

Missing the Mark

YoungMinds' new campaign, Missing the Mark, calls for reforms to address the harmful impact of exams on children and young people's mental health. The urgency of these reforms cannot be overstated: 1 in 5 young people now have a probable mental health condition, up from 1 in 9 in 2017.¹ We need to look at why so many young people are struggling, and we know that exams are a major cause of poor mental health.

Exams not only cause anxiety, but they also fail to effectively assess the skills young people need today. Young people deserve an education fit for the twenty-first century, where mental health and academic achievement are not at odds with one another.

With the Independent Curriculum and Assessment Review's final report due in the autumn, the Government has a real opportunity to build a better assessment system and create a long-term legacy in improving young people's mental health.

New research: key findings

This briefing contains the findings of YoungMinds' recent research about the experiences of children and young people sitting SATs, GCSEs and A Levels this summer.²

Our survey of year 6 children who took their SATs this year found that:

- Over half (56%) worried about their abilities for the first time
- Over a third (35%) said SATs made them feel ill
- Over a quarter (28%) said SATs made them feel bad about themselves

In our survey of GCSE and A Level students, 63% told us they struggled to cope in the lead up to and during exams. Of these:

- Over half had trouble sleeping
- 1 in 4 had panic attacks
- 1 in 7 stopped going to school
- 1 in 8 self-harmed
- 1 in 8 had suicidal thoughts

Impact of SATs on children's mental health

SATs are used to rank the performance of schools, not support children's learning. The excessive time schools spend preparing for English and maths tests leaves little room for other subjects.

A target-driven culture leads to teaching to test, at the expense of creativity, broader learning experiences and supporting pupil wellbeing: 90% of head teachers agree that SATs narrow the curriculum, and 96% agree that they have a negative impact on wellbeing.³

Schools in the most deprived areas spend more time preparing for SATs than those in the most affluent areas – and almost twice as many teachers and school leaders in the most deprived areas say that SATs have narrowed the curriculum.⁴

Our survey of children who took SATs exams this year revealed that:

- Over half (56%) worried about their abilities for the first time
- Over a third (35%) said SATs made them feel ill
- Over a quarter (28%) said SATs made them feel bad about themselves

The research also found that many children experienced problems with sleep and eating, with **71% feeling worried before they took their exams**. Of these,

- Over a third (38%) didn't sleep well
- 1 in 5 (20%) didn't want to go to school
- 1 in 5 (20%) had headaches
- 1 in 5 (19%) had tummy aches
- 1 in 7 (14%) worried about getting a job because of doing badly in SATs
- 1 in 10 (10%) didn't eat properly

Impact of GCSE and A Level exams on young people's mental health

Over the last decade, reforms to GCSEs and A Levels mean that they are now almost entirely assessed by end of two-year exams. Students taking GCSEs in England spend an average of 31.5 hours sitting exams – more than in almost any other comparable country.⁵

When a young person's grades depend on such a short period of high-stakes exams, the pressure can become completely overwhelming. The stress being placed on young people is leading to severe consequences, with many young people experiencing sleep problems, self-harm, and suicidal thoughts.

Our recent survey of GCSE and A Level students found that **63% struggled to cope in the lead-up and during exams**. Of these,

- Over half (56%) had trouble sleeping
- Almost a third (30%) skipped meals
- 1 in 4 (26%) experienced panic attacks
- 1 in 7 (15%) stopped going to school
- 1 in 8 (13%) had suicidal thoughts
- 1 in 8 (13%) experienced self-harm

Exam stress is driving school absence – of the 15% who stopped going to school, 37% were absent for more than 15 days.

Exam stress is causing mental health problems – among those struggling to cope, 61% reported high levels of anxiety and 40% reported worsening mental health.

Exams have a greater negative impact on mental health than social media – young people aged 15-18 said exams (55%) and academic pressure (40%) are the factors most likely to have a significant negative impact on their mental health, with exams more than twice as likely to cause this as social media (24%).

Recommendations

1. End SATs

We need a better way of maintaining high standards that doesn't put the weight of accountability on 11-year-olds. Timed tests taken over 4 days in year 6 are not a reliable way of capturing a pupil's knowledge and abilities or of monitoring standards.

Only 5% of primary school leaders believe the tests are an accurate reflection of a child's academic achievement, and only 3% agree they are an accurate measure of school performance.⁶

Assessment should support pupils' learning and be clearly separated from school performance metrics. For example, the British Educational Research Association has proposed a system of nationally representative sampling to replace high-stakes statutory assessment.⁷

We also know that 50% of mental health problems appear before the age of 14.⁸ Ending SATs is one way we can ease unnecessary pressures on young children in this critical period, and avoid increasing their likelihood of developing a mental health problem.

69% of 10-11-year-olds said that having no SATs would make them feel less stressed.

2. Reduce the reliance on high-stakes, end-of-course exams at GCSE and A-Level, in favour of a modular, multimodal approach

Introducing a range of assessment methods so that courses are not entirely assessed by high-stakes end-of-course exams would reduce stress and anxiety and have a positive impact on students' learning.

In addition to mental health benefits, alternative assessment methods would better replicate real-life scenarios and support young people to develop the skills required for work and further study, such as public speaking, creativity, and critical thinking.

74% of young people think exams should be reformed to improve mental health.

While exams should remain a feature of assessment, there are ways to reduce the pressure caused by the current system. This balance could be achieved by, for example, reintroducing modular exams, open-book exams, or “on-demand” online exams that students can take when they are ready.

We understand the drive to make assessments as equitable as possible, but high-stakes examinations are not a wholly fair way to assess a young person’s skills, knowledge and abilities. The lack of balance in the system unfairly disadvantages young people who struggle with exams, as well as those experiencing poor health or other pressures during the intense exam period.

While the best mix of assessment methods will vary between subjects, courses should not be entirely assessed by one method or in one short window of time. A better system would use a range of methods to counteract the advantages and disadvantages of any single approach.

What you can do

1. Sponsor a debate on assessment reform, with support from YoungMinds.
2. Write to the Minister of State for Schools about assessment reform.
3. Submit oral or written Parliamentary Questions about the Curriculum and Assessment Review.
4. Refer young people and their families to YoungMinds for advice and support.

References

¹ NHS Digital (2023). Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2023 - wave 4 follow up to the 2017 survey: <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/2023-wave-4-follow-up>

² YoungMinds and Savanta. Interviews of 1,040 15–18-year-olds taking GCSE or A-Levels this summer and 534 10-11 year-olds taking year 6 SATS this term, online, between 21st-30th May 2025.

³ More than a Score (2019). Pressure, anxiety and collateral damage – The Headteachers’ Verdict on SATs: <https://www.morethanascorere.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/SATs-research.pdf>

⁴ More than a Score (2024). School leaders vs SATs: a view from primary and secondary: <https://www.morethanascorere.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/School-Leaders-vs-SATs.pdf> (accessed June 2025)

⁵ OCR (2024). Striking the Balance: <https://teach.ocr.org.uk/striking-the-balance>

⁶ More than a Score (2024).

⁷ BERA (2021). High standards, not high stakes: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/high-standards-not-high-stakes-an-alternative-to-sats>

⁸ Kessler RC, Berglund P, Demler O, Jin R, Merikangas KR, Walters EE. (2005). Lifetime Prevalence and Age-of-Onset Distributions of DSM-IV Disorders in the National Comorbidity Survey Replication. Archives of General Psychiatry, 62 (6) pp. 593-602. doi:10.1001/archpsyc.62.6.593