



Press Release

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### **How Education and Mental Health go Hand-in-Hand**

During Children's Mental Health Awareness Week, Rachel Rix, Cygnet Health Care's Head of Education, reflects on how we create the conditions that allow every young person in our care to access education, and, most importantly, to feel that "This is My Place."

By Rachel Rix, Head of Education

#### **Creating a sense of belonging**

The familiarity and routine of attending school are important constants in most young people's lives. School is not just a place of learning, it's a foundation for emotional wellbeing, confidence, and growth. For many children, attending school regularly nurtures friendships, builds resilience, and provides access to caring adults and supportive environments.

But what happens when a young person is receiving care in a mental health hospital?

During Children's Mental Health Awareness Week, we've been reflecting on how we create the conditions that allow every young person in our care to access education, and, most importantly, to feel that "This is My Place."

#### **What education looks like in a hospital setting**

Education within a mental health hospital looks different to mainstream school, but its purpose is the same: to help young people learn, grow and feel hopeful about their future.

A typical day is carefully structured but flexible. Students usually attend smaller classes, often with a higher staff-to-pupil ratio and the option of one-to-one support where needed. Lessons are shorter and paced around treatment programmes, therapy sessions and individual health needs. Some students attend the classroom full time, while others begin with shorter sessions or learning on the ward until they feel ready to join.

We mirror mainstream routines wherever possible, with timetables, subject lessons, breaks, and opportunities to work towards qualifications, because maintaining that sense of normality and continuity is incredibly important. For a young person in hospital, school can be a reassuring constant and a reminder that life continues beyond their current difficulties.

### **Why continuing education matters during treatment**

When a young person is admitted to hospital, they are often experiencing significant distress or crisis. It would be easy to assume that education should pause, but continuing to learn can play a vital role in recovery.

Education provides routine, purpose and a sense of achievement at a time when confidence may be low. It helps young people maintain a connection with their identity beyond their diagnosis and reminds them that they still have aspirations and opportunities ahead.

Just as importantly, continuing education prevents further disruption. Many of our students have already experienced gaps in schooling due to their mental health challenges. By maintaining progress and rebuilding positive experiences of learning, we help reduce anxiety about falling behind and support smoother transitions back into community education or employment.

### **Rebuilding a positive relationship with school**

For some young people, school has not always felt like a safe or successful place. Past experiences of anxiety, bullying, unmet needs or prolonged absence can leave them feeling disconnected from education.

When a student joins one of our inpatient schools, our first priority is to rebuild trust. We take time to understand each young person's experiences, strengths, interests and aspirations. Within the first few days, we gather information from families and home schools and develop a personalised education plan that reflects both academic needs and emotional wellbeing.

Our classrooms offer a calm, purposeful environment away from the ward and a space where young people can focus, collaborate and rediscover confidence. Education becomes a vehicle not only for academic progress but for rebuilding self-belief.

### **What makes teaching in a hospital school different**

Teaching in a mental health hospital requires flexibility, creativity and close collaboration with clinical colleagues.

Our education teams work as part of the wider multidisciplinary team, alongside nurses, psychologists, occupational therapists and doctors. We adapt teaching approaches in line with each young person's care plan and mental health needs, sometimes adjusting hour by hour. On some days, a student may be fully engaged in lessons; on others, simply entering the classroom or completing a short activity may be a significant achievement.

Class sizes are smaller, and learning is highly personalised. We use diagnostic assessments to identify gaps in knowledge and tailor learning carefully to avoid overwhelming students. Progress is measured not only academically but also in terms of confidence, communication and readiness to learn.

### **Creating a calm, safe and welcoming environment**

For children who may feel anxious or vulnerable, the school environment must feel safe and predictable.

Our classrooms are intentionally calm spaces with clear routines, consistent staffing and flexible seating options. Young people are involved in shaping their learning environment, helping to create a sense of ownership and belonging. Staff prioritise building positive, trusting relationships so that students feel understood and supported.

Simple things make a big difference: greeting students warmly, offering choice and control in learning activities, and ensuring expectations are clear and achievable. Over time, these small, consistent actions help young people feel secure enough to engage.

### **Supporting pupils on difficult days**

Mental health is not linear, and there will always be days when learning feels harder.

On those days, our focus shifts from attainment to accessibility. We might adapt the timetable, offer shorter sessions, provide one-to-one support or use interest-based activities to gently re-engage a student. Sometimes success means attending for ten minutes, completing a creative task, or simply having a positive interaction with staff or peers.

By meeting young people where they are, rather than where we expect them to be, we help them maintain a connection with education even during challenging periods.

### **Celebrating progress and success**

Success in our schools looks different for every pupil.

For one student, success might be achieving GCSEs or completing coursework for college. For another, it might be speaking in class for the first time, attending regularly, or rediscovering enjoyment in learning after a long absence.

We celebrate all forms of progress, through certificates, displays of work, and, most importantly, through genuine recognition from staff. Reflecting on achievements helps young people see how far they've come and builds confidence for the future.

We have seen students who once felt unable to enter a classroom go on to complete qualifications, return to mainstream education, or move into college and training. One young person who had been out of education for over a year

gradually rebuilt their confidence through personalised support and went on to achieve the grades needed to pursue their chosen college course. Stories like these remind us of what is possible when the right support is in place.

### **Preparing for the next step**

From the moment a young person arrives, we begin thinking about what comes next.

Whether they are returning to school, moving on to college, or exploring alternative pathways, we work closely with families, home schools and local authorities to plan transitions carefully. Maintaining links with their community education setting and providing clear information about progress and support strategies helps ensure continuity and reduces the risk of setbacks.

Our aim is always to help young people leave us feeling more confident, capable and hopeful about their future.

### **What we wish more people understood**

We often wish more people understood that education in a mental health hospital is not simply about keeping up academically. It is about restoring hope, rebuilding identity and helping young people rediscover what they are capable of.

What's most rewarding for our teams is hearing directly from young people and families about how their view of education has changed and how they've found *their place* once again.

*"My child has always struggled with education, but the staff at Forestwood School have been able to tailor an individual package that suits them. They are now learning and enjoying it after two years out of education."*

– Parent, May 2025

*"The support I get at Phoenix School is absolutely brilliant! It's the best school I've ever been to. Staff understand how to support someone like me with ASD. They tailor the learning, offer one-to-one help, and make it personal. I passed all my GCSEs in three months of learning. Now I'm at college training to be a mental health nurse — I want to help people the same way they helped me."*

– Young person, November 2024

Learning can be a powerful part of recovery. When a young person realises they can still achieve, still progress and still dream about the future, it can transform how they see themselves.

### **A message for Children's Mental Health Awareness Week**

During Children's Mental Health Awareness Week, our message to families, schools and communities is simple: education and mental health go hand in hand.

With understanding, flexibility and compassion, young people can continue to learn even during the most difficult periods of their lives. When we work together - health professionals, educators, families and communities - we create the conditions for them to thrive.

What makes me most proud is the resilience of the young people we teach and the dedication of the staff who support them. Every day, we see courage, determination and moments of growth that might otherwise go unnoticed.

At Cygnet, we believe every child deserves a place where they feel valued, understood and capable of growth. For many of our young people, that place begins in the classroom, a space that offers stability, connection and hope for the future.

This is their place. And it is our privilege to be part of their journey.