



Extended Research Article

Enhancing referrals to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services: the EN-CAMHS mixed-methods study

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Plain language summary

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Plain language summary

National Health Service Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services are specialist teams that assess and treat children and young people with mental health problems. Overall, 497,502 children were referred between 2020 and 2021, almost one quarter of these were unsuccessful. Reasons for unsuccessful referrals include: not following the correct referral process, or because the child is not deemed to meet referral criteria. This is often distressing for children and families who are turned away, and costly to services because time is wasted reviewing referrals which should have been referred for alternative help.

The overarching aim of this study is to understand fully what the problems are and how we can develop solutions that can improve the success of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services referrals. We analysed patient data from nine Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, and referral data from four National Health Service Trusts to look at factors, such as age, gender and ethnicity of children and young people referred to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services. There was wide variation in the numbers of referrals between and within Trusts and in the proportions not being successful for treatment. Problems identified included: confusion about what Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services do and do not provide; and lack of support provided during the referral process.

We also talked to over 60 individuals who have different perspectives on the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services referral process (children and young people, parents and carers, key referrers, and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services professionals) and asked about the current difficulties within the referral process. Next, we talked to 45 children and young people, people working in Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services and health professionals about potential solutions to improve the referral process. We shared our findings with professionals who influence policy, and at an event with young people, parents/carers, key referrers and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services professionals to determine what we should do next. Patient and public involvement was an important aspect of this project and we had extensive input across all stages to ensure findings reflected the views of children and young people, parents and professionals.

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