

# Relate NI

All Party Group on Mental Health  
*Inquiry into Mental Health Education and  
Early intervention in Schools*

Relate NI Submission

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**we can Relate**

## **1.0 Executive Summary**

Relate NI has been operational in NI for 75 years. Our vision is of a future in which healthy relationships form the heart of a thriving society and make expert information and support for healthy relationships available to everyone. Relate NI has delivered therapeutic services to children & young people (CYP) across Northern Ireland since 1993

*Relate NI recommend the APG's Inquiry prioritise the availability of therapeutic programmes for school children.*

Happy children tend to become happy adults. (Centre for Longitude studies, UCL 2019) The tender for Healthy Happy Minds has been postponed until further notice. Relate NI's experience as a school counselling provider gives witness to how significant therapy has been for children and how they benefit from a young age. Early intervention is key to helping children talk about their feelings and share their worries. Relate NI's professional opinion is all schools benefit from the support of a school counsellor.

*Relate NI recommend the APG's Inquiry prioritise funding to increase CYP community counselling provision.*

Demand for Relate NI CYP community counselling services has increased significantly since lockdown. For the period April 2021-March 2022 29 % of CYP referrals were made by a medical professional. Of these, 4% were referrals from CAMHS/Children's Early Intervention Service (CEIS) Withdrawing Healthy Happy Minds funding will put additional pressure on CYP community counselling services.

*Relate NI recommend the APG's Inquiry highlight the importance of age-appropriate and evidence-based Relationships and Sexuality (RSE) in all schools.*

School counselling works best in schools with a healthy pastoral care system focusing on modelling to children the development of respectful relationships. Young people are growing up in an online world with relationships formed beyond the classroom or, indeed, school walls.

Good quality RSE gives an understanding to pupils of the impact poor relationships have on mental health. Education can break this cycle with a view to preventing and/or reducing relationship distress through providing tools and techniques to encourage, nurture and strengthen the foundational relationships that bring us joy and improve our mental and physical wellbeing.

## **2.0 Introduction**

Relate NI welcomes the opportunity to respond to All Party Group (APG) on Mental Health's Inquiry into Mental Health Education and Early Intervention in School. As a society still working to address the impact which our recent history has had on the health and wellbeing of all of our people, as well as the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic and associated public health restrictions, we believe that mental health education and early intervention in schools offer a framework for not only giving children and young people the best start in life but also for improving the health and wellbeing of our society as a whole. Through our casework over many years, we are aware of the impact of poor mental wellbeing and mental ill health on children, young people and family systems and wider communities.

In considering the Terms of Reference for this Inquiry, this submission to the APG has been informed by Relate NI's data and experience of providing therapeutic services to children, young people, individuals, couples and whole families over many years.

## **3.0 About Relate NI**

Relate NI is a leading relationship support charity in Northern Ireland and has been supporting families and their relationships across Northern Ireland for over 75 years. Established in the aftermath of the second world war, Relate NI has significant experience in developing and tailoring services to support people and their relationships. Our mission is to make expert information and support for healthy relationships available to everyone, and our vision is of a society where healthy relationships form the heart of a thriving society.

The Relate NI team deliver a range of therapeutic and educational services to children and young people; individuals; couples and families across Northern Ireland. We provide schools counselling in primary schools through the Healthy Happy Minds Framework and under contract with the Full Services Community Network (FSCN). We also provide Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) to 15 and 16 year olds across Northern Ireland through a partnership with The Rainbow Project and Nexus. In 2021/2022, we helped over 18,000 people across Northern Ireland through our therapeutic services: community programmes and our digital resources.

Relate NI is passionate about enabling good quality relationships. Through over 75 years' experience of working with people throughout Northern

Ireland, we've come to understand that relationships not only give our lives meaning, they are of vital importance to our physical and mental wellbeing.

Evidence indicates that good quality relationships are a crucial protective factor which can prevent propensity towards substance misuse; shield us from the effects of long-term health conditions; aid our recovery, and can even prevent illness in the first place. Conversely, poor quality relationships are risk factors for poor health and wellbeing<sup>i</sup>. Not only do people in poor quality relationships have worse health than those in happier ones<sup>ii</sup>, but poor-quality relationships are also worse for our health than none: unhappily married people are at greater risk of poor health than divorced people<sup>iii</sup>.

Put simply, good quality relationships:

- **Are a foundation to our health and wellbeing:** Evidence demonstrates that people who have good quality relationships have lower blood pressure than those in poorer quality relationships<sup>iv</sup>; close couple relationships can slow the rate of decline in people with dementia<sup>v</sup> and even delay admission to hospital or care homes<sup>vi</sup>. Relationship distress is linked to anxiety<sup>vii</sup> and depression<sup>viii</sup>.
- **Are important for children's life chances:** Evidence indicates that children growing up with parents who have low parental conflict, whether together or separated, enjoy better physical and mental health<sup>ix</sup>; better emotional wellbeing<sup>x</sup>; higher educational attainment<sup>xi</sup> and a lower likelihood of engaging in risky behaviours<sup>xii</sup>.

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## 4.0 Relate NI Submission

### Scope of the inquiry

**This inquiry will examine the provision of Mental Health Education and Early Intervention across education settings (including and not limited to schools, such as home schooling, children and young people units and Education other than school centres) in Northern Ireland. It will consider associated issues, including:**

- **Understanding and mapping levels of mental health provision available within the education setting across Northern Ireland**
- **What resources / programmes are provided by Department of Education and Education Authority?**

Relate NI currently offering school counselling for 5 Primary schools under EA/DE funding through the Healthy Happy Minds Framework.

FSCN - Relate NI works in partnership with the Full Service Community Network (FSCN) to provide a counselling service for primary school children in 13 Primary Schools in the Upper Springfield and Greater Falls clusters. The aim of the counselling service is to increase the emotional well-being and learning potential of the pupils, operating alongside the integral pastoral care provision in each school, funded by DE/CCMS.

- **How can the Department of Health/HSC work with schools to help identify need and access support for children and young people through CAMHS?**

Provision of clear guidelines on the referral pathways, & criteria to CAMH's services to educational professionals, including steps required prior to a CAMHs referral being accepted, would allow referrers to signpost pupils to the correct service to meet their needs. This would reduce waiting times by avoiding duplication of referrals & services.

- **What resources are available in the Community and Voluntary Sector?**

Relate NI Services operate across Northern Ireland:

- Adult Relationship Counselling for Individuals & Couples
- Family Counselling
- Relate Kids
- Relate Teen
- Schools Counselling
- Sex Therapy
- Relationships and Sexuality Education
- Counsellor training and Student Placements

Between April 2021-March 22 28% of Relate NI one to one counselling referrals were for Children and Young People (CYP). The majority of CYP sessions were funded under the Strategic Planning and Performance Group (SPPG) formerly Health & Social Care Board contract designed for parents and children under 18 years. This specialist service is currently delivered by Relate NI. To compliment publicly funded sessions, private clients accessing Relate NI make up 29% of overall referrals received. This includes CYP services.

In addition, Relate NI deliver the following contracts:

- Relate NI work in partnership with The Moving Up, Moving On (MUMO) Project to provide counselling support in 2 Primary schools and family support in West Belfast. Parent support can also be offered in Relate NI offices. This is funded by Big Lottery.
- Seamless Transition Through Education project (STEP) is an early intervention programme specifically designed to provide support to families and children to help them get the best start in life. Relate NI commenced provision of therapeutic support services to schools in the South Belfast area, supporting children, parents, and teachers to enhance emotional wellbeing. This is funded by Forward South Partnership.
- Over the course of the 21/22 year, Relate NI continued to work with a range of existing partners such as health and social care trusts, Parentline, Positive Life, and Parent Rooms to deliver services & other means of support.
- Golden Threads. This education programme is funded by the Department of Health's Mental Health Support Fund and administered by the Community Foundation Northern Ireland to promote healthy relationships providing education workshops in youth & community settings in the Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon Council Areas.
- Thanks to the Dormant Accounts Fund & TNL Community Fund the Sustaining Healthy Relationships project takes our educational interventions into the heart of communities with a view to preventing and or reducing relationship distress through providing tools and techniques to encourage, nurture and strengthen the foundational relationships that bring us joy and improve our mental and physical wellbeing.
- Relate NI deliver on the Relationships and Sexuality Education Contract, funded by the PHA. Doing so provides children and young people with a safe space to explore issues around relationships, including what healthy relationships look like so that they can recognise and negotiate unhealthy relationships. It is about protecting children and young people by teaching them how

to stay safe online; how to tackle inappropriate behaviour and to develop coping strategies. It also allows opportunities for young people to receive age-appropriate information about sexual health. By teaching young people about consent for example, we can protect them from sexual abuse and exploitation.

- Relate NI are proud of our training heritage. We are aware of the current deficits in a skilled CYP counselling workforce. To meet this need we offer a Level 5 counsellor training qualification and supervised placements for CYP student counsellors and therapists to support newly, or newly qualified practitioners to gain the experience required for achieving accreditation/registration with their professional body.

**- What resources have you developed/ self-funded to offer within your education setting?**

Where issues children are experiencing have a family context, Relate NI counsellors may also be able to signpost parents to our online suite of self-help content via the website, which can support parents and the wider family unit to work on issues which may be affecting the child's well-being. In this way, the relational nature of our work with children can have an impact on the entire family unit.

Relate NI school counsellors have experience in providing individual counselling, group sessions and/or drop in sessions for pupils, support for parents, consultation & training for school staff. During lockdown we adapted to provide services online with parenting support sessions completed and joint sessions with parents and children.

Relate NI's Sustaining Healthy Relationships project takes our educational interventions into the heart of communities with a view to improving the sexual health and well-being of young people across Northern Ireland by enabling them to make healthier relationship choices and contribute to the reduction in numbers of young people engaging in unhealthy relationships, having unsafe sex, crisis pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections. The programme provides knowledge, skills and understanding to help young people navigate and build healthy relationships which are essential to mental and physical wellbeing. All the materials have been developed in line with the UNESCO 2018 international technical guidance on sexuality education -An Evidence Informed approach and have been approved by the PHA.

**• Understanding and mapping current processes within the education setting across Northern Ireland**

**- How are the emotional health and wellbeing needs of children and young people assessed within the education sector?**

RSE also offers the opportunity to explore mental health related themes through its curriculum. This was recognised by National Association of Head Teachers response to govt consultation which highlighted:

Children and young people need to be digitally literate and resilient as digital technologies are integrated into so many aspects of their lives. PSHE [Personal Social Health Economic education] is the right model to provide an effective and cohesive programme of learning to support pupils to thrive in an online world. This includes sex and relationships, but also much broader issues, from violent content to the impact of social media on mental health, as highlighted by the Children’s Commissioners report, “Life in Likes”.<sup>xiii</sup>

The Children & Young People’s Mental Health Coalition, found “a common weakness of RSE is that content is taught to late.” (2022)<sup>xiv</sup>

It has been our experience in schools, once parents, teachers and pupils become aware that counselling is available in their school referrals quickly come in from concerned parents and teachers. Pupils who are in Key stage two and above can also refer themselves for counselling.

The assessment stage is the first crucial step in the counselling process. A thorough assessment involving the child’s parents and their teachers is carried out to ensure that all relevant information is gathered. The assessments help the counsellor to understand what the child’s presenting issues are and what they are finding ‘tough’. At the assessment stage the therapist is seeking to determine what the family system is like at home. Is it supportive? Are they in a good place to support the child as they move through therapy. The practitioner can also establish what the child’s strengths are.

The assessment stage allows parents, teachers, and children to set realistic goals which they hope to achieve through counselling. Parents are offered an ending / review appointment with the counsellor and their child. Standardised evaluation tools are distributed as appropriate to evidence outcomes.



**- How are emotional health and wellbeing interventions identified?**

The counsellor in each primary school will engage in collaborative working with the key contact to share information about counselling provision to school staff, to parents and promote awareness of this with pupils. After the initial parent and teacher assessments have been completed, the counsellor meets with the child to discuss what counselling is and how it might help them. The child remains at the heart of what we do, so it is very important to establish if they are happy to engage in counselling and if it feels right for them.

Building a rapport with a child is extremely important at this stage, while also creating a safe therapeutic space for the child to explore their feelings, share their worries and process what they have been finding 'tough'. Information will also be shared about confidentiality and its limitations and the complaints process.

**- What evaluation measures are in place for mental health interventions provided within education settings?**

Relate NI use a range of tools to understand the impact of our services and to evaluate satisfaction levels with our services. These include Child Outcome Rating Scale (CORS) & Child Session Rating Score (CSRS)

Children accessing Relate NI Schools Counselling Service demonstrated an average 22% improvement in pre and post intervention CORS scores.

Parent assessment and evaluation measures used in our schools counselling service demonstrated an average 18% improvement in scores, driven by significant improvements in parental scores for their child's behaviour (38% average improvement) and their overall wellbeing (25% average improvement)

Teacher assessment and evaluation measures used in our schools counselling service demonstrated an average 21% improvement in scores, driven by significant improvements in teacher scores for the child's relationship with classmates (24%); Relationship with parents/main carer (23%); and Behaviour (22%).

**- What quality assurance measures are in place for mental health interventions provided within education settings?**

Relate NI is an approved provider on the Primary school counselling framework and works under the ICSS standards. Relate NI take seriously

the responsibility to ensure these are maintained through supervision, line management and continuous professional development. We offer enhanced clinical governance with a clinical consult rota; external clinical supervision provision; safeguarding support; auditing procedures & referral reviews to ensure children get the service they require. As an organisational member of BACP we keep up to date with their Ethical Framework and Code of Ethics and adhere to Relate NI organisational policies and procedures.

**- What support and guidance is provided to professionals within the education sector?**

Following the success of ICSS, the provision of counselling in primary schools under Healthy Happy Minds strengthens the view that counselling provision is a normal component of schooling for children. To date 566 (69.5%) schools have used the Healthy Happy Minds funding. Only 13 (1.5%) have informed the EA that they do not intend to use the funding. (Education, 2022).<sup>xv</sup> There appears to be a 29% gap in provision from schools who would like to offer this service to their pupils.

Relate NI are aware of the current deficits in a skilled CYP counselling workforce as Healthy Happy Minds changed the funding landscape, causing seismic shifts in the movement of the CYP counselling workforce. Due to issues securing staffing Relate NI were able to deliver Healthy Happy Minds from November 2022. We have been contacted by 33 primary schools seeking a service resulting in unmet need.

As a school counselling provider Relate NI work in partnership with parents and teachers offering advice and guidance on how best to support their child through their difficulties. An important element in counselling is that all the systems around the child, including family and school, work together to help improve the child's overall well-being. Through therapeutic support the risk of children suffering emotionally is significantly reduced and helps to prevent low aspirations, truancy and exclusion from school leading to greater educational achievements.

School counsellors / staff at Relate NI include integrative child counsellors, play therapists and art therapists. This multi-disciplinary team provides established forms of psychological services and range of modalities within schools that can reach children at their developmental level. By offering creative approaches to children who have been impacted by adversity, their story can often be told in the form of art, play or music, creating a sense of safety within the therapy room, and benefiting children both mentally and physically.

**- How do education professionals create a safe space for the children and young people they support?**

In this context Relate NI Counsellors have significant knowledge and skill to review the work undertaken with children. Theoretical perspectives guide professional interventions with children. The therapist creates a safe space by involving and informing the children and young people they work with from the start. Being clear and transparent with the child or young person as to why they have been referred to art therapy initially helps to create a space of trust. Providing a consistent space where they can attend each week to create and speak helps to build on this trust and establishes continuity and feelings that this is a safe space. Assessment is ongoing and this informs if further therapeutic interventions or other services are required to realistically support and enhance the resilience of the child. The review will ascertain the need for further therapeutic counselling or case closure.

**- What trauma informed practices are in place?**

Given the history of Northern Ireland and the roll out of trauma-informed care principles in schools, Relate NI school counsellors compliment this with our understanding of child development & awareness of issues impacting such young people. Relate NI staff have been trained in Risk Assessment & Management at regular intervals along with Safeguarding and Child Protection Training.

Trauma Informed Approaches are utilised. Establishing a safe, consistent space for children and young people to build trust, create, play and process their experiences. This approach centres on the involvement of the child but calls on the involvement of parents/carers and/or teachers/teaching staff. Involving these key figures in the child's life ensures progress is made outside the counselling room.

Issues such as addiction, poverty, abuse and neglect, domestic violence, family difficulties including communication issues and/or conflict, family separation & divorce, hidden harm of alcohol & substance abuse, trauma (including impact of community issues), bullying, loss and illness of family members can have a long lasting and traumatic impact. In addition, Relate NI practitioners also have experience supporting children with anxiety, including academic anxiety and stress, social anxiety, and peer relationships difficulties. Over Lockdown Relate NI have experience supporting pupils with social & emotional issues (including issues resulting from COVID-19 because of the pandemic & lost learning) by providing online counselling support to children of primary school age.

### **- How are children and young people involved?**

Children and young people are integral to the process. Children and Young People are involved as early in the referral/assessment process as possible this ensures autonomy and that the child's voice is recognised throughout the process. Throughout the child or young person's time in therapy they will decide what they speak about.

The child is the client. The client sets the goals for therapy, with input from parents and teachers as appropriate. Relate NI recognises that moving from a position of powerlessness to re-establishing self-respect can enable and support parents and their children address their difficulties and have an opportunity to achieve their potential.

To assess children who have been referred for counselling it is crucial counsellors have specific training which enables them to understand appropriate engagement with children and who can conduct a comprehensive initial assessment of their needs and capacity to engage in the process. Relate NI information leaflets for use with pupils, parents and schools' staff refer to the complaint's procedure.

Here is what our clients tell us:

- *"I feel calmer now"* Child accessing schools counselling
- *"I like having a place to express myself"* Child accessing schools counselling
- *"I learned that I am a good artist, you helped me with being in P3, I feel less worried about school"* Child accessing schools counselling

### **• Understanding and mapping funding available within the education setting across Northern Ireland**

**- What funding is currently available for mental health interventions within the education sector, including wellbeing interventions (PE art music) and resilience training/ MH programmes (such as those that aim to prevent anxiety), stress management, goal setting, mindfulness, nurture, healthy happy minds and interventions for children who have symptoms (counselling, play therapy)?**

Relate NI currently offering school counselling for 13 Primary schools under FSCN funding, 2 Primary schools under MUMO and 5 Primary schools under Healthy Happy Minds.

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