



Implementing Youth MHFAiders

Guide for schools, colleges, and
youth settings



MHFA England

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Welcome

Whether you already have MHFA England® training in your school, college, or youth setting, or are still considering it, this guide is for you.

We all have mental health and, just like our physical health, it needs looking after. This also applies to children and young people. Half of all reported poor mental health is established by the age of 14 years old and more than 200 school-aged young people are lost to suicide every year. Poor mental health that presents during childhood and adolescence can have lifelong effects that impact upon a range of adult outcomes. These include employment, the ability to establish and maintain healthy relationships, and general health and wellbeing.

It has been reported that 6% of young people surveyed in England aged 10–15 years old are unhappy with their lives, and nearly 12% are unhappy with school life. There is also a clear relationship between the number of missed school days and the likelihood of having a probable mental health condition.

Due to the lack of Government funding to the NHS, professional mental health help is not always available straight away. Investment in community youth services, such as youth clubs and groups, has also fallen across the country. Despite this, the needs of young people have increased. When these sources of help are not available, those who have attended a Youth MHFA course have the skills and knowledge to provide person-centred, first-response support for 8–18-year-olds. They can help by assessing for any crises and safeguarding concerns, helping young people to feel valued and listened to, and providing crucial signposting information.

To be effective and have a sustainable impact, MHFA England training needs to be implemented as part of a strategic, whole-organisation approach to wellbeing. This guide will take you through the key considerations to help you embed positive, long-term cultural and behavioural change. Every youth setting is unique, so we encourage you to identify the best ways to apply these in your organisation.



Lay the groundwork in your setting

Effective, sustainable approaches to the wellbeing of young people are holistic.



Consider the role of senior staff members

It is important that all senior staff members in every youth setting recognise their responsibility within a whole-setting approach to youth mental health and wellbeing. Having senior staff members champion your mental health initiatives is a powerful way to break down stigma and gain traction across school, college, or youth settings.

Senior leaders should:

- Be responsible for fostering a positive and inclusive culture that prioritises mental health and wellbeing, ensuring that all young people feel safe, valued, and supported
- Ensure that adequate resources are in place such as staff training, wellbeing programmes, and an early intervention approach
- Recognise that positive wellbeing has a well-documented impact on academic progress for young people
- Embed good practice within policy and procedure that supports a whole-setting approach to mental health and wellbeing
- Make young people's wellbeing a key responsibility for all levels of staff
- Give staff of all levels the time, resources, support, and training to proactively support the wellbeing of their young people



Assess how healthy your setting is

Understanding your setting's current status will inform your strategy, your approach, and how you communicate it. If you are relatively new to talking about mental health, we recommend that you gradually introduce the topic, sensitively and whilst raising awareness, before rolling out MHFA England courses.

You can begin to assess levels of wellbeing by using a measurement tool such as the [Stirling Children's Wellbeing Scale](#), which will allow you to identify areas of need. The scale is a psychological tool designed to assess emotional and psychological wellbeing in children, particularly those aged 8–15 years old. Developed in the UK, it focuses on positive aspects of wellbeing – such as optimism, happiness, and self-acceptance – rather than on negative symptoms or disorders. The tool is commonly used in schools, research, and clinical settings to monitor children's wellbeing over time, evaluate interventions, or guide supportive programmes. You can find other measurement tools on the [Child Outcomes Research Consortium website](#), an Anna Freud project.

Lay the groundwork in your setting cont.

You can also use focus groups of staff and young people to understand what those groups' experiences of mental health support are. This can be a challenging and time-consuming process, but it does mean that changes and developments you make will be more meaningful in the long term. Find some advice on taking this approach from [Mentally Healthy Schools](#).



Refine your overall strategy

Building a wellbeing strategy centered around the whole person is essential for fostering a supportive environment where young people can thrive academically, emotionally, and socially. By addressing mental health from multiple angles – such as emotional, social, and physical wellbeing – youth settings create a more inclusive culture that supports prevention, intervention, and postvention. This work is more effective when everyone is engaged, including parents/carers.

[The Whole School and College Approach Measurement toolkit](#) is a free resource that helps education settings develop a co-ordinated approach to promoting emotional wellbeing, identifying emotional and mental health challenges early on, and providing support to those who need it.

The toolkit works in line with guidance on [eight key principles of a whole-school or college approach to mental health and wellbeing](#), published by the Department for Education (DfE) and Public Health England:

- Leadership and management
- Ethos and environment
- Curriculum, teaching, and learning
- Student voice
- Staff development, health and wellbeing
- Identifying need and monitoring impact
- Working with parents, families, and carers
- Targeted support and appropriate referrals

The resource contains practical actions that education professionals can take to develop a whole, setting approach on their own terms.



Lay the groundwork in your setting cont.



Review your practices

Review your processes, practices, and policies with mental health and wellbeing in mind. In a school or college setting this might mean looking at all stages from transition to examinations. For example, you might decide that young people should understand that their mental health and wellbeing is important from the moment they join the setting, and that they can talk to staff if they are facing any challenges.



Consider your training framework

We recommend regular youth mental health training for staff. This could go alongside an annual safeguarding update. Training should also work alongside special educational needs training and development to ensure young people with additional needs receive the support they require. Map your training framework against what your staff need to:

- Know
- Understand
- Be able to do

The DfE and Public Health England's guidance outlines that a development framework should include staff wellbeing too, to help adequately support students.

In addition to supporting your young people, if you want to know how MHFA England can teach your employees crucial mental health skills to support each other, get in touch here: workplace@mhfaengland.org.

Raise mental health awareness and tackle stigma throughout your setting to help create a culture where young people feel empowered to contact staff trained in Youth MHFA for support. In a school or college setting, you might think about ensuring mental health and wellbeing is part of the curriculum across all key stages. You may also consider inviting speakers with lived experience of poor mental health or subject experts to deliver assemblies. If you are inviting lived experience speakers into your settings, you should review the content to ensure that it is safe and age-appropriate for your young people.



Create a clear Youth MHFA policy and role document

Setting out a written policy for your organisation's approach to MHFA England training will benefit your MHFAider® network and those they support.

The UK government's 2017 green paper, [Transforming Children and Young People's Mental Health Provision](#), outlined the role of the Senior mental health lead, and whilst they are not a statutory requirement, they are strongly recommended in school settings. In settings with a senior mental health lead, the implementation of Youth MHFAiders is likely to be their responsibility.

Always seek independent legal advice before finalising and implementing a policy. Give your Youth MHFAiders clear documentation containing the expectations and boundaries of their role within your setting. You might want to use MHFA England's Being a Youth MHFAider. Your guide to the role document as a starting point. Consider the points following in your policy.



Self-care and opting out

Remind Youth MHFAiders that they need to look after their own wellbeing. Encourage them to take a break or step down from the role if they feel they need to, and to communicate this with their named contact.



Support for your Youth MHFAiders

Name a contact who is overseeing the initiative. Include details of who the Youth MHFAiders should contact if they have any questions or concerns about their role, or in case they need support themselves.



Responsibilities

Think about any specific responsibilities that Youth MHFAiders will have in your setting, and how these fit in with their normal job duties.

After attending the Youth MHFA course, Youth MHFAiders can:

- Understand the important factors affecting poor mental health
- Identify the signs for a range of types of poor mental health
- Use a five-action plan to provide Youth MHFA to a young person aged between 8–18 years old who is experiencing poor mental health, emotional distress, or a mental health crisis
- Listen non-judgementally and hold supportive conversations using the Youth MHFA action plan
- Signpost young people to professional help, recognising that their role as a Youth MHFAider does not replace the need for ongoing support

MHFA England courses do not teach people to be counsellors or to diagnose mental health conditions. Instead, the courses prepare them to act as a point of contact, reassure a young person who may be experiencing poor mental health or emotional distress, and signpost them to professional, or other, support.

Create a clear Youth MHFA policy and role document cont.



Making reflective notes after a Youth MHFA conversation

After a Youth MHFA conversation, we recommend asking your Youth MHFAiders to make reflective notes using the MHFAider Support App® conversations feature. The reflections are not formal notes and should be written after the conversation to remind the Youth MHFAider of how they felt themselves, anything that concerned them, and any actions they took. They should be used primarily as a reflective tool.

Youth MHFAiders don't need to ask the young person's permission to make notes, but it is good practice to explain the benefits. These include: to support the Youth MHFAider to process a conversation and reflect on how they used their skills, to be a helpful note for any future conversations, and to better understand the impact of the role by seeing how many Youth MHFA conversations they are having and how much time they are spending on Youth MHFA responsibilities.

Optional fields in the reflective note-taking feature are:

- 'Name' of the contact you've had the conversation with. You can also use initials or key words here if you prefer. Always follow your in-house data protection policy.
- 'Notes', where you can record details of how the conversation went for you.

Mandatory fields are:

- 'Date' of when the conversation took place
- 'Duration' of the conversation in minutes
- 'Situation', which describes the main issue(s) discussed
- 'Signposting', which describes any professional or other support that you have encouraged



How to handle immediate danger (a crisis)

Remind Youth MHFAiders that confidentiality never applies when a young person becomes a danger to themselves or others. Ensure Youth MHFAiders understand your setting's safeguarding actions, which they should follow alongside their Youth MHFA action plan if they come across a situation where a young person is at risk of significant harm or if there is a risk to another person.

Youth MHFAiders have a responsibility to always follow your safeguarding policy and should refer any concerns to the Designated Safeguarding Lead as soon as possible. The Designated Safeguarding Lead must have oversight of all children with signs of poor mental health related to a safeguarding concern, or who are at risk of becoming a safeguarding concern. Think about your information-sharing protocols in the two roles.

Create a clear Youth MHFA policy and role document cont.



Time commitments

Establish clear expectations regarding the time commitment required from your Youth MHFAiders, ensuring it can be balanced effectively with their primary responsibilities. This is especially important for staff in school and college settings who have regular classroom duties. Plan for situations where other staff may need to step in to take over classroom duties when a Youth MHFAider is supporting a young person in crisis.

Youth MHFA conversations with young people may arise unexpectedly during a Youth MHFAider's day, requiring staff to balance the young person's needs with their own workload. To manage this effectively, it may be necessary to set clear boundaries on the length of the conversation, whilst also reassuring the young person and suggesting a follow-up meeting later if one is needed. An example of a boundary for the initial conversation might be 30 minutes. This approach ensures both the young person's wellbeing and the staff member's responsibilities are respected. A time limit does not apply if a young person is in crisis.



Links to other relevant policies

Ensure there are close links between your safeguarding policy, behaviour policy, anti-bullying policy, and student wellbeing policy. Ensure that it is clear to the Youth MHFAider how the ethos of a whole-organisation approach to mental health and wellbeing is at the centre of all these policies.



Evaluate the support you have in place for young people

Vital actions in the Youth MHFA action plan include signposting to both professional and other support.

Develop clear referral and assistance pathways so your Youth MHFAiders can signpost young people effectively and safely. The following are key questions to ask.

In-house support

What can young people access in your setting? Do you have counsellors, mentors, pastoral teams, or mental health support teams? How easy is the support to access? What are the referral requirements?

Promotion and referrals

Is the support widely promoted and easy for staff to refer to? Is there a clear process for referrals that both staff and young people understand? Can young people self-refer?

External support

Do you work with services like Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), Place2Be, or Early Help? Remember to also consider organisations that are not directly linked to mental health and wellbeing, but that can support the wellbeing of a young person holistically such as sports teams, creative arts groups, youth organisations such as Guides and Scouts, and targeted supports that support adverse life situations such as homelessness charities.

Evaluating services

Do you get feedback from young people? Do you monitor the impact of the services on young people with both young people and staff? What qualitative and quantitative data do you gather to judge effectiveness of a service?

Recruit your Youth MHFAiders

MHFA England courses are open to all, but asking your employees to apply to you for the training will help you to recruit the people within your organisation who are best placed for the role.



The number of Youth MHFAiders your organisation needs

Legislation for mental health first aid provision in schools, colleges, or youth settings is not yet in place. We recommend that you consider your organisation's structure and the demands on your workforce. This will look different in each setting so the decision should be made based on the review of your practices and the needs within the community. It would be useful to have regular meetings with Youth MHFAiders to reflect on their workloads and consider whether more people need to be trained. For some settings it may be worth aiming to have as many Youth MHFAiders as physical first aiders.



Who is best placed to be a Youth MHFAider?

We recommend that you train:

A wide range of individuals

Encourage applications that represent the diversity of your workforce, from different seniority levels, locations, genders, and ethnic backgrounds. Young people make connections with a range of adults, and all staff need to feel confident to have initial conversations around mental health and wellbeing.

People who want to learn more about mental health to support others

It doesn't matter if they have experienced poor mental health themselves or not. Make sure that all applicants (not just those who have disclosed personal experience) understand what the role will involve and have considered their own wellbeing. This will help the applicant decide if now is the right time for them.

People who can maintain confidentiality

Staff members who have demonstrated they can maintain confidentiality and relate well to young people are well suited to the Youth MHFAider role.

People who spend most of their working hours on site and can commit to the time required

For settings with hybrid or remote working, the Youth MHFAider should be easily contactable and communicate when they won't be available to respond. It is essential that the person in post has the capacity to engage with the number of young people in need. If staff do not have this capacity, it can add to the stress levels of all staff as well as risk the needs of young people going unmet.

Recruit your Youth MHFAiders cont.



Expected time commitments for Youth MHFAiders

Initial training	Approximately 14 hours over four sessions (3 hours 30 minutes per session), either online or face to face.
Youth MHFA conversations	Up to approximately 30 minutes at a time. This limit does not apply when a young person is in crisis. Encourage Youth MHFAiders to record how much time they are spending on these conversations and review this regularly.
Taking part in an internal Youth MHFA network	Time will vary depending on the organisation, but monthly or quarterly meetings are most common.
MHFA Refresher training	Half a day every three years.
Supplementary training	Optional, decided by the organisation.
The Association of Mental Health First Aiders®	Time will vary depending on the Youth MHFAider's commitment to their membership, ongoing development in the role, and time spent accessing exclusive events and resources.



Recruit your Youth MHFAiders cont.



The application process

Invite employees to apply internally for the Youth MHFA training via your organisation's application form. You could follow this up with informal interviews and a reference check with their manager.

When advertising the training you should outline:

- What the Youth MHFAider role entails
- Who should apply
- How the role fits in with other wellbeing and safeguarding strategies
- The time commitment involved
- The topics covered on the course:
 - The MHFAider role, self-care, and boundaries
 - Mental health models
 - Risk factors, i.e. marginalisation, social media, bullying, environment
 - The Youth MHFA action plan
 - Signs of types of poor mental health or crises
 - Skills and conversation practise
 - Case studies and discussion

On the application form, ask questions to determine why the person would like to become a Youth MHFAider, what they feel they can bring to the role, and whether they have their line manager's approval to apply. If you choose to follow up on the applications with interviews, this is a good opportunity to assess the person's suitability for the role and discuss in more detail what the role will entail.

Qualities and values of a Youth MHFAider include being:

- Approachable
- Non-judgemental
- Emotionally aware
- Accepting
- Genuine
- Empathetic
- Attentive
- A skilled listener
- A skilled communicator
- Trustworthy
- Patient
- Resourceful
- Realistic

Example questions for the application process could include:

- Why do you think supporting positive wellbeing in a youth setting is important?
- Why are you interested in becoming a Youth MHFAider?
- How do you see yourself using these new skills in your role?
- What would success as a Youth MHFAider look like to you?

As part of the application process, review whether applications are from a diverse range of individuals and those selected are representative of the workforce.

Support and develop your Youth MHFAiders

Support is vital to successfully embed MHFA England training into an organisation, and to allow Youth MHFAiders to perform their role safely and effectively.

Follow up after the Youth MHFA course

Get together with your course attendees with a conference call or meeting. Make sure everyone feels comfortable in their new role, provide written role and policy documentation, and answer any questions around how it works in your setting.

Set up a Youth MHFAider network

Your network should have a clear remit for support and idea sharing. This should be overseen by someone with an HR background or the person who is leading the initiative. The network should meet regularly and should be used as an opportunity to remind Youth MHFAiders to look out for their own wellbeing too.

Join the Association of Mental Health First Aiders

The Association of Mental Health First Aiders is here to transform how we talk about and support mental health in the workplace and beyond.

As the national authority on mental health first aid, MHFA England is the only organisation that offers ongoing support as part of its mental health training, and with that membership of the largest community of its kind. Once your people have trained as Youth MHFAiders with MHFA England, they are certified for three years. They'll also be invited to become members of our Association, so you can be confident they have the tools they need to carry out their roles effectively.

By providing your staff with the right learning tools and support, we can help you shape a healthy and productive setting for young people. As members, they'll receive exclusive access to a wide range of resources and opportunities from a social enterprise that reinvests its profits into giving quality mental health training to those who need it most. This includes:

- **The MHFAider Support App.** Access to features such as a 24/7 text support service, signposting to a national database of health services, and insights that teach critical self-care skills
- **Access to the MHFA England Online Learning Hub.** This includes resources such as course manuals and MHFAider guides
- **First-hand insights.** They'll learn from real people sharing their honest lived experiences of mental health conditions
- **Online networking.** They'll be invited to exclusive quarterly webinars to empower them to carry out their role with confidence, skill, and care
- **Monthly newsletters.** They'll be kept up to date with all the latest news from our community
- **Access to the Youth MHFA Refresher course (half a day's training) every three years,** in line with physical first aid training

Promote your Youth MHFAiders to your young people

Make sure young people in your setting are aware of who the Youth MHFAiders are, what their role entails, and how to contact them should they need support.



Easy identification and clear role description

Provide Youth MHFAiders with physical lanyards or badges. Encourage your Youth MHFAiders to include their digital Youth MHFAider badge, received after completing training, in their email signature, with an agreed-upon message on how to contact them or find out more.

Share details about the responsibilities and boundaries of the Youth MHFAider role with both colleagues and the young people in your setting. Everyone must be clear that Youth MHFAiders are not there to provide ongoing support or counselling, but instead to offer first response support. However, there may be situations where follow-ups and check-ins are important and feel right.

Be clear that Youth MHFAiders are not available outside work hours. Create a resource that outlines support young people can access if they are unable to speak with a Youth MHFAider straight away, or during school and college holidays, and ensure this is promoted widely. This could include organisations such as Shout text service, Childline, YoungMinds, Samaritans, and 111.

Assure your young people that conversations with a Youth MHFAider are confidential, except in situations where there is concern that the young person is at risk of harming themselves or others.



Resources

Share details of Youth MHFAiders and where/when to find them in key documents, such as planners and communal areas. This could reflect the approach often taken for promoting safeguarding teams.

Download MHFA England's free poster templates from the MHFA England website and place them around your setting to promote Youth MHFAiders, or create your own posters if you prefer. Leave posters in key areas, e.g. a front office, toilets, the medical room, on classroom or office doors, and in pastoral offices.



Transition and in-year admissions

When young people are transitioning into the school, college, or community environment, introduce Youth MHFAiders and their role as part of the transition and in-year admissions process.



Regular communication

Use assemblies, parents' evenings, and open evenings as opportunities to promote the work of Youth MHFAiders. This should be aimed at both the young people and their parents/carers, and is intended to inform them of the service whilst also breaking down the stigma around mental health and wellbeing.

Helpful resources

[The MHFA England website](#) hosts information on our training courses and has free toolkits for your workplace.

[Charlie Waller Trust](#) is a charity with free mental health resources and a focus on children and young people.

[YoungMinds](#) offers comprehensive information to give young people the tools to look after their mental health, and to empower parent(s)/carer(s) to be the best support they can be to the young people in their lives.

[Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition](#) provides resources and information from its members on children and young people's mental health.

Share your story

Your story has the potential to inspire and help others. By sharing experiences of mental health and supporting others, we can help tackle stigma and create a community that speaks freely about mental health and in which people seek support when they need it.

If you feel comfortable sharing your experience of being a Youth MHFAider or know someone who would be willing to share their story, we would love to hear from you. Please email us at stories@mhfaengland.org.

Get in touch with MHFA England

You may find it helpful to keep up to date with the latest mental health news and campaigns. Find out how to keep in touch with us below.

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