

Better training needed to help new teachers promote healthy lifestyles to children: U.K. study

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A survey of managers of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) courses has shown there is a lack of attention paid to public health priorities in teacher training and little consistency in helping trainees to develop the skills they need to promote positive health behaviors to pupils. Government public health priorities include issues such as, healthy eating, physical exercise and preventing smoking, drug and alcohol abuse.

Dr Jonathan Shepherd, the study's lead researcher and Principal Research Fellow at the University's Southampton Health Technology Assessments Centre (SHTAC), says: "Until now, there has been no clear overview of how trainee teachers are prepared during ITE in England to promote health and wellbeing to children in schools. We hope this study -- the first national, comprehensive survey into the issue -- will help address this."

Researchers from SHTAC, Southampton Education School and Medicine at the University of Southampton sent online questionnaires to 220 ITE course managers in higher education institutions and employment and school-centred courses, of which 74 returned completed forms. They also conducted in-depth interviews with 19 course managers.

Based on the survey findings, the researchers found that for new teachers there is:

- * a lack of attention and little consistency in provision of adequate training to equip them with the skills they need to promote public health priorities in the classroom
- * a greater emphasis is given in their training to topics perceived as being more closely relevant to a pupil's learning, such as emotional health
- * the majority of ITE providers recognised the importance of inclusion of health and well-being in the teacher training curriculum in England and held a holistic perspective on education
- * little use of external expertise from health professionals, such as nurses and doctors, to support trainee teachers in building their knowledge and confidence in health matters

The researchers also found that the main barrier to health promotion training was a lack of time in the ITE curriculum and a perception that health and well-being were lower priorities than other aspects of education in new government education policies.

Dr Jenny Byrne from the Southampton Education School, comments: "Our research has shown that training results in great improvements in trainee teachers' confidence and competence in dealing with certain aspects of health education. All of our teacher training courses have elements of health education and this includes a 'Health Day' that is supported and facilitated by a multi-disciplinary team of health professionals.

"The public health white paper Healthy Lives, Healthy People emphasizes the role of teachers in promoting healthy lifestyles and preventing risky behaviors among young people. Coupled with responsibility for public health moving from the NHS to, in part, local authorities -- communities and, in particular, schools will become even more important in addressing health needs and inequalities in their local areas."

Story Source:

The above story is based on [materials](#) provided by [University of Southampton](#). *Note: Materials may be edited for*

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Journal Reference:

1. S. Dewhirst, K. Pickett, V. Speller, J. Shepherd, J. Byrne, P. Almond, M. Grace, D. Hartwell, P. Roderick. **Are trainee teachers being adequately prepared to promote the health and well-being of school children? A survey of current practice.** *Journal of Public Health*, 2013; DOI: [10.1093/pubmed/fdt103](https://doi.org/10.1093/pubmed/fdt103)
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