

# An Integrated Approach to Promoting Emotional Well-being in the School Setting

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# **AN INTEGRATED APPROACH TO PROMOTING EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING IN THE SCHOOL SETTING**

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## **Background**

It is now recognised that good mental and emotional health is a fundamental and underpinning component of positive health and well being. There are strong links between the emotional well-being of children and young people and their personal, social development and academic performance.

Strong national and international evidence exists which indicates that schools are an ideal setting to promote emotional well-being and the evidence is strongest where the promotion of emotional well-being is taken forward as part of an integrated whole school approach. Children and young people need the provision of healthy, supportive and stimulating environments with a clear focus on, and commitment to, helping them have high self esteem, good relationships and to be confident, happy and ambitious.

Universal approaches to promoting emotional well-being help to facilitate more targeted approaches for vulnerable groups thus enabling greater impact. We know that in Scotland, one in ten children and young people experience mental health problems<sup>1</sup> which impact on their thoughts, feelings, behaviour, learning and relationships on a day to day basis. By taking a whole school approach to improving emotional well-being, we are able to increase the mental and emotional resilience of all school pupils and provide a good environment and support for those children and young people who are experiencing difficulties.

## **Policy context**

The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends promoting emotional well-being as an essential role for national governments. WHO also recommends an integrated approach to policy which addresses promotion, prevention, care and treatment. They also recommend countries consider the impacts of legislation (as well as specific legislation on mental health issues) as there is strong evidence to show the benefits to populations of promoting emotional well-being. This, in turn, helps to address the rising challenge of the increased prevalence of mental health problems, such as depression and anxiety, which face western countries today.

In January 2005 a Mental Health Declaration for Europe was signed by all 52 national Health Ministers. Among many other commitments, the document calls on member states to promote emotional well-being in education and to address the specific needs of children and young people.

The Action Plan associated with this Declaration states that member countries should develop evidence based programmes that foster skills, resilience, emotional intelligence and improved psycho-social functioning in children and young people.

The European Commission is currently preparing a Mental Health Green Paper which will identify the evidence for health promotion in schools.

In Scotland the National Programme for Mental Health and Well Being Action Plan 2003-2006 sets out the main aims and a guide to areas of activity for national and local partners to take forward and highlights the importance of the schools setting for promoting mental, emotional and social health and well-being.

HeadsUpScotland – The National Programme for Children and Young People’s Mental Health has been established to facilitate the integration of children and young people’s mental health and well being as a mainstream issue by supporting local areas in their work. *Children and Young People’s Mental Health: A Framework for Promotion, Prevention and Care*<sup>2</sup> currently out for consultation clearly identifies the role that the education sector/schools can play in improving the mental health of children and young people.

In Scotland all schools have been given the target of becoming health promoting schools by 2007. Schools are also a key part of an integrated services approach to support children and young people. The Scottish Health Promoting Schools Unit (SHPSU) has been established to provide national support for the development of health promoting schools throughout Scotland. *Being Well – Doing Well: a framework for health promoting schools in Scotland (2004)*<sup>3</sup> is the national consensus statement providing a holistic view of education and health promotion that can be used by all stakeholders as a foundation for planning purposes and sets out the characteristics of a health promoting school. The Scottish Executive currently funds three National Development Officer posts within the SHPSU, one focusing on mental and emotional health and well being.

Within education the current policy agenda has set the scene for schools to help children and young people have the self esteem to be confident, happy and ambitious, with support provided if required, within schools that value inclusion, equality and diversity.

This includes:

- ambitious, excellent schools (Scottish Executive 2004)
- A Curriculum for Excellence (Scottish Executive 2004)
- Happy, safe and achieving their potential. A standard of support for children and young people in Scottish schools (Scottish Executive 2005)
- Moving Forward! Additional support for Learning (Scottish Executive 2003)
- Making the difference: a Partnership for a better Scotland (Scottish Executive 2003)
- Better Behaviour-Better Learning (The Scottish Executive 2001)

### **Particular factors surrounding schools today (Weare 2000<sup>4</sup>):**

- Pressures on children and young people
  - very different world to that of parents
  - facing accelerated pace of social change
  - forced to grow up quickly
  - exposure to adult ways of thinking (e.g. TV and media) and not always equipped to deal with this
  - significantly different values and attitudes
  - peer group is more powerful
  - no voice in community or wider society
  - social fragmentation of generations
  - increasingly deprived of meaningful support.
- Pressures and changes for teachers
  - pressures and changes in young people make them more difficult to teach
  - rise in multi cultural society
  - pressure to perform- classroom more public- schools more accountable
  - increase in own management – decrease in support
  - increasing stress and sick absence.
- To date promotion of physical health has been prominent
  - concerns with physical health must be underpinned by concerns with, and promotion of, mental, emotional, social and spiritual health
  - there is evidence that poor mental health has direct effect on physical health
  - people will either choose to look after their health or not according to how they feel – if they feel they are worth it they do.

### **Mental and emotional health and academic attainment**

Recognition of the significant interrelationship between academic achievement and attainment and the promotion of mental, emotional, social and spiritual health is essential.

- There is growing awareness that attention to emotional and social needs is an essential pre-requisite to learning and will therefore have direct benefit to academic attainment.
- The promotion of mental, emotional, social and spiritual health will support academic learning and not detract from it.
- Pupils learn more effectively if they are happy in their work, believe in themselves, like their teachers and feel the school support them.
- People *can* learn the knowledge, skills, attributes and language to protect their mental and emotional health, therefore protecting their physical and potential to achieve and attain throughout life.

## **Evidence of what works in health promotion**

The emotional well-being of everyone in a school can be improved by establishing a whole school approach. Individuals within the school environment may be experiencing particular emotional difficulties, but a whole school response generates benefits for everyone, by providing a supportive context for targeted actions.

*Mental Health Improvement: What Works?(2003)*<sup>5</sup> highlights the importance of integrated, whole school approaches that combine changes to school culture, staff morale, pupil, family and community involvement. Methods such as peer education, input on problem solving skills, the development of social skills and the school environment are identified as being more effective than taking single topic based approaches to improving emotional well-being.

This is further detailed within *The Evidence of Health Promotion Effectiveness: a Report for the European Commission (2004)*<sup>6</sup> which states that health promotion in schools is most effective by developing:

- approaches that are comprehensive and 'holistic' – the whole school approach
- approaches that are 'substantial', sustained over years, and relevant to changes in young people's social and cognitive development
- working in partnership with children/young people, parents/carers/families, external agencies, local communities
- school policies – negotiated and understood by whole school community
- adequate attention to capacity building through school staff training and provision of resources
- well designed and relevant curriculum programmes based on accepted and understood learning theories
- the physical environment – design, facilities, layout, supervision, 'ownership', etc.
- the psychological environment – relationships, ethos, values and traditions.

*Emotional Health and Well Being – A Practical Guide for Schools (2004)*<sup>7</sup> highlights that the best interventions focus on more than one factor and that certain elements are crucial:

- The intervention should involve relevant parts of the social network ,such as parents/carers, school staff, community members.
- They should intervene at a range of different times rather than once or twice only.
- They should use a combination of methods, e.g. social support and coping skills.

## **Current work/action**

There is a wide range of projects, programmes and interventions underway and being developed, nationally and locally, in support of emotional-well-being in schools. Some are local initiatives and partnerships for health promotion in schools, and some are individual school responses to need. Others are on the basis of a health improvement commitment. It is important to build upon this work and learn from it.

These include:

- curriculum based programmes, particularly around emotional literacy
- peer education/support schemes
- buddying schemes
- transition programmes
- anti stigma and discrimination work
- suicide prevention work
- expressive arts
- celebrating success
- circle time
- talks/presentations from outside agencies
- support services for children and young people
- training and development for school staff
- support for school staff
- SHAW
- working with parents and carers
- physical activity and eating for health programmes
- school environment/grounds projects
- counselling
- participation projects.

There is wide variation in how this work is planned and resourced. Monitoring and evaluation can be inconsistent. In some areas, participation and involvement is exemplary; elsewhere, less so. There are also issues about how such work might be sustained. There are numerous examples of whole school integrated approaches, however, in many cases, the work relies on the interest and commitment of individual school staff. These individual staff members are often working with an outside partner agency/organisation and are very often operating in a 'stand alone' capacity. The work tends not to be integrated into the wider curriculum (formal or informal) or the ethos of the school. In addition, feedback from schools indicates a continued discomfort around the subject of emotional well-being and there is a perception of lack of knowledge, experience and skills.

School staff are also often confused by the range of resources and support packages available and unsure as to the most effective or relevant choices.

## **The challenge**

There is a growing awareness in Scotland about the importance of improving and maintaining good emotional, mental health and well-being for all. In all settings, there is a developing enthusiasm for addressing promotion, prevention, care and support. This is particularly so within the school setting.

At the present time, we have the beginnings of an emerging national strategic and coordinated approach to policy and delivery support around emotional and mental health and well-being in schools. This is now a good opportunity for progressing policy and implementation work across all Scottish schools in conjunction with local and national partners.

## References

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