



A growing sense of wellbeing

Liz Lowe considers the increase in wellbeing at the core of the school day and the benefits it delivers for children

The birds and whales are heading south for the winter. The trees stand tall as their leaves change colour and fall to the ground. And the bears are stretching out and preparing to hibernate, before collapsing into a heap of wriggles and giggles.

This isn't a nature documentary, but a yoga session at Freshford Pre-school, where the children are celebrating the change of seasons. The mood may be more silly than serene, but these mini yogis are having a lot of fun as they explore shapes and stillness.

Mindful movement sessions are just one facet of the pre-school's wellbeing-centred approach. Children's wellbeing is "Paramount", explains manager Debbie Giles, and "central to the staff's planning and rationale for what we offer."



A day at Freshford Pre-school can include yoga and music

Last year the NHS's Mental Health Taskforce reported that 'half of all mental health problems have been established by the age of 14,' and one in ten children aged 5-16 already has a diagnosable condition. The statistics are sobering and could be one reason many local pre-schools and schools are placing mental health and wellbeing at the top of the agenda.

So, what exactly is wellbeing?

"Wellbeing to me is all about aligning mind, body and spirit," explains Dr Linda Mallory, an educational psychologist who has worked with several schools in the region. "The word 'being' is really important: being yourself, being authentic, being the person you were born to be."

Kate Garden, founder of Bath-based children's wellbeing company Flow Kids, describes "A balanced state of health, where one can respond to the physical and mental challenges of life pro-actively and positively".

Wellbeing is linked to all aspects of life – how we think, behave and interact. The mental health charity Mind has identified 'Five ways to wellbeing', highlighting the importance of supportive relationships, staying active, being present, learning and participating in community life.

Many local pre-schools and schools are working hard to help children find this balance and enable them to get the most out of their setting. How are they integrating these factors into the day's activities?

Freshford's pre-schoolers begin and end their sessions singing hello and goodbye songs, to foster the children's sense of belonging. Their day may include yoga, music and movement activities and crafts, including 'Sunshine Circles' facilitating small group play, which is valuable for social, personal and emotional development.

"Staff have all undergone 'Philosophy for children' training, which centres around the wellbeing and involvement of the child," says

Debbie Giles. "For children to thrive and achieve their best possible outcomes, they need to feel secure, safe and settled."

The children are encouraged to use puppet play and active story making to explore feelings and experiences. Dr Linda Mallory recommends building emotional literacy from pre-school age when comparisons with other children, such as who can run faster, tend to begin. Linda helps children to articulate emotions using stories, picture books, colours, shapes and a 'feelings wheel' featuring colours and emojis.

St Keyna Primary School in Keynsham strives to take the needs of the whole person into account through what Deputy Head, Megan Morris, describes as their "more holistic approach". The school is one of several in the region to have implemented the Thrive Approach, which teaches methods of working with children to support their social and emotional development. Recent research, co-ordinated by three American universities, showed that social and emotional learning programs, such as Thrive, have both immediate and long-term benefits for mental health, social skills and academic outcomes.

Within what Megan describes as "a very clear behaviour system, which includes both praise and sanctions," St Keyna's teachers avoid confrontation where possible, as well as situations where children might feel shame. "We try and approach our children's difficulties with an emotion coaching approach," says Megan,

a practice that has been shown to give children greater awareness of their feelings, and help them to understand and manage them.

Also at St Keyna's, nurture groups provide support for higher need pupils, and there is a self-referral lunchtime nurture classroom for all children. Here lunch is eaten "in a family way around the table, facilitating discussion and interest in one another," explains Megan. After lunch, there are games and activities to join in with, or children can choose to go outside to play.

One child describes the positive effect of this safe space: "We have all come here after a bad morning, and then we have felt better. It's a calm atmosphere."

Another adds: "I like the quiet area where you can have time out and be private."

Mindfulness techniques have been used within the nurture groups, as well as with Year 6 pupils before SATs. Mindfulness is a bit of a buzzword currently, but what exactly is it and how can it benefit children?

In essence, mindfulness is about experiencing the present moment, with compassion and without judgement. It sounds pretty simple but can be a powerful tool, enabling children to recognise thought patterns, beliefs and triggers. Mindfulness techniques can be used to overcome obstacles and manage big emotions; building resilience and reducing anxiety.

The Mindfulness in Schools Project (MiSP) was established to promote the introduction of mindfulness techniques to school

St Keyna pupils enjoy a holistic approach that includes a focus on the whole person



children, and their materials are now used in primary and secondary schools across the country. Claire-Louise Symonds and Donna Person are part of the Bristol-based Mindful Parenting & Community Project, which delivers MiSP courses to local schools, and offers mindfulness taster sessions and courses to parents. One of the group's aims is to support children, families and teachers by providing practical skills to manage stress and anxiety and to promote self-compassion.

One parent who attended a course described it as "very powerful", saying it had "changed the dynamic with my younger child in a very positive way". Another said their children had benefitted from learning mindfulness techniques, and could now "step back and breathe".

Mindfulness can be useful in enabling parents and teachers to build structure and set limits, explain Claire-Louise and Donna. They also highlight the importance of parents practicing mindfulness along with children, and modelling how to regulate emotions and respond with compassion rather than reacting on 'autopilot'.

St Saviour's Junior School in Bath has also offered mindfulness sessions, as part of a council run pilot scheme. Head teacher, Joe Beament, found it had a positive effect, explaining, "Year 5 did 'Sitting like a frog' mindfulness and guided visualisations, with the children finding it relaxing and a nice reward at the end of the week." Other schools are currently trying similar initiatives.

St Saviours has also begun integrating the Thrive Approach. Joe explained, "We mainly see Thrive as a whole school approach that helps develop social skills, behaviour and learning." As well as class profiling and tailored class activities, the approach also helps the school with individual action plans for those children who need "a little bit extra."

Last year St Philip's Primary School, in Odd Down, organised a wellbeing day for pupils, teachers



St Saviour's has offered mindfulness as part of a council run scheme

and parents. Sessions covered physical activity, relaxation, spiritual and religious beliefs, calming, creativity, personal identity and working with others. Workshops for parents tackled healthy eating and reducing sugar, and calming techniques for them to use at home. Having recently completed training as a Thrive practitioner, Head teacher Jo Coppens explained that she "wanted staff and children to see that good mental health and wellbeing is as a result of many areas". She added that the day received an "overwhelmingly positive" response from pupils and parents, with the school adopting an approach where they can "educate the whole child, focusing on personal skills and wellbeing as much as academic results". As well as several wellbeing and nurture group activities, such as drama and art therapy, the school provides one-to-one mentoring for pupils to support the transition into secondary school.

At Bathwick St Mary Primary School, a Flow Kids wellbeing club has been added to the list of extra-curricular activities. Flow founder, Kate Garden, describes some of the activities that take place: "We cook, move, laugh and breathe through yoga, cooking, mindfulness, aerobics, Zumba and doodling," she says. "Most of all we have fun and relax."

The same phrase was repeated often: "It's a whole school approach." Scheduled activities such as yoga and mindfulness sessions are part of it all, but more fundamental is the philosophy that children's, and indeed staff's, wellbeing is the foundation on which the school's other achievements can be built. "It has to be the bedrock of everything we do," says Megan Morris. Evidence supports this: a 2014 report by Public Health England highlighted a positive correlation between the culture and ethos of schools and pupils' health and wellbeing, and a readiness to learn.

St Philips received an overwhelmingly positive response to its mindfulness day



Wellbeing at home

A few tips for things that parents can do at home to support or enhance their child's wellbeing, from Kate Garden – Flow Kids

1. COOK Ask your child for help making a healthy meal. Even though it may mean more work for you, it's a great way to bond and connect with your child, and encourage your child's interest in food and nutrition. Children are much more likely to try a new ingredient/dish if they help create it. Expect mess and try to go with the flow!

2. MOVE You don't have to go to a class to practice yoga, aerobics, running or HIIT – you can do these activities in a small space in your house, your park or your street. I use yoga cards with my kids and also go running with them. It's important to do the activity regularly so that it becomes part of your routine.

3. CONNECT Schedule some 'tech free' time into your daily routine where you are totally present and focus on your child. It's hard to find the time when you have more than one child but even a five minute game of cards or doodling session after dinner will support their wellbeing. Switch off the TV and computer and doodle away.

It's a great opportunity to talk and connect with your child.

4. BREATHE Do some deep breathing exercises together, perhaps as part of a bedtime routine. Breathe in for a count of 5 and out for a count of 7. This simple technique brings us back into our parasympathetic (relaxed) part of our nervous system and helps us deal with stress.

5. RELAX Ensure your child has a regular bedtime and routine. Sleep is so important and hugely underrated. A simple, regular routine such as a bath and a story/quiet time is paramount for their overall health and wellbeing.

A key aspect of wellbeing is there is no 'one size fits all' approach, and Dr Linda Mallory cautions against viewing it in terms of a checklist. Linda prefers to ask parents, teachers and children "What do you need?" She encourages adults to model this approach to children, believing "an education which focuses on wellbeing of children, staff and parents leads to healthy communities".

Many schools' resources are already stretched, and increasing wellbeing support may seem unrealistic, but Linda says it comes from the "philosophy and ethos of the school", and is "embedded in everything that we do and everything that we say".

Flow Kids clubs help children to focus on their mental and physical wellbeing

Is this just a passing trend? Until recently, few people had heard about mindfulness, let alone expected their children to be doing it. In fact, the World Health Organisation introduced the concept of 'mental wellbeing' in 1948. The term 'mindfulness' was coined in the late 1800's but, like yoga, the practice has been around for thousands of years. With increasing numbers of young people affected by mental health issues, it seems to make sense to equip them with as many tools as possible to navigate the stresses of modern life.

Jo Coppens at St Philips sees it as "vital" to allow time to focus on the wellbeing of children and staff. At St Keyna, Megan calls it "time consuming work but worthwhile work".

Improved academic performance may not be the primary aim here, but Public Health England stated in its report 'The Link Between Pupil Health and Wellbeing and Attainment – A briefing for head teachers, governors and staff in education settings' that 'pupils with better health and wellbeing are likely to achieve better academically'. Local schools also report positive results. "The school has been improving," says Megan of St Keyna,

which was recently rated as 'good with outstanding features' by Ofsted.

At St Saviours, Joe Beament has noticed pupils demonstrating "improved focus" and better "independent calming strategies". Ofsted reported that many parents referred to the school's "strong commitment to supporting their children's wellbeing."

Beyond academic results, the hope is that supporting children's social and emotional development will help them develop the resilience and self-confidence they need to thrive.

Back at Freshford Pre-school, those giggling bears have finished their yoga session and are heading off for lunch with smiles on their faces. And, as Jo Coppens explains, "Some things can't be measured but that does not mean they are not important. Seeing a child smile or being happy to come to school after taking part in a wellbeing activity is evidence of positive impact." ■

Resources

www.thriveapproach.com

www.connectingwithmindfulness.co.uk

<http://mindfulnessinschools.org>

www.flowkids.co.uk

www.ppe.co.uk