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Perspectives

Going beyond cognitive schooling:

Safeguarding, student well-being and effective learning

The teaching of non-cognitive skills such as emotional intelligence and growth-mindset is intrinsically linked to the promotion of happiness and well-being. Research shows that the incorporation of social and emotional learning into the classroom to improve emotional intelligence, improves learning outcomes, minimises anxiety and behavioural problems.

While the ever-increasing roles of safeguarding and promoting social and emotional well-being, are key components of staff responsibility and crucial to pupils' success at school, tackling the mental health problems of children and young people presents more difficulties and challenges. Schools should take a well-planned and clear approach through the curriculum, reinforced by a stimulating, positive and solution-focused continuing professional development programme for staff.

There is a fundamental link between safeguarding and mental health. Awareness of the extent and nature of mental health problems in children and young people and a school's obligation to be part of the response to these problems, is an essential component of improving safeguarding, promoting well-being and school improvement. Teaching emotional intelligence empowers children to make positive and informed choices which supports their well-being, safety, and good mental health. It is also more likely to make them effective learners as research shows that school enjoyment and engagement may play an important role in students' learning.

School staff are ideally placed to identify and respond to safeguarding concerns as well as emotional and behavioural problems. Behavioural problems in children indicate a risk of developing mental health problems. Research shows that 50% of lifetime mental illness starts by the age of 14. Risk factors include social disadvantage, family difficulties, parent-child relationships and cognitive or attention problems.

The prevalence of mental health needs in looked-after children is significant. It is estimated that 45% of looked-after children have a diagnosable mental disorder (compared to 10% of all children). Exposure to domestic abuse can have a negative impact on a child's emotional well-being. A study by SafeLives showed 52% of children who witness domestic violence experienced behavioural problems and issues with social development and relationships. A British Medical Council study of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) adults found they are at higher risk of mental disorder, suicidal thoughts, substance misuse and self-harm than heterosexuals so LGBT children have particular support needs. Children and young people in gangs are particularly vulnerable to mental illness. One in three female and one in ten male gang members are considered to be at increased risk of suicide or self-harm. Similarly, a study published in the Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry shows that young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEETs) have more mental health and substance misuse problems than peers who were not NEET.

Self-harm, eating disorders and suicide have increased - in 2014 there was a 43% rise in the number of young people who admitted they attempted suicide. Social media, cyberbullying and broken families can trigger emotional disorders and problems with trust and relationships. Schools need to take a more active role including being alert to warning signs while maintaining an open and supportive attitude. Undetected and untreated emotional disorders lead to increasing behavioural problems, thereby increasing the stresses on staff and pupils alike.

The promotion of good mental health and well-being are also key factors in developing children's resilience. To enable this to happen, staff must have a good understanding of protective factors, particularly those that can be established in school. For instance, robust and easily accessible policies on safeguarding, behaviour and bullying, that are understood by everyone, where staff can contribute to policy development and review. For children to feel safe and happy, it is important there is a named, trusted adult available to hear their concerns and a whole-school approach to promoting good mental health including an ethos and environment that promotes respect and values diversity, enabling the student voice to influence decisions, staff development to support their own well-being as well as their students and working with parents. Children must know that they have a voice and that staff are there to support their emotional well-being.

On 4 December 2017, the Department of Education and Department of Health released 'Transforming Children and Young People's Mental Health Provision: A Green Paper' highlights the crucial role of schools and colleges in supporting young people with mental health conditions. The main proposals relate to the education sector:

> 1. A designated senior lead for mental health placed in every school. One of the key responsibilities will be to support other members of staff with how to talk to pupils about mental health
>
> 2. Mental health support teams to work directly with schools
>
> 3. Reducing waiting times for access to NHS-funded mental health services in pilot areas.

These proposals together with effective staff training and development will help to raise awareness and improve understanding of the link between good mental health, safeguarding and effective learning.

In the report 'Time to Deliver', The Independent Commission on Children and Young People's Mental Health recommended that Ofsted should consider pupils' mental health and well-being as part of their inspections. DfE research shows children with higher levels of emotional, behavioural, social

and school well-being, on average, have higher levels of academic achievement and are more engaged in school. Improving staff understanding of mental health and well-being can support a strong school ethos enabling a positive learning environment, effective behaviour management and the happiness of staff and students.

Evidence shows that the following school support systems can improve academic and mental health outcomes and that promoting positive social and emotional well-being, tackling the mental health problems of pupils in difficulty and having well-planned approaches and interventions, will have a positive impact on learning, motivation, a sense of commitment and connectedness to school:

- **Adopt whole school thinking** – this involves everyone (senior leadership team, staff, parents, pupils) working consistently in developing an ethos and culture which promotes trust, connectedness, focus and purpose, the promotion of communication, acceptance of emotion, respect and the celebration of diversity. Schools must also promote staff well-being and provide support systems to address staff stress. Enabling a climate and ethos which supports well-being encourages robust safeguarding and supports school 'connectedness', described as a feeling of being accepted, respected and bonded to the school environment. In turn, levels of conflict and disruptive behaviour will decrease and a sense of warmth, responsiveness and support to the individual needs of children will be encouraged. Promoting the voice of the child and engaging parents can add strength and depth and has been proved to making interventions more effective, while also developing parenting capacity and attitudes.
- **Prioritise professional learning** – understanding risk factors to well-being and helping children become more resilient in overcoming hostile conditions; raise awareness of mental health and early intervention; support children and young people with transitional arrangements; keep updated of the direct impact of social media and the challenges posed by new technology.
- **Develop supportive policy and practice** – robust policies, e.g. behaviour, anti-bullying and diversity, tackling prejudice and taking positive steps to de-stigmatise mental health.
- **Implement targeted programmes and intervention** – use of high-quality specified programmes and interventions; use of well-trained and enthusiastic teachers; of positive, experiential and interactive methods, integrating learning into the mainstream process of school life.
- **Implement targeted responses and identify specialist pathways** – provision of more intense work on social and emotional skill development for children with difficulties; use of one to one support and group work; specialist staff to initiate innovative and specialist programmes; ensuring sustainability and integration by transferring responsibility to mainstream staff; ensuring there are clear pathways for help, referral and intervention, use of a coherent teamwork approach, including involvement of outside agencies, e.g. Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services.
- **Connect appropriately with approaches to behaviour management** – responding wisely to 'difficult' behaviour, use of clear consequences while understanding its deeper roots; taking opportunities to model and teach positive alternatives.

Supporting children with mental health difficulties, ensuring their needs are identified and supported, requires careful classroom management and calmness and control through good role modelling. Strategies that can be used should include allowing flexible deadlines, offering the option to re-do

work so they feel more confident, being able to recognise escalating anxiety, equipping teachers with the tools to intervene and help implement strategies to manage anxiety, ensuring children write down tasks correctly, pre-planning for class discussions to help reduce anxiety, planning alternative activities when they are unable to focus and allowing for breaks or opportunities to de-stress.

Safeguarding, emotional health and well-being are central to school improvement and effective learning. While schools may be under pressure to deliver results on achievement in the teaching and learning of literacy and maths, this is intrinsically linked to the fundamental, statutory responsibility of staff to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and to promote their well-being and social and emotional learning. Ensuring pupil well-being and instilling in children a sense of purpose that can develop a growth mindset necessary to motivate and to ensure dedication and hard work, can only be successful if schools not only have a clear awareness of the extent and nature of mental health problems in children, but also that they understand their role in the response. Evidence shows a strong connection between safeguarding, social and emotional learning and school improvement so a good understanding of mental health can go a long way towards promoting effective learning.