CONCERNS FOR OUR YOUNG PEOPLE

OCTOBER 2025

This report is put together by the group facilitators at Hope's Place who work with children and young people in school settings in Bristol. The contents of this report should be read and understood as being the reflections & opinions of the facilitators, and as such are in no way conclusive or exhaustive, or indicative of the issues facing all young people, or those outside Hope's Place current remit. These reflections are an attempt to clarify the main themes facilitators have seen across their work with young people, so that stakeholders and interested parties can gain insight into the lives of the young people who access Hope's Place groups, and therefore also (it can reasonably be concluded) a number of their peers. Please also note that what is contained here is the perspective of facilitators who only work with female students, as reflects the work of Hope's Place at the time of writing. This is a working document which can be updated and adapted when we return to working with boys.

Although outlined here as separate concerns, many of the issues here often co-exist.

1. SEXUALISATION OF CHILDREN

Increasingly, we are seeing children and young people exposed to adult themes and **sexualised language, mimicry and behaviours**. This is evident from the early years of primary school but becomes increasingly 'normalised' towards Year 5 and beyond. Young people are engaging in sexual activity from the early teenage years (and younger) and it is now considered more 'normal' than ever before to have intimate sexual partners from the early years of secondary school onwards. Schools/DoE are feeling the need to respond, therefore expanding the topics covered in RSHE to include sexual behaviours such as masturbation (Year 6). It is important to support children and young people through topics that if left to navigate alone, would lead to increased vulnerability. However, formerly introducing early the concept of sexual behaviours (as a reaction to the increased sexuality of children), runs the risk of glossing over the reasons for the increase which, among other things, is arguably caused by children with pre-existing **unaddressed trauma or other emotional/attachment needs** being impacted by their social media, gaming or pornography use. Providing ongoing support and education around the topics of self-worth, comparison, healthy decision-making and giving children opportunities for children to feel a sense of belonging, would address the root causes of their need to connect. Children who feel loved, seen & heard and who have a healthy sense of self are more able to make positive choices and remain within a network of safety.

2. HARMFUL SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR

Sexual abuse of children by children is increasing in schools. The National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) report on police reported child sexual abuse and exploitation[1] states that in 2023, **52% of perpetrators of child sexual abuse were aged 10-17 years old**; 17% of these cases were rape and **41% the sharing of indecent images of a child**. Facilitators at Hope's Place now see that the requesting and exchanging of explicit photos is now considered to be an 'expected' stage of many young people's partner relationships.

The increased sexualisation of children and young people can create a culture where sexual behaviour/language considered 'normal' by some children, also leads to an unsafe environment for others. Girls in our groups report that being called 'whore' or 'slag' and even being threatened with rape is part of what

they consider everyday 'normality' at school. **92% of girls in schools report that sexual harassment happens to them either sometimes or a lot**.[2]

Young people have 24/7 access to pornography, including extreme and violent content which, in boys, is found to have a negative effect on their social interactions and their expectations of girls. This manifests itself at school through name-calling and sexual touching, as well as direct and indirect sexual threats in the corridor, the playground and the classroom. These incidents can continue outside of school; online and in-person. In girls, it has a harmful effect on their expectations of sex and relationships, as well as negatively impacting their view of themselves and their female peers, resulting in name-calling and abuse. In the Children's Commissioner's report into pornography and young people[3], 47% of respondents believed that girls 'expect' sex to involve physical aggression. There is pressure on both boys and girls to use their sexuality as a form of social survival which exploits their need for sense of identity, belonging and validation; it leaves all young people vulnerable.

Whilst all children are at risk of being sexually exploited, there are obviously specific risk factors that make some more vulnerable, such as family poverty or instability; SEND; being in the care system; previous abuse or neglect and community factors such as a lack of safe space or local criminality. Girls are nearly five times more likely to be sexually exploited than boys.

3. SOCIAL MEDIA/ONLINE PLATFORMS

Social media platforms can provide ways for young people to find connection and pursue interests. They provide means by which young people can nurture a sense of belonging and identity; however, this can quickly become polarising and can create **algorithm-led 'echo-chambers'** where a young person's social media feed exacerbates negative feelings or extreme views/beliefs. The constant stream of algorithm-created content, based on misinformation or lacking in nuance (or even reality) doesn't give opportunities for young people to fact-check or objectively question what they're consuming; it quickly **creates their 'reality'** and informs their worldview and sense of self. People are fast-becoming addicted to the dopamine hit provided by their social media feeds; children and young people's developing brains are especially vulnerable.

Young people often rely on social media for self-validation. The number of 'likes' or the content of a comments section is the **barometer by which many gauge their popularity and likeability**. Life is often lived through the lens of their phone, and documenting in film even the most mundane activities is expected to evoke a reaction in a young person's online community. **Young people are lured into believing that being *seen* is the same as being *known*,** and the relentless strive for validation is exhausting our young people. It does not deliver the deep-rooted sense of belonging and self-worth they need, it merely sets the standard of validation ever higher.

The sheer number of influences a young person is exposed to (we regularly hear of young people spending up to 8-9 hours a day accessing online content) is creating a situation where they don't know what to believe, how to feel, who they are or how to act; they have too many voices vying for their attention and so they live in a constant state of overwhelm. Being exposed to myriad points of view and choices results in them (consciously or not) continually comparing themselves with others, often resulting in feelings of dissatisfaction or failure. They are bombarded with so many potential identities/lifestyles/belief systems to choose from, they get stuck; frozen in a state of questioning who they need to try to be, whilst constantly wondering if they're enough for everybody.

We undoubtedly now live in a culture of self-promotion, where individual voices clamour over each other in an effort to seek validation; yet our young people are experiencing a decreasing **decline in their sense of self** and their own **worth & potential**. It is a modern paradox that sees children and young people encouraged more than ever before to explore their unique place in the world and that emphasises the *individual*, whilst simultaneously creating **ever-increasing levels of anxiety, self-harm and low-resilience**.

YoungMinds[1] reports that 34% of young people want to leave social media at least once a week but feel they can't, meanwhile the Millenium Cohort study[2] revealed that 48% young people feel addicted to social media (of which 57% were girls).

Young people are particularly vulnerable to the negative impact of extreme social media when they lack safe & nurturing relationships in their home & community. Such connections might act as 'anchors' for them (and might help them 'sift' through the many 'voices'); they find instant belonging and pre-packaged identity in their online feeds. Stabilising relationships are key to young people being able to healthily navigate the world of social media, where they can grow a strong sense of self and the ability to think independently.

4. EXTREME VIEWS/BELIEF SYSTEMS

As mentioned above, online platforms use algorithms to personalise future content based on previous use. One click on a video can lead to an entire feed of videos based on the topic/creator of the original 'click'. If a user watches a video of someone baking a cake, their feed will immediately give them more videos about baking; the more of these you watch, the more baking videos you get – a positive outcome if you want to learn more about baking. However, the videos will always diverge into the more extreme; they may go from a video of someone making a birthday cake to another of someone attempting to make the 'largest cake in the world', to finally one showing someone throwing a cake at someone else and the fist-fight which ensues.

This is (arguably) harmless if the content is reasonably innocuous. However, a person's social media feed initially offers a spectrum of topics and if the video you click on is, for example, pro-Donald Trump content, the videos fed via the algorithm may very quickly migrate away from mainstream politics towards promoting fundamentalist or nationalist ideas. NASUWT's report on behaviour in schools[1] states an increase in young people's **far-right** views. We suspect even more so since the death of Charlie Kirk. Whilst we want to encourage young people to have opinions and have healthy debate of important topics, the extreme nature of some the views witnessed via their social media uploads is something of which to be mindful, especially those which incite or promote intolerance. A report by TES[2] states that suspensions for racist behaviour have increased by 220% in the last three years in primary schools alone.

Likewise, another source of extremism is the **'manosphere'**[3] - the collective online world which promotes alpha-masculinity and misogyny. There are sub-communities within the manosphere, each basing their ideology on a specific variant of a misogynistic worldview, such as the call for women to remain out of the workplace (to be solely child-bearers), the domination of women (which includes the right for a man to physically abuse his female partner) or the call for the legalisation of rape. These sub-communities often overlap and have their own shared parlance. Whilst originally operating in the margins of the internet, these communities are now in many senses mainstream, and exist very much in the everyday social media feeds of our young people. We know that how much social media informs a young person's sense of reality and worldview – therefore these views are easily filtered down to the corridors and classrooms of our schools. Again, it is also important to remember that due to algorithms, a user might watch a video posted by a male fitness influencer but may very soon be given videos by another male fitness influencer who shares misogynistic views, and so forth.

5. BODY IMAGE

This is a **long-term concern for girls, but increasingly evident in boys** as 'gym culture' becomes more mainstream via influencers simply promoting healthy lifestyles, through to 'gym-bros' in the manosphere pontificating that real masculinity is only found in building extreme muscle and adhering to strict dietary regimes.

The beauty industry is bigger than ever; girls as young as 8 or 9 are increasingly using expensive skincare products and filming their GRWM videos; much to the worry and concern of dermatologists who report seeing a large-scale increase in very young girls with skin damage caused by the ingredients of products meant for much older skin. Fillers, veneers and plastic surgery are no longer the option of the few – girls and young women are increasingly reporting that they would engage in the procedures at a young age.

The availability and use of **weight-loss jabs** is now a mainstream way to lose weight but is also unfortunately working against the strides made in the body positivity movement. Once again, thinness (rather than the promotion of genuine and authentic health) is the ideal goal for many of our girls. Eating disorders are still prevalent and increasing amongst boys.

6. STUDENT-SCHOOL CONFLICT

The requirements of schools to meet the social & emotional needs of children in addition to also reaching academic targets (whilst being arguably underfunded to do either) is creating school systems which it could be said, are stretched to breaking point. Hope's Place often witnesses **teacher-student dissonance** caused largely by the ongoing tension between 'blanket' behaviour systems and the individual needs of the student. Whilst it is clear that children need boundaries and to learn the consequences of actions, what we often see is this taken to the extreme; where a child's unique circumstances are not taken into consideration sufficiently, or at all. It is a system in which children who are traumatised or vulnerable are continually punished; where there is no 'wiggle room'. Furthermore, students are being punished over simple instances of human error such as forgetting something once in a whole academic year. For some students, just getting to the school premises is challenging and takes great effort and determination; to be sent to isolation for a whole day because they're not wearing the right shoes when they get there, we believe is counterproductive for that child. This often leads to a breakdown of the relationship between teachers/parents/children and often makes children feel even more anxious/frustrated; this is turn causes them to feel even more disconnected from school and to further negative outcomes. **Schools (and individual teachers) who are able to 'see' the child are able to form deeper connections with them and so positively impact the child's ability to engage and grow.** There is a vast number of staff who do this everyday, and as a result see children progress both socially & emotionally, with increased aspirations for the future. However, children who present complex and unique needs require a system which can behave uniquely to meet those needs, rather than a one-size-fits-all model. Too many of our children are now slipping through the net.

7. SCHOOL ABSENTEEISM

In 2025, it was reported that 21.2% of children are persistently absent from school (missing more than 10%). Children with SEND and those who are vulnerable or from minority groups are more likely to be absent; children eligible for free school meals make up 36.5% of these compared to 15.6% non-eligible.

2% of children are not attending school 50% of the time; this has nearly tripled since the pandemic (0.7%).

The rate of persistent student absence in Bristol is 26%[1] (compared to the national average of 21.2%) and is the 6th highest rate in England[2].

The increase in school absence is thought to be due to a variety of reasons but at Hope's Place, we see three main causes:

1. Lack of provision for children with **SEND**; parents/carers and students do not believe that children's educational needs are being catered for due to a paucity of specialist staff and limited resources. Up to a quarter of cases referred to Local Government and the Social Services Ombudsmen are related to SEND provision, including delayed EHCP assessment, inadequate support provision or failure to implement SEND plans.

2. **Anxiety:** many children are suffering with extreme school-based anxiety due to issues with bullying, a breakdown of relationships with teachers or finding the school environment stressful. This can often be due to undiagnosed special needs or trauma.

3. **Caregiver support:** A number of students tell us that their parents/caregivers do not make efforts to get them into school on the days they don't want to go; anecdotally reporting that they 'don't care' whether the student goes to school or not. Whilst undoubtedly some cases of this are due to neglect on behalf of parents, it should be considered that making little effort to get their child into school may not always be indicative of apathy, rather the result of longstanding efforts to work with the student/school without a satisfactory outcome, therefore leaving parents withdrawing engagement.

8. CRIMINAL EXPLOITATION (to be updated)

Hope's Place has not worked directly with many girls who have been criminally exploited, as we work largely as a preventative service. Whilst both boys and girls can be victims of CCE, boys are more commonly drawn into criminal networks linked to drug supply, theft, violence, or "county lines" operations (9 in 10 children exploited via county lines are boys) whilst girls are more likely to be sexually exploited; however, it is important to remain unbiased and mindful that all children are vulnerable to all types of exploitation. Children living in vulnerable communities (due to criminality or lack of safety), in poverty or experiencing family instability, SEND, experience of abuse or neglect or are in the care system, are especially vulnerable to criminal exploitation. **These circumstances often inform a young people's psychological and material needs; the need for status and identity (for boys, this is often tied into what is believed to be 'masculine'), the promise of financial gain or protection, a desire to 'matter', and the need for belonging and acceptance.**

9. DRUG/ALCOHOL USE

Hope's Place sees some children who use alcohol and drugs (such as nicotine, cannabis or nitrous oxide or ketamine) as coping mechanisms in the absence of appropriate support systems; they use substances to escape their feelings of sadness, anxiety, or loneliness. Alcohol or drugs brings temporary relief from the trauma of abuse, neglect or violence at home, bereavement, bullying or broken relationships. **We see that what can sometimes begin as occasional social use, can quickly develop into a harmful pattern** that affects their physical health, emotional well-being, and relationships with others. Often, children who are trying to cope with these negative circumstances find connection with others who are experiencing similar feelings, and using drugs or alcohol together creates a shared experience that gives them a sense of belonging and connection. We find that sometimes children start using substances as part of a group activity, but go on to also use drugs or alcohol when they are alone.

Children of parents who misuse substances are at higher risk of developing substance use issues themselves. According to a report by Public Health England[1], 40 in every 1000 families in England has a parent who misuses substances. This has obvious consequences for the child who may experience anxiety, depression, and behavioural problems due to inconsistent parenting, exposure to conflict, or feelings of shame and isolation. Academically, they are more likely to struggle at school and may have difficulties forming healthy relationships. In some cases, children take on caring responsibilities for their parents or younger siblings, which can impact their own development and wellbeing.

10. DOMESTIC ABUSE

Domestic abuse has a profound and lasting impact on children and young people in the UK, affecting their emotional, psychological, and physical wellbeing. Witnessing or experiencing abuse at home can lead to anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and difficulties forming healthy relationships later in life. Many children

may develop behavioural issues, struggle in school, or experience sleep problems and nightmares. Exposure to domestic violence can also cause young people to internalise harmful ideas about power and control, sometimes leading to cycles of abuse in adulthood. In the UK, organisations such as NSPCC and Refuge[1] highlight that children living in abusive environments (not necessarily directly abused) are victims in their own right and early support and intervention are vital to help them recover and build resilience.

As well as being victims of DA in the home, children and young people are experiencing violence in their own partner relationships. Safe Young Lives[2] has found that 94% of these victims were female, whilst 49% of boys and 33% of girls thought that it is sometimes 'okay' to hit a partner.

We see that where unhealthy relationships are present in the home, children and young people have reduced understanding of what makes a healthy relationship, and few aspirations/expectations for their own relationships. Moreover, some young people's low self-esteem informs them that they are also **undeserving of healthy and happy partnerships.**

11. YOUNG CARERS

Being a young carer can have a profound impact on a child's life, both positively and negatively. On one hand, caring for a family member can foster maturity, empathy, and a strong sense of responsibility from an early age. However, it can also place significant emotional and physical strain on the child. Balancing schoolwork, friendships, and caregiving duties often leads to stress, fatigue, and social isolation. Many young carers may struggle to focus in class or miss school due to their responsibilities, which can affect their academic progress and future opportunities. Emotionally, they may experience anxiety, guilt, or worry about the person they care for, sometimes feeling different from their peers who do not share the same burdens. While support networks and understanding teachers can help, the challenges of being a young carer often shape a child's development in complex and lasting ways.

12. BEREAVEMENT

Some of our children are grieving the loss of a loved one/attachment figure. Each year in the UK, 1 in 29 school-aged children (5-16 years) are bereaved of a parent or sibling. Approximately 46,300 children aged 0-17 years are bereaved of a parent each year; that's 127 newly bereaved children every day.

Such loss can have profound effects on a child and it is important that we remember that **we cannot predict how a child may deal with their grief, nor is there a time-limit to it**. Additionally, key attachment figures in a child's life are not limited to biological parents or siblings and may well be other family members/friends who have played important attachment roles in that child's life.

A note from Anna Jeffery, Senior Education Facilitator:

As well as presenting with one or more of these concerns, nearly every young person we encounter in our groups *additionally* presents with inherent **low self-esteem** and an **enduring lack of psychological integration** (below that which is developmentally expected). These things are much more challenging to identify as they are not always the effects of something *happening to* the child; rather, as in cases of neglect, it is what the child *didn't receive* that has done the damage.

Low self-esteem

Believing themselves to be of little or no worth directly impacts young people's everyday choices and future aspirations, as well as making them increasingly vulnerable to others preying on their need for validation and acceptance.

Lack of psychological integration

If young people do not have the support to be able to acknowledge and process their feelings, work effectively through challenges (and learning from them) or have awareness of their own needs; they are left ill-equipped to be able to cope with not only further challenges but in some cases, day-to-day life.

Without a network of sustained support and connection, young people end up just 'surviving' life, without any aspirations or desire for change.

What can be done?

The current Hope's Place 10-week provision focuses on psychoeducation in addition to creating a safe space for young people to talk through some of their thoughts and feelings. For the short period of time we're with them, we are able to 'hold' their experiences without judgement and whilst we listen to them, create space for learning new ways of thinking and tools for coping.

However, experience (and research) shows us that long-term positive change is affected through persistent safe, stable relationships with adults within young people's communities. A child can develop a fundamental sense of safety when the system around them is able to work in ways that are suitably tailored to their needs, in order to **consistently** provide –

- a sense of belonging

- championing

- psychoeducation

- opportunities to be heard

- stable adult-child relationships

Therefore, as the needs of the children and young people being referred to Hope's Place groups become more complex and longstanding, it becomes more urgent for Hope's Place to adapt its service. If the 10-week model proves unable to meet the long-term needs of children, we must ask what more we can do to provide some of the safe and stable relationships they require; how can we integrate ourselves into these children's communities in a consistent and sustained way? Is there further training required so that facilitators can more suitably meet need?

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