How do Early Adolescents Cope with the Stresses of Daily Life?


What?

We set out to understand how early adolescents experience coping with the problems, difficult situations, and feelings that they face in daily life in England.

Who?

We interviewed 82 early adolescents aged 9 – 12 years across six different regions of HeadStart. These interviews were part of the national evaluation of HeadStart, a mental health and wellbeing programme, and these young people are taking part in interviews once a year for five years. This study drew on their first interviews, in 2017.

How?

We asked the early adolescents about the types of problems and difficulties they encountered in daily life, in areas such as school, home and family, friendships, and feelings and emotions, and asked about how they coped with and responded to these issues. We then wrote up these interviews and looked for patterns of experiences across young people’s accounts.

What did we find?

We found a number of different patterns across participants’ experiences:

- Many of the young people used specific activities and strategies to make themselves feel better during difficult emotions or when managing a problem. This included engagement with digital media, creative activities, positive thinking, physical breathing or stress release exercises, and in a small number of cases self-harm.
- Most reported that disengaging from the problem helped them, either by distracting themselves, ignoring their problem, or removing themselves from the situation. Others also described standing up for themselves, challenging unwanted behaviour or defending themselves.
- A small number of young people described accepting their problems, believing that they needed to simply get used to it or accepting that this was just part of life.
- All of the early adolescents we spoke with described accessing social support from trusted others as a way to cope, sometimes for comfort and sometimes for help with the actual problem.
  - Most saw parents as particularly trustworthy and consistent, and felt they could talk to them about their problems.
However, they also drew on siblings and wider family, friends, and school and professional staff.

- Many felt that school staff were available mostly for school-related problems (e.g., bullying or academic issues).
- Many of the young people reported learning about specific ways to cope or gaining support through HeadStart (the programme they were engaged in) or other professional support.
- Finally, around half of the early adolescents we spoke to said that sometimes it was best to hide their feelings or problems from others. They gave a number of reasons for this, including that others couldn’t help or would tell other people, that they wanted to deal with the issue alone, that they didn’t want others to know, or that they might get in trouble.

Wait a minute!

Because we asked young people themselves about these areas of their experience, we only learned about the coping strategies that they consciously knew they were using, and we know that people sometimes respond involuntarily to problems they face. This also meant that we could not assess how effective or appropriate the strategies our participants used actually were – that is, we don’t know if these things were actually working or would necessarily work for others.

What does this mean for educators?

- Early adolescents are likely actively trying to manage the different issues they face. It might be useful when working with young people to explore their existing strategies and finding ways to build on these. It might also help to provide time in the school day for young people to de-stress.
- Teachers could check whether young people have people available that they feel comfortable speaking to about their problems, and explore whether there is scope for them to help encourage and support this. It might be helpful to think about how schools can support everyone (including parents and peers) in knowing what to do when someone asks for help.
- Some young people felt it was not a good idea to ask for help with some difficulties, including because they thought they would be judged or get in trouble. It may be important to offer safe spaces to share without these concerns, and to ensure that the wider school system encourages sharing.