

DELIVERING SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN TO NAVIGATE ADOLESCENCE WITH GREATER RESILIENCE

A pathfinding adolescent mental health project in China

The imperative to address adolescent mental health issues in China

China is home to 146 million adolescents who are undergoing a critical transition from childhood to adulthood that is fraught with challenges.

Based on the available data from a 2013 national survey by the China Adolescent Mental Health Research Group, an estimated 23 per cent of urban adolescents were found to be suffering from mild to moderate depression, and nearly 13 per cent were suffering from severe depression.¹ A survey conducted in 2017 among 15,415 in-school students showed that around one third of adolescents reported anxiety.² A total of 30 million children and adolescents under 17 are estimated to have behavioural and emotional problems in China, among which around 50 to 70 per cent need mental health services but remain untreated.³ This comes at a staggering cost to families and communities, as the consequences of not addressing mental health conditions extend to adulthood, impairing both physical and mental health and limiting opportunities to lead fulfilling lives as adults. Tackling mental health problems in adolescents and building up positive mental states is likely to lay the foundation for better adult health, including mental health.

A SCHOOL-BASED WEEKEND CAMP IN SHANDONG

On a Saturday morning, Jinnuo Lee, 16 years old, went to her high school in Huantai county, Shandong Province, to attend a weekend camp activity supported by UNICEF. A dozen of her schoolmates joined her.

“The facilitator asked us to close our eyes, put our hands on our laps, straighten our backs and listen to our own breathing.” This made Jinnuo wonder, “We breathe every day, so what’s the point of this?” Soon, she felt the effects of the ‘mindfulness’ exercise. “After a few attempts, my body started to relax, and all these irritable and anxious feelings hanging over me simply slipped away without being noticed.”

Under the guidance of the facilitator, Jinnuo and her group also rehearsed a skit, re-enacting and interpreting the different relationships with schoolmates, teachers, and parents, as well as the romantic relationship. Through the skit, Jinnuo and her friends learned how to manage and relieve their emotions. “It brought a calming of mind and soul, and comfort from friends. It was almost a transformative experience and it was much better than the usual weekends filled only with homework” she recalled.

A pathfinding adolescent mental health project

In 2016, UNICEF joined forces with the National Health Commission to launch the ‘Adolescent Health and Development Project’ in 14 districts and counties of 11 provinces nationwide. The project focuses on preventative intervention to build adolescents’ awareness, knowledge and skills for better mental health and provide information on when and where they can access services. This project will reach over half a million adolescent girls and boys from more than 430 schools with a comprehensive mental health services package.

The adolescent mental health service package includes:

- Positive psychology and group sessions in schools for adolescents
- Mindfulness-based stress reduction and attention exercises
- Screening and referral for mental health disorders in health facilities
- Online communication on adolescent mental health

1— China Adolescent Mental Health Research Group, China adolescent mental health report, China Science and Technology Press, 2013. Data was collected using a scale of depression for self-assessment, but scored by staff who have professional qualifications

2— Luo X, Zhou Y, Zheng R, et al. Association of health-risk behaviors and depressive symptoms and anxiety symptoms: a school-based sample of Chinese adolescents [published online ahead of print, 2019 Oct 22]. J Public Health (Oxf). 2019;fdz115. doi:10.1093/pubmed/fdz115

3— National Project on Mental Health (2002-2010), China Department for Disease Control and Prevention, Ministry of Health, 2002. In: China Health Information Profile. World Health Organization Regional Office for the Western Pacific, 2010.

The package, which targets general and at-risk adolescents, is being delivered via school-based initiatives, and implemented by trained teachers or counsellors. Adolescents can access health education lectures, group sessions, and summer or holiday camps. The package is complemented with online mental health communication via the '12320' public health hotline and social media posts. At-risk adolescents, identified by teachers/counsellors or hotline staff, can also access community-based initiatives implemented by health providers. The package also reaches parents through parent classes.

In 2018:

- More than 80,000 adolescent students in the project areas participated in various health promotion activities (including health education lectures and group sessions)
- More than 130,000 teachers and parents participated in adolescent health seminars
- 20 per cent of the 310,000 calls made from pilot areas to the '12320' hotline related to mental health

The camp has become a vital channel for delivering the service package in pilot areas since 2018. In a two-to-three-day camp over a holiday or weekend, adolescents learn and practice how to manage their emotions, relieve stress, maintain peer and parent relationships, and cope with anxiety. Through lectures, games, and group sessions a variety of strategies are used to help children. To date, thirty camps have been conducted in the pilot areas, benefiting around one thousand students.

UNICEF hopes to document lessons from this pilot so that programmes to build resilience can be replicated and scaled up to benefit all adolescents in China.

The key actions in the pilot project

- Promote the development and introduction of adolescent mental health related policies.
- Conduct school-based mental health courses, group sessions and parent classes through multi-sectoral collaboration.
- Invite a team of mental health professionals to develop practical manuals for preventive care, stress reduction and strengthening resilience, as well as screening and early identification of adolescents with additional mental health needs.
- Develop case identification and referral systems and links to professional psychological institutions where more clinical support is needed.
- Conduct training to improve the mental health service capacity of school doctors, '12320' public health hotline counsellors and maternal and child health practitioners.
- Increased capacity within Maternal and Child Health Hospitals in the project areas to provide counselling and referral services for adolescents' mental health concerns.

"The weekend camp had a great impact on me. The group of facilitators (mental health care doctors) I interacted with are least concerned with your academic performance. Instead, they care about whether you are happy. What matters is not whether you are outstanding, but whether you are healthy. So, they do not see us as machines only capable of taking exams. I truly had a keen sense of the human touch and care from them"

— Wenhong Tian, a 16-year-old high school student after attending the camp.

"The camp bridged us and the adolescents. What we passed on to the adolescents in the three days is limited, but they can think of what they learned when they encounter troubles in the future, or they can consider coming to us for help, which may also be a long-term effect of our camp."

— Yanshan Zong, a member of the medical staff after facilitating a camp.



"In this camp, we practiced how to face the mental health issues that may happen as we grow up, how to sense our emotions, and come to terms with the fact that it's just fine to have negative emotions."

In Jiaxin city, Zhejiang Province of China, a group of adolescent girls and boys participated in an adolescent mental health camp during the national holiday in October. The camp has been introduced and promoted in pilot areas of the Adolescent Health and Development Project which was jointly implemented by the National Health Commission and the UNICEF China office. These adolescents experienced helpful mental health approaches, including positive psychology, mindfulness exercises and group sessions.