school now – my son has been repeatedly bullied – so I feel I cannot talk to school about his emotions.”

Parent of boy, aged 11

Tiredness

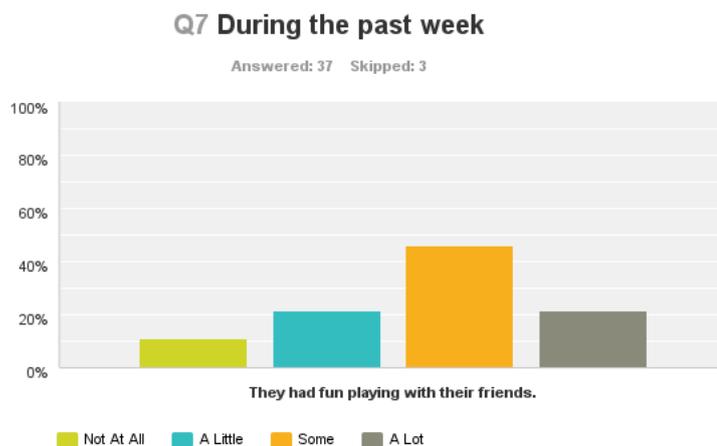
Parents survey 2015 – “They felt too tired to do things.”



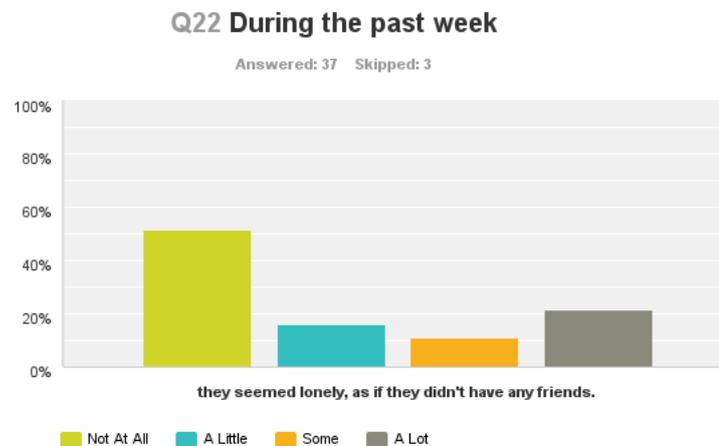
- 11% of parents felt their child was tired a lot the previous week. Only 22% felt their child was not tired at all
- 14% of parents said they felt their child hadn't slept at all well during the previous week. Only 22% said they had slept well at all.

Friendships

Parent survey 2015 – “They had fun playing with their friends.”



Parent survey 2015 – “They seemed lonely, like they didn’t have any friends.”



- 11% of parents said they felt their child had experienced no fun playing with friends the previous week. Only 22% of parents said their child had experienced a lot of fun.
- 11% of parents said they felt like other children were not friendly towards their child or didn’t want to be with them. Only 35% of parents didn’t feel like this at all.
- 22% of parents said they felt their child had seemed lonely the previous week as if they didn’t have any friends.
- 9% of parents reported that their child had frequently said that other people didn’t like them. 52% of parents reported that their child didn’t say this at all.

“Overall, I feel that my child’s social, emotional and mental health and well being are quite good, although there are some areas of concern. He is aware that in some ways he is “different” from the other children - for example, most of the boys in his class play football and he has no interest at all in football. This is a real point of difference for him. The friendships he has made (and we are very grateful that he has made friends), seem to be with some of the children in his class who are at the two extremes in terms of behaviour and ability. He gets very upset because he generally does not get invited to birthday parties.”

Parent of a boy, aged 6

“My son is really struggling socially at school. He moved to his current school in October last year and hasn’t made any firm friends. He feels this keenly. School are being incredibly supportive, but of course, this sort of thing cannot be rushed/forced. We did invite some of his new classmates to his seventh birthday party, but it hasn’t helped nurture friendships.”

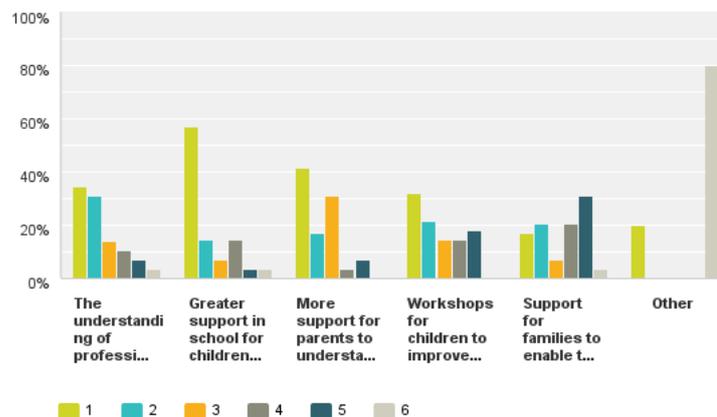
Parent of boy, aged 7

iii) What parents want to support them and their child

29 parents rated a series of options provided to them as possible ways to help them and their family with any emotional or mental health issues facing their child.

Q34 Which of the following suggestions do you think would help with your child's social/emotional or mental health or wellbeing. Please put your choices in order (1= most important)

Answered: 29 Skipped: 11



More parents (57%) responding to this section of the survey made greater support in school for children with social, emotional or mental health issues their most important issue to address, followed by:

- more support for parents to understand their high learning potential child, and
- a greater understanding by professionals about social, emotional and mental health issues and high learning potential children.

However, if we take into account weighted averages from the scores provided, the top three types of support parents wanted for them and/or their child in the UK were:

1. support for families to enable them to share experiences to reduce their isolation
2. workshops for children to improve resilience
3. the understanding of professionals about the social, emotional and mental health needs of high learning potential children.

Parents also made a number of additional comments which could help steer policy and practice. We have left parents to give their views themselves although we have grouped them for ease under several categories. These include:

a) A greater understanding by or support for the child

“She would definitely benefit from some sort of workshop to help her deal with her perfectionism and anxieties, and to build her resilience.”

“More understanding of her needs especially at school. Ways to develop her emotional literacy and social skills.”

“Help her develop her emotional intelligence and improve her self confidence.”

“A continuation of ongoing support for the child beyond childhood. I think that it would help if CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service) didn't stop as soon as a child is considered to be an adult. They have built up a relationship with a professional and it is hard for them to start all over again.”

“Ways to help him understand that he can't always have what he wants and to help him to control his temper.”

“Some sort of talking therapy for her and possibly for us as a family. Some strategies to help her to deal with her feelings and to relax. Strategies to help her to relate to her peers and improve her relationships.”

“Counselling might be a start.”

b) Initiatives to enable high learning potential children to make friends/to reduce isolation

“Regular opportunities to socialise and learn with other high learning potential kids.”

“Support to ensure opportunities for regular time with other HLP children.”

c) Specific support for parents

“We could do with access to resources to give us ideas on how to advise and support our child - especially when we are socially awkward ourselves. We can inadvertently make things worse by saying the wrong thing which then makes us the focus of the blame and the outlet for the frustration and anger - Advice on how to deal with this would be a major advantage. Finally, some advice on how to approach the school in a way that does not provoke a defensive reaction to get them to recognise that a change of approach can be helpful.”

“Support to maintain contact and networks with other parents to share ideas and strategies.”

“A helpline to call when I feel like I just don't know what to do!”

“We would appreciate help in dealing with her high anxiety, as talking things through with her doesn't always seem to make much difference.”

d) Services to encourage families of high learning potential children to support/learn each other

“Services (which bring parents and children together) like those of Potential Plus UK are brilliant. It's really important that they are maintained especially things like family weekends that allow building of networks for the kids so they don't feel so isolated and different. And more support for the development of local networks is needed.”

“Workshops involving the children and the parents as I think the suggestions could be better accepted from someone else i.e. not the parents!”

“We are looking forward to leaving primary and hope secondary will be a different experience. My son`s hlp has only just been formally diagnosed so I feel a sense of relief. I hope we are going to a good school – it has a very good reputation for pastoral care – primary school has been a very lonely experience. I don` t really know any other children like my son who are hlp but also have dyslexia. I would like to meet more parents and children.”

e) Support for home education

“Support for more home educating families so that the child can benefit from both home education and the positives of the school system like access to exams.”

“Financial support for the huge cost involved in maintaining appropriately stimulating opportunities...especially because you are home educating.”

“We need financial help as now home educating and we are a one wage earner family.”

f) More support for teachers themselves

“It would be very helpful to have teachers trained to spot and support children who may need a little extra help to make friends within school, and not just recommend they stay for school dinners which just adds to the amount of time the child is alone, isolated and unhappy. Also teachers being made more aware of the impact of sweeping statements about an entire class being badly behaved, as an example, which has a significant impact on a sensitive child.”

g) Greater understanding of/ links/partnership with parents/schools/other professionals

“I think it is all about understanding - school, parents, health care professionals. So often, behaviours are simply misinterpreted and this can have a damaging, long lasting impact on the child. If we understand what is going on for these children, what is driving their behaviours, what their needs are and how these may differ from the mainstream we (parents, school etc) can respond and nurture from a place of wisdom, rather than from a place of ignorance. We need to support our children to be who they are, not try and squeeze them into a box that they simply do not fit. How damaging is that to their self esteem and their sense of self?”

“Better links between the health services and education services; a joined up approach for all children.”

“I think my child would be happier in school if her teachers had a greater understanding of how her anxieties and her HLP tie together, and talked to her about things in a sympathetic and understanding way.”

“More understanding by teachers of how to handle his disruptive behaviour by getting to the root cause, rather than (just) disciplining him.”

“She was never supported at school - bright enough to do ok so just left to get on with it. Her social issues were never recognised. This has been a slow burn problem built up over years of feeling inadequate/different/odd.”

“We need to work more with the school. We need to start trying to work together more to implement a positive response to her challenging behaviour. We need to try our best to establish more routine and healthier eating habits... The latter two are not going to be easy to do with our lifestyle.”

“Mental health professionals who get the hlp issues so that we feel that it is worth even approaching them for help and who don't fob us off with standard parenting advice that clearly doesn't work.”

“Schools recognising high potential and the SENCO (Special Needs Coordinator) being aware of possible issues. For example, our son has a special need as well as high learning potential and yet he was treated as naughty, not bright.”

“We have good support from the GP. We need more support for welfare staff in school from outside agencies.”

“Increase funding for professional mental health support for these children. The lack of funding for CAMHS has seen the service decline in recent years with many staff leaving the service. Most parents cannot afford private psychological support.”

“Don't get me started on mental health services in this area!”

h) Specific changes to the school system

“Schools (should be) measured on a child's wellbeing not just (on their) academic attainment.”

“Bring back formal assessment in school with attached funding and local support.”

“Autonomous learning for children, with adult guidance and support. Letting children learn their way, in their own time.”

“Earlier identification of HLP. It has needed me to go on and on at the school. Even still, I don't know if anything is really changing in the classroom for him.”

“There are processes in place to bring children up to a certain grade but the teachers I have spoken to don't seem to know what to do to help my son and some don't seem to think he needs extra help and should just be happy being at the top of the class. We need understanding and support with his sensory issues. Sometimes I want to explain away some of his quirks by saying he is autistic because I think people may accept this.”

“Remove the pressure of labels and value difference in all its forms, seeing each child as an individual and following their interests rather than imposing learning upon them that adults think they need.”

These suggestions are fed into the recommendations which are made in the next section of this report.

Key Recommendations

This research, whilst qualitative, has enabled us to make nine very practical recommendations. If implemented, these recommendations could have a real impact on both policy and practice in the way children with high learning potential with emotional and mental health issues can be supported in the United Kingdom in the future.

Recommendation One - A national programme should be developed specifically for high learning potential children to help improve their understanding about, and resilience for, being a high learning potential child in today's world. This should be piloted in one Local Authority area or federation of schools and the results evaluated.

Being a high learning potential child, particularly one who is profoundly gifted, can be a lonely experience indeed. Many of these children can believe that they are the only ones experiencing such feelings such as intense emotions, perfectionism and depth and breadth of thinking. We believe that, from as early age as appropriate and for some initiatives as early as pre-school, these children should be:

- encouraged to understand how their brain works
- supported to become more resilient
- given opportunities to talk about their emotions and feelings with others who understand.

This kind of support should be available at any age and should be easily accessed. We propose that a pilot of such a service should be initiated in an appropriate sample area such as a Local Authority or a federation of schools and the results evaluated.

If problems are beginning to be reported by children as young as four years old, this cannot be allowed to continue. Investment in the Early Years with the aim of increasing understanding, developing channels of support and helping to reduce some of the more damaging effects of issues, such as perfectionism, on the future development of the child must be an investment worth making.

Recommendation Two - A guide should be put together and shared across schools, local authorities and other bodies to ensure that all those with a vested interest in addressing the isolation of high learning children benefit from the many excellent initiatives which exist.

The feelings of loneliness and isolation are particularly felt through the lack of friends 'on the same wavelength' which many children with high learning potential report. Whilst high proportion of children with high learning potential are introverts, some are desperate to seek out and secure deep and meaningful friendships with people who understand them. This was reported by children as young as four in 2010 and there is nothing to suggest that the situation in 2015 is much different.

Specific suggestions which should be considered in this area include:

- Greater investment in time and resources should be made to encourage friendships both between high learning potential children of the same ages and across age groups. These do exist in the UK both inside and outside the formal education system. However, in the main, they have to be funded by parents/carers themselves and there is often no funding available to support low income or otherwise disadvantaged families.

- Good practice should be shared and developed on what schools are doing to promote friendship amongst high learning potential children in the UK and beyond.
- Buddying systems should be developed in all schools which build on the strengths of these high learning potential children and train them to buddy other, often younger children within the same school or even across schools.
- Investment in new technology should be made to develop a social media approach for younger children to support each other within the UK and beyond.
- The approach of IGGY, British Mensa and Potential Plus UK amongst older children 13+ should be supported nationwide for younger children to ensure that there is a consistent approach to all children with high learning potential from four years old upwards to ensure that they have ongoing opportunities to form appropriate friendships.

These and other initiatives being run across the country and beyond should be put together in a 'good practice guide' and shared across schools, local authorities and other bodies to ensure that all those with a vested interest in supporting these children benefit from the many excellent initiatives which exist.

Recommendation Three - More support should be given to parents and carers in the form of an increased Information and Advice Service (such as Potential Plus UK's Helpline) supplemented by face to face workshops and parenting programmes and distance learning programmes and webinars.

Parents and carers are central to their child's social and emotional development and the more that can be invested in the approach they take towards supporting their child's mental health and wellbeing the more it will help the child to thrive in the future. Parental involvement is important for the development of all children and is absolutely crucial for the development of children with high learning potential if they are to thrive and achieve personal success.

The relationship between the parent and the high learning potential child is often not an easy one. Asynchronous development; strong feelings of justice and fairness; the ability to reason and argue from a very young age; intense emotions and high degrees of sensitivity are just some of the issues frequently mentioned by parents contacting Potential Plus UK's Helpline. All of these can create barriers to positive parent-child relationships which can sometimes lead to emotional or mental health issues.

In view of this, it is recommended that more support is given to parents and carers in the form of an increased Information and Advice Service (such as Potential Plus UK's Helpline) supplemented by:

- face to face workshops and parenting programmes
- distance learning programmes and webinars.

Recommendation Four - A bottom-up approach to family support should be encouraged wherever possible and good practice shared to ensure that families of children with high learning potential benefit from sharing experiences and learning from each other. Potential Plus UK should build on its successful track record in this area and seek to increase the volumes accessing such networks.

Just as children with high learning potential report feelings of isolation and loneliness, so too do their parents and carers. One of the ways in which these feelings can be reduced is to encourage the community to support itself.

One of the positive, if unintentional results of the dismantling of the national programme for gifted and talented education in the UK has been the increased development of community-led support through initiatives such as Facebook and other social media groups; local family get-togethers and organised trips and events. This has had a net benefit for families which has encouraged the high learning potential community to support and learn from each other.

This bottom-up approach should be encouraged wherever possible and good practice shared to ensure that families understand what local opportunities could be created. Potential Plus UK should build on its successful track record in this area and seek to increase the number of families accessing such networks.

Recommendation Five - Specific support should be provided for families who are home educating to help remove any barriers to learning for their child. This should include the development of hybrid models of learning using a combination of different methods of learning.

In the UK, there is a growing number of families who, for a variety of reasons, have moved away from mainstream education in the state and private sectors towards home education as a viable alternative for their child. Many of these children have high learning potential and within this group at least a proportion of families have chosen home education because of the inappropriate 'fit' between the needs of the child and the requirements of formal education.

Over the years, Potential Plus UK has spoken to countless parents and carers who have chosen home education as a viable option. There is always representation from parents of home educated HLP children on our Board of Trustees. Finally, at all our larger events we hold at least one session a day for home educating families (and those considering it) to learn from each other and to encourage a community of mutual support.

Home Education is currently seen as a negative option by many in the education mainstream; there is little, if any, funding available and governments have from time to time sought its abolition. In spite of this, the community continues to thrive. From Potential Plus UK's experience, as children are becoming more stressed and anxious at school and as many of them face deteriorating emotional and mental health, an increased number of families will continue to turn to other models of education, including home education.

We believe that, rather than forcing home education into the grey hinterland, it should be strengthened and supported by mainstream education. Examples of ways in which this could be done include:

- allowing more children to opt for flexi-schooling or part-time schooling where there is a reason to supplement home education with more formal opportunities or to take advantage of social learning at school
- allowing children to take exams at school rather than their parents having to find exam centres which will accept children of different ages

- looking at the development of hybrid schools within the state system in the UK which allow formal education to be delivered in different ways, thereby allowing the child to work at his or her own pace and at the right level regardless of age. Examples of such hybrid models include those developed by the Nisai Academy; TLC and Wey Education.

Recommendation Six - There should be a greater understanding amongst parents/carers, health professionals and schools about the needs of children with high learning potential who have emotional and/or mental health problems and, wherever possible, partnerships based mutual trust and understanding between all those involved these children's emotional health and wellbeing. In particular, all local Child Adolescent and Mental Health Services (CAMHS) should have access to good practice advice to enable them to understand and support children with high learning potential.

Tackling mental health issues must involve a partnership between child, parents/carers, school and/or other professionals such as specialists in the mental health sector. Such partnerships must be based on mutual trust and understanding, both of each other and also of what is best for the high learning potential child.

To help ensure this, it is recommended that:

- good practice advice should be provided to all Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services across the UK
- parents should be well informed about the system in place in their area to support children with mental health issues, including methods of applying for support, waiting lists and the roles of different professionals within the system
- health professionals should be trained to help them understand the characteristics of children and young people with high learning potential and how these can relate to emotional and mental health issues
- there should be stronger links between parents, schools and mental health professionals to ensure that appropriate support is put in place for the benefit of the child. Where appropriate, the child should be part of this framework so that any provision is provided with the child and not to the child
- the length of time between a parent or child first flagging up an emotional or mental health issue and support provision being put in place should be as short as possible and ideally should be measured in days or weeks and not months
- the content and quality of service provided should not be based on where a family lives but should be of a similar standard across the UK.

Recommendation Seven - A training programme for teachers and other professionals in school should be implemented either within schools or during initial training to ensure that all aspects of high learning potential which can impact on these children's emotional and mental health are clearly understood and the skills developed to support them. A whole school approach should be piloted within a number of schools or through a teaching school.

The approaches taken by the current Westminster government and regulatory bodies such as Ofsted emphasise the need for achievement in education. As a consequence, some schools are focusing on those pupils who are 'high attainers' as a way of supporting their 'gifted and talented' strategy. Where they encounter any behavioural, social, emotional or mental health issues amongst some of these high potential learners in many cases they do not associate these attributes with high ability at all, because for them

ability and attainment are the same thing. Without support, such children can 'fall between the cracks', becoming the responsibility of the special needs department at best or being labelled as troublemakers or even excluded at worst. There is strong evidence that the high potential of some of these children is ignored.

This cannot be allowed to continue. Ability and attainment must be treated as two separate issues. To help to raise awareness and understanding of these issues as well as provide professionals with the skills they need this, it is recommended that all professionals within the school system are trained to spot the signs – both positive and negative – of high learning potential in school. This must include:

- supervisors responsible for supporting children at lunchtime and break times
- learning support/teaching assistants
- teachers
- senior leadership
- school governors.

Such training could be provided as part of initial teacher training or via the teaching schools. It would be useful to pilot a whole school approach in this area across one school or a federation of establishments.

Recommendation Eight - Specific changes to the school system should be considered such as introducing into the league tables the assessment of the emotional health and wellbeing of a school and the impact on its pupils.

It is interesting that many of the home educating parents Potential Plus UK supports, even when their child has left school as a result of emotional and mental health issues, have highlighted over the years that the negative impact of these issues entirely or almost entirely disappeared when their child became home educated.

This strongly suggests that specific changes are needed in the school system to enable high learning potential children who may be susceptible to emotional and/or mental health difficulties to thrive.

Suggestions for changes which could be made include:

- measurements of pupil wellbeing should be included in the results' framework, which evaluates the performance of each school and is then formally assessed by Ofsted and other bodies before being published in the education league tables. This could be done on an international level through, for example, the Pisa tables
- specific programmes should be put in place to support children from primary school onwards (and in some cases even earlier) to build their resilience and address any factors impacting negatively on issues that can affect their mental health and wellbeing, in particular perfectionism, isolation and anxiety.

Recommendation Nine - Further research should be conducted on the emotional and mental health of the UK's population of children and young people with high learning potential and a database created to share good practice both nationally and internationally in this area.

This report outlines the early findings of the research which we have conducted over the past five years. Much more needs to be done to:

- raise awareness in the UK that children with high learning potential can have emotional and mental health issues
- increase understanding amongst parents/carers, professionals and even children and young people themselves that these are not isolated incidents and that something on a national scale needs to be done
- put in place a practical framework which translates research into policy, so that there is real change on 'the ground' for the benefit of these children everywhere.

To do all of this, we recommend that:

- a national enquiry should be put into place to evaluate the extent of these issues and their impact specifically on high learning potential children
- further research should take place in the UK both amongst children with high learning potential and their non-gifted peers to enable generalisations to be replaced by evidence-based practice
- evidence from other countries should be sought to determine whether an international solution should be sought for what could be a national epidemic in the UK
- examples of what works to support these children both in school, at home and elsewhere should be brought together in an open-source local, national or international database which facilitates the sharing of good practice.

Conclusion

This report has provided valuable evidence from high learning potential children and young people themselves, as well as their parents and carers, about the extent and nature of emotional and mental health issues affecting them in the UK today.

It clearly suggests that a growing number of high learning potential children at a younger age are facing more serious emotional and mental health issues, perhaps than ever before.

Obviously the sample sizes are small in this research compared to the potential scale of the problem and more work needs to be done on this both through wider research and in-depth pilot programmes.

Notwithstanding, if our research is right, what are the long-term solutions to this:

- a UK-wide early intervention programme
- a large-scale initiative to support these children in school
- or a totally different approach towards children with high learning potential in the UK?

If nothing else is done, consideration should at least be made at both local and national level of how to:

- support perfectionists in a system which, without any checks and balances, can mitigate against their emotional and mental health and wellbeing
- address the isolation and loneliness which many of these children feel
- address some of the more restrictive practices within the school system which prevent some children and young people with high learning potential who are vulnerable to emotional and mental health issues from being supported as effectively as they should.

There is a tremendous amount of good practice going on within schools up and down the country. This must be built upon and shared to ensure that every family benefits regardless of where they live or their personal circumstances. However, much of this good practice has been developed almost in spite of and not as a result of the positive support of government, both national and local, and its agencies. If this continues, we believe that more and more children and young people with high learning potential along with their parents and carers will leave a system which is no longer fit for purpose.

If this were about any other issue apart from children with high learning potential, there would be a national outcry in the UK. Let's hope that the policymakers listen before it is too late.



Potential Plus UK
Challenge House
Sherwood Drive
Bletchley
Milton Keynes
MK3 6DP

Tel: 01908 646433

Email: amazingchildren@potentialplusuk.org

Website: www.potentialplusuk.org

Charity Number: 313182