

Understanding mental health and wellbeing in intermediate and lower secondary school students



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School resources

In New Zealand, students in intermediate school and at the start of secondary school are typically aged between 11 and 15-years-old. These students are often undergoing significant changes to their lives, including potentially transitioning between schools, experiencing social changes and puberty, being introduced to social media, and starting to figure out who they are in the world. Many students at this age can experience challenges to their mental health and wellbeing for the first time, and can have difficulty adjusting to the different ways of working and interacting in intermediate and high school. While people often associate mental health challenges with older teenagers, 11–15-year-olds do experience mental health, emotional, and behavioural challenges.

Schools are one of the most important places where mental health support is offered, and where students learn about mental health and wellbeing. However, intermediate schools often have less resource to respond to mental health needs than secondary schools. This guide will outline some important information for teachers in intermediate school and the early years of secondary school about mental health, particularly for those not formally tasked with or trained in wellbeing support. This will include discussing how mental health challenges typically present in 11–15-year-olds, some common issues that impact wellbeing for these young people, the role of mental health education, and how teachers can support students within their roles.

What teachers of 11–15-year-olds need to know about mental health and wellbeing

Imagine a 13-year-old student who has just transitioned into secondary school. Their new school is much larger than their old school, and they know only a handful of students. This student's parents separate during their first term of school. The student has not yet built trust with the teachers, and does not know how to talk about what is happening or to whom. They feel scared and uncertain about what will happen next and who will help them. What pressures related to this student's context might impact their wellbeing? How might navigating this as a 13-year-old be different to how an older, or younger, student would respond to this challenge? How could it impact them in the school context? Considering the student's perspective is an important first step, and this guide will offer some guidelines for navigating these kinds of scenarios.

The spectrum of mental health, development, and wellbeing: Within intermediate schools and the first few years of high school, there is significant variation in students' physical, social, and cognitive development. There can also be a lot of variation across settings – for example, students who remain in the same school for primary and intermediate school will have a different experience to those transitioning to a large intermediate school. Teachers will be very aware of this spectrum of development as it relates to their student's social lives and academic performance. Importantly, it also relates to student mental health and wellbeing.

Mental health and wellness is a spectrum, with the World Health Organization defining good mental health as not only the absence of mental health challenges but the presence of a state of holistic wellbeing and the ability to respond flexibly to the challenges we face¹. Students with good mental health and wellness will have access to sufficient supports and strategies, both within themselves and in their

communities, to cope with the stress, pressure, and emotional challenges they experience without being overwhelmed. Importantly, many students aged 11-15 will be encountering new challenges for the first time, and will also often be responding to these without the same supports in place on which they may have relied in the past. As a result, some students can feel overwhelmed by new stressors that they have not previously experienced.

All students will experience challenges related to the school setting and beyond the gates. Their emotional wellbeing will vary, and often fluctuate, on the spectrum from a consistent state of mental and emotional wellness to, in some cases, a major mental health challenge. Promoting students' understanding of their mental and emotional wellbeing, and intervening early to support students before they develop a major mental health challenge, are essential to promoting wellbeing for this age group. Teachers can be an important source of both information and support.

Understanding poor mental health and wellbeing: In New Zealand, most students in this age range do not have major social, emotional, or behavioural challenges², and younger students tend to have better wellbeing than older students³. For those that do experience mental health challenges, the most common at these ages are diagnoses related to anxiety and fear, [obsessive-compulsive](#) and related presentations, feeding and eating, and stress⁴. Importantly, the peak age of onset for both anxiety and obsessive-compulsive and related presentations is before the age of 15⁵. However, many teachers report that younger students are increasingly presenting with mental health challenges more commonly seen in older students, such as mood symptoms and suicidal thoughts or behaviour. Some students are more vulnerable to developing major mental health challenges, including Rainbow young people, those of minority ethnicities, and those with disabilities or [neurodivergence](#).

What teachers might see in students struggling with their mental health and wellbeing

It can sometimes be challenging as outside observers to tell when a student is struggling in a busy classroom environment, particularly if you do not know a student well, or do not see them often. This can be challenging in intermediate and at the start of secondary school, with teachers often knowing students for shorter periods of time and managing students of numerous developmental stages in one classroom. Identifying mental health or wellbeing decline early is important because the earlier support is offered, the more likely it is to have a positive impact on the young person. The early stage of wellbeing decline is also when teachers can have great impact – before formal supports need to be provided.

One common sign to look out for is behaviour change. This could include noticing a student's behaviour has changed inside and outside of the classroom. Teachers might see difficulties getting along with friends, aggressive or disruptive behaviour, loss of appetite or pickiness about food, or a change in how a student speaks in the classroom⁶. Teachers might also notice changes to academic performance, such as differences in homework or classwork completion.

But what should teachers do if they do not know a student well enough to know whether the behaviour they are seeing is a change – for example, if the student is new to the school? This is particularly likely to occur for 11–15-year-old students, and can result in students falling between the gaps or going unnoticed. Keeping an eye on how students are adjusting can help with this. Signs a student might not be adjusting could include challenges finding friends or getting along with peers, tearfulness, difficulty engaging with schoolwork, or expressing worries and fears. It can also be very important to talk with and listen to families who may notice differences or have concerns.

There can be many reasons why a student's behaviour and academic output changes or why adjusting is tough, and it is not always indicative of mental health and wellbeing challenges. Additionally, many students experiencing a decline to their wellbeing might not show signs or feel comfortable telling a teacher how they feel. Noticing signs is not the only path to getting support for a student, but can provide an opportunity to speak to students or their families about their wellbeing broadly, to discuss how they are adjusting to school, and to determine whether they could benefit from any additional support.

How to support students' positive mental health and wellbeing

Mental health education: One unique challenge for teachers of this age group is that students have a widely varied understanding of mental health and wellbeing. This is often the age at which students begin talking about mental health more with friends, interacting with mental health-related content on social media, and learning about health and wellness in school. Some students might have had access to social media for some time already and could have been exposed to many ideas about mental health, while others might only have heard about this in school health classes, if at all.

Within this context of varied understanding, many students will have questions and curiosities about mental health and wellbeing, including what it means and how to support their friends. School provides an excellent opportunity to engage young people with meaningful conversations about mental health, and it is important that we take this time to provide accurate, engaging information and to challenge myths about mental health to which they may be exposed.

Suggested actions: All schools, regions, and countries will vary in their expectations of mental health education in schools and whether a formalised curriculum is expected. In New Zealand, [guidelines](#) are available⁷ to support schools and teachers to understand the role of mental health education and what this can look like in their setting. If your school has a mental health education programme in place, reviewing what is being taught is a great step to understanding what your students' understanding of mental health might be. Consider reviewing the education currently in place against resources on good practice in your region, such as the New Zealand Mental Health Education guidelines.

If your school does not include mental health education, consider raising this with the senior leadership. Education on mental health and wellbeing is very valuable for young people aged 11-15, and can be woven into other aspects of the curriculum. Teachers who teach for wellbeing have a positive impact on wellbeing⁸, so it might be worth considering how wellbeing could be integrated into your work in the classroom. Consider identifying whether your region has any guidelines on mental health education, such as the New Zealand guidelines, and advocate to school leadership that these be reviewed.

Informal support from teachers in schools: Teachers are an incredibly important part of supporting students with their mental health and wellbeing. At this age, students may not explicitly name mental health concerns, but they might express worries or name specific problems, such as with friends, that they want to talk to a trusted adult like a teacher about. Providing opportunities for students to talk to their teachers about challenges they are experiencing is extremely worthwhile. Processes such as anonymous question boxes, or online forums where questions can be posted, allow students to ask for help indirectly and anonymously. Teachers can also be an important touch-point for families and can work collaboratively with families to support young people across multiple settings.

Suggested action: It is important that teachers are aware of how to respond if issues pertaining to mental health arise. A useful first step is to establish who to talk to about student wellbeing within your school. Establishing this pathway proactively means that if a student raises mental health concerns, or expresses challenges, you already know who can help clarify whether the student should be referred to

formal support. Deciding whether students will benefit from formal support, or whether they need some informal connection with a trusted adult, can be complex. It is important that individual teachers do not feel they need to make this decision alone and know who they can talk to if they need to discuss a student's needs.

Formal support in schools: Different school systems, both within and across countries, will have different supports and programs available to support student wellbeing. For example, in New Zealand intermediate schools often do not have funding to employ a school counsellor.

Suggested actions: Familiarise yourself with your school's resources for supporting student wellbeing and the processes for accessing these. As mentioned above, a good starting point is establishing the school's process for what you should do if you notice a student is struggling or vulnerable, particularly if there are not formal mental health supports available in the school. When supports are available at school, teachers can play an important role in bridging the gap to support. At this age, within-school supports are often the only option for students to access mental health support without family input, if this is their preference. While you may not be involved directly in offering support through school mental health programmes or helping students access these, you can help facilitate this process for students and help them feel more comfortable, such as by sharing information about school counselling.

Schools are essential to a functional mental health response so, if your school does not have capacity to provide formal mental health support, leaders should consider what processes can be put in place, such as policies on how teachers could respond if they are concerned, and how and when the school will involve families or make external referrals. This can help reduce burden and stress for teachers who realise a student is struggling, especially if there are no services available within the school.

Support outside of school: Just as different school systems have different supports within schools for student wellbeing, they will also have different processes for referring students to support outside of school. Referrals to services outside of school will be important if appropriate support is not available in the school or if families would prefer to manage this outside of school. It's a good idea to familiarise yourself with the system in your local area. Many services will require family involvement at this age, although some may not, particularly for teenagers. Services like Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services in the community may require a referral from a professional like a general practitioner or a school counsellor. While you will likely not be responsible for making these referrals, having some knowledge of the services available can help you speak with students or their families if they would like or need support outside of school.

Suggested action: Ask the staff member responsible for student wellbeing at your school who students are referred to if they are struggling with their mental health and need support outside of school.

What is not a teacher's responsibility?

Mental health and wellbeing are complex, and all students have unique needs and worldviews. Teachers may interact with students they believe could benefit from additional support, but they or their families do not believe this support is needed. Having processes in place to inform others in the school when you are concerned is important, so you do not hold this worry alone. Importantly, teachers should never be expected to manage major mental health challenges for which they are not trained. If you are currently managing major mental health challenges in your classroom without support, consider if there is anyone in leadership within your school you can speak to about this. Both your students' safety and your own safety are essential.

Talking about mental health

Talking to students: Students in intermediate school and at the start of high school will have varied baseline knowledge about mental health and wellbeing. This will vary based on the contexts they have grown up in, education they have had in school, and information to which they have been exposed through friends, the community, and online. Many students of this age may be interested in talking and learning about mental health and wellbeing. There are also some broad principles that can be helpful to bear in mind, which are available in [this](#) guide.

Talking to families: Most schools will have policies around informing families about student's mental health, particularly if a student is at risk of harm, if they are younger, or if it is impacting them academically. For this age range, while many students are developing their independence, most health services are only accessible for young people with family support. As a result, it is often important that families be informed according to school policies.

Across this age range, students may have different reactions to speaking to their parents about their wellbeing, and some students can be resistant to informing their families. More information on preparing for this scenario can be found in [this](#) guide. However, most services will not have an expectation that health information shared by an under 16-year-old is confidential from their family. Transparency around who will be spoken to and what will be said can help students develop their agency and make informed decisions.

Suggested action: Clarify what your school's policies are for informing families about student wellbeing, who is responsible, and the school's expectations of confidentiality at different ages.

Talking with external mental health providers: Sometimes an external mental health provider may be in touch with teachers. For example, they may contact the school about modified learning plans for a student. Other students might enter a school with an existing plan which needs to be adopted or modified. Helping smooth the transition for students can be very important for adjustment and long-term engagement with education. If you have engaged with external agencies, mental health or otherwise, in the past, it may be helpful to consider what made that interaction better or more helpful for the student? What made that interaction challenging or less helpful? Consider if there are any learnings to take forward and share with others on what makes external engagement meaningful, or less meaningful, in your classroom.

Key learnings

- While most 11–15-year-olds have good social, emotional, and behavioural health, many will experience mental health challenges. Given the wide range of development across this age range, mental health challenges can look very different.
- Teachers of this age range are often getting to know new students and may have less context about a student's history. Keeping an eye on how students are adjusting and listening to what they and their families say is important for understanding student wellbeing.
- Students at this age will often have questions about mental health and can benefit from meaningful mental health education. Investigating your school's policies and procedures around mental health education is a great start if you are not currently involved in mental health education.
- Knowing your school's processes and policies around mental health in advance ensures teachers can be ready to support students in the moment, rather than worrying about what they can and cannot do or what the school offers. This is particularly important at schools that do not have traditional formal mental health supports, like counsellors, available at school.

- Relationships with families are often an important part of support for students of this age, as supports often are not available without family involvement. While students will vary in their interest in involving families, it is important to understand your school's expectations of this.
- Finding your own support is important. You may be involved in decisions like how to answer tricky questions about mental health, supporting students to talk to their family or school counsellors, or managing behaviour in class. You should not feel alone in these decisions.

Endnotes

- 1 World Health Organization (2022). Mental Health Fact Sheet. Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-health-strengthening-our-response>
- 2 Ministry of Health (2018). Social, emotional and behavioural difficulties in New Zealand children: Summary of findings. Wellington: Ministry of Health. Retrieved from <https://www.health.govt.nz/publication/social-emotional-and-behavioural-difficulties-new-zealand-children-new-zealand-health-survey>
- 3 Lawes, E., & Boyd, S. (2018). Making a difference to student wellbeing: A data exploration. New Zealand Council for Educational Research. Retrieved from <https://www.nzcer.org.nz/research/publications/making-difference-student-wellbeing-data-exploration>
- 4 Solmi, M., Radua, J., Olivola, M. et al. (2022). Age at onset of mental disorders worldwide: Large-scale meta-analysis of 192 epidemiological studies. *Molecular Psychiatry*, 27, 281–295 <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41380-021-01161-7>
- 5 Uhlhaas, P.J., Davey, C.G., Mehta, U.M. et al. (2023). Towards a youth mental health paradigm: A perspective and roadmap. *Molecular Psychiatry*, 28, 3171–3181, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41380-023-02202-z>
- 6 See <https://raisingchildren.net.au/pre-teens/mental-health-physical-health/about-mental-health/teen-mental-health> for a useful list of other behavioural changes you might notice.
- 7 Ministry of Education (2022). Mental Health Education Years 1-13: A guide for teachers, leaders, and school boards. <https://hpe.tki.org.nz/guidelines-and-policies/mental-health-education/>
- 8 Lawes & Boyd, 2018.

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