



Talking Mental Health

Information Sheet for School Staff

We all have both physical and mental health. Mental health is about our feelings, our thinking, our emotions and our moods. We all have feelings that come and go every day. However, as with our physical health, each of us can have problems with our mental health from time to time. These problems can stop us getting on with our lives and can change how well we feel, how we see the world, how we behave and how we get on with others. By the time they leave primary school 20% of children will have experienced mental health problems at least once in their lives.¹

Definitions

When we talk about *mental health problems*, we mean:

- Changes in thought, mood and/or behaviour that make it difficult to function²
- Feelings that interfere with our daily life
- Feelings that go on for long periods of time
- Behaviours or thoughts and feelings that are so out of the ordinary that they cause us great distress and concern.

Sometimes people use the terms 'mental disorder' or 'mental illness' instead of 'mental health problem'.

Mental wellbeing is not simply the absence of mental illness. Young people we work with have described mental wellbeing as "feeling good, feeling that their life is going well, and feeling able to get on with their daily lives."³

Tips for talking with children about mental health

1. Make conversations about mental health a normal part of life:

Anywhere is a good place to talk. It could be in the classroom, the playground or at lunch.

2. Give your full attention:

We all know it's horrible to be half listened to. Keep eye contact, focus on the child and ignore distractions.

3. Check your body language:

Try to keep it open and relaxed and make sure you come down to the child's level.

4. Take it seriously:

Don't downplay what the child is saying or tell them they're "just being silly". Resist the urge to reassure them that everything is fine.

5. Ask open questions:

Such as "How did your day go today?" This will help to extend the conversation.

6. Calmly stay with the feelings that arise:

It can be our automatic reaction to steer away from difficult emotions.

7. Offer empathy rather than solutions:

Show that you accept what they are telling you but don't try to solve the problem.

8. Remember we are all different:

Respect and value the child's feelings, even though they may be different to yours.

9. Look for clues about feelings:

Listen to the child's words, tone of voice and body language.

10. Some ways to start a conversation about feelings might be:

"How are you feeling at the moment?"

"You don't seem your usual self. Do you want to talk about it?"

"Do you fancy a chat?"

"I'm happy to listen if you need a chat."

Learn more

If you would like to learn more about children and young people's mental health you may find these websites useful:

www.annafreud.org – the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families offers free resources produced by child mental health experts specifically for school staff.

www.minded.org.uk – MindEd for professionals offers free e-learning for all adults working with children and young people.

To find organisations in your local area that support children and young people experiencing mental health problems visit the Youth Wellbeing Directory at www.youthwellbeing.co.uk

¹ Morrison Gutman, L., Joshi, H., Parsonage, M. and Schoon, I. *Children of the new century. Mental health findings from the Millennium Cohort Study*. Centre for Mental Health and University College London.

² Murphey, D., Barry, M., & Vaughn, B. (2013). Mental health disorders. *Child Trends*, (January), 1–10.

³ Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families, Public Health England and the Child Outcomes Research Consortium (2016) *Measuring and Monitoring children and young people's mental wellbeing: A toolkit for schools and colleges*. www.annafreud.org/what-we-do/schools-in-mind/resources-for-schools/mental-health-toolkit-for-schools