

How to create mentally healthy classrooms

Staff CPD for Primary Schools

What is mental health?

The World Health Organisation defines mental health as:

“a state of well-being in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stress of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community.”

In schools, this could look like:

- happy teachers who are able to cope with, not just survive, the daily ups and downs of teaching
- pupils who approach challenges with confidence and resilience, and enjoy being at school

What is the current picture of mental health in schools?

According to the Department of Health and Social Care, one in eight 5 to 19 year olds has a mental health disorder.

↳ Statistically, 13% of the children in your class have a mental health issue

↳ If you have a class of 30, four children are struggling



Fight, flight or freeze: the acute stress response

When people are in the **acute stress response** (also known as fight, flight or freeze), they are unable to engage the 'thinking' and 'feeling' parts of their brain – they are in survival mode.

- Someone in 'fight' can look hot and bothered. They can be angry, aggressive, controlling or argumentative.
- Someone in 'flight' can look very busy, hyperactive or silly. They might be unable to cope with free time or literally remove themselves from the situation.
- Someone in 'freeze' can look bored or confused. They can come across as forgetful or daydreaming.



Do you recognise any of these traits in the children you teach?

Someone in the fight, flight or freeze mode cannot engage the 'thinking' and 'feeling' parts of their brains until they feel **safe**. Once they feel the threat has gone then you can begin working on making connections, rationalising the problem and thinking of different strategies to cope with it.

"As adults, we can think back on past experiences to help us respond appropriately to stressful situations. That doesn't mean we will always be able to rationalise situations but it does help us cope. Talking and remembering with the people around you can help grow new brain connections that teach us over time how to respond to stressors. It helps you to understand that feelings are transient which can in turn help to change mindsets. So when the dust has settled, **talk**. Remind yourself, your colleague, your students that things seemed pretty bad earlier, but they don't any more. When reading books together, make it a habit to discuss how the characters feel, and talk about situations in which they might have felt the same way. The more your pupils are able to make connections between actions, reactions and feelings the better."

-Catherine Lynch, PlanBee

10 practical ways to create mentally healthy classrooms

The challenge can seem overwhelming but there are lots of simple ways to promote mental health in your classroom on a day-to-day basis.

It doesn't require extra curriculum time – these are strategies you can slip into your teaching.

1. Create a nurturing environment where everyone feels valued and safe

Children who feel nurtured and safe will not only learn better but feel better too. Getting to know the children in your class, beyond what you know of their academic abilities, is a fundamental way of achieving this.

- Give them a 'Knowing Me, Knowing You' card for them to fill in with something interesting about themselves, or as a space to share anything they are struggling with or worried about.
- Give children one-to-one feedback on these (you could write a quick response on the back of the card and leave it in their tray, or take a child aside if necessary)
- Take the time to acknowledge that you value what they have shared with you, even if it's just a quick "Hey, I didn't know you love ostriches – they're my favourite animal too!" moment.

Foster good relationships with the children in your class by asking them to fill in one of these 'Knowing Me, Knowing You' cards every once in a while. Responding to their fun facts, thoughts or worries in a personalised way will help your children feel valued and safe in their classroom environment. Write a reply on the back and leave it in their tray, or have a chat with them about their fact.

 <p>Write a fact about yourself that your teacher doesn't know already! It could be a fun fact, a hobby, something you are worried about...anything!</p> <p>What you might not know about me is...</p> <p>Signed: _____</p>	 <p>Write a fact about yourself that your teacher doesn't know already! It could be a fun fact, a hobby, something you are worried about...anything!</p> <p>What you might not know about me is...</p> <p>Signed: _____</p>
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2. Allow everyone to have a voice

It's important to give every child the opportunity to voice their ideas and opinions, not just those who are orally confident.

- Use flip sticks - have each child's name on a lolly stick to pull out when asking questions and colour one end. Flip the stick over once you have asked that child so you don't pick out the same children all the time.
- Talk for Me Buddies - a child discusses a question or problem with a partner who then feeds back what the first child has said to the rest of the class, and vice versa.

↳ This is great for children who want to share their ideas with the class but who don't yet have the confidence to voice their own thoughts in a large group.



3. Be playful and have fun

Play fosters creativity, collaboration and problem solving, all of which are important for good mental health.

- Thread games into your normal teaching activities as much as possible:
 - ↳ Role-play wherever you can
 - ↳ Find ways of making games out of normal learning experiences
 - ↳ In 'Golden Time', organise team-building games for your class



Where else can you build playing into your curriculum?

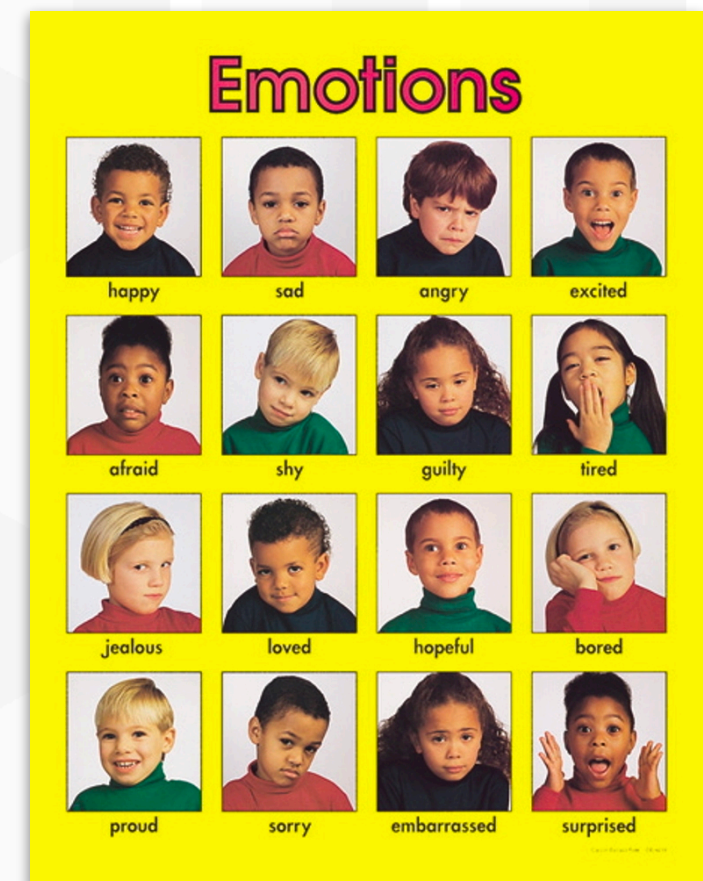
4. Name feeling and emotions as they arise

Children need to be able to identify the emotions they are feeling at different times during the day in order to understand how to deal with what they are feeling.

- Display an Emotions Poster in the classroom and encourage children to refer to it throughout the day

↳ Ensure that the poster shows a wide range of emotions and the names for them to help children learn to identify their feelings. Being able to identify how they are feeling will help them to address their feelings more effectively.

- Give them each an individual feelings monitor to encourage them to identify when they feel different emotions, and consequently how to deal with them.



5. Take a mood register, either verbally or as a self registration board, to check in with the feelings in the room

Children give a number from 1 to 10 when answering their name in the register to show how they are feeling that day. Subsequently, the teacher can follow-up with any low-answering children later in the day for a private chat, and other children can be aware of how their peers are feeling, giving them the chance to offer encouragement and support.



6. Create an atmosphere where all feelings are allowed

Give feelings an appropriate outlet. Put boundaries in place around behaviours to keep everyone safe and develop strategies to help reinforce those boundaries.

You are allowed to feel angry.

BUT

You are not allowed to hit or bully.

You are allowed to feel sad.

BUT

You are not allowed to take it out on other people.

When addressing undesirable behaviour, help both the child themselves and the other children in the class to understand that there are appropriate and inappropriate ways of dealing with emotions. Learning to identify these will come in time as the children are supported in identifying and accepting their feelings.

7. Focus on the bigger picture

Sometimes it's important to help children (and colleagues) to see past the latest disastrous playtime or bad lesson and focus instead on the bigger picture. Some experiences can seem worse than they really are. Encouraging children to recognise this is key in not catastrophising every set-back.

- Is a child frustrated because they didn't understand column subtraction straight away? Remind them of a time they struggled with, and overcame, another tricky strategy. Is this really any different?
- Do you really want to end the friendship with your best friend over the argument you had at playtime or is it not worth losing such a good friend over?

↳ A great strategy to help put issues in context is the **7s rule**:
Will it matter in 7 seconds? 7 minutes? 7 hours? 7 days? 7 years?
This can help give both time to calm down and let things go.

8. Take learning outside and make it active as much as possible

Outdoor learning doesn't have to mean traipsing around a field looking for earthworms (although this kind of outdoor learning is extremely valuable, fun and enriching too).

- Take advantage of whatever your local area has to offer and explore:

- ↳ places of worship
- ↳ museums
- ↳ streetscapes
- ↳ galleries
- ↳ shopping centres



9. Read stories

Take the opportunity to discuss the feelings and actions of the characters as you read books to your class. Analysing the reactions of characters in a number of stressful situations can support children in identifying how they react in certain situations. In turn, they can then consider how they might react more positively next time.



- Is there a better way the character could have reacted?
- How do you think you would have responded to this situation?
- What would have been the best way for the character to react? How might this have changed the story?

10. Encourage calm classrooms

Being able to calm down is a skill that needs to be practised (in some children more than others!). Embedding periods of calm into your classroom through simple activities will help your pupils to feel safer and more peaceful.

- Provide mindfulness colouring sheets for children to engage with when they need to calm down
- Have an end-of-the-day routine that includes a period of calm and meditation
- Teach children a variety of breathing exercises for them to practise as they are lining up to go to assembly or for when they need time out from learning



Taken from the original blogs:



Understanding and creating mentally healthy classrooms



10 practical ways to create mentally healthy schools