

Space to Grow: Scotland Policy Report

Awareness of children and young people's mental health needs has never been higher. Yet for many, especially those already facing disadvantage and are under-served by the current mental health system, support remains out of reach.

Children First have been working alongside the Children's Society to deliver a new report on children's access to mental health and wellbeing support, to better understand the barriers preventing children and young people from getting the support they need.

The Children's Society's report draws on evidence from literature, practitioners and children and young people themselves to explore the barriers to mental health support that disproportionately affects under-served groups, with recommendations for policy change.

The Scottish context

Scotland has made strong commitments to children and young people, incorporating the United Nations Convention for the Rights of the Child into Scots law in 2024, and setting targets for delivering mental health support for children.

However, Scotland's mental health system is still not working for children and families. Support systems struggle to meet the building demand for their services. Children First research found that around 100 children are being referred to CAMHS every day. Many are looking for help but struggling to find it.

Space to Grow in Scotland

This work places the whole family at the centre of support, recognising that children's wellbeing is shaped by their relationships, home environment and wider community.

Rather than focusing on a single child in isolation, practitioners work alongside families to understand their strengths, address root causes and build trust over time. This flexible, family-led model removes traditional barriers such as formal referral processes and long waiting lists, creating welcoming opportunities for families to seek help early and on their own terms.

In doing so, the service fills a gap for families who might not meet statutory thresholds but still need support, particularly those experiencing poverty, isolation or cultural barriers, by offering early, holistic support that connects emotional, practical and community needs in one place.

What the report shows

- **Trust and relationships matter:** many children and young people reported not feeling listened to or lacking a consistent adult they can rely on.
- **The system is not fit for under-served children and young people:** rigid processes force children to adapt, rather than adapting to their needs.
- **The "missing middle" gap most impacts under-served groups:** the system is not equipped to respond to complexity, particularly for those whose needs are less visible or do not meet standard thresholds.
- **Access is fragmented:** complex referrals and reliance on schools leads to inconsistency, especially for families less able to navigate support.
- **Short-term funding undermines access:** limiting services' ability to build trust, sustain relationships, and deliver consistent support.

What children and young people need

When we spoke to children and young people in Scotland about their experiences, they told us about barriers to support.

- Children highlighted that **emotional barriers** such as fear, embarrassment and worry about being judged are central to why they don't seek support, alongside concerns about privacy and others finding out.
- **Social expectations** can also create barriers, particularly for boys who feel pressure to cope alone and not show emotion, while girls emphasised anxiety about trust, opening up and being taken seriously.
- **Practical barriers** including cost, access, booking systems and physical or neurodiverse needs further limit support.

We also heard about what the solution would look like to them. Those conversations consistently called for relational, compassionate responses, including trusted adults who take time to get to know them.

- **Trusting relationships are the foundation of support**

Children and young people need consistent, reliable relationships with adults they trust. Many described not having a trusted adult, or feeling let down when professionals change or appointments are cancelled. This makes it harder to open up and stay engaged.

- **Support must recognise different needs, including gender**

Children and young people want services that recognise difference rather than assuming one approach works for everyone. There is a need to design support that actively creates safe ways for boys to express themselves. Boys spoke about pressure to appear strong and not ask for help, alongside a perception that their needs are less visible or taken seriously. At the same time, girls' experiences also need to be understood in their own context.

- **Communication must be flexible and inclusive**

Many children and young people struggle to find the words to describe how they feel. This is also important with emerging harmful content online, that can be difficult to describe and something that adults struggle to understand. Feeling listened to and understood is central to whether they engage with support. This is especially important for children with additional support needs.

- **Emotional readiness and stigma affect children's ability to reach out**

Children and young people described how anxiety, fear, low confidence and feeling overwhelmed can stop them from asking for help or staying engaged. Some feel they are not "worthy" of support, and children talk about a fear of judgement or being labelled by peers.

These barriers mean that even when support is available, it may not be used. Children need services that are patient, flexible and responsive to how they are feeling day to day.

- **Services must be accessible, safe and relevant to modern challenges**

Busy or unfamiliar spaces, unsafe school environments, travel costs and confusion about how to access help all act as barriers, at the same time as growing online harms are increasingly impacting their mental health.

The gaps in trusted support are so significant that some are turning to AI tools for help. This is a worrying signal. It reflects both unmet need and the absence of safe, trusted relationships around them.

Recommendations for Scotland

1. **Scotland urgently needs to find new ways to support children and family mental health.** Children's overwhelming experience of mental health support is that it's distant, and hard to reach. Whole Family, community-based support options need scaled up, with a focus on offering children relationships that can build over time so trust is at the centre.
2. **There must be a shift from services that respond to need, to services that proactively offer support.** Support needs to be visible, accessible and open, to stop children holding back worries until they build up and become more serious concerns.
3. **Services delivering community-based support need to be backed by multi-year funding.** Relationships are the key to effective support, and they are too often broken up by inconsistent and sporadic funding decisions.
4. **Support needs to be child-centred, but family minded.** This means delivering services that consider children in the context of their families, and pressures or challenges that might be impacting children there.
5. **This investment needs to recognise the cost of inaction.** Failing to support children as they are growing up has serious long-term consequences for other public services. Accessible, community-based services can ease pressure across the system.

A call for system change

Under-served children and young people are not failing to access support – systems are failing to reach them. Barriers are structural and rooted in how the system was designed.

Addressing these inequalities requires a fundamental shift towards relational, inclusive and community-based approaches that meet children and young people “where they are”.

Without this transformation, under-served children and young people will continue to face unequal access to support and poorer outcomes.