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# Young people's experiences of **HeadStart**: 2017–2021

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Written by:

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## HeadStart and the Learning Team

Started in 2016, HeadStart is a six-year, £67.4 million National Lottery funded programme set up by The National Lottery Community Fund, the largest funder of community activity in the UK. HeadStart aims to explore and test new ways to improve the mental health and wellbeing of young people aged 10–16 and prevent serious mental health issues from developing. To do this, six local authority led HeadStart partnerships are working with local young people, schools, families, charities, community and public services to design and try out new interventions that will make a difference to young people's mental health, wellbeing and resilience. The HeadStart partnerships are in the following locations in England: Blackpool, Cornwall, Hull, Kent, Newham and Wolverhampton.

The Evidence Based Practice Unit (EBPU) at the Anna Freud Centre and University College London (UCL) is working with The National Lottery Community Fund and the HeadStart partnerships to collect and evaluate evidence about what does and does not work locally to benefit young people now and in the future. Partners working with the EBPU on this evaluation include the Child Outcomes Research Consortium (CORC) and the University of Manchester. This collaboration is called the HeadStart Learning Team. Previous partners in the HeadStart Learning Team include the London School of Economics (LSE) and Common Room.

## Our interviews with young people

The HeadStart Learning Team has conducted interviews with the same group of young people each year over the course of HeadStart.<sup>1</sup> All of the young people were attending schools delivering the HeadStart programme. The interviews are about young people's experiences of coping and receiving support (from the HeadStart programme and other professional or social sources) for difficult situations and feelings in life. We interviewed

<sup>1</sup> Ethical approval for the HeadStart Qualitative Evaluation was granted by the University College London (UCL) Research Ethics Committee (ID number: 7963/002).

82 young people (aged 9-12 years old) at Time 1, the start of the HeadStart programme in 2017-18. We interviewed 78 of these young people again at Time 2 (2018-19), 62 again at Time 3 (2019-21), and 23 again at Time 4 (2020-21). Due to disruption caused by the coronavirus pandemic, the number of young people we interviewed at Time 4 was much smaller than in previous years. In addition, we did not conduct interviews when young people had moved schools and we were unable to contact them.

Lots of different types of support are being delivered through HeadStart.<sup>2,3</sup>

This includes:

- universal support delivered to whole school year groups or classes, such as lessons or assemblies about mental health
- training for staff at schools and in the community about how to support young people's mental health and wellbeing
- co-production or participation activities, whereby young people are involved in activities to inform the development of their area's HeadStart programme or to improve their school, such as giving suggestions for how to make the school environment feel like a safe place
- targeted or universal+ support for young people who are experiencing specific difficulties with their mental health or wellbeing, such as small group sessions about coping with difficult emotions or one-to-one support with a peer mentor or adult
- support for parents and carers, such as group sessions about how to help young people who are experiencing difficulties with their emotions or behaviour.

Young people were invited to take part in the interviews if school staff or HeadStart staff identified them as already having received some form of support from the HeadStart programme by Time 1, or identified them as being eligible to receive such support in the future, including support delivered on a universal, universal+, or targeted level. Young people were

<sup>2</sup> Evidence Based Practice Unit (2019). *HeadStart heads up: What are local HeadStart partnerships doing to support the mental health of children and young people aged 10 to 16?* Retrieved from [www.ucl.ac.uk/evidence-based-practice-unit/headstart-learning-team/headstart-reports-publications](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/evidence-based-practice-unit/headstart-learning-team/headstart-reports-publications)

<sup>3</sup> Lereya, S. T., Edridge, C., Nicoll, C. & Deighton, J. (2022). *HeadStart heads up: Targeted interventions in HeadStart*. Evidence Based Practice Unit. Retrieved from [www.ucl.ac.uk/evidence-based-practice-unit/headstart-learning-team/headstart-reports-publications](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/evidence-based-practice-unit/headstart-learning-team/headstart-reports-publications)

either selected by staff and offered the opportunity to take part or were invited to express interest in being involved. If young people agreed to take part, consent was sought by the HeadStart Learning Team from both the young people and their parents or carers. At each of the six HeadStart partnerships, the number of young people interviewed at Time 1 ranged from 12-16.

## About this briefing

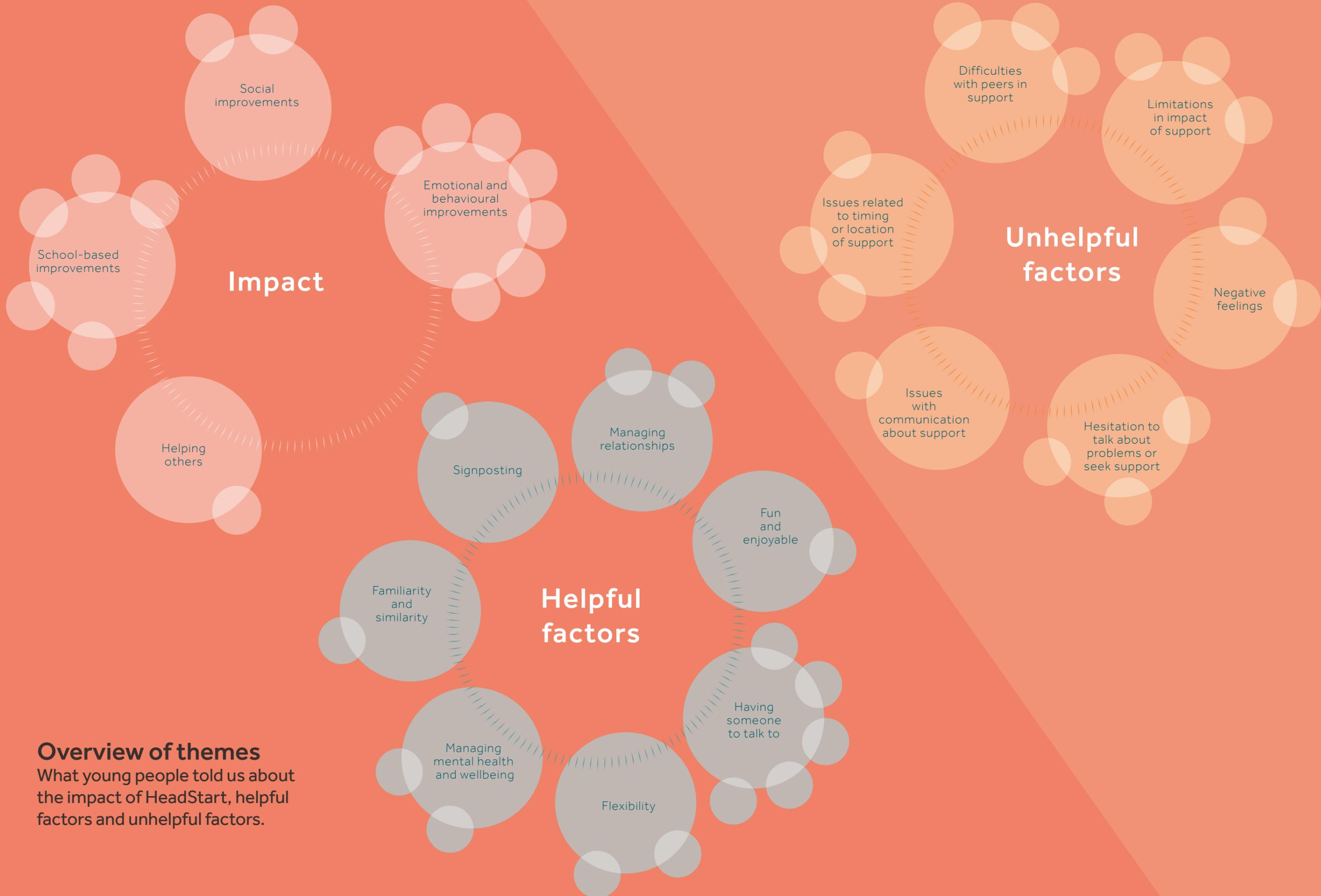
This briefing presents some of our findings from the interviews we have conducted with young people so far. It focuses on any support that young people reported receiving from specific HeadStart interventions and from staff in HeadStart schools or in the community. This briefing aims to highlight the breadth of young people's experiences of, and views on, support. This includes their perceptions of the impact of support, and enablers and barriers to bringing about change through the HeadStart programme. The findings are presented in three sections:

1. What young people told us about the impact of HeadStart on their lives.
2. What young people told us is helpful about HeadStart.
3. What young people told us is less helpful or could be improved about HeadStart.

Each section shows the themes we identified when analysing the young people's interviews. The themes were developed systematically using a thematic analysis approach.<sup>4</sup> The themes are not specific to particular types of support; rather, they span the full range of support that young people talked about receiving in their interviews at any timepoint. The main themes are presented in circles with subthemes, examples and illustrative quotes from young people presented around them.

It was not always clear from young people's perspectives whether a particular staff member, lesson, or intervention was directly funded through HeadStart. Moreover, by the fourth year of the programme, the level of integration of HeadStart within schools and local areas also made it more difficult to draw meaningful distinctions between what constituted HeadStart and non-HeadStart support. Therefore, where possible, we drew distinctions between HeadStart and non-HeadStart support in our analysis, and where activity appeared to be HeadStart-related, we classified this as HeadStart support.

<sup>4</sup> Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2021). One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis? *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 18, 328–352. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1769238>



## Impact

## Unhelpful factors

## Helpful factors

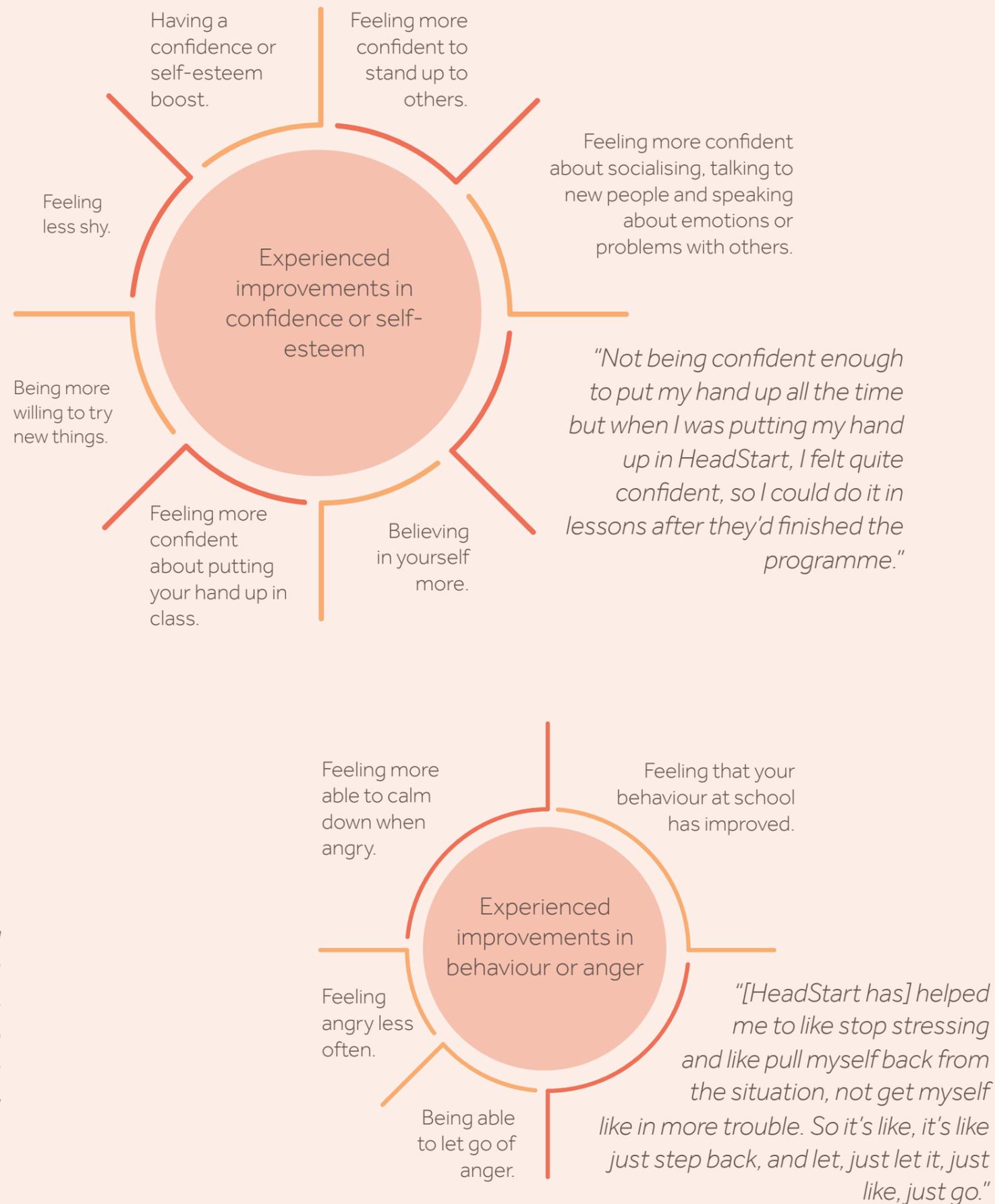
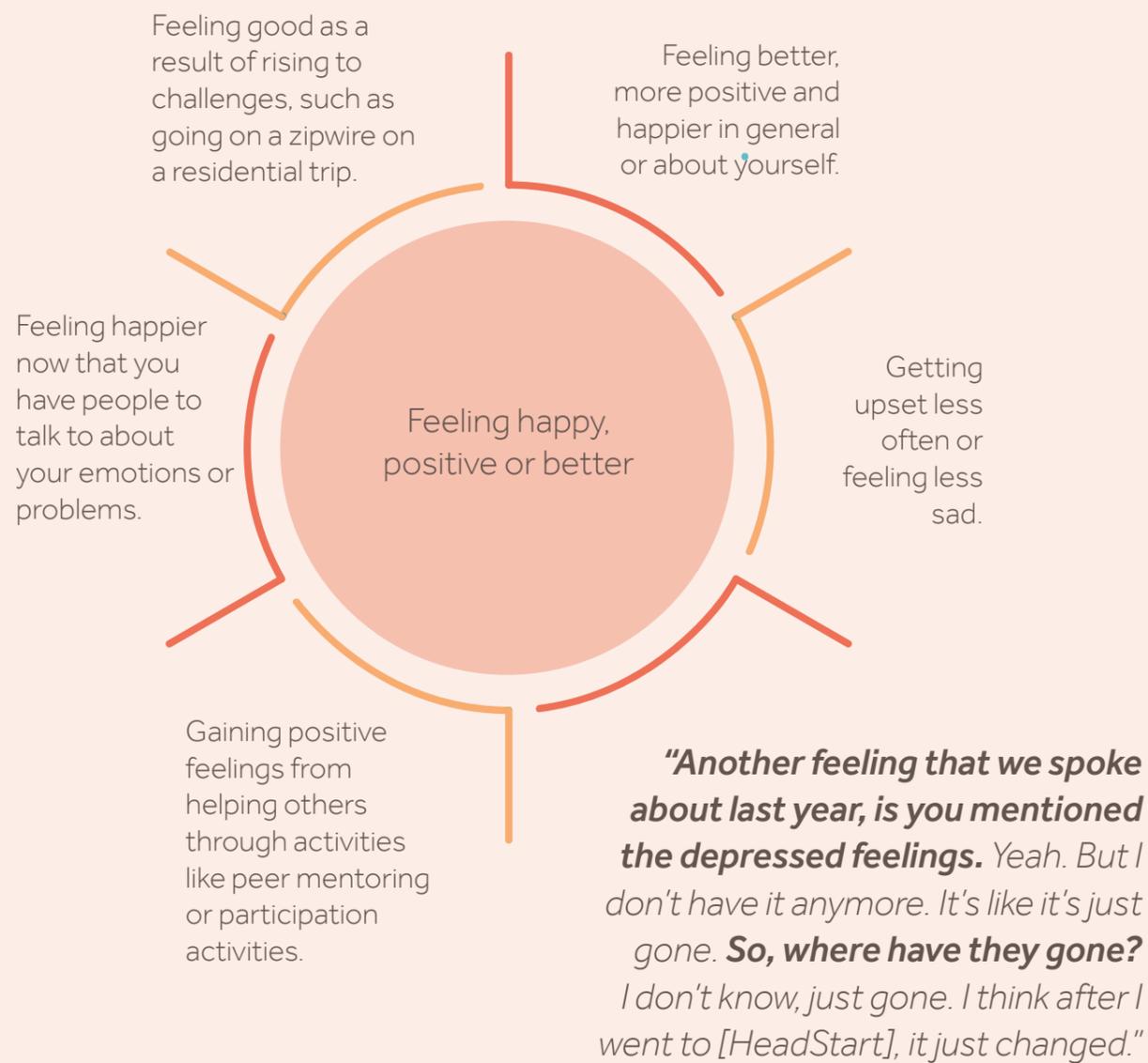
### Overview of themes

What young people told us about the impact of HeadStart, helpful factors and unhelpful factors.

What young people told us about...

# the **impact** of HeadStart on their lives

## Experienced emotional and behavioural improvements



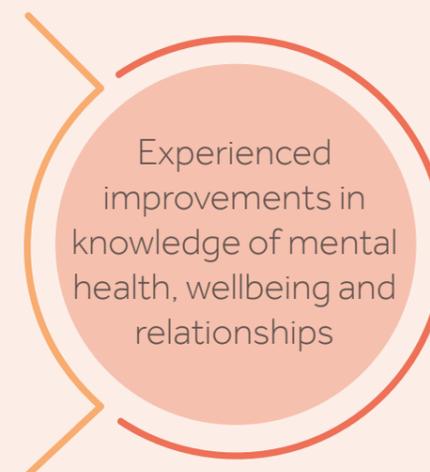
## Experienced emotional and behavioural improvements

Finding ways to cope, other than self-harm, e.g., talking to people about how you are feeling.

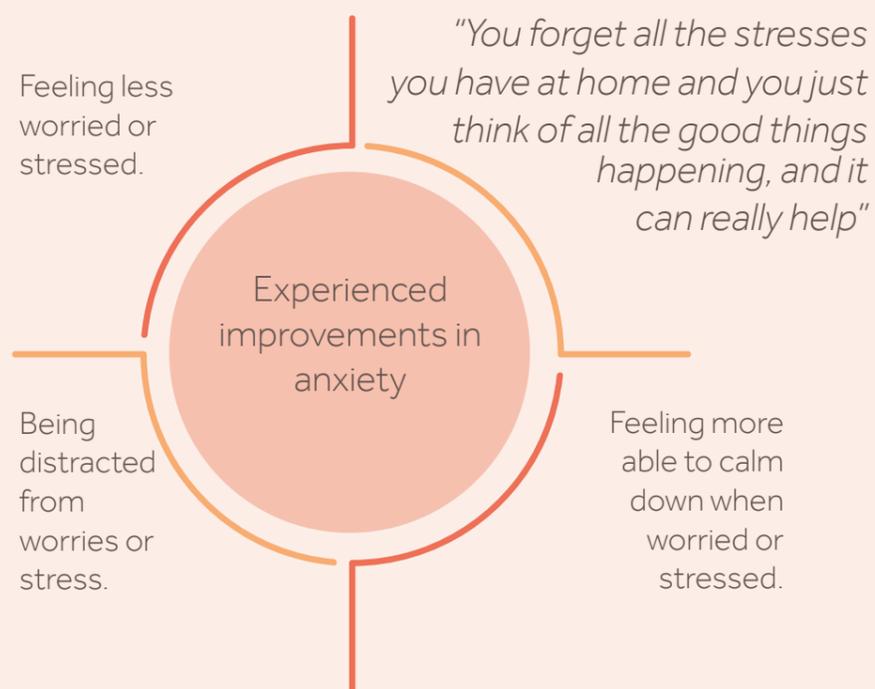


*"At [HeadStart], I realised it wasn't doing me any better than what other things that I could do to get the pain out, like to talk to other people about it, like that got it out and it was like, miles easier."*

*"I found it useful because like if, if it got to the point in life where like my mental health started to go bad, then that lesson, them lessons have like taught me new things that I can use for things from that lesson to make my mental health better."*

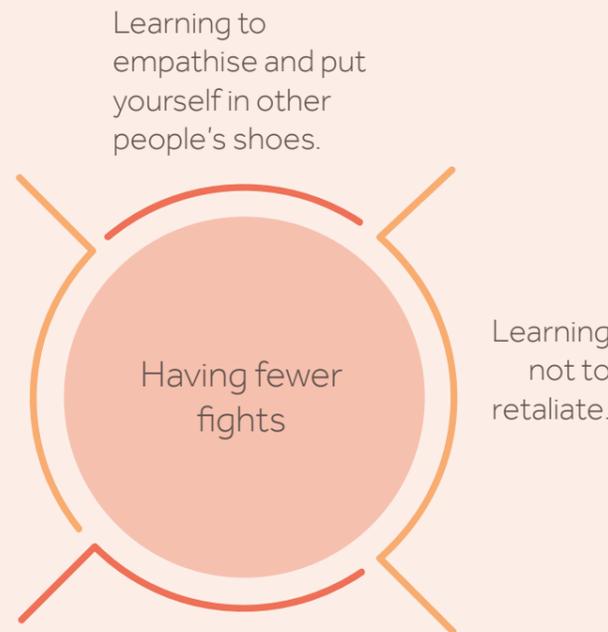


Having assemblies, lessons or sessions about mental health, how to stay safe (e.g., online or in relationships), peer pressure, and bullying helps you to know what to do in difficult situations, including who to talk to and strategies to use.



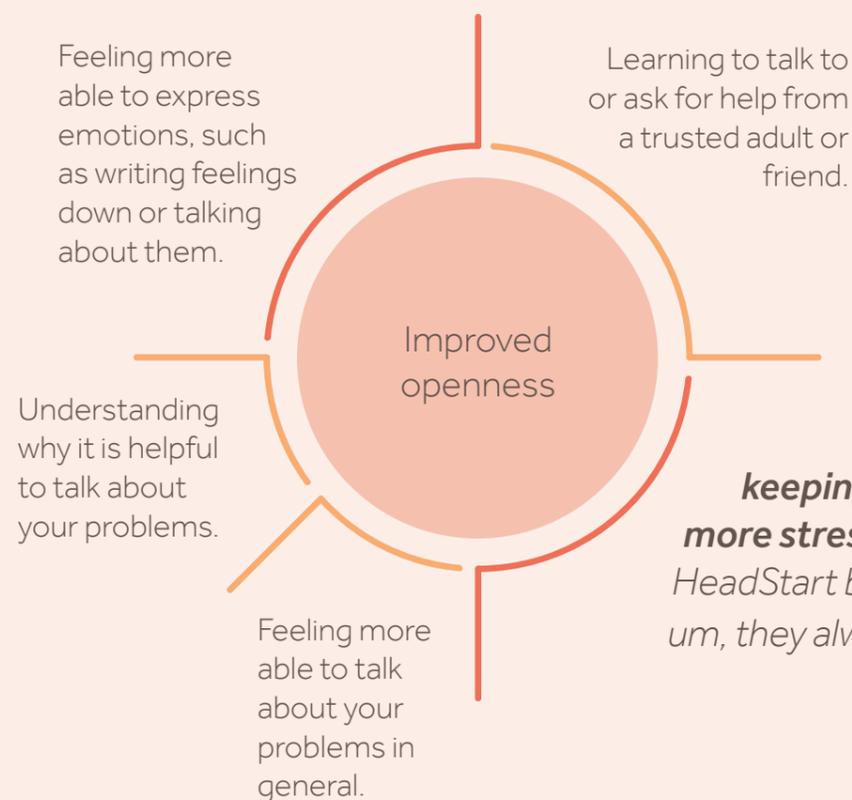
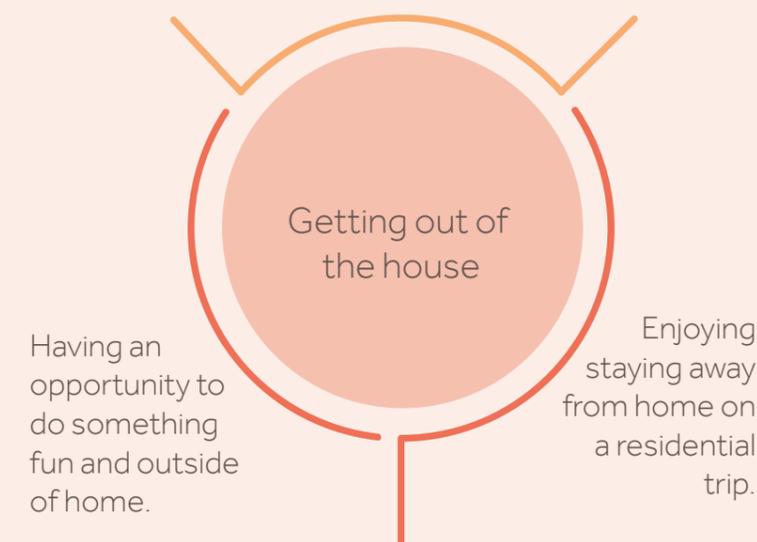
**Experienced social improvements**

*"I really enjoyed it because, I got this... some of the people are not in my form, not in my classes and everything and I get to like talk to them and everything and like, yeah. We got really close after the HeadStart."*



*"People'd wind me up and so then I'd have a go at them. And then, ever since that happened, ever since I've been going to [HeadStart] it's stopped because I know how to deal with it now. So it's helped."*

*"Once I even went to the cinema with her. **What was helpful about having that time with that HeadStart person?** Because people had said that, apart from when I go to school, I never leave the house. Until they had actually said that, I didn't even realise."*



***"Where did you learn that? So, about how keeping it inside can make you more stressed? Um, I learnt it from HeadStart because, um, I knew that, um, they always talked about that, to share your feelings."***

Having fewer arguments with parents, carers or siblings, as your own ability to calm down when angry improves or because you have had help with managing family relationships.



*"Everything's alright now as well. [My mum and I] haven't argued for a long time. **What's helped with that?** Um, well I did go to [HeadStart], that helped. I got, um, skills from there that I use at home."*

**Experienced school-related improvements**

Concentrating more or feeling less distracted in lessons, for example due to goals set by your peer mentor around improving behaviour.

Worrying less and receiving help with emotional, peer and family difficulties also helps with concentration.

Experienced improvements in schoolwork

*"I've learned how to deal with that and like... be able to not think about it at school... and like, just concentrate like on my work."*

***"What's been better since [HeadStart]?"*** Like I think teachers, um, have listened more to what we have to say. Instead of doing a one-way conversation and taking one person's side, they've taken both sides."

Changes to school environment

Enjoying being able to help others through influencing change within your school and local area.

Feeling listened to more by school staff.

**Helping others**

Developing skills to manage conflict between peers.

Learning how to help and care for others.

Feeling inspired to become a peer mentor after being a mentee.

Helping others

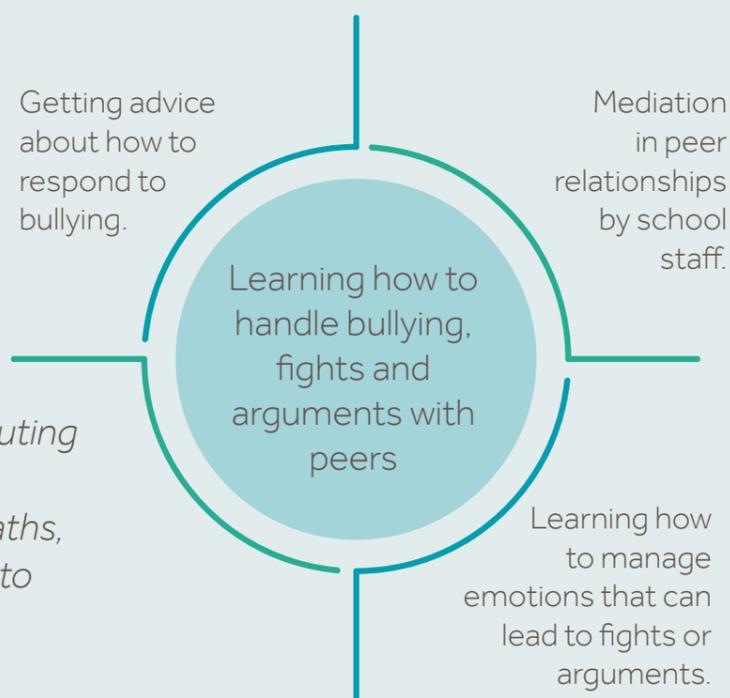
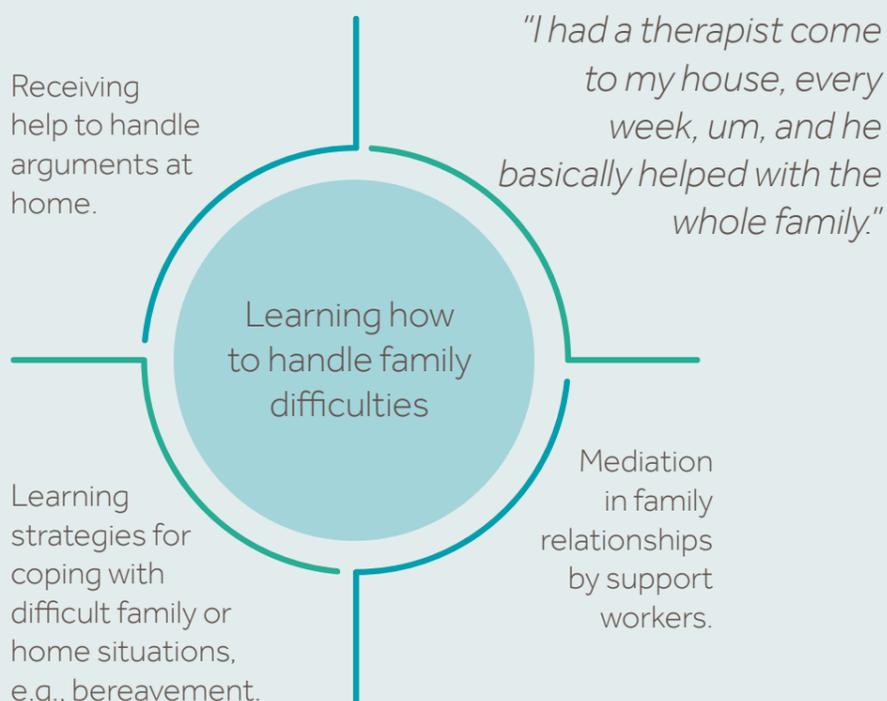
Feeling that even if participation activities do not directly help you, they may help someone else.

*"You get to learn about, like worrying, anger and it, and it makes you open up and it makes you know the emotions, so if somebody, if you see somebody who is like worrying or something you could use those skills what you learnt from [HeadStart] to help them."*

What young people told us is...

# helpful about HeadStart

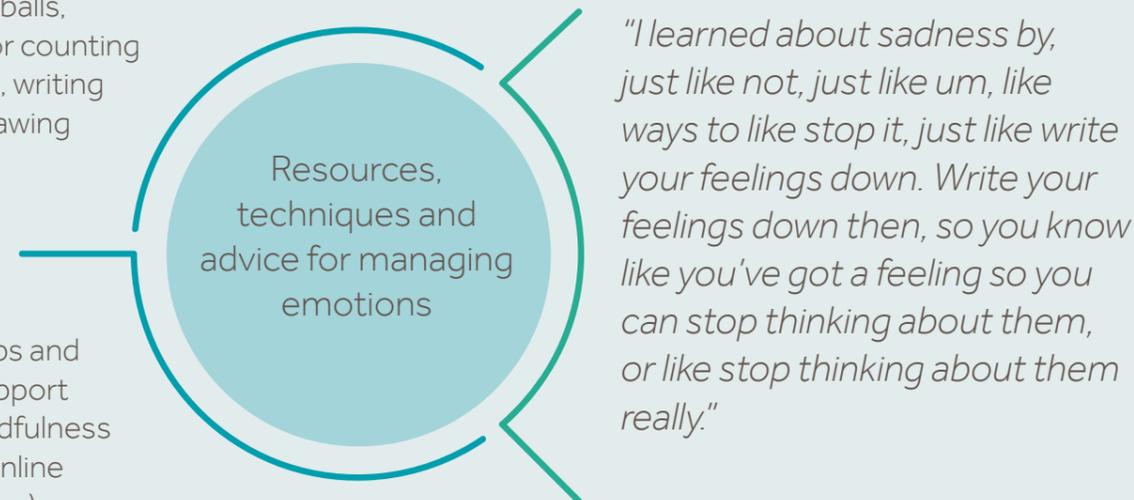
## Managing relationships



## Managing mental health and wellbeing

Being given advice, techniques and wellbeing resources to use to calm down when angry or to deal with stress and worries, e.g., stress balls, breathing or counting techniques, writing down or drawing feelings.

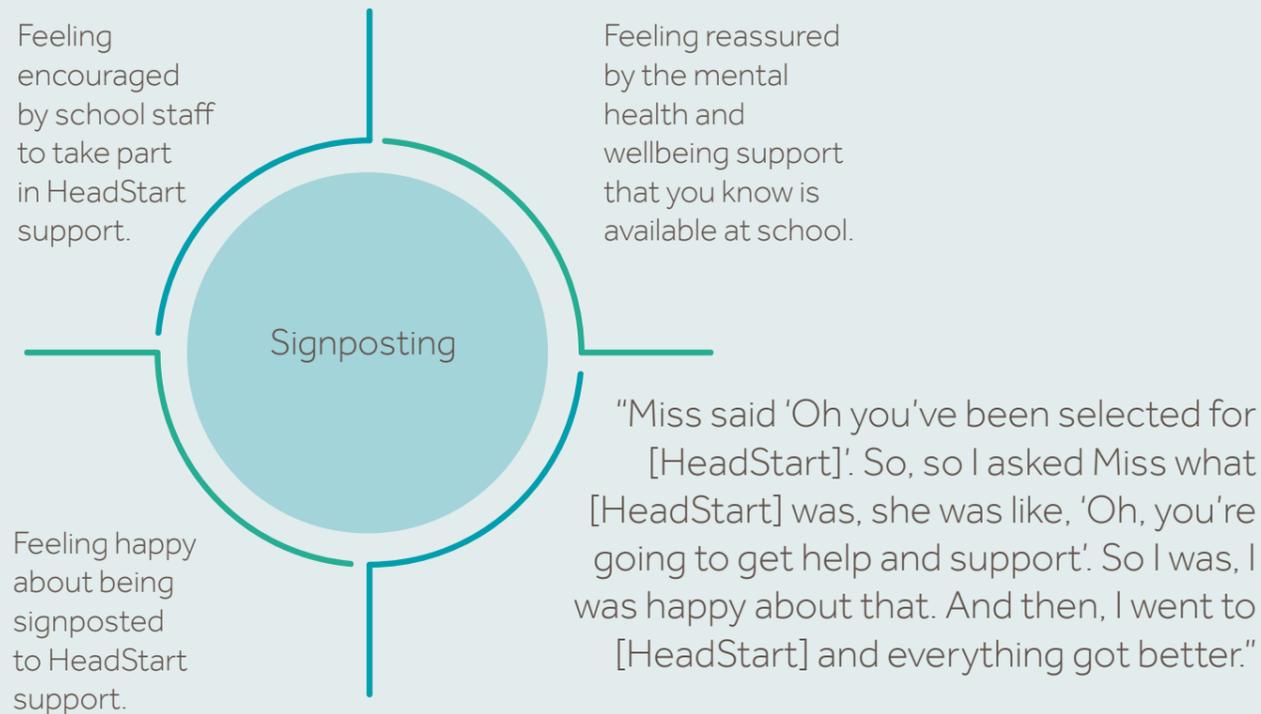
Using apps and digital support (e.g., mindfulness apps or online counselling) to manage emotions.



*"[Peer mentoring] improved me by the mini targets, I'd remember them. Like, the breathing thing and stuff like that, so it helped me a lot. Then I had a chance to use it like in a place where I knew, so um, I realised that this, I can't do this anymore. I kind of set myself boundaries."*



**Signposting**

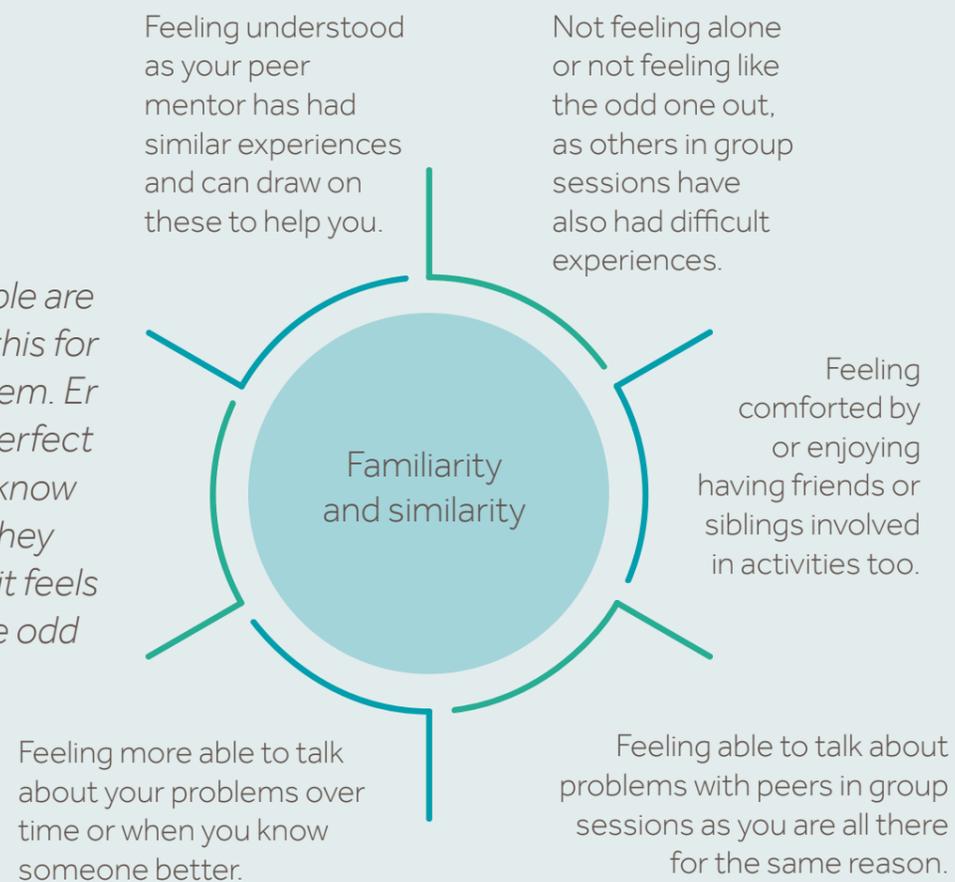


**Fun and enjoyable**



**Familiarity and similarity**

*"Because I felt like, like when people are like, saying like their mum's done this for them, their dad's done that for them. Er it felt like everybody had like the perfect family. But, when I actually got to know the people and talk to them, it's, they hadn't got the perfect family and it feels a bit good to think that I'm not the odd one out."*



## Flexibility

Feeling able to escape, relax, forget worries, and take time out from everyday life,

Calming or relaxing environment

*"Well at school you like have a lot of rules and like, but at [HeadStart] like you only get like, it's a little less rules. So you're allowed to like, so you're allowed to like get a drink in the middle of a presentation that you're shown, so I think it makes, it means that you don't have a lot of weight on your shoulders."*

Enjoying having fewer rules in HeadStart sessions.

## Having someone to talk to

*"I could just like talk to her about anything. Even if it was like, I don't know how to like, what spices to put in my tea or something like that."*

Easy to talk to

Feeling that you can talk about anything with HeadStart staff.

Feeling able to say whatever you want and not having to edit what you say.

Feeling that school staff, HeadStart staff, and peer mentors have time to speak to you when you need them.

Receiving support as and when you need it

Having the option to approach HeadStart staff when they are present in school if you need to talk to them, rather than feeling like you have to talk to them.

*"Because if I was like wanting to sit with my friends and didn't want to go over to them, I could. And like I weren't forced to go to speak to them. So I thought, the o- the option would be better."*

Not having to talk about anything that you do not want to.

Being taken seriously.

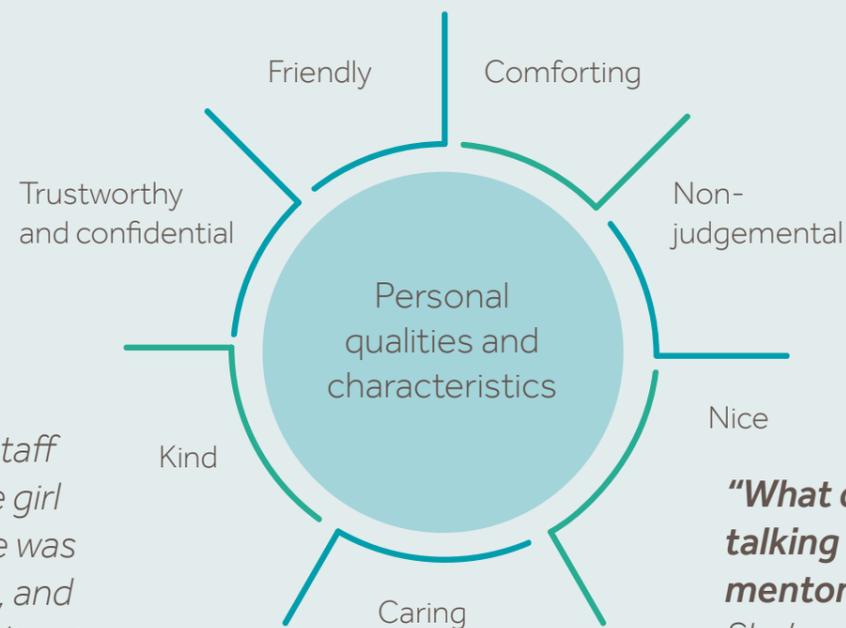
Feeling listened to or understood

Feeling listened to and understood when you are talking about your experiences or sharing your opinions.

*"I feel like [HeadStart is] an output where I can say all my feelings [...] without being laughed at or with people who actually care rather than just brush me off."*

Not being interrupted and being given space to talk.

**Having someone to talk to**



*"(HeadStart staff member), the girl that did it, she was like really kind, and like if you didn't get something she would make it much better in a phrase, so she didn't shout."*

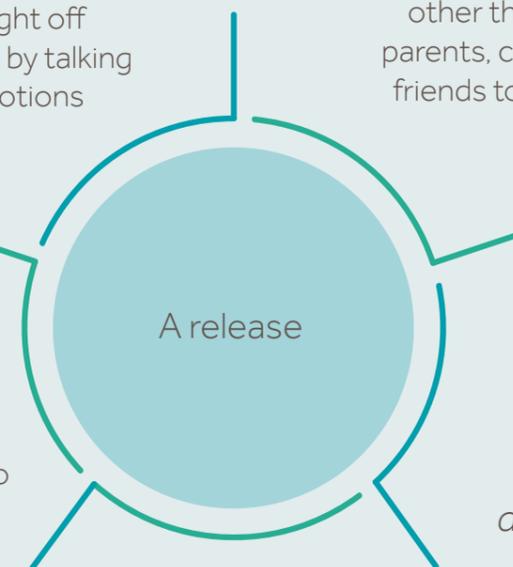
*"All the people [at HeadStart] are really nice, they all care about you. And you can learn a lot from it."*

***"What do you like about talking with your [peer mentor]?"*** Everything. She's a very nice... she's a very nice person."

Getting things off your chest, letting your feelings out, or releasing a weight off your shoulders by talking about your emotions or problems.

Having someone other than your parents, carers or friends to talk to.

Having someone to talk to if you don't have anyone else to talk to.



*"I release that, the, the weight off my shoulders, I just tell [my peer mentor] what happened. Like, I have someone to tell if I don't want to necessarily tell my mum, I can tell either her or my friends"*

Enjoying having the opportunity to talk to someone.

Sharing opinions, advice and experiences in group sessions is an opportunity to learn from each other.

Expressing yourself in group sessions helps you to feel less shy.



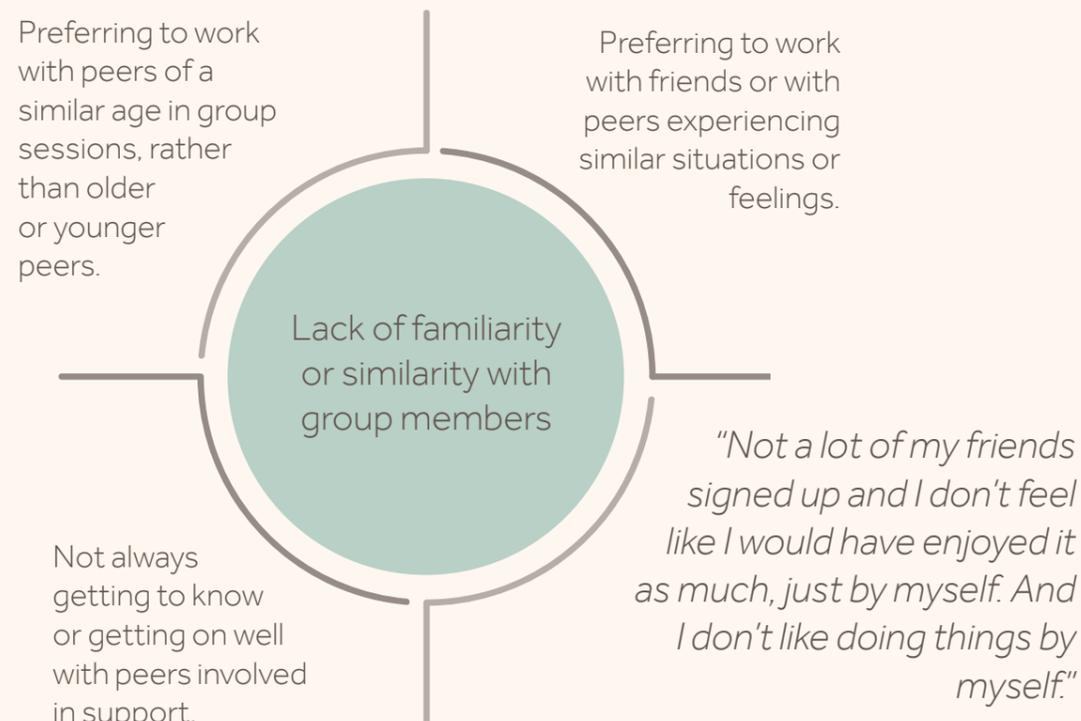
*"It's really like benefitted me because I'm not as stressed or worried now because I've got like more advice from people that might have had different experiences or just like thoughts and that."*

Improving your confidence and socialising more as a result of meeting new people in group sessions or on residential trips.

What young people told us is...

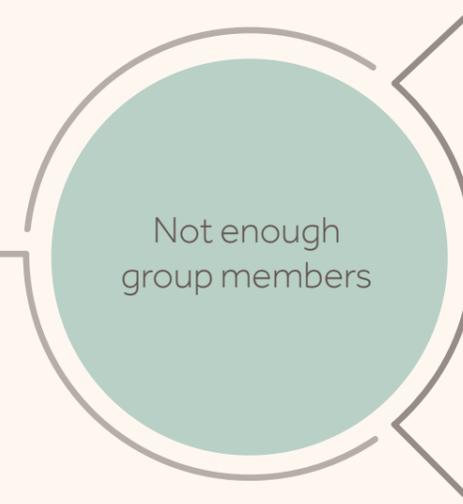
# less helpful or could be improved about HeadStart

## Difficulties related to peers in support



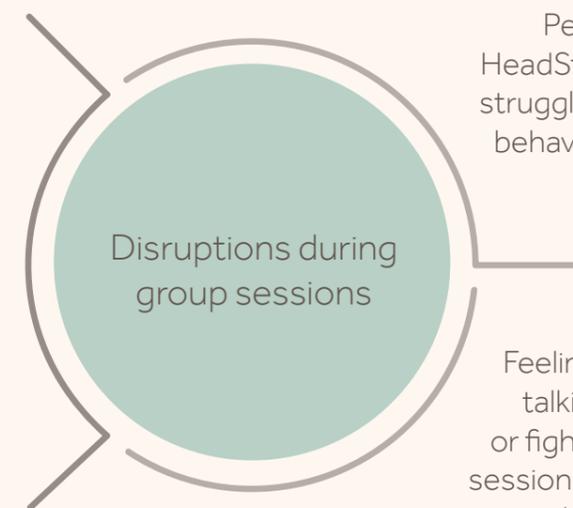
Preferring there to be more people in group sessions, e.g., so that you can hear more opinions.

Not enough people passed peer mentor training, so the intervention was not able to continue.



*"We had like I think it was like 12 people. So, and they were, like they were saying like the same stuff, so it would be, it would be helpful and nice if like more people joined, and we can hear other opinions than ours."*

***"Do you think there's anything that could be done to help that or improve that situation? Maybe a bit more of a screening process, learning about whether people actually want to do this or if they just want to skip lessons, learning whether they, whether they would actually benefit from this."***



Perceiving that HeadStart staff can struggle to manage behaviour in group sessions.

Feeling that peers talking, shouting or fighting in group sessions can disrupt content, take up session time, or undermine the positive atmosphere.

**Hesitation to talk about problems or seek support**

Not wanting staff to be dismissive, think that you are wasting their time, or think that you do not need help.

Worrying about consequences once you have talked about problems, e.g., being referred to therapy, getting told off, or people (such as parents or carers) worrying or feeling upset.

Concerns about consequences

Not wanting problems to be blown out of proportion or to be treated differently by staff after you have told them about your problems.

*"I get really weird talking about things because I don't want to go like back into counselling and all that sort of stuff. I don't want people to worry about me."*

Not talking about problems with staff when you do not know whether you can trust them yet.

Having concerns that staff have to break confidentiality in some circumstances.

Concerns around trust

Not wanting to create an account to access online counselling, because then you feel that you are not anonymous.

*"It takes a lot of trust and, like, dedication I guess to talk to somebody about these kind of things and maybe I feel like I'm not quite fully there with them."*

Worrying that staff might tell your parents or carers what you say.

Having concerns about your peer mentor telling others about your problems, including feeling that adults can be more trustworthy than peers.

Having difficulties or reservations talking about problems, e.g., worries about being judged.

Not knowing how to articulate your emotions or problems.

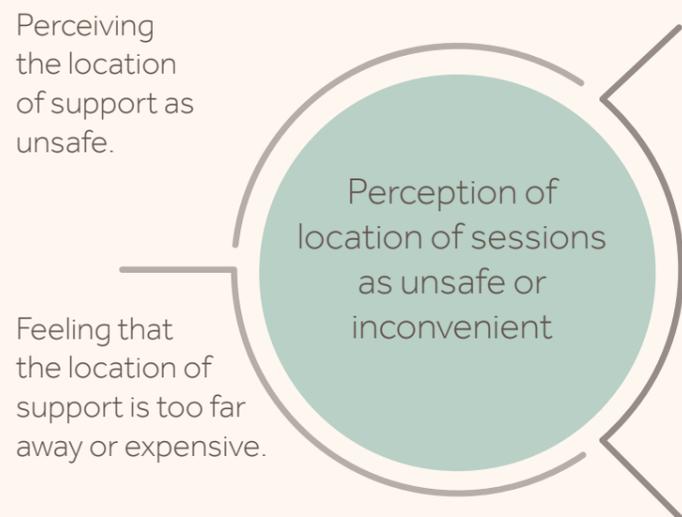
Not wanting or feeling able to talk or ask for help

*"I don't really speak to them about my problems because I don't really want them to bring it up while I'm at the youth club 'cause it might be like ooh... they might ask me [...] and I'll be like, 'I'm depressed', and then they be like 'Why?', I'm like 'It's, it's just life.'"*

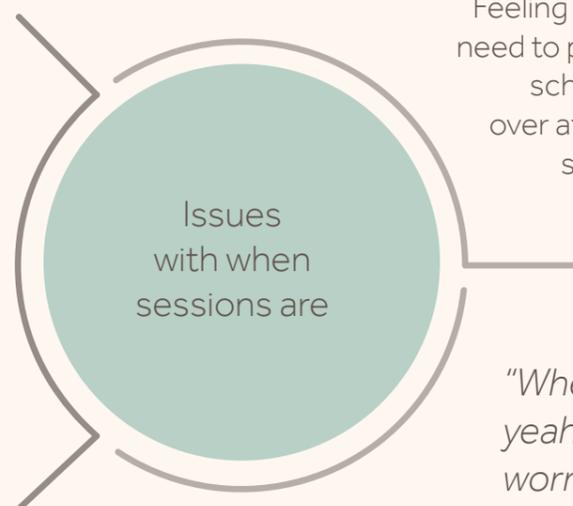
Not wanting others to know about your problems or not wanting to talk about particular problems, which can lead to you stopping attending support if you are forced to talk about them.

Not feeling like you can or will be helped even if you do share your problems.

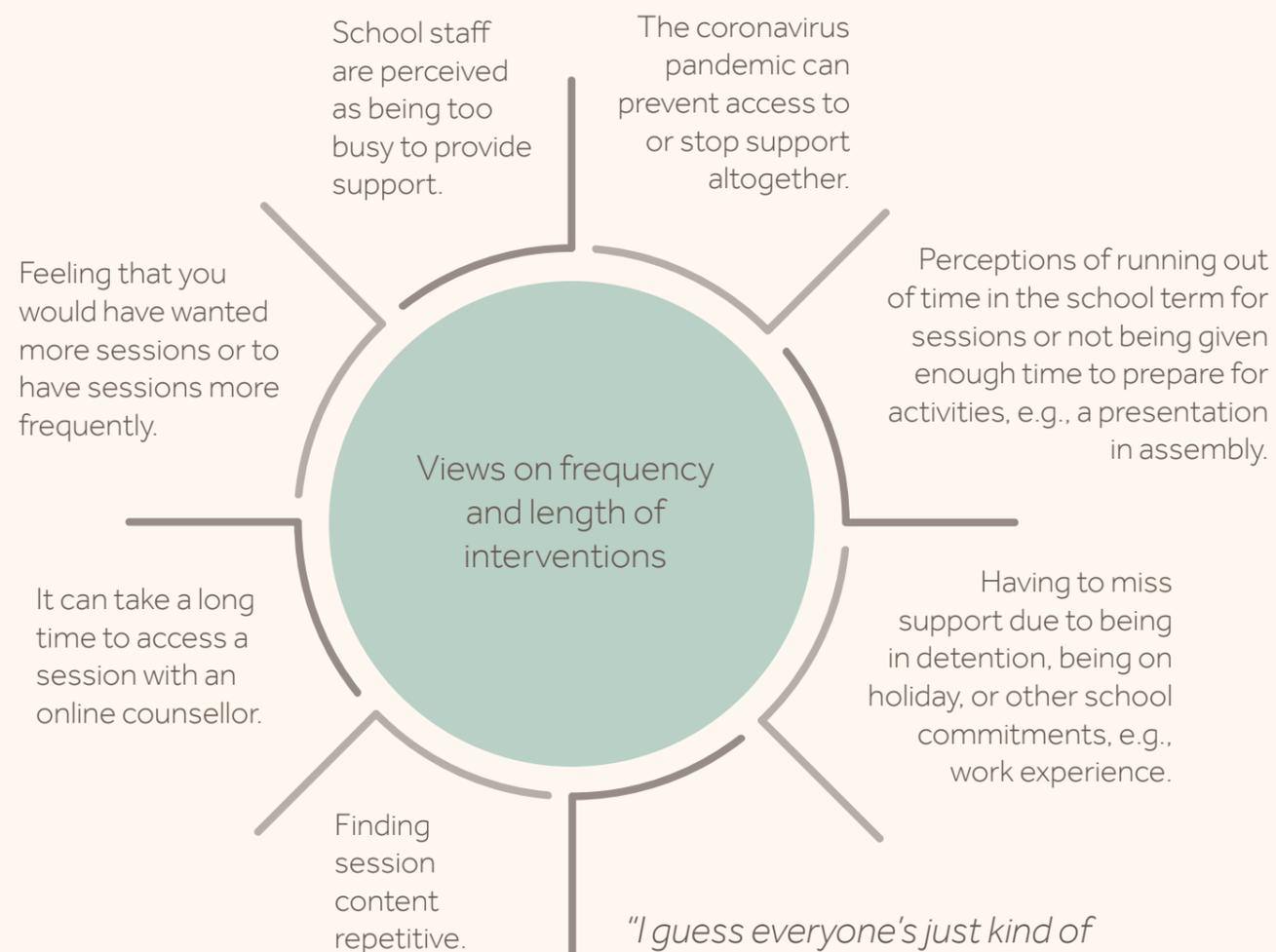
**Issues related to timing or location of support**



*"We started going every [week]. But then it was all the travel to get there."*



*"When it's dark outside, yeah, my mum gets kind of worried. Ah, but then, I only went there about like two times and then I stopped."*



*"I guess everyone's just kind of busy like, [my mentor] has her classes that she needs to teach and things and she needs to do, and then, um, I guess like 'cause we, we have exams coming up, so being in lessons is really important, so there's not like a lot of time when we are available for mentoring sessions."*

**Negative feelings**

Feeling left out or jealous when other people are chosen to be involved in HeadStart, but you are not.

Feeling annoyed or frustrated, e.g., about having to miss school to attend HeadStart sessions, with others' behaviour in group sessions, or when you are not eligible for support.



Finding the content of sessions boring, e.g., when it is repetitive.

***"How did you feel about not being able to speak to a peer mentor? Um, I was kind of frustrated [...] it's kind of just like, oh like, why do I not meet the like requirements? Like obviously, you know, I don't feel the best most of the time."***

Feeling nervous, awkward or scared at the outset of support.

Feeling sad about staff or peer mentors leaving, or about support ending.



*"It was more like get all your feelings out, and then you leave. And then you leave the room, and you're like, oh, I feel really bad now 'cause I've spoke about a lot of bad things, what do I do with myself now?"*

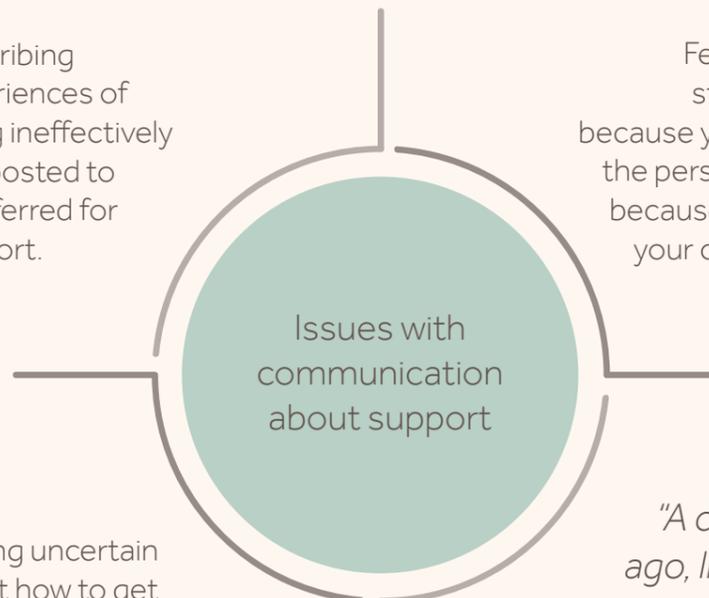
Feeling stressed, upset or uncomfortable as a result of the content of sessions, e.g., when sessions focus on mental health, when you feel embarrassed about giving presentations or appearing in a video, or when you are asked to talk about emotions or problems that you don't want to talk about.

Finding it draining or difficult speaking about your emotions or experiences.

**Issues with communication about support**

Describing experiences of being ineffectively signposted to or referred for support.

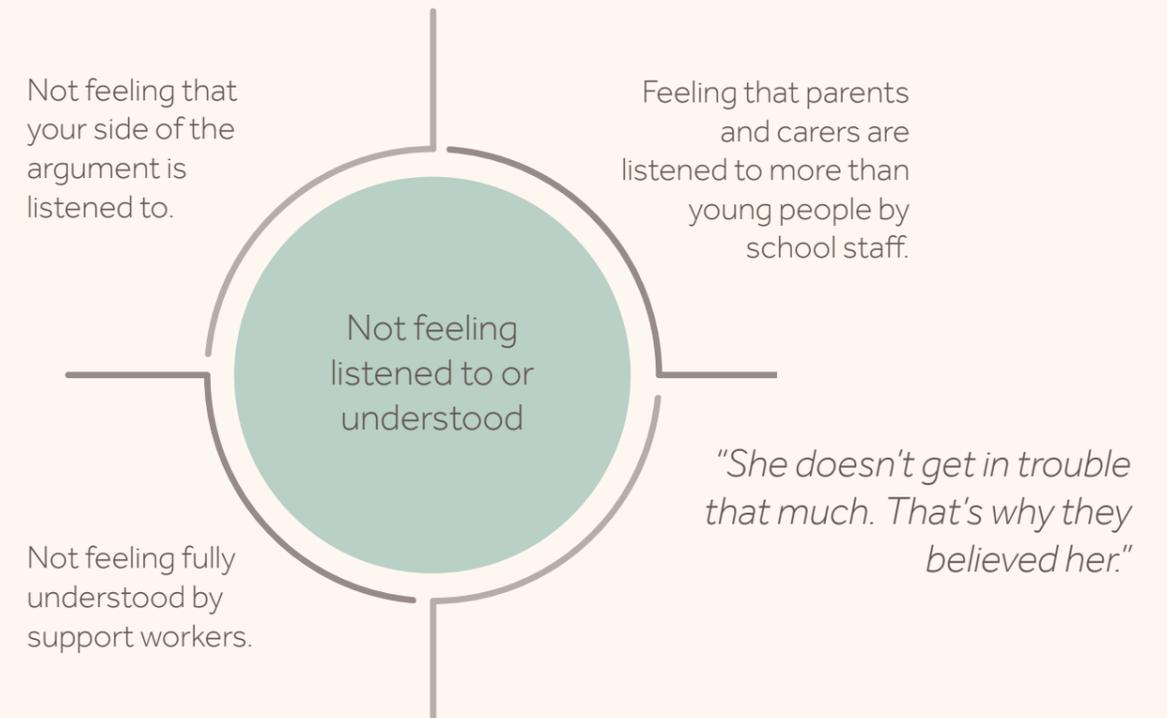
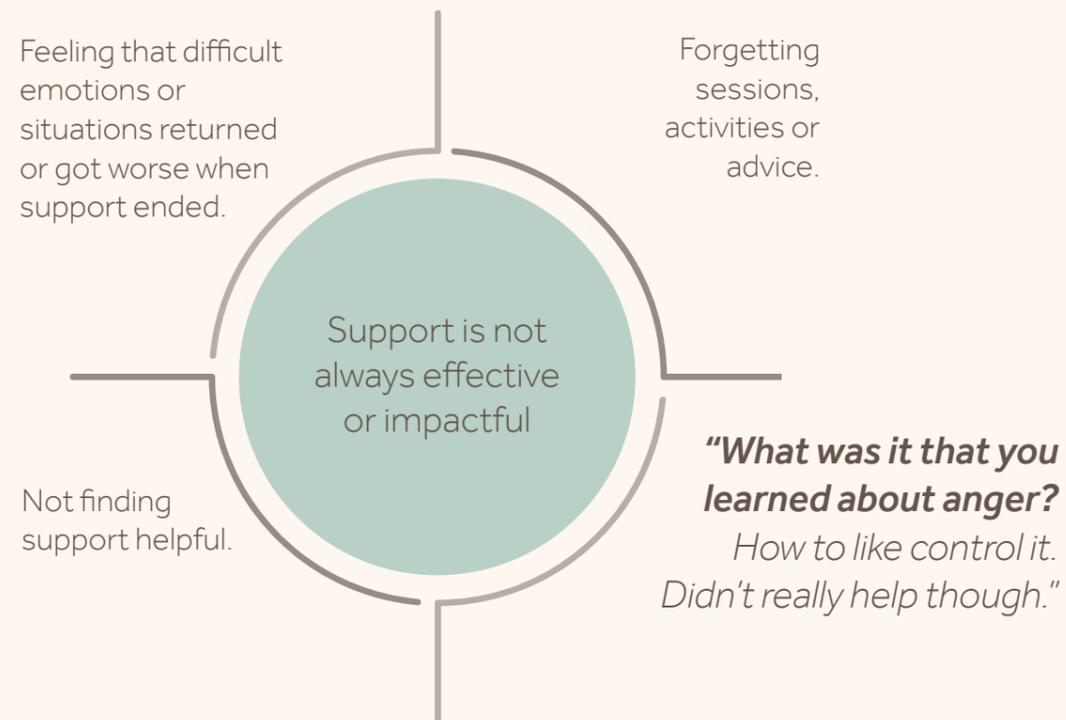
Feeling that support stopped happening because you lost touch with the person organising it or because you did not hand your consent form in on time.



Feeling uncertain about how to get involved in HeadStart, why support ended or why you were referred to HeadStart in the first place.

*"A couple of months ago, like there was this other teacher and he told me to like be in another group, like another HeadStart but they said they'll take me up but they didn't."*

**Limitations in impact of support**



## What do these findings tell us?

Young people described a range of ways in which they felt that support they had received from HeadStart had had a positive impact on them and their lives, including:

- experiencing emotional and behavioural improvements, such as feeling happy, positive or better in general; feeling more confident; and feeling less angry, anxious, stressed, or sad
- experiencing social improvements, such as making more friends; having fewer fights and arguments; and having an opportunity through the HeadStart programme to get out of the house and have fun
- experiencing school-related improvements, such as feeling able to concentrate more in lessons
- feeling inspired to help others, or learning how to do so.

Young people spoke about what had led to these areas of positive impact and described lots of ways in which they felt that support had been helpful for them. The findings tell us that it is important for young people to have someone who they can talk to about their problems, who they trust, and who listens and understands, but who doesn't judge or force them to talk about things they find difficult to talk about. This might be an adult or a peer mentor. The findings also tell us that boosting confidence and receiving advice about how to handle relationship difficulties, difficult emotions, and behaviour can be really helpful for young people from their perspective. Sharing advice and experiences with peers in group sessions can also help young people to get ideas about how to handle situations and it can make young people feel less alone or less shy.

Young people also talked about aspects of the HeadStart programme that were less helpful for them or which they thought could be improved. This included having difficulties with peers in group support sessions, for example preferring to be with peers their own age or experiencing disruptions due to others' behaviour. The findings also tell us that it is important that support takes place at a time and location that is suitable and accessible for young

people because this can be a barrier to attending. In addition, some young people described feeling uncertain about why they were receiving support; others indicated that they felt uncertain about how they could get involved in HeadStart activities if they wanted to. Young people may also feel sad about support ending or can feel that they are still experiencing difficulties after support finishes. Sometimes, young people indicate that techniques they are given to manage difficulties do not always work, are not that easy to use or can be forgotten.

## Limitations

The findings presented in this briefing represent the views and experiences of young people interviewed by the HeadStart Learning Team. There are many other young people in schools delivering the HeadStart programme whose views are not represented here.

## Conclusion

The findings show how and why the support that young people have received from specific HeadStart interventions and staff in HeadStart schools and in the community is helpful from their perspective. The findings also provide suggestions for how HeadStart, and other programmes like it, could be improved or designed in future. The findings highlight young people's perceptions of the impact of support and provide indications of the mechanisms behind this. The range of experiences described by young people shows how support programmes can be engaged with and perceived differently – young people like and don't like different aspects of the same experiences. For instance, some young people like having a peer mentor as they feel they can relate to their experiences, whereas others struggle to trust a peer mentor and would prefer to have an adult to speak to.

The enablers and barriers to bringing about change through the HeadStart programme, which young people highlighted in their interviews, provide

rich information for commissioners, practitioners, and schools to reflect on when designing and delivering support for young people, to ensure that support is truly accessible and useful for young people. The findings point to the importance of co-designing support with young people, as well as remaining curious and asking young people about what they think of the support they are receiving, what is helping or not helping, and what may be preventing them from being able to access the support they need.

Overall, the findings presented here provide a snapshot of the difference that the HeadStart programme has been making to young people's lives. They show that if a young person is struggling, there are many kinds of help out there that can support them in lots of different ways.

The findings mapped in this briefing are part of a series of studies, drawing on qualitative and quantitative data and led by the HeadStart Learning Team, exploring the impact of the HeadStart programme.

## Acknowledgements

Our utmost thanks to the young people who generously shared their experiences with us.

With thanks also to other members of the HeadStart Learning Team (Rosa Town, Sarah Stock, Hannah Merrick and Parise Carmichael-Murphy) for their vital role in the collection, management, and analysis of data used to inform our research publications.

With thanks also to Colleen Souness and Lorraine Joyce (The National Lottery Community Fund) and Lauren Garland (HeadStart Learning Team) for helping us to draw out the implications of the findings presented here.

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