



Embedding a culture of mental health and wellbeing into Primary Schools

Cat Shennan, Assistant Head and Mental Health and Wellbeing Lead at Cunningham Hill Schools advises that before embarking on a programme of any type, it's important to first identify the key people involved in taking responsibility for the programme, and define clear and consistent ways children can share thoughts and feelings throughout the day and across the site.

1. Short daily sessions to develop emotional literacy and wellbeing

It's proven that emotional literacy has a huge impact upon children's confidence in understanding and sharing their feelings. There's an inherent need for schools to have a consistent approach helping pupils feel encouraged and safe to share their feelings. There are plenty of resources out there, or schools can develop their own. However, a long term, whole school approach will see children really reaping the benefits quickly.

CHS used the FEELIT™ programme to gradually introduce children to new feelings across each school year through engaging activities that have direct links into the academic curriculum. The programme helped develop a common language across the school, while strengthening their own wellbeing strategy.

Both registration periods during the school day at CHS provides a safe space for the class to connect, reconnect, reflect and, if needed, decompress. Using this time to instil mental health or wellbeing check ins has been the quickest way to roll out positive change across the whole school.

DAILY CHECK-IN

Arriving at school each day provides an opportunity to reset and prepare for the day ahead. By providing a feelings check in at registration, teachers are able to see if there are issues that may need addressing, or supporting. Check ins can be done in many ways, from a discreet thumbs up or thumbs down from pupils on entry or roll call, to a more organised daily plotting of their feelings on a feelings mapper.

Some teachers have also trialled a second check in at afternoon registration, which has helped the teaching staff at CHS to very quickly take an umbrella view of the children's feelings and any changes that may have taken place across the day – providing an oversight of any issues that may have arisen.

REFLECTION AND DECOMPRESSION



Having tested the benefits of Daily Journaling for 2 terms, CHS are in the process of rolling out journaling for years 3-6. CHS recognised huge improvements in both behaviour and communication from pupils who were using the journal in the trial, as they began to better self-regulate, process and express their emotions. Not only do the pupils benefit, but the teachers can quicker identify pupils who may be going through challenges even though they were perhaps not expressing it – enabling earlier intervention when needed.

CHS is now planning to introduce in these periods the Happy Confident Me video programme - presented by Emma Willis - to teach years 4 to 6 the 10 essential character building skills that children need to thrive, such as resilience, growth mindset, Interoception and compassion.

2. Weave emotional literacy into the curriculum

Whether building, adopting, or buying a programme to deliver a mental health and wellbeing strategy, it's key to consider how the programme can link into the existing curriculum. A good programme will wrap into core subjects with ease. CHS has seen this working brilliantly and it adds a huge value to the overall philosophy of the school.

Mental Health and wellbeing can be perfectly integrated into PHSE, English, History, Art and Drama through using emotional literacy to grow skills in both empathy and compassion, creating a safer, more open culture. From exploring characters in history, or current affairs, through to abstract art to convey mood and emotions, through to helping children develop their written skills all foster a much richer education, with wellbeing at its heart.

3. Use school wide time to create a shared feeling of community and drive compassion

SCHOOL ASSEMBLIES

Whether whole school, year groups, phases or key stages, assemblies offer an excellent opportunity to embed whole-school ideas, messages and language and create an open and compassionate community.

Commencing with a monthly assembly to talk about the different aspects of Mental Health, CHS used these assemblies to focus on specific issues. The topics and themes are then supported further across the month, with resources, activities and curricular discussions following the theme. Banks of activities for each theme were sent out as home learning during lockdown –creating a stronger nexus between school, child and home. This initiative was so successful that the school now holds fortnightly assembly exploring emotional literacy, a life skill or a problem which may be encountered in day-to-day life.



4. Set up school community initiatives for peer-to-peer support

The playground can be both an enjoyable experience and a place where conflict occurs, or problems arise. A mentor, or buddy system is a great initiative that can make all the difference. The role of a child mentor scheme at CHS has proven to be an effective way to encourage children to take responsibility for their own feelings and behaviour and be open to discuss how they are feeling.

MENTORING

With a separated area in the playground, 'trained' year 6 children support others through play with a range of toys including LEGO and sensory games. These child mentors' role is supported by the school's Behaviour and Learning Mentor, who oversees and supports them. Any child is welcome to go and talk to the mentors and they are trained to listen to children when they are upset/overwhelmed and to offer a kind ear or elevate bigger issues to a teacher.

FRIENDSHIP SPACES

Simple methods can be put in place. For example year 5 and 6 playground monitors can be on the lookout to help children who may need support or a friendly shoulder. Reflection Gardens or Friendship Benches provide physical spaces for children in need of comfort to indicate that they are in need of support.

WELLBEING SPACES

It can be advantageous to have a consistent named space that can be utilised for mental health and wellbeing interventions.

CHS has named specific spaces within the school as wellbeing areas. In doing this, the profile of mental health around the school has been raised. It tells visitors, staff and children that wellbeing is both valued, and important.

Example of the impact of Journaling in Cunningham Hill School

One of my favourite testimonies as to why we should make time for journaling in schools came from a year 3 child. At the beginning of the year, his behaviour on the playground was quite difficult, he would often be in the centre of group friendship issues and often fall out with his friends. These friendship issues would come back into class with him. Heightened, angry and unable to articulate himself, there was a steady deterioration in his behaviour throughout the afternoon until he reached crisis point. After about two weeks, with the rest of the class journaling after lunch, this young man was still very resistant to the concept of journaling. He didn't want to have quiet time and found the idea of taking time to reflect on his feelings deeply uncomfortable. To ease him in, we started off simply keeping a journal of what he had done at lunch times each day, slowly building up to add in how certain activities made him feel. By Christmas, this young man used his journal as a tool every day. He learnt to calm himself by putting his feelings on paper and the journal then aided his communication with the teacher. It was an incredible first step into being able to recognise his feelings and process his experiences. He even carried the journal with him on school trips and took it home over the holidays!