

Mental Health and Schools

Our children spend approximately a third of their childhoods in school. Their experiences here impact immensely on their emotional wellbeing and development. In particular this experience has a major bearing on how they view themselves socially and intellectually, and whether they believe they are clever, good at achieving things and popular. In addition, their experiences in school teach them how to get on with others, how to work and how to compete. For this reason, it is very important that school provides the best opportunity to protect and enhance children's emotional health. Academic achievement is secondary to this key priority and indeed without emotional health academic achievement becomes irrelevant.

We know that 75% of mental health difficulties begin before the age of 24, that about 50% of all lifetime cases begin at 14, and that contributing positively to a young person's emotional health pays dividends in the long term. (EU Compass Forum on Mental Health and Well-being, Mental Health at Work and in Schools, Prevention of Suicide. Report of the 2017 EU Compass Forum.). Irish research suggests that 1 in 3 Irish children younger than 13 experience mental health difficulties while this figure rises to 1 in 2 before the age of 25. Internationally we know that 1 in 10 children will experience difficulties severe enough to require specialist mental health treatment.

Most schools provide good educational experiences for children and seek to be child centred in their approach. All schools are governed by standards developed by educational authorities and are subject to inspections. Most schools have procedures governing discipline, child protection, health and safety and teaching practice. Most schools seek to employ good quality teachers and most teachers are committed, dedicated professionals who seek to do the best that they can for their pupils. Parents have a say in the running of most schools through Parents' Councils and the Board of Management and in many schools, pupils have a say through Student Councils.

In general children's involvement in school should and does enhance their mental health. In an environment where so many adults and children interact on a daily basis, difficulties will arise. In addition, some schools, for a variety of reasons, do not provide a mentally healthy environment for children.

There are a number of specific risks arising in school for children's mental health:

- Academic over-anxiety
- Inadequate supports for children experiencing mental health issues-lack of awareness, stigma, lack of resources
- Bullying or abuse by other pupils
- Social disengagement
- Alienation or abuse by an adult working in the school
- Engagement in anti-social activity, bullying, over use of alcohol and drug use
- Self-identity difficulties, sexuality, disability, cultural, ethnic
- School avoidance and disengagement

Children who have experienced abuse, maltreatment or bullying are far more likely to develop mental health problems in adulthood. A child bullied in school is 3 to 4 times more at risk of developing depression than a child who is not bullied.

Although bullying can occur in any setting it is probably one of the biggest risks to our child's emotional health in school. Bullying is defined as the continuous physical, verbal or psychological intimidation of a child and by its very definition has a negative impact on a child's emotional well-being. While bullying has always been a feature of childhood the Internet and mobile-phones have added a new dimension. It is likely that most children will experience bullying at some stage in their childhoods and many will experience it at a severe level. Talking and listening to children about bullying, monitoring if problems start to arise and supporting them to address bullying if it occurs are essential. When deciding whether to intervene or how to intervene, the first consideration should be our child's emotional well-being.

Within a school, our children can be at risk of being bullied by other children or by teachers. Bullying of children by other children probably occurs in all schools. Bullying by teachers can also occur, particularly when teachers do not have the ability to keep control or teach.

The dynamics underpinning bullying within schools are complex, involving the personal emotional and psychological difficulties of the perpetrator, the psychological make-up of the victim and the school environment which facilitates the abuse or bullying.

Children bully or abuse other children for a variety of psychological and emotional reasons. Sometimes, they feel insecure, inadequate or humiliated and want to take out their anger, frustration or sadness on somebody else. Sometimes, they may have been abused in some way themselves or are being scape-goated or bullied somewhere else. Sometimes they are under pressure of some kind, perhaps to succeed or feel a sense of accomplishment. Sometimes they feel they don't fit in with others or expect everyone to do what they say because they like the feeling of power.

Stigma and particularly stigma regarding mental health issues is still a major obstacle to creating a mentally healthy school environment.

Children will benefit most if they receive a rounded education which includes academic, emotional, social and physical education. Most importantly, a good education will help a child achieve their individual potential in these areas, enhancing their sense of self-worth and self-esteem and enhancing their opinion of themselves as achievers.

Children should not have to do well academically to feel they are achievers. An over-emphasis on academic achievement or competitiveness in a school is not mentally healthy. The best schools are those that achieve the right balance, that have an educational ethos that values different skills, abilities and achievements and that seeks to ensure every pupil is valued in their own right.

Part of the educational ethos of the school should involve all school staff being vigilant for early signs of distress in pupils such as deterioration of work, spurious illness, social isolation, the desire to remain with adults, erratic attendance.

A school that has a child-friendly ethos will be safer and more secure and will create a more mentally healthy environment for children. There are a number of factors that make a school child-centred and a mentally healthy environments.

First among these is that the school values each child's uniqueness and values them for who they are. How staff interact with each child is crucial. If this interaction is respectful and positive this will serve to enhance the children's mental health. Emphasising the inclusion and participation of children is also important. The more children are encouraged to take an active role in the school through individual consultation, school councils, organising committees and consultation forums, the more likely it is that an environment that is conducive to their development is created in the school. The school that promotes consultation with children will be a safer environment for children and the school that values positive interactions with children will be an environment that promotes children's well-being and development.

How discipline is taught and maintained within a school is important. For children to feel safe and secure, it is important that the school has strong positive discipline whereby children co-operate and support each other and act in a way that gives due consideration to others' welfare. In addition, a school should contribute to a child's learning about what is right and wrong to them, encouraging them to think out right and wrong and to question, challenge and take personal responsibility for their actions. Positive discipline also involves teaching children how to understand the importance of valuing others and of making decisions which will be for the greater good. In a school in which discipline is weak, children will feel unsafe and will not learn to be self-disciplined. Equally, in a school with a negative or punishment-based disciplinary ethos, children will be fearful and will learn to simply do as they are told.

While most schools are careful to employ only qualified teachers, it is important nonetheless to ensure the quality and experience of all staff, particularly teaching staff. in our children's school. It is important that schools have a strong recruitment ethos and seek to employ the best teachers they can obtain.

It is also important to ensure that the school has practice guidelines, child protection guidelines, an anti-bullying strategy and mental health promotion programs and supports in place.

The physical environment in which children are being taught is important to their emotional and psychological wellbeing:

- The condition of classrooms, canteens etc
- Hygiene and health and safety
- Class sizes
- Overcrowding
- Availability of adequate play areas
- Hazards existing around or near the school.
- That school transport meets the highest standards of health and safety.

Within a school, the quality of interaction between staff working in the school will not only impact on the type of environment created for children but will reflect on how the staff will interact with children. In a school where staff interact with each other in a respectful positive manner, it is likely that children will not only benefit from the positive environment this creates but it is also likely that they will be interacted with in the same manner. Where staff are constantly disrespectful, critical or negative towards each other, it is likely that the atmosphere will be conducive to

this sort of interaction with children and will not help their well-being and development. Of course, just because staff interact positively with each other does not automatically mean that they will interact positively with children but it does make this much more likely.

How staff in a school interact with parents is an important indicator of the type of atmosphere existing in the school and of the quality of interactions with children. Again, disrespectful, antagonistic interactions will create a negative atmosphere and will be reflective of an antagonistic, disrespectful attitude to children. School staff should be willing to meet with parents as appropriate, listen to their concerns and work with them to ensure their child's welfare is promoted.

Parents have a key role to ensuring school has a positive impact on a child's mental health. In particular they can:

- Listen and communicate with their child about school
- Teach personal safety skills
- Enhance emotional resilience
- Be age appropriately involved and be vigilant
- Communicate appropriately and work in partnership with the school
- Agree an educational strategy/ethos

Mental health supports in a school are vital. Across Europe over the last five to ten years there has been a significant growth in awareness of the importance of mental health. It would seem that there has been a parallel increase in awareness raising and anti-stigma programmes.

Schools are taking their responsibility to promoting mental health awareness and mentally healthy living very seriously. Some governments such as the Irish government has initiated mental health components into the curriculums and many schools in Ireland are now running mental health programmes.

Most mental health organisations run schools initiatives, St. Patrick's runs a programme called Walk in My Shoes which runs specific campaigns such as "*Mind Your Selfie*", "*Mission Possible*" and "*Still Just Me*". In April 2016, *Walk in My Shoes* launched its hugely successful #MindYourSelfie campaign, circulating 5,000 hard-copy mental health packs to schools around the country. All videos and packs are accessible through www.WalkinMyShoes.ie, which will continue to become a one-stop mental health resource for schools in the coming years.

One of our most popular programmes for Secondary Schools, the *Walk in My Shoes* Transition Year Programme, is now in its 8th year. A 5 year evaluation of the Programme showed overwhelming recognition by teachers and students of the positive impact this programme has on its participants. The report stated that "*the extent of praise for the programme is striking, and represents a strong endorsement of the efforts of the staff involved*". A very successful partnership has been developed with the National Parents Council providing mental health awareness training to parents in primary schools across the country.

Another two initiatives begun in the 2016-2017 academic year were the Mission Possible school mental health achievement awards and the short film competition

“Frame of Mind”. The aim of these programmes is to build on partnerships with schools to support teachers and students in the promotion of positive mental health, and to create an emotionally healthy environment for students and staff. Peer support and voluntary led support programmes are also becoming more common in schools. In Ireland Pieta House runs a schools based self harm prevention initiative.

Examples of other programmes across Europe include the Dream Teen programme in Portugal. This is a nationwide project to promote civic engagement and encourage active participation of young people between the ages of 11-18 years old. The project included the dissemination of an online application, a partnership with a nationwide broadcasting TV network and public figures, and an online debate by young people on six identified topics of interest fostered by an online media platform coordinated by senior researchers and trained by senior researchers on basic research strategies. This work was then followed by research projects performed by young people. The Dream Teens is now run independently by the young people. The programme is focused on sharing examples and experiences of young people in the health advocacy and policy arenas with international agencies, such as the World Health Organization, and on training other young people on active citizenship processes.

Mind Matters initiative, which was originally developed in Australia, has been adapted to German schools and policies. The program serves as a free resource for primary and secondary schools and it focuses primarily on developing healthy schools as opposed to health-promoting schools. Every year approximately 1000 copies of the resource pack are disseminated and teachers use modules or parts of it. The last project implemented by the National Youth Council of the Netherlands was Mind Matters as well.

A new platform implemented by the Croatian Institute of Public Health aims to facilitate schools in Croatia on joining the Schools for Health in Europe Network. As a result of this project, during 2016-2017, nine high schools joined the network. The project included a phase of assessing current practices and school policies, a phase of implementation of recommended activities to improve school climate, support and communication, and a phase of monitoring and evaluation. Research on the project found that the health-promoting schools approach is supportive to implement new processes in schools, that it leads to overall improvement in school climate and wellbeing of teacher and pupils after a period of 3-4 years, and that it provides an opportunity for professional and personal development of pupils and teachers.

The Schools for Health in Europe (SHE) Network specifically works on developing and implementing new strategies and interventions with the aim of improving mental health in European schools. The SHE defines a health-promoting school as one that implements a structured and systematic plan for the health and well-being of all pupils and of teaching and non-teaching staff.

In France, a framework convention between Ministers of Health and Ministers of Education was signed in November 2016, formalising the cooperation between these two ministries to work together on mental health in schools. The objectives of the framework are to help pupils become responsible agents for their own health, to make schools beneficial environments for health and learning, to strengthen dialogue between schools and municipalities, to reduce social inequalities of health in youth, and to implement sustainable working methods. Programmes implemented related

to this framework in France include the Good Behaviour Game. The Good Behaviour Game is incorporated during lessons at school and is aimed at reducing aggressive and disruptive behaviours. The experience shows that the game significantly facilitates the reduction of further development of depression and alcohol use. Other programmes, such as Ecole 21, '*feel well to learn better*', focus on bringing together all actors in realising steps in connecting schools to health care systems. In addition, the suicide prevention initiative incorporates points similar to the education/health initiative and includes media involvement, in an effort to reduce stigma.

Mental health support services in schools across Europe appear to be inadequate. One study by Patatay, Giese, Stankovic, Curtin, Moltrecht and Gondek in 2016 obtained data from 1346 schools collected in France, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Poland, Serbia, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom and Ukraine through an online survey. Around 3% of the surveyed schools indicated that mental health provision was not a priority, compared to 47% indicating that it was a high/essential priority. More than half the surveyed schools did not implement a school policy regarding mental health. Half the surveyed schools reported not providing sufficient support with the key barriers identified including limited staff capacity, funding, access to specialists and lack of national policy and less than a third of schools reported good or excellent links with local mental health services.

While the responses varied by country with 8–19% between-country variation across the study outcomes, secondary schools reported significantly better links with agencies, were more likely to have a school policy and were less likely to indicate having sufficient existing support compared to primary schools. Privately funded schools reported that mental health support was a higher priority and identified less barriers to provision compared to publicly funded schools. This study provides an up-to-date and cross-country insight into schools' perceptions regarding priority given to mental health support and the barriers they face in providing sufficient mental health and wellbeing support for their students. The cross-country comparisons allow for a better understanding of the relationships between policy, practice and implementation and provide a platform for shared experiences and learning.

Key Messages from the study were:

- Schools are considered an essential community setting for mental health support for young people and in many cases the first point of access for screening and intervention. However, little is known about the level of priority schools place on mental health support and their perceived facilitators and barriers to provision.
- Responses from schools in 10 European countries indicate that many schools report not doing enough to support their students' mental health. The majority of schools do not report good links with external agencies relevant for mental health, although this varies by type of external agency and country.
- Key barriers identified include limited staff capacity, funding and access to specialists. Lack of national policy was also identified as a key barrier in countries where these do not already exist, suggesting that national policy and guidance around school mental health provision may promote higher activity in schools.

- The findings suggest that improving schools' links with agencies and access to specialists might be one route to facilitate the capacity of schools to effectively support their students' wellbeing.

In Ireland provision of mental health support services in schools is inadequate and the gateway to specialised community based mental health services, which are themselves inadequate, is poor. In the last ten years the school Counselling service has been depleted. Every year the HSE produces a performance report outlining that over 1000 children and young people wait over 3 months for a 1st appointment with over 200 waiting over a year. Up to 100 young people are placed in adult in-patient units despite this being an infringement of their basic human rights. The annual reports of the Mental Health Commission outline how most services do not reach the quality standards defined in legislation and that few child and adolescent teams have a full multi-disciplinary team complement in place. Last year a Seanad committee heard direct evidence from families who have been failed by the system. While the deficiencies cannot be addressed overnight there appears to be a deterioration, year after year

Our views of school are greatly determined by our own experiences of school. For some, our school days were some of the best days of our lives. For others, they were some of the worst. We may, depending on how old we are, have experienced a significant degree of physical punishment at the hands of teachers. Some of us may have been subjected to treatment in school that we now consider to have been abusive. We may have been bullied by other pupils or we may have bullied others. Some of us may attribute our successful lives to our schooling and to particular teachers. Whatever our experiences of school, they have inevitably impacted on how we view and manage our perceptions of the educational system. For this reason it is important to acknowledge and resolve the legacy of our own school experiences.

END

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