

Supporting the Wellbeing and Mental Health of Primary School Pupils

The importance of schools in fostering children's positive mental health



Sharon Eustace
Regional Director,
National Educational
Psychological Service,
Department of Education

Recent years have seen schools rise to global challenges, including pandemic and war, offering safety and security to children. These events have brought wellbeing to the fore for everyone, highlighting the importance of schools in the lives of our children. This article examines that role and describes how schools can help children develop vital skills and resilience through a supportive environment and relationships.

Introduction

The last few years have brought challenges to schools in Ireland as school communities responded to a global pandemic and then to the outbreak of war in Ukraine. Schools rose to the challenge and offered safety and security to children during these times of difficulty, change, and transition. Many schools have now welcomed children from Ukraine. These unprecedented events have brought wellbeing to the fore for everyone, highlighting the importance of school in the lives of our children.



Deirdre Mc Hugh
Regional Director,
National Educational
Psychological Service,
Department of Education

The Hobfoll principles of promoting a sense of safety, calm, connectedness, efficacy, and hope are key evidence-based principles of support, known to help people regain a sense of normalcy and wellbeing in the aftermath of emergencies or traumatic events (Hobfoll et al., 2007). They are familiar to schools, as they formed the basis of the Department of Education's response to supporting wellbeing during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Children will do better in the long term if they feel safe, calm, and hopeful, if they feel a sense of belonging and connectedness to their new school, and if they feel they can manage and cope. Applying these five principles will help a school community, in its own unique way, to foster children's and young people's resilience. Guidance documents

on implementing them were shared with schools throughout the Covid period.

Why schools have an important role

“ Schools are important settings for preparing children and young people to develop wellbeing and positive mental health.

There is a recognised connection between the cognitive and the emotional worlds of children and young people. In the school environment, social and emotional skills do not exist in isolation but interact with the development of cognitive skills. School is now understood as a place which develops the ‘whole child’, one who should leave school with a balanced set of cognitive, social, and emotional skills to face the challenges of the 21st century (Hewlett & Moran, 2014). Hargreaves et al. (2018) identify the mutually supportive relationships between children’s wellbeing and their achievements and emphasise the importance of this reciprocal relationship.

Schools are important settings for preparing children and young people to develop wellbeing and positive mental health, where emotional wellbeing may be understood as an educational end in and of itself. Risk and protective factors related to promoting wellbeing that are specific to the school or educational setting have been identified. These factors include:

- positive relationships with peers and teachers, including positive classroom management strategies and sharing positive behaviour-management practices with parents
- a sense of belonging, security, and connectedness to school through a positive school climate and participation in school and community activities
- opportunities for social and emotional learning, including the development of attention and planning, self-awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making skills (CASEL, 2015)
- opportunities for the development of knowledge and skills providing a sense of mastery and self-efficacy (Shonkoff et al., 2015)
- fostering expectations; recognising contributions, effort, and achievement; and providing opportunities for success
- wellbeing of school personnel
- protocols and support systems that proactively support children and their families should difficulties arise
- opportunities to develop the necessary skills to cope with using online technology in a safe and appropriate way
- opportunities to develop skills to manage stress that may be linked to school work.

Protective factors promote positive outcomes for children and young people, even when they have been exposed to risk factors (Cooper & Jacobs, 2011) such as disengagement, isolation, bullying, violence, special educational needs, cultural differences, or harsh discipline. In the school

context, therefore, it is recommended that preventative wellbeing promotion be implemented, with a focus on strengthening school-based protective factors and minimising school-based risk factors.

How can the Department of Education help?

Schools are already doing a lot to promote wellbeing and equip children with knowledge, skills, and competencies to enhance their wellbeing and deal with challenges. To build on this work and ensure that wellbeing is truly embedded in our schools, the Department of Education published the Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice in 2018, refreshed in 2019. The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) of the Department is leading on the rollout of a wide range of actions in the Wellbeing Policy, and a separate Wellbeing Office has been established in NEPS, emphasising the importance that the Department places on this work.

“ The Department has an Employee Assistance Service in place, provided by Spectrum.Life, as a supportive resource to promote the health and wellbeing of school employees, with a strong focus on prevention. ”

The Department's Wellbeing Policy defines wellbeing as follows:

Wellbeing is present when a person realises their potential, is resilient in dealing with the normal stresses of life, takes care of their physical wellbeing and has a sense of purpose, connection and belonging to a wider community. It is a fluid way of being and needs nurturing throughout life.

The policy proposes a preventative, multi-component, whole-school approach to supporting wellbeing and mental health that includes both universal and targeted actions and focuses on four key components:

1. To provide children and young people with opportunities to be part of a school environment and culture that feels physically safe and psychologically safe, where they feel a sense of belonging and connectedness, where their voice is heard, and where they feel supported.
 2. To provide children and young people with opportunities to experience supportive relationships within the school community.
 3. To give children and young people opportunities to experience success and a sense of achievement in their learning, and to develop and build core physical, social, and emotional skills and competencies.
 4. To ensure that approaches to supporting wellbeing and resilience are embedded in all of the school's policies and practices.
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Schools are encouraged to use a reflective, self-evaluation approach to identify and prioritise the needs of their own school community in relation to promoting wellbeing and mental health, and to respond to meeting those needs. Embedded in the whole-school approach is the recognition that members of the school community may have different needs at different times and that a continuum of support for wellbeing should be made available.

To support schools' continuous professional development (CPD) for school leaders and teachers on the national rollout of the Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice, training began in March 2022, following delays due to Covid-19. This is a major step to achieving the goals of embedding wellbeing across the whole spectrum of activity in our schools.

The Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) is leading on this comprehensive programme of CPD, which will be supplemented with a range of parallel training, including resources for schools developed by NEPS. For example:

- NEPS psychologists train teachers in the delivery of the FRIENDS Resilience programmes ('Fun Friends', 'Friends for Life', and 'My Friends Youth'), which are evidence-based programmes for preventing anxiety and building resilience.

- Incredible Years Teacher Classroom Management (IYTCM) is an evidenced-based programme that builds teachers' competence and confidence in managing their classrooms, using strategies that prevent and reduce behaviour problems and promote children's social and emotional competence. Over six days of training, teachers can reflect on the effective use of classroom management strategies and the development of comprehensive behaviour-support plans.
- NEPS also offers wellbeing training and support sessions in welcoming and helping pupils fleeing the war in Ukraine.
- A series of training on Wellbeing and Resilience in Schools is also on offer to schools. The first training, 'Introducing a Trauma-Informed Approach, the Stress Factor: Getting the Balance Right', was delivered in the summer term 2022 to primary and post-primary school staff through Education Support Services Ireland (ESCI). The training is now being offered to school leaders because of their important role in embedding practices in their schools. The workshops, which are for all staff, focus on exploring and understanding the sources and impact of stress on children and young people, including attachment, trauma, and adverse experiences. Following the webinars, NEPS psychologists will be available to support implementation in schools.

A dedicated wellbeing portal has been developed and is now available, bringing together all the wellbeing supports and resources that have been developed by the Department and its support service.

The Department has an Employee Assistance Service (EAS) in place as a supportive resource to promote the health and wellbeing of school employees, with a strong focus on prevention. Provided by Spectrum.Life, it is a self-referral service where employees have access to a 24/7 freephone helpline (1800 411 057) providing advice on a range of issues, such as wellbeing, legal, financial, mediation, and management support. The service is also available via SMS, WhatsApp, email, live chat, and call-back request. All points of contact for the service are qualified, accredited, and experienced mental health professionals.

 **NEPS offers wellbeing training and support sessions in welcoming and helping pupils fleeing the war in Ukraine.**

Where required, short-term counselling is available to employees and their family members (over the age of 18 years and living at home). A wellbeing portal and app is available which offers access to webinars, presentations, podcasts, e-learning programmes, and live chats on wellbeing and mental health, family life, exercise, and nutrition. The service also provides advice and support to managers and delivers interventions to help them deal with health and wellbeing issues in the workplace.

All services provided through the EAS are in total confidence. People's identity and personal details will always be protected by the EAS case managers and their team of counsellors. This information will never be shared with or reported to an employer or anyone else without the employee's clear consent.

Conclusion

Promoting the wellbeing of our children and young people is a shared community responsibility and is everybody's business. While many factors that influence a child's wellbeing are beyond a school's reach, schools can be a powerful setting for healthy development and can provide an accessible and effective means to promote protective factors and reduce risk factors. Schools provide a stable and supportive environment for all students while developing core skills and competencies in supportive relationships – all of which are vital protective factors for the development of resilience and coping.

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