Space to grow: learning and evaluation 2024 to 2026

Summary of an independent evaluation conducted by Dartington Service Design Lab

NOVEMBER 2026

space to grow

Support that helps children flourish

Delivered by The Children's Society

Delivered by CHILDREN FIRST Protecting Scotland's Children

Delivered by MAC-UK SUPPORTING CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE

SUPPORTED BY BBC CHILDREN IN NEED

Supported by The Health Foundation

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Executive summary

Introduction

The emotional wellbeing of children and teens remains a growing concern across the UK. Recent findings from The Children's Society's Good Childhood Report 2026 highlight declining levels of wellbeing, and reinforce the importance of providing support before difficulties escalate.

Space to grow provides free emotional health and wellbeing support for children and teens aged 8 to 13 in schools, communities and other trusted local settings. Delivered by emotional wellbeing practitioners, the programme offers early support during a period when many children are experiencing significant changes in their education, social lives, and emotional development. As they go into their formative teen years, it helps children build confidence, understand their emotions, and develop coping strategies before difficulties escalate. A particular focus is reaching children who experience systemic barriers to accessing mental health provision. In the last year of delivery, **Space to grow** has reached 6,509 children (including through assemblies and awareness-raising events). Of which, 1,459 were supported through one-to-one and group work.

Space to grow is funded by BBC Children in Need, The Health Foundation, and Impact on Urban Health. It is delivered across thirteen sites in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland through a partnership between The Children's Society, Children First (Scotland) and MACS Supporting Children and Young People (Northern Ireland). This four-nation model creates opportunities to share learning, strengthen practice, and respond to emerging policy and practice developments across the UK.

This report summarises learning from an evaluation conducted by Dartington Service Design Lab using programme and qualitative data collected between October 2024 and May 2026. During the evaluation period, **Space to grow** supported 461 children through one-to-one or group work (the additional reach of awareness-raising events and assemblies was outside the scope of this evaluation). Drawing on outcome data, interviews and partner learning workshops, the evaluation explored the difference **Space to grow** made for children and teens, how this was achieved, and the implications for policy, practice and future delivery.

Headline findings

- **Children described feeling happier, more confident and better able to manage** difficult emotions after receiving support from **Space to grow**.
- Children described feeling **more connected** to peers, trusted adults and wider support networks, **increasing their confidence** to seek and offer support.
- **Creative**, **flexible and choice-led approaches helped make the programme accessible** to children with a wide range of needs and experiences.
- **Trusted relationships were central** to children's experiences of the service. They consistently identified practitioners as key to **helping them feel safe**, **valued and engaged** with support.
- Working across thirteen sites as a **single partnership** and developing **strong local networks** has supported **Space to grow** to better **meet the needs of under-served children**.
- **Delivery across the four nations** has created **opportunities to monitor and respond** to policy and practice developments.

Key implications



It matters how **support is framed, experienced and accessed**



Emotional wellbeing support works best as **part of a wider system of support**



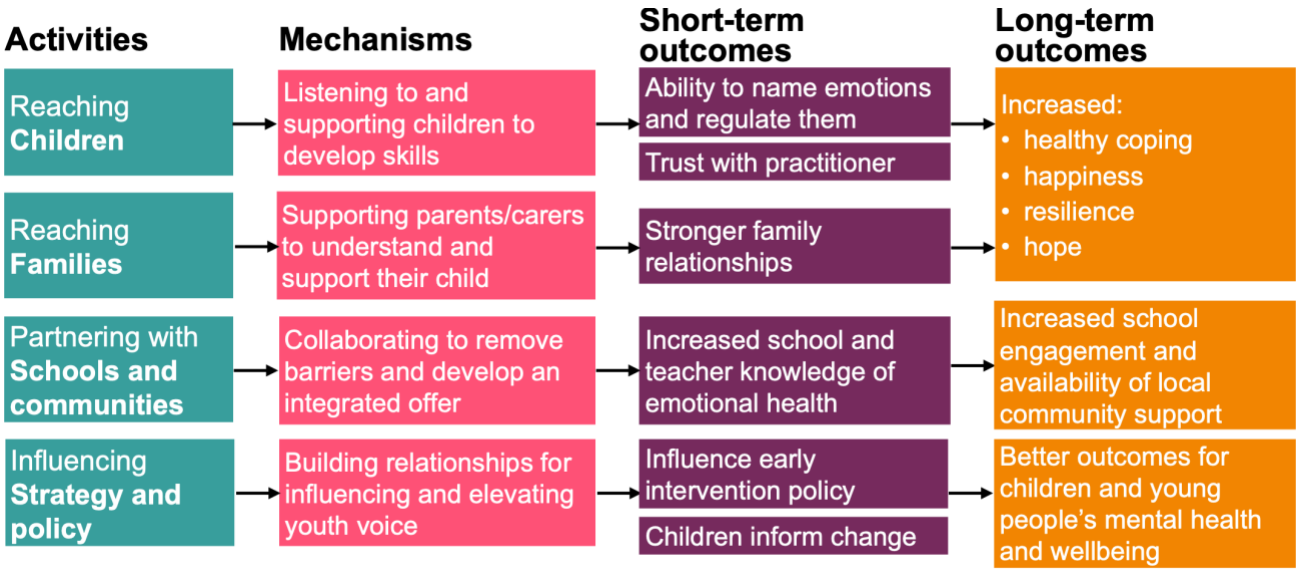
Time, trust and sustained presence is key

Overview of the programme

What is Space to grow?

Space to grow provides community-based emotional health and wellbeing support for children and teens aged 8 to 13. This includes one-to-one sessions, group work, parent and carer support (with whole family support in Scotland), and community-based activities. A core feature of the programme is its focus on children and families who may face systemic barriers to accessing emotional wellbeing and mental health support, such as young carers, LGBTQ+ children and young people, global majority communities, and children with additional learning needs.

Space to grow is grounded in a social model of mental health, recognising the influence of social, environmental and structural factors on emotional wellbeing. This is reflected in the programme's theory of change, which sets out the activities, mechanisms and intended outcomes underpinning delivery.



Learning and evaluation activities

The learning and evaluation activities that informed this report explored three key questions:

1. What difference did **Space to grow** make for children and families?
2. How were these outcomes achieved?
3. What can we learn to inform future practice, commissioning and policy?

To answer these questions, Dartington Service Design Lab completed:

- a rapid literature review
- six learning partner workshops with staff from all three delivery partners, between March 2025 and March 2026
- quantitative analysis of outcome data drawn from Goal Based Outcomes[1], Pebbles (Scotland)[2] and Me & My Feelings[3], collected between programme launch (from October 2024, variable by site) and January 2026
- qualitative analysis of 12 interviews with children in April and May 2026.



[1] See more detail here: https://www.corc.uk.net/outcome-measures-guidance/directory-of-outcome-measures/goal-based-outcomes-gbo/

[2] Pebbles is an outcome tool, developed by Children First, to measure 7 key areas of a child's life (including wellbeing, relationships and community) on a 1-5 scale.

[3] See more detail here: https://www.corc.uk.net/outcome-measures-guidance/directory-of-outcome-measures/me-and-my-feelings-mmf/

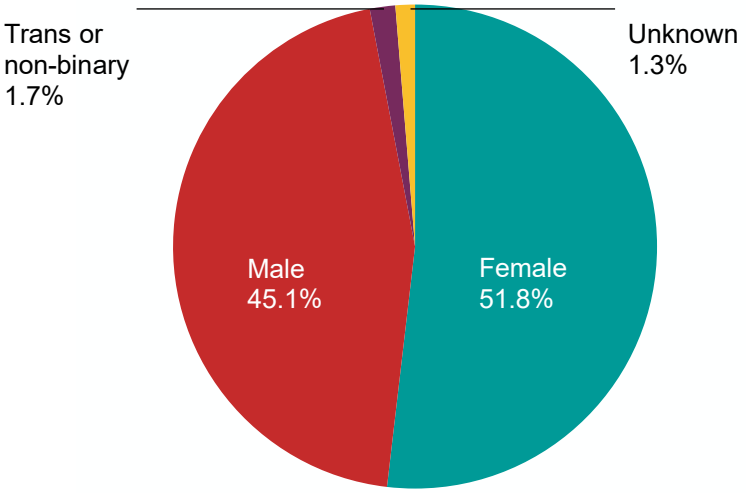
space to grow

Support that helps children flourish

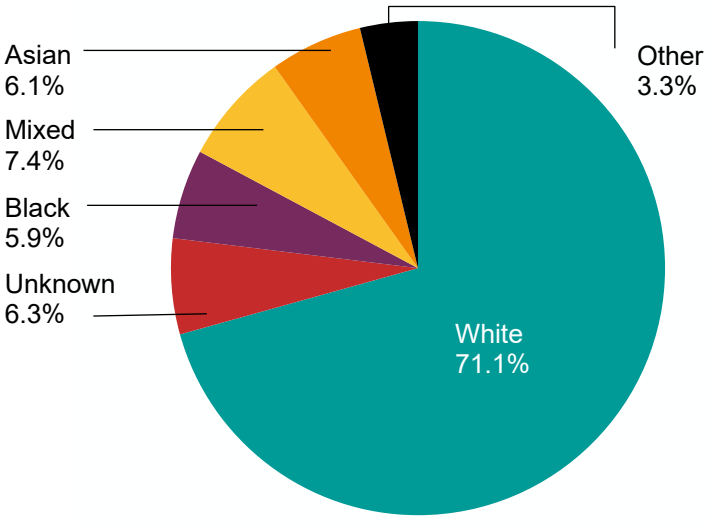
Findings: children and young people

Who Space to grow supported

- **Space to grow** supported **461 children** through one-to-one and group work during the evaluation period.
- The **average age** was **ten years old**.
- The **gender** breakdown was:



- The **ethnicity** breakdown was:



9.5%
of children were subject to a **child in need, child protection or kinship care arrangement**.

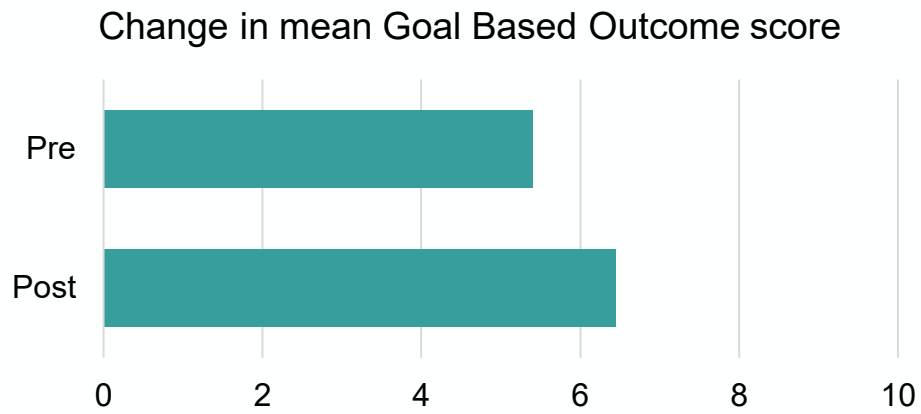
4.8%
identified as **young carers**.

13.2%
had a recorded **disability**.

The **number of needs** a child presented with, at point of referral, ranged from
0 to 11

Progress in goals set by children

Children set goals with practitioners using the Goal Based Outcomes tool, and tracked progress on a scale of 0 to 10 (253 children had paired data available). **Overall, there were significant improvements in their goals**, from a mean score of 5.41 out of 10 before support, to 6.45 after. 32.3% of children reached a level of 'meaningful change' of at least a 2.45-point improvement after support.[4]



Based on 253 children and young people with paired data

Children in Scotland recorded goals using the Pebbles outcome tool. They saw improvements in their goals around relationships, wellbeing, and community.

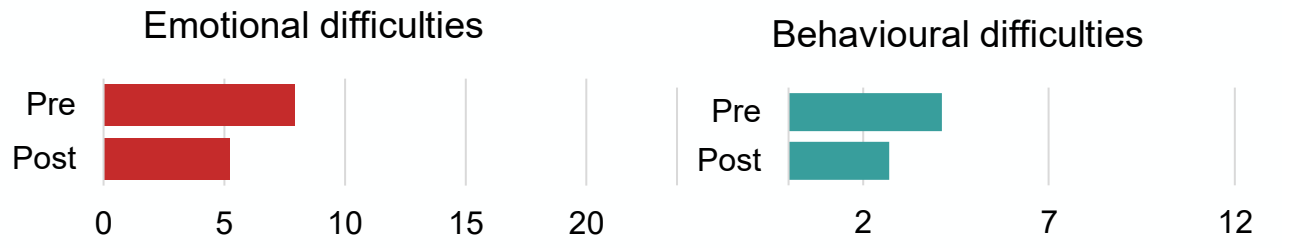
Improvements in emotional wellbeing and understanding

Alongside improvements in the goals children set for themselves, the evaluation found **statistically significant reductions in emotional and behavioural difficulties (for the 76 children with complete data)**. This suggests that children experienced broader improvements in their wellbeing during their involvement with **Space to grow** – a core outcome in the theory of change.

Overall, children who engaged with the service showed reductions in both emotional and behavioural difficulties measured using the Me & My Feelings tool. Emotional difficulties scores decreased from a mean of 7.93 (out of 20) to 5.24, while behavioural difficulties scores decreased from 4.12 (out of 12) to 2.71.

[4] 'Meaningful change' is defined by the principles of the Reliable Change Index. This means that progress towards goals by at least a 2.45-points reported by children accessing Space to grow could not be accounted for by coincidence alone. While, on average, children saw significant improvements in their goals by 1 point (e.g., from 5 to 6 on the scale), 32.3% of children saw larger changes of 2.45 points (e.g., from 5 to 7.45 on average).

Change in mean score



Based on 76 children and young people with paired data

Notably, some children accessing the programme presented with needs beyond those typically associated with an early support service. Pre-support scores ranged from 1 to 16 for emotional difficulties and 0 to 9 for behavioural difficulties, indicating that some children may have benefited from more specialist support (the clinical thresholds are 12 and 7 for emotional and behavioural difficulties respectively). This highlights pressures in the wider system of support.

During interviews, children also described improvements in their emotional wellbeing and better understanding of feelings. They were also able to recall strategies introduced by their **Space to grow** practitioner, including coping techniques, identifying trusted adults and setting achievable goals. Together, these helped children understand that feelings are a normal part of life:

> "… if I'm scared or something, I'll try and do big breaths, I'll countdown to 10. I'll calm down more since I usually get anxious a lot."
>
> "We liked that they taught us that it's normal to be anxious and you're not always going to feel happy."

They also described increased confidence and ability to manage challenges after engaging with **Space to grow**:

> "… I started getting more talkative. I started talking to people in my new school and it's just been great. It makes me feel like a whole different person … It's mostly in school but also in general. Now I can talk to people perfectly fine."

How these outcomes were achieved

Workshops with delivery partners and interviews with children accessing **Space to grow** identified several features of the programme that supported engagement and outcomes.

Children described sessions as **enjoyable, varied and accessible**. Creative activities, games and **opportunities to choose** what they shared and how they engaged helped children participate in ways that felt comfortable for them:

> "… having the option to say no was really important."

Children consistently highlighted **the importance of relationships with practitioners.** They described practitioners as approachable and understanding, and talked about how they valued trusted adults who listened and supported them at their own pace:

> "She made a comfortable space where I was able to talk to her. So a lot of the time we did it through games and then sometimes we'd talk."

During workshops, practitioners and managers also identified the following features as a key foundation for engagement:

- **Space to grow** used a **flexible, whole-person approach**, where practitioners adapted activities and delivery to children's individual needs, strengths and circumstances.
- Language barriers, trauma, cultural stigma, and difficulties navigating services could affect access to support for children from under-served groups. **Space to grow** teams developed **local partnerships and tailored delivery approaches** to improve accessibility and engagement.
- Practitioners described assemblies, classroom sessions and group work as important **lower-threshold pathways into support**. These activities introduced emotional wellbeing topics in familiar settings, helped children become familiar with practitioners, and built trust before they accessed one-to-one support.

Challenges

Practitioners reported that the **typical six-to-eight-week offer was not always sufficient** to build trust and respond to the complex and ongoing challenges experienced by some children and families. This challenge was also reflected in children's experiences.

A small number were uncertain whether things would continue to improve over time:

> "My anger takes time like it processes to get better.
> Right now it is good but I wouldn't say I think it could get better."

Some children also described feeling sad when support ended and, in some cases, were uncertain about who they would turn to for help afterwards:

> "I really want to go again and I felt a bit sad
> [practitioner name] didn't come again."

These findings suggest that many children and families require longer-term support than an early support service can provide alone. They also highlight the **importance of planning transitions** carefully where strong relationships have been established.

Another challenge found was that, in some areas, practitioners were responsible for delivering support across **large geographical areas. This limited the number of children and families that could be reached, and reduced flexibility** to respond to changing needs and demand.

Findings: families and communities

Who Space to grow reached

Families (primarily parents and carers) and professionals within **Space to grow's** wider network (such as schools, community organisations and local authority services) were not interviewed as part of the evaluation. This section therefore draws on children's accounts and the workshops with learning partners.

Changes made for families and communities

Children reported **reduced tensions at home and wider positive effects** on the people around them thanks to the skills they developed:

> "You don't realise you're spreading your emotions and your happiness with other people because how much fun it is and how much fun it gets."

Practitioners also reported that joint sessions involving children and their parents or carers helped build a **shared understanding** of children's needs and reinforced coping strategies.

How Space to grow created this change

Practitioners identified several **factors that supported engagement** with families, schools and communities:

- Being an **independent source of support that is not clinical or statutory** helped the programme build trust with families who may have concerns about stigma and the perceived consequences of engaging with statutory services.
- **Flexibility to work at a child's pace and adapt support** to local circumstances helped engage children and families who might otherwise struggle to access support.
- Rather than relying on a single referral pathway, **embedding the programme within existing local networks** created multiple entry points into support. Practitioners were able to engage children and families through schools, community organisations, and local partners – relationships where there was already trust. It also helped strengthen school engagement and partnership working.
- **Children's positive relationships with practitioners often acted as a catalyst** for wider family engagement.

Challenges

- Practitioners described a **complex local support landscape**, with families and professionals sometimes unclear about available services and referral routes. As a result, **families frequently sought support with issues beyond the programme's intended scope**, including SEND and neurodevelopmental assessment pathways.
- Families, community members and professionals were sometimes described as cautious about engaging with new services, reflecting **experiences of other short-term initiatives**. Practitioners reported that building trust therefore required consistency, visibility, and sustained engagement over time.
- Practitioners described challenges **engaging some families who faced multiple and intersecting barriers to access**. These included socio-economic pressures, caring responsibilities, limited digital access, and language barriers. As such, practitioners described often requiring additional time and flexibility in their support offer.
- The service **relied on relationships with schools and other partners** to identify children, engage families and deliver support. Practitioners reported that **staff turnover** among partner organisations could disrupt established relationships, slow progress, and require them to develop new networks and ways of working.



Findings: strategic influencing and policy work

This section draws on learning from two policy and influencing workshops involving practitioners, managers and commissioners from across the four nations.

Emerging outcomes

The evaluation identified early evidence that **Space to grow** contributed to – and amplified children's voices in – local and national discussions about children's emotional wellbeing and early support, such as policy forums and local service developments:

- MACS Supporting Children and Young People was involved in a cross-sector working group for education, youth, mental health and voluntary sector representatives to develop sustainable approaches to wellbeing support within schools.
- **Space to grow** Coventry was also invited by the local NHS trust to share learning from its work delivering non-clinical support for neurodivergent children.

How these outcomes were achieved

Workshop participants highlighted factors that supported this work, including:

- **Collaboration** as a core feature of the **Space to grow** model. Delivery across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland enabled practitioners, managers and delivery partners to regularly **share learning, identify cross-country challenges and exchange effective practice**. This helped inform programme development while contributing to wider policy and practice discussions.
- **Strong relationships with schools, communities, and local partners** helped create opportunities to influence local practice and service development beyond direct service delivery.

Challenges

Participants in the learning partner workshops identified **short-term funding** as a challenge, particularly where influence depended on building long-term relationships and maintaining a presence within local and national networks. While the evaluation identified examples of emerging influence, it could not assess their longer-term impact.

Building on the evaluation findings

Since the evaluation, **Space to grow** has contributed to wider policy discussions on children's mental health through the publication of Meet Me Where I Am, a report exploring barriers to mental health support for underserved children and teens.[5] Accompanied by four nation-specific policy briefings for England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, the report helped bring local evidence and children's experiences into national conversations about access to early support.



[5] See more details here: https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/meet-me-where-i-am

Implications

The learning presented in this report has implications for commissioners and funders in particular, as well as the future direction of the sector.

It matters how support is framed, experienced and accessed

A recurring theme across the evaluation was the importance of how emotional wellbeing support is framed for children. The findings suggest that **play-based, choice-led, and relational approaches may help challenge assumptions that wellbeing support is a clinical space** associated with more severe mental health difficulties. Such approaches may **reduce barriers to engagement and improve accessibility** to early support services. The findings also raise wider questions for the children's sector about how emotional wellbeing support is communicated to, and normalised for, children and families.

Emotional wellbeing support works best as part of a wider system of support

Another consistent theme was the importance of relationships and connection. **Space to grow** is grounded in the understanding that children's emotional wellbeing is shaped by the people, environments, and systems around them. The findings suggest a similar principle applies to the delivery of support itself. **Space to grow** appeared most effective when embedded within strong local networks, working alongside families, schools, community organisations and other services. **Effective early support appears to depend not only on individual programmes but also on the wider network of support surrounding children and families**. Commissioners may therefore wish to consider how services work together across different levels of need, including what support remains available when time-limited support comes to an end.

Time, trust and sustained presence is key

The evaluation highlighted **the importance of long-term, flexible funding for early support services**. **Space to grow's** impact was closely linked to relationship building, trust and sustained engagement with children, families and communities, all of which require time to develop. The findings suggest that **long-term impact depends not only on the support provided to children but also on its continuity** and the relationships and partnerships surrounding it.

Conclusion

This evaluation suggests that **Space to grow** is supporting meaningful change for children and teens, who described increased confidence, a greater understanding of emotions, and skills to manage challenges.

Perhaps most importantly, the findings suggest that **Space to grow** is responding to a clear need for accessible early support, helping children before difficulties escalate and reaching children whose needs are not always well met by existing systems. Through trusted relationships, flexible delivery, and creative, non-clinical approaches, **Space to grow** has been shown to engage children with a wide range of needs and experiences.

Operating across thirteen sites in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, **Space to grow** has demonstrated the unique value of a four-nation partnership model. Learning and insight generated within local communities has been shared across the programme, enabling partners to strengthen practice, identify common challenges, and contribute to wider conversations about children's emotional wellbeing, access to support and early help.

Continued investment would enable more children and families to benefit from this support while building understanding of its longer-term impact.

It can be a difficult journey, from childhood to adulthood. But it’s a truly formative time.

One that should be defined by experimentation – and a healthy dose of fun.

But too many of Britain’s teens are in crisis. Let down by failing systems, they’re missing trusted role models, trapped in poverty, and facing abuse, on and offline. It’s no wonder they’re the unhappiest in Europe.

That’s why we want to make sure every teen has a safe place to go, and an expert to talk to, whenever they need it. We want to open more drop-in centres, provide lasting support – and champion change with and for teens.

Because at The Children’s Society, we believe in setting teenagers up to thrive. That they all deserve the chance to enjoy this brilliantly unique life stage.

Because the truth is, if they’re in trouble, we all are.

We’re raising the alarm to Save Teenhood.

childrenssociety.org.uk

Email: spacetogrow@childrenssociety.org.uk

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