

Project 1: Understanding and optimising treatment outcomes for autistic children and adolescents with obsessive compulsive disorder.

Proposed supervisory team

- Dr Chloe Chessell
- Professor Polly Waite

Background and rationale

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) has a peak age of onset during adolescence and affects up to 4% of children and adolescents. OCD is a common mental health difficulty among autistic young people, with clinical samples suggesting that up to 25% of children with OCD are also autistic (or likely to be autistic). Experiencing OCD in childhood/adolescence is associated with significantly impaired home, school, and social functioning and research has shown that OCD often persists into adulthood without effective treatment.

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) is the recommended psychological treatment for autistic children with OCD; however, published studies to date have shown that autistic children with OCD have poorer treatment outcomes than their non-autistic peers. The factors associated with poorer treatment outcomes are largely unknown. This DPhil proposal therefore aims to quantitatively and qualitatively explore the factors that may mediate and moderate CBT outcomes for autistic children with OCD and identify possible evidence-informed adaptations for CBT treatments.

Proposed research aims

- To identify potential moderators and mediators of CBT treatment outcomes for autistic children and adolescents with OCD, and map existing adaptations to CBT treatments for autistic young people.
- Explore treatment outcomes from CBT based treatments for autistic young people compared to their non-autistic peers.
- To identify perceived mediators and moderators of treatment outcomes for autistic young people with OCD.

Potential methodologies

- Systematic review
- Secondary data analysis using routine clinical outcome data from the NHS-commissioned Anxiety and Depression in Young People (AnDY) Oxford and Reading clinics.
- Qualitative interview studies with autistic children/young people, their parents/carers and clinicians

Project 2: Supporting parents and teachers to work together to address emotional and behavioural problems in children.

Proposed supervisory team

- Professor Cathy Creswell
- Dr Helen Manley

Background and rationale

Emotional and behavioural problems are common among children and young people and are associated with substantial costs for individuals, families, and society. We developed an efficient and accessible therapist-supported platform (OSI) for treating anxiety problems among primary school aged children, have demonstrated that it is effective ([Creswell et al., 2024](#)), and are now implementing it at scale within NHS and associated child mental health services. Parents/carers and clinicians have told us that are keen for a similar intervention for managing challenging behaviour and 'big emotions' so we are in the process of adapting OSI for this purpose.

Alongside our work on OSI we have worked with children, parents and teachers to develop teacher training to reduce anxiety within school settings through classroom management approaches. Initial feasibility testing demonstrated that the training was positively received by school staff, however schools required flexible approaches to training delivery. In parallel our colleague Dr Abby Russell at the University of Exeter has codesigned an [online platform](#) for training school staff in developing strengths-based, neurodiversity affirmative practices for supporting primary school aged children with ADHD. Initial feasibility also showed a positive response however indicated that teachers might benefit from guidance and support as they implement the programme (e.g. from the same clinicians that are increasingly delivering OSI in their routine practice). Bringing together these innovations provides an exciting opportunity to support teachers to minimise emotional and behavioural problems in the school environment.

Proposed Aims

- Codesign expanded online teacher training content to support classroom-based management and prevention of emotional and behavioural difficulties.
- Evaluate the feasibility of delivering this teacher- focused approach, alongside parent-directed OSI.
- Explore the key mechanisms of action and drivers of implementation.

Potential Methodologies

- Systematic review
- Qualitative interviews
- Establish and work with Expert Reference Groups
- Feasibility testing in schools

The student would have the opportunity to work with the wider team who will be focused on adapting OSI for child behavioural problems.

Project 3: Me and my anxiety: Understanding diagnosis-as-identity in adolescence.

Proposed supervisory team

- Dr Lucy Foulkes
- Professor Polly Waite

Background and rationale

Receiving a diagnosis is often a profound event, whether it is for a physical health problem, mental health problem or neurodevelopmental condition. When it explains longstanding, long-term symptoms and challenges, it can transform one's understanding and interpretation of the past, present and future. Existing research shows that such a diagnosis often becomes incorporated into a person's identity, becoming a fundamental part of who they are.

There has been limited research assessing this phenomenon relating to anxiety, particularly in school-age adolescents (11-18 years). This is surprising, given that this is a rapid period of identity development and given the specific context for adolescents today: adolescents receive an enormous amount of information about potential diagnoses, particularly anxiety, and many now self-diagnose. In parallel, stigma remains high, and adolescents are often judged by their peers for self-diagnosing, suggesting adolescents will have mixed feelings about any diagnosis. Academics and clinicians remain divided about to what extent the diagnosis-as-identity phenomenon is helpful or problematic for an individual, and very few studies have asked adolescents themselves what they think.

Proposed Research Aims

This DPhil seeks to build a clearer, in-depth picture of the relationship between diagnosis and identity in adolescents. The focus is specifically on anxiety, a common mental health problem that leads many young people to self-diagnose and/or seek professional help. The wider aim is to generate findings that can help clinicians, parents and school staff support adolescents who self-diagnose or receive a clinical diagnosis of an anxiety disorder.

Potential Methodologies

This is a mixed-methods project, using a combination of qualitative and experimental methodology. A particularly novel element is the use of longitudinal qualitative data, in which a small group of participants are interviewed at multiple time points across several years.

Project 4: Valuing Difference: Developing Inclusive Peer Ecologies in Neurodiverse Primary Classrooms.

Proposed Supervisory team:

- Dr Connor Keating
- Professor Shelley McKeown Jones
- Dr Jiedi Lei

Mainstream classrooms are becoming increasingly neurodiverse, yet many neurodivergent pupils remain socially excluded within them. Neurodivergent pupils may be perceived more negatively by peers, have fewer friends, and face increased exclusion and bullying. Targeting social skills in neurodivergent children without environmental changes places the burden solely on this group, leaving the wider classroom peer ecology unchanged.

Taking a classroom-level approach, this project builds on evidence that children's peer attitudes and behaviours can be shifted by (1) changing how they understand and appraise differences (2) encouraging perspective-taking and (3) helping pupils recognise one another's strengths. By bringing these mechanisms together in a co-produced intervention, the project addresses a key gap: targeting the peer ecology around neurodivergent pupils.

Although the final content will be shaped by co-production, the intervention is likely to include three linked components: a value-in-diversity digital storybook, extending McKeown et al's approach from ethnic minority inclusion to neurodivergent peer inclusion, and building on Keating et al.'s digital storybook tasks co-developed with, and for, neurodivergent primary school children; a perspective-taking session that helps pupils question assumptions about difference (including neurodiversity), and consider how classroom situations may be experienced differently; and strengths-focused activities, drawing on Lei et al.'s zine-making workshops, that introduces the Character Strengths Framework and supports pupils to identify strengths in fictional characters, themselves, and – with the support of an adapted co-produced strength-spotting chatbot – their classmates.

Proposed Research Aims

- Map perceptions of neurodivergent peers, classroom social networks, and the environments and activities that facilitate or constrain intergroup interaction.
- Identify the routines, activities, and contexts most likely to support intergroup interaction.
- Co-produce a classroom-level intervention.
- Pilot the intervention and evaluate the acceptability, feasibility, and impact in the Emerging Minds Classroom.

Potential methodologies

- Mixed-methods approach to mapping mainstream primary classroom peer ecologies (surveys, photovoice methods).
- Co-production with primary school children, parents/carers and educators.
- Pilot intervention.

Project 5: Adolescent risk and resilience after shared adversity: Developing an experimental classroom paradigm to probe socioemotional mechanisms.

Proposed Supervisory Team

- Dr Alex Lau-Zhu
- Dr Jack Andrews
- Professor Kate Nation

Background/Rationale

Exposure to adverse and traumatic events is common during adolescence and is one of the strongest risk factors for mental health difficulties. Such experiences are often witnessed, discussed, or shared collectively through schools, communities, and social media. A hallmark response after traumatic stress is the development of intrusive imagery, a key driver of psychological distress. Research has identified modifiable processes influencing risk and resilience following adversity but has largely focused on adults and individuals in isolation.

For adolescents, many emotionally challenging events are experienced, witnessed and/or discussed among peers. Community violence, school-based incidents (e.g., the death of a peer), and distressing material shared through social media can affect entire peer groups. Yet schools, families, and practitioners have little guidance on how to manage peer processes to promote resilience after such shared adversities.

Adolescents' heightened sensitivity to social influence means interpersonal processes, such as co-rumination, may disproportionately affect emotional adaptation. Despite this, most experimental models of adversity neglect the social context in which adaptation naturally unfolds. This limits our understanding of causal social mechanisms that confer risk and resilience.

Proposed Research aims

This DPhil will address this challenge by developing the first experimental paradigm for studying exposure to shared adversity in adolescents and subsequent intrusive imagery and emotional adaptation. Leveraging OCEMR's Experimental Classroom, the project could create controlled yet ecologically valid shared experiences, enabling rigorous experimental investigation of previously inaccessible peer processes. This innovation would address a longstanding methodological barrier that has prevented the field from understanding how adolescents adapt to adversity together rather than alone.

The findings could provide the first experimental evidence on how peers shape adolescents' responses to shared adversity, informing future group or school-based interventions. This project would suit someone interested in psychological trauma, adolescent social development, and innovative research methods.

Potential Methodologies

Test the feasibility and validity of a novel experimental classroom paradigm.

- Identify socioemotional processes, for example, through:
 - Naturalistic follow-ups examining peer interactions and intrusive imagery
 - Examine peer mechanisms through social network analyses.
- Manipulate causal mechanisms (e.g., peer interactions).

Project 6: Fiction and Feeling: Investigating the Nature, Utility and Potential Mechanisms of 'Creative Bibliotherapy' for children and young people.

Proposed supervisory Team

- Professor Kate Nation
- Second supervisor to be selected depending on student's proposal

Background and rationale

Creative bibliotherapy refers to the use of fiction/literature to support wellbeing and mental health. A recent systematic review (Redman et al., 2025) highlighted its potential for improving mental health outcomes in 5-16 year olds. Bibliotherapy has popular appeal, and it chimes with discussions around creative arts and social prescribing more generally. If evidenced, it might be a way to develop low-cost, acceptable and scalable initiatives in schools/homes to support good mental health for all children and young people, and it could complement traditional psychological approaches to prevention and intervention.

Importantly, however, the evidence base is tiny and lacking in depth and quality. Many questions are completely unanswered. What type of books should be used? What type of interaction with the text is needed? Who is a good candidate for bibliotherapy? What are the critical ingredients that underpin any positive effects and are there potential harms?

The aim of this studentship is to use mixed methods to address these knowledge gaps.

Possible investigations could include:

- Manipulation of emotional language in reading materials to test generalisation to emotion differentiation of own emotions
- Manipulation of explicitness of emotional inference in narrative to test ability to consider different perspectives and predict character (other) emotions
- Variation in social connectiveness within texts (quantified by social network analyses) to test participants sensitivity to social relationships.
- Manipulation of book reading episodes (shared, didactic, private) to test emotional response as a function of directed instruction

As well working in schools, there is the opportunity to make use of the new Emerging Minds Experimental Classroom. An innovative new facility at the Oxford Life and Mind Building. The Emerging Minds classroom offers the opportunity for detailed observations to provide insights for future development as well as opportunities for creative involvement and engagement of children and young people.

Proposed research aims

- Explore what makes a good story for social-emotional learning and what aspects of fiction engagement might optimise response.
- Isolate and test specific identified features.
- Assess therapeutic potential alongside feasibility and acceptability.

Potential methodologies

- Literature review
- Qualitative and quantitative analysis of text and fiction engagement
- Experimental manipulations to isolate and and test specific features and assess language, social and emotional outcomes (in primary and secondary schools)
- Pilot work in clinical context

Project 7: Understanding and addressing socioeconomic inequalities in child mental health services.

Proposed Supervisory Team

- Dr Tessa Reardon
- Second supervisor to be selected depending on student's proposal

Background and rationale

In a typical UK class of 30 children, there are 10 children living in poverty. These children are more likely than their peers to experience mental health problems *and* are more likely to experience difficulties accessing mental health services. Targeted action to reduce inequalities in access to child mental health services is a key priority for the NHS.

This DPhil proposal initially sets out to provide an improved understanding of the nature and extent of socioeconomic inequalities in child mental health service utilisation. Studies reporting service use vary in design (e.g. use administrative data, retrospective surveys, prospective longitudinal studies) and measure socioeconomic circumstances and mental health need in various ways. Identifying and synthesising existing evidence, exploring patterns (e.g. differences between countries within different healthcare systems, income/wealth distribution, country income level) and gaps could inform priorities for targeted action.

Innovative approaches to improve access to mental health care in low and middle income countries (e.g. strengthening existing community assets, near-peer task sharing, mobile 'pop-up' community care) provide valuable learning opportunities for low-resource contexts globally, including in the UK. This DPhil therefore seeks to map this existing evidence from low and middle income countries and work with front-line staff and parents/carers in the UK to consider potential application and adaptation for local UK contexts.

Proposed Research Aims

- Systematically review and synthesise global evidence on socioeconomic inequalities in utilisation of child mental health services.
- Map evidence from low and middle income countries on strategies and approaches to increase access to child mental health services.
- Codesign strategies to address socioeconomic inequalities in access to community-based child mental health services in England and test the feasibility of implementing these strategies in routine practice.

Potential Methodologies

- Systematic review and evidence synthesis
- Co-design with child mental service providers, practitioners, and families
- Implementation feasibility testing

Project 8: Identifying Adolescents in Need of Support for Anxiety and Depression in Schools.

Proposed Supervisory Team

- Professor Polly Waite
- Dr Eleanor Leigh

Background and rationale

Over the past decade there has been increasing interest in mental health screening within schools to identify young people who may benefit from support. Most existing screening measures were originally developed to identify symptoms associated with anxiety and depressive disorders. While this approach provides valuable information about population mental health, it may be less useful for informing decisions about support provision within schools.

Schools must decide which young people require monitoring, targeted support, referral to specialist services or no immediate intervention. However, these decisions are typically made without universal screening, relying instead on approaches such as teacher identification, pastoral concerns or self-referral, all of which may create additional barriers for some young people. If screening is used, symptom severity alone may be insufficient. Emotional symptoms are common during adolescence and often occur in the absence of substantial distress or impairment, while some young people experience significant functional difficulties despite reporting relatively modest symptom levels. This raises questions about whether current approaches accurately identify those with the greatest need for support.

Adolescence is an important period for early identification because anxiety and depression commonly emerge during the secondary school years. Secondary schools provide a unique opportunity to identify young people who may not otherwise access support. Given well-established inequalities in help-seeking, referral and access to care, school-based screening has the potential to improve equity by identifying adolescents in need of support regardless of whether they have sought help or come to the attention of services.

Research Aims

1. Review the existing literature to identify measures used to screen adolescents in secondary schools for anxiety and depression and examine their psychometric properties.
2. Co-design a measure to screen adolescents in secondary schools who are most likely to benefit from support for anxiety and depression.
3. Psychometrically evaluate the measure in secondary school populations.

Potential Methodologies

Mixed methods and participatory research approaches including:

- Systematic review and evidence synthesis
- Co-design and measure development
- Psychometric evaluation