

10 tips for school leaders and senior staff on supporting mental health and wellbeing

Children's mental health and wellbeing should be a core thread running through all school activities and should clearly link with whole-school priorities – school leaders, governors and trustees need to be the driving force behind this.

Changes to the curriculum and Ofsted's inspection framework will mean that supporting children's mental health and wellbeing will become more of a focus within the school setting. From [September 2020](#), all primary schools will have to teach relationships education and health education. Schools will need to put in place building blocks for developing healthy and respectful relationships (focusing on both families and friends, and on physical and online relationships). Children will also need to understand how to be healthy – with particular focus on mental wellbeing, learning how to take care of themselves, and knowing how and when to ask for support if problems arise.

And from September 2019, children's mental health and wellbeing will take a more prominent place in [Ofsted's new inspection framework](#). Schools will be assessed on how well they support children's personal development through some of the following ways:

- teaching pupils how to build their confidence and resilience so that they can keep themselves mentally healthy
- promoting equality and making sure all pupils can thrive together; children should understand that being different is positive, not negative
- teaching pupils how to be safe online and the impact social media and the internet can have on their wellbeing
- developing pupils' understanding of healthy relationships.

Schools are also being encouraged to appoint and train a [senior mental health lead](#) who will support colleagues and implement whole-school approaches.

There are a number of ways that school leaders can approach supporting children's mental health and wellbeing. But here are our top 10 tips for making mental health a whole-school priority.

1 Provide clear leadership, vision, strategy and plans for improvement

Working with governors and trustees, the senior mental health lead and the senior leadership team (SLT), school leaders should develop a clear vision for how to promote mental health and wellbeing throughout their school.

By auditing what is already in place, the SLT can identify priority areas for improvement and convert this into a strategic plan to help drive whole-school change. An essential part of this audit will be speaking with pupils, parents and carers to highlight areas for improvement.

Recommended resources: [Emotionally healthy schools resource pack](#)
[Whole-school framework and self-assessment tool](#)

2 Develop a school policy for mental health and wellbeing

It is helpful to develop a mental health and wellbeing policy and review it regularly so that it responds to evolving needs and changes within your school. The policy should be concise, well promoted and accessible, and provide guidance on supporting staff mental health and wellbeing.

Wider school policies should also be reviewed to make sure they support the wellbeing of staff and pupils – these include policies relating to bullying, discrimination, behaviour management and school exclusion.

Recommended resource: [How to write an effective mental health policy](#)

3 Create a warm and supportive environment

Children should feel that they belong at school; that they are supported and can develop trusting relationships with school staff. School leaders have a vital role to play in creating this ethos across the school and should model best practice, for example by using positive, inclusive and respectful language, celebrating pupils' successes, and being out to talk to parents and carers at the start and end of the school day.

Recommended resource: [Using restorative practice](#)

4 Create a culture where mental health can be talked about openly

School leaders can encourage a culture in which mental health and wellbeing is talked about openly and where children, parents, carers and staff understand the importance of, and links between, good mental and physical health.

It's important to help staff understand that every child is different and may cope with challenging situations differently. Pupils and staff should know who to talk to if they need support - clear signposting within the school (through posters or in assemblies for example) is a good way to promote a sense of openness about seeking support or advice.

Recommended resource: [Talking mental health](#)

5 Weave PSHE topics throughout the curriculum

Provide a strategy for how to develop children's social and emotional skills throughout the curriculum and school life. Children and staff should feel confident talking about mental health and wellbeing – and children should have an understanding of how to support themselves and understand when something might be wrong. School leaders should work with staff to develop ways to boost children's self-esteem and resilience.

Recommended resource: [Guidance on new PSHE requirements](#)

6 Develop strategies to support at-risk children

Some children are more likely than others to develop mental health problems. This can be because they have faced multiple challenging situations over time. School leaders need to make sure that staff can recognise children who are more at risk, and that staff have strategies in place to support those children. This may include buddy systems, peer-mentoring, access to Nurture groups, recruiting role models to speak in school assemblies, access to school nurses or to individual or group-based counselling.

The school leadership team will also need to work in partnership with local commissioners to make sure there is a clear roadmap of local support services.

Recommended resource: [Youth wellbeing directory](#)

7 Guide staff on referring a child

There should be clear guidance on how staff can best support students who may have mental health problems. Staff should be aware of how to spot the signs that a child may be struggling, the types of mental health issues that a child may have, and what school staff can do to support these children.

Leaders can direct staff to the [mental health needs](#) section of Mentally Healthy Schools which can help staff make sense of any changes they are seeing in a child's behaviour, and guide them on what support the child may need. Staff can use this section as part of their continuing professional development (CPD). Staff will also need to know when and how to refer children for specialist support within or outside of school. Where possible, schools should provide spaces for children to go to if they need to talk to someone or be calm.

Recommended resource: [Concerned about a child?](#)

8 Work with families and communities

Families are often the key to helping support a child who is struggling. School leaders should encourage staff to work with pupils, parents or carers; raise awareness about mental health and wellbeing, alongside attempting to destigmatise it, where necessary.

When working with families, senior leaders and school staff should emphasise that we all have mental health, that it is something we can strengthen and look after through learning positive strategies to help us cope with difficulties. But that it is also something that we might sometimes need help with – and early support can help people recover more quickly.

Recommend resource: [Engaging with families](#)

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Protect children from harm and neglect

All children should feel safe at school, be able to learn and know that they can speak out if anything is worrying them. School leaders can make a difference by creating an inclusive and welcoming environment that supports children when they're experiencing challenges both inside and outside the school setting.

Recommended resources: [Understanding neglect](#)
[Signs of abuse – and keeping children safe](#)

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Support staff mental health and wellbeing

As primary school staff juggle a multitude of different tasks and demands, it is important that all staff are given the right emotional and practical support so that they can, in turn, support their pupils. Positive staff wellbeing can increase productivity and engagement, and also improve job satisfaction. Research shows that this will also help to reduce absence from work - both short and long term.

Recommended resource: [Helping you](#)

Read more:

[Getting started – tips for teaching and support staff](#)

[Whole-school approach](#)

[Governors and trustees](#)

[Mental health needs](#)

[Risks and protective factors](#)

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