

My researcher journey: How do young people want to be consulted when it comes to their mental health?

Ruby Porter, is a Counsellor at Faversham Counselling Services. She was awarded a Springboard Individual Development Award by the Applied Research Collaboration Kent, Surrey and Sussex (ARC KSS), to help her develop her research skills in children and young people's mental health. Read her story below.



Introduction

As a person-centred counsellor, based in Faversham, Kent, we regularly work with adults (18+) and run projects such as 'talk it out' which is a group dynamic, educating individuals about their wellbeing and delivers a great sense of community to discuss with others.

Inspired by these groups, I wanted to create a similar environment for younger people (14 to 16-year-olds). Something that would capture what was important to them, giving them the opportunity to discuss this, so that their views could be integrated into new approaches.

Fortunately, I received some funding from the Applied Research Collaboration Kent, Surrey and Sussex (ARC KSS) to help build my research skills and this enabled me to do just that. Inspired by some previous training and having attended a local conference, where I had heard young people talk about what is important to them when it comes to their mental health, I embarked on my research project that would help me identify the best way to engage with my chosen target audience.

Tell us about your approach

One of the first things I learnt was the importance of involving and engaging with people in research, right from the start. So, I worked closely with a 14-year-old member of the public, who helped me write the research questions in a language that young people could understand and relate to. They also taught me how to create a relaxed environment, when inviting people to attend a group session, so that contributors felt comfortable within the group setting and who they were with.

Another public advisor, who has lived experience of mental health challenges and had previous experience of working with young people in group settings, helped me take into consideration: how to facilitate the sessions; how to portray the questions to the young people; and the protocols needed to be put in place to safeguard these young people. For example, putting in place a code of conduct, at the beginning of the session, to ensure structure, expectations and safety before we started.



How did you recruit your people to your research project?

To recruit young people to contribute to the discussion, posters were sent to mental health professionals, and shared through social media platforms and by word of mouth. We needed the contributors to be aged 14–16 years, living in Medway or Thanet area, in order to find out how young people wanted to be consulted before they accessed adult services and so that the results could be used to inform practice within my organisation.

My aim was to build connections with local professionals, to collaborate ideas, showcase this to my place of work and produce outputs from my findings to make positive change/impacts to those working with younger people.

What was the response?

We had a great response. More than 100 individuals contacted us to take part and more than 70 parental and young person consent forms were sent out, as a result. The young people chosen to take part in the research, were selected on a first come first served basis. And, the individuals that did not have the chance to take part in the research all said they are happy to take part in future projects.

The results of my research have been used to create a case study to educate professionals on:

- how young people want to be communicated with
- what decisions they would like to be part of
- what counsellors can do to make their environments more relaxed
- their lack of knowledge of the transition period to adult services and
- how they would like to be educated about this and the role of young practitioners in their place of education/community and current themes/topics affecting their age group.

What difference has this award made to you and the young people you support?

This award has several benefits to me at my current stage. First, I was able develop my skills engaging with another client group. As currently I only work with individuals 18 and above, I am passionate about taking my counselling skills to this particular age group.

Moreover, I was interested in taking the lead on a project by running my own group discussions, where the findings could have real world impact. In my degree, I loved interviewing health care professionals in my dissertation exploring men's mental health. This award allowed me to take my knowledge of case study writing to a much larger scale and increase my skills in transferring knowledge into practice.

This project allowed me to communicate the findings on how mental health professionals, parents and teachers could better communicate with young people around their mental health and also the things they would like to see in place.



What was one of the key findings that you learnt from this project?

One of the key findings was how young people find ease discussing mental health with people who are their age or a young adult. They described that they can communicate with less judgment and understanding of what they are currently facing. From this, I hope this could enhance peer workers in mental health services, peers finding more spaces to showcase their voice and developing a community of young people to enhance positive mental health.

As a 24-year-old counsellor in the mental health profession, I also hope this will influence other young people to develop a career in mental health to help younger patients/clients.

Launched in 2023 the Springboard Individual Development Awards (IDAs), have been developed specifically to support individuals, employed by health and social care provider organisations in Kent, Surrey and Sussex, to take their research ideas and projects forward by providing them with financial support and a bespoke training programme - including a professional mentor.

Individuals selected come from a range of different employers including: universities, schools, NHS Trusts, local authorities and the voluntary sector. These projects usually last around six months.

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