

WHAT WORKS?

Research into Practice

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How can school communities create cultures that support positive mental health and well-being in practical and effective ways?

Resilient, Active, and Flourishing:

Supporting Positive Mental Health and Well-Being in School Communities

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Research Tells Us

Educators can promote mental health by:

- supporting students in identifying and empathizing with diverse feelings and emotions
- supporting students with self-regulation
- identifying and enhancing students' strengths rather than focusing on their needs
- recognizing that when students are withdrawn or acting out, they are doing the best they can with the skills they have
- providing opportunities throughout the day for students to be engaged in meaningful physical activity

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Promoting well-being is one of the key actions listed in *Achieving Excellence*.¹ Students (and teachers) who maintain positive mental health and experience a sense of well-being feel a) able to cope with adversity; b) physically well, nourished, and active; c) physically and psychologically safe; d) included, valued, and supported at home, school, and in the community; e) competent and able to participate in productive activities; and f) confident that others care about their well-being.^{2,3,4,5} These characteristics impact a student's attention span, creative thinking, and capacity to learn; improve attitudes toward self and others; and decrease problem behaviours and potential emotional distress.^{3,4,5}

What is Positive Mental Health?

Positive mental health is “the capacity of each and all of us to feel, think, and act in ways that enhance our ability to enjoy life and deal with the challenges we face.” It is “a positive sense of emotional and spiritual well-being that respects the importance of culture, equity, social justice, interconnections, and personal dignity.”⁶ It is characterized by resilience, commitment to an active lifestyle, and the experience of flourishing.

Resilience allows us to cope with life's disappointments, challenges, and pain. To be resilient, we need to believe in our own strengths, abilities, and worth. Resilient traits include flexibility, empathy, realistic action planning, listening and problem-solving skills, self-confidence, optimism,

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We're all in this together ...

Schools are challenged to promote equitable, inclusive, and accepting school climates and to ensure all children develop enhanced mental and physical health and a positive sense of self and belonging. This community effort requires careful consideration and dialogue among families, communities, and schools. Regardless of our role, we are all in this together.

a sense of humour, and an ability to develop effective relationships, manage emotions, and make social contributions.^{7,8}

An *active lifestyle* is associated with improved interpersonal relationships, social skills, self-image, self-worth, cognitive functioning, and brain composition changes. Regular physical activity contributes to the management of a range of mild to severe psychological difficulties.⁹

The *experience of flourishing* is characterized by positive emotions and relationships, as well as by a sense of connection, purpose, and accomplishment.¹⁰

A Continuum of Support for All Students

In-school mental health promotion involves opportunities for all students to develop resilience, be active, and flourish. Meeting all students' needs, however, may require multiple, targeted levels of support.

Level 1. Universal support for all. All students experience some level of anxiety at some time in their lives. Schools anticipate areas of need (long-term and temporary), help students recognize anxiety and sadness, build resiliency skills, and teach a range of healthy behaviours to navigate these challenges.

Level 2. Prevention through targeted support for some. School-based programs target specific self-regulating social-emotional skills (such as breathing exercises, mental imagery, and positive self-talk) with those at risk for common behavioural, emotional, and social problems.

Level 3. Intervention and intensive support for a few. School staff work with mental-health professionals to provide intensive intervention through a system of “wrap around” support and accommodation for students as they practise self-regulation and other coping skills.

Effective universal supports leave less preventative and intervention work to do.

Promoting Mental Health in Schools

Research highlights the importance of the environment in developing resiliency and providing opportunities to flourish.¹¹ In mentally healthy classrooms, all students feel they are a valued part of a team. Diversity is appreciated and celebrated. Many values fostered in today's classrooms are directly linked to positive mental health, including equity, social justice, and respect for culture. Helping students understand these links and utilize them to foster their own mental health is the ultimate goal.

Promoting mental health involves creating opportunities, such as those listed below, for all students to celebrate and develop their gifts, experience joy and belonging, and learn social-emotional resiliency skills.

Creating classroom communities that support social-emotional learning.

Daily activities present opportunities for direct instruction and practice of social-emotional skills. Use literature, sharing circles, real-life experience, and community meetings to develop knowledge and skills to a) identify and manage emotions; b) pursue positive and reasonable goals; c) communicate caring for others; d) initiate and sustain positive relationships; and e) demonstrate respect for self and others. *I Wonder* by Annaka Harris offers lessons of emotional intelligence that stem from natural curiosity and wonder.

Make social-emotional learning a whole-school focus. Social-emotional learning can exist as an intentional, authentic process that is woven into school culture with common understandings, competencies, and language that involves all members of the school community – including teachers, parents, administrators, and bus drivers. *Ripple’s Effect* by Shawn Achor and Amy Blankson presents the power of positive thinking and the need for community social-emotional awareness.

Support students in identifying and empathizing with diverse feelings and emotions. We all need help to figure out why we feel troubled, how to deal with and appropriately express emotions, and how to relate to others. When individuals feel troubled but cannot understand, express, or deal with their anxiety, they are at risk of developing poor habits to release tension. Use books (e.g., *Feelings* by Aiki), media, and real life as a springboard for discussion. Teach students to use “I messages” (e.g., “I feel angry when...”) to communicate with others.

Support students with self-regulation. “Self-regulation is the ability to manage your own energy states, emotions, behaviours, and attention in ways that are socially acceptable and help to achieve positive goals.”¹² Students who recognize and regulate their emotions are less likely to get stuck in emotional distress. Provide strategies that allow students to take control and self-regulate independently, such as engaging in legitimate opportunities for movement, removing oneself from a distressing situation (e.g., by using a cozy corner), or using a stress ball.

Identify and enhance students’ strengths rather than focusing on their needs. Help students identify feelings associated with strengths and needs; support them as they explore ways to express their strengths and work on their needs. When we focus on strengths, challenges become learning opportunities rather than deficits or disruptions. Recognize and label productive behaviour; ensure that students understand that, while their behaviour may not be acceptable, they are always welcome and valued as persons.

Recognize that when students are withdrawn or acting out, they are doing the best they can with the skills they have. Behaviour is open to interpretation; treating behaviour as a symptom fosters appreciation for uniqueness and supports student well-being. Consider, for example, transitioning from one activity to the next: A child who appears unwilling to transition may, in fact, be task-committed and completely absorbed in his work. Provide a cue or a warning to support him. Another child, however, may appear focused in the group activity but become withdrawn and unable to transition to the next task. Recognize that she may need time to recharge before she is ready to move on. Provide a quiet space or an independent activity to meet her needs.¹³ *The Invisible Boy* by Trudy Ludwig presents a tale of introversion and the implications of belonging.

Provide opportunities throughout the day for students to be engaged in meaningful physical activity. Plan legitimate opportunities for movement. Use active games, songs, and activities in class to supplement learning. Implement daily physical activity across the curriculum. At recess, teach yoga, aerobics, or fun and active games. Provide opportunities for intramural sports where all can participate and be successful, regardless of perceived skill level.

Mental health matters ...

Developing positive mental health is foundational to student academic achievement, effective life skills, and overall well-being. At the core of mentally healthy classrooms are the principles of compassion, inclusion and engagement, encouragement and support, and effective instruction that facilitates success.

Student-Family-Teacher Strategies that Support Well-Being

Individuals develop skills for resiliency and flourish when they are successfully engaged in home and school activities that allow them to develop positive relationship skills and confidence in problem solving. By employing the following strategies, adults can play a pivotal role in helping students access appropriate resources for success and well-being.¹³

Set reasonable and attainable social, emotional, and learning goals. Recognize that each goal reached is a success point. Revisit goals on a weekly basis for reinforcement and revision. Focus on personal bests rather than whole-class competitions. Help students recognize that mistakes are a part of the learning process. Use texts such as *What Do You Do with an Idea?* by Kobi Yamada, *The Most Magnificent Thing* by Ashley Spires, and *Wings of Change* by Franklin Hill to foster open conversations about persistence, resilience, belief in oneself, and openness to small successes.

Employ gratitude journals to focus on the good things that happen every day.⁴ These can be small things (e.g., “I answered a really hard question”). For each entry, invite students to reflect on one of the following questions: Why did this happen? What

does this mean to me? How can I ensure that I have more of this in the future?

Identify strengths, needs, and supports through survey or self-identification. Have each student produce an “*All About Me*” poster, or photo-essay that gives others an authentic picture of who they are as individuals and learners; a similar approach can be used to build family identities. Post in the classroom to promote student-family-teacher-school connection, highlighting that we are all in this together.

Recognize multiple intelligences to help students flourish. Get to know all of the ways that your students are smart, rather than restrictively focusing on verbal and mathematical abilities. Provide opportunities for students to be passionately engaged in learning opportunities that involve diverse intellectual modes, such as visual-spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, naturalistic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal.¹⁴ *Through the Cracks*, by Patricia Solomon, demonstrates how multiple-intelligence pedagogy supports engagement and students’ capacity to flourish.

Work together to promote well-being in school and at home. Communicate openly and engage families in identifying strengths.⁴ Build identity through the use of family stories, modelling how strengths can be used to overcome challenges. Embed principles of positive mental health in all that schools, families, and communities do.³

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