



Health literacy

Being able to see the benefits and risks associated with a certain treatment, understand medical terms and seek help when it's needed is a crucial life skill

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aged 16
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- **Natalia,**
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Health literacy – the ability to find, understand and use health information and services to make informed health-related decisions – is a fundamental skill. Low health literacy levels are strongly linked to poor health outcomes, but health literacy is often neglected or undervalued in educational environments.

Making sense of online information

In a digital world, it's natural for children and young people to want to find out what they can about a health issue for themselves online – but how can they do it safely and accurately? Algorithms prioritise what people interact with, quickly spreading shocking, potentially fake, information. This means children and young people may arrive at appointments with a self-diagnosis and a lack of trust in what doctors say if it contradicts what they've seen online.

We ask doctors to address myths seen on social media during consultations without using medical jargon. Check for misinformation by finding out what we think we know about the issue we're facing. Use simple analogies and

language. Display more posters on the walls of hospitals, schools and clinics, with QR codes that link to information about common issues.

Knowing where to go online is crucial. Many people struggle to identify reliable sources or find it difficult to access or log into apps. A list of a few trusted websites in a leaflet, on the wall or sent by text message would really help. Could you create, for example, a Reel about a common (or rare) medical problem? Could you send follow-up resources after consultations by text or email with details of where to read more?

Health education in schools

Health literacy is as important to a young person as any other subject, like maths, because it applies to their own life. However, Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) education tends not to go into much detail, which can lead to over-simplified explanations (such as diabetes only occurs from eating too many sweets) and leave gaps in a young person's knowledge.

“Many people struggle to identify reliable sources”

Health is not talked about enough in schools generally. We might get a brief introduction to common conditions and who to go to if we need support, but more depth is needed – such as talking about lesser-known conditions – as well as advice on how to start a conversation with doctors to get the best support possible.

Forging closer links between doctors and local schools can help. Doctors could offer informative talks or short videos covering issues they notice that are frequently brought to clinic. Leaflets or magazines shared between local health services and schools could provide further information to children and young people, increasing their understanding and reducing confusion. Even better: joint informal health clinics could provide a safe space for young people to ask questions, and in doing so, decrease stigmas and increase knowledge of conditions that might go unnoticed or unspoken about due to embarrassment or lack of awareness.

We need to work together to ensure children and young people are better able to find, understand and use health information and services to make informed health-related decisions. What will you do differently in your practice to support this ask? 

ABOUT

RCPCH &Us: The Children and Young People's Engagement Team delivers projects and programmes across the UK to support patients, siblings, families and under 25s, and gives them a voice in shaping services, health policy and practice. RCPCH &Us is a network of young voices who work with the College, providing information and advice on children's rights and engagement.

 **RCPCH &Us**
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young people and families

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