

Promoting the Mental Wellbeing of Children and Young People in Hertfordshire Schools

The past six months have been difficult for us all; the sense of uncertainty, social isolation and lack of routine can take its toll on anyone's mental health. However, amidst the chaos, many Hertfordshire schools have made efforts to safeguard the wellbeing of their pupils and staff. In this document we are only mentioning a few of these positive steps which you can consider taking to help your students, parents, carers and school staff maintain good mental health throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

BACK-TO-SCHOOL ANXIETIES

It is to be expected that students will feel a sense of anxiety about returning to school. This is a normal emotional response and can often be managed. Clear communication is key, so students, parents and staff know what to expect when schools reopen in the autumn.

How can you do it?

- Share pictures and videos of how the school will look. Virtual tours can be filmed on most smart phones and sent out over the summer. This will let pupils know how the school might appear different once they're back.
- Provide information via newsletters or blogs to students and parents over the summer about any changes they can expect, and make sure that safety is a top priority. This should help ease any concerns about staff and students feeling safe when they return.
- Ensure a gradual reintegration, allowing students to have space to reconnect with their peers, as well as returning to education.

Examples:

- ✓ Brookland Junior School plans to help address back-to-school anxieties by hosting a 'Transitional Back-To-School Week' over the summer, where families of students can visit the site. The aim is to allow students and their families to have a look around, familiarise themselves with any changes and get to grips with what to expect before classes resume.
- ✓ To boost morale, [Southfield School](#) and [Goffs-Churchgate Academy](#) have put together a video for their pupils. [Hitchin Girls' School](#) have also made a video for their students to let them know they were thinking of them over lockdown.

STAFF WELLBEING

Whilst promoting positive mental health amongst students, it is paramount that school staff wellbeing is also supported. Staying connected is one of the best, and most simple steps that can help achieve this. Although the current situation makes it harder to keep in touch with colleagues, there are plenty of ways your school can encourage communication between staff.

How can you do it?

- Host regular Q&As to establish how staff are feeling and respond to their needs adequately and honestly (you may not have all the answers).
- Set up a group chat on social media to help all staff feel included. Start conversations about topics outside of school – such as holidays, TV programs and weekend plans.
- Support social events. Current circumstances have proven that we don't need to be together in person to feel connected. Try hosting a virtual staff coffee morning, murder mystery or pub night on Zoom.

Examples:

- ✓ The Reach Free School held open communication between staff and SLT and Q&A to alleviate any staff anxieties.
- ✓ To help address any concerns or anxieties, Hailey Hall School sent out a wellbeing questionnaires to all staff. This provided opportunities for all members of the team to open a dialogue about mental health, voice any concerns, talk through anxieties and make suggestions on how staff wellbeing can be maintained.
- ✓ Hitchin Girls' School also kept up social connections amongst staff and hosted a virtual quiz night.
- ✓ Brookland Junior School instigated a 'staff drop in' to provide space for staff to talk about their own wellbeing but not about school related issues.

THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

Looking at new, innovative ways of doing things is beneficial to students and staff. There are plenty of small changes schools can make to lessons, assemblies and form time, to ensure that mental wellbeing is at the forefront.

How can you do it?

- Plan lessons to be delivered outside where possible. Creating a change of scenery, allowing students to have fresh air encourages them to take notice of their surroundings leading to more positive mental health and increased engagement. Even better, incorporate some physical exercises into lessons to encourage being active – this also helps boost wellbeing and forces physiological change which shifts a state of mind/ emotional state.
- Integrate more creativity into lessons and allow time for fun and engaging activities. Making something fun makes learning easier and promotes positive mental wellbeing.

Examples:

- ✓ Little Green Junior School took inspiration from David Attenborough's 'Learning Through Landscapes' and held classes outside. Visit the [webpage](#) for free resources, such as outdoor lesson plans and learning ideas.
- ✓ Southfield School recorded and uploaded a video of a [class assembly](#) to YouTube that pupils could watch and engage with at home.

SUPPORTING PARENTS AND CARERS

As well as staff and students, it is also important that parents feel like they are being listened to and supported throughout the current uncertainty. As previously mentioned, communication is paramount to help manage anxieties, and parents are not exempt from this.

How can you do it?

- Keep in contact. Having one-to-one phone calls or hosting group coffee mornings (or online), provides platforms for parents and carers to come together to discuss any concerns and share ideas to support one another.
- Start an online blog which lists useful websites and resources that parents and carers can visit over the summer.
- Tap into the wealth of online resources to maintain contact, such as ClassDoJo and Google Classroom. These are effective, easy ways to contact parents and carers directly, as well as providing a forum to publish messages, such as back-to-school information.

Examples:

- ✓ Hockerill Anglo-European College in Bishop's Stortford demonstrated the benefits of keeping in contact with parents. A parent of one of the pupils applauded how the Head of Year reached out to enquire about the students' mental health and wellbeing at the start of lockdown, as well as touching base periodically to provide updates on the students' performance.
- ✓ Keeping in regular contact with parents and carers, either over the phone, email or via newsletters, will help them feel included and manage what to expect when students return to school.
- ✓ Haywood Grove asked families and pupils what would make them feel ok going back to school practicing active listening and responding to families' needs.

MAKE TIME FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

Advocating the importance of wellbeing amongst students and staff is positive and designating time throughout the school day to put this into practice will enhance this work. There are simple steps which can encourage students to get in touch and reflect on their feelings to increase their self-awareness of their mental wellbeing which supports feeling more in control.

How can you do it?

- Bring in 'Check In/Check Out' periods at the beginning and end of each day, asking how students are feeling as they come into school, and asking what they enjoyed about the day, and what they are looking forward to tomorrow as they leave.
- Ask pupils to think about what has helped them to remain calm and positive during times of stress or worry (e.g. things to help calm, like reading or art). Allow time for these activities throughout the school day/week. (Educational Psychology Service, Hertfordshire County Council, May 2020).
- Be vocal about mental health. Let students know that school is a safe space, where they can be open about any emotions they are experiencing.

Examples:

- ✓ Haileybury Turnford School has shown their dedication to promoting and maintaining mental wellbeing, which was the focus of their Mental Health Awareness Week in May. Students and staff completed 'Mental Health Challenges' and contributed to their school newsletter, demonstrating how they have been using each of the Five Ways to Wellbeing. These are: Connect, Be Active, Take Notice, Give and Learn. A new Hertfordshire Five Ways to Wellbeing toolkit has been developed for you to use: <https://www.justtalkherts.org/professionals/toolkits/five-ways-to-wellbeing.aspx>
- ✓ By encouraging students to take small steps to boost their wellbeing; children and young people are learning new strategies on how to look after their mental health.

IMPLEMENTING A WHOLE SCHOOL APPROACH TO MENTAL HEALTH AND EMOTIONAL WELLBEING

A whole school approach ethos considers all aspects of the school to increase and develop appropriate levels of support around emotional wellbeing for the whole staff community including pupils, staff and parents. It ensures that all school staff are consistent in their approach in developing resilience and practicing reflective practice principles to improve children, staff and parents emotional wellbeing.

How can you do it?

- In Hertfordshire, the Healthy Young Minds in Herts Emotional Wellbeing Kitemark accreditation process and supporting documents have been created to help schools navigate through 11 areas which will support a whole school approach. So far ten settings (including an ESC and a college) have already been awarded the kitemark.

Examples: (A log in to the Healthy Young Minds in Herts website is required to access some of these pages)

- ✓ The Head Teacher and Business Manager at Garden City Academy produced this [Wellbeing Charter](#) to support their staff wellbeing and workload across all areas of school life.
- ✓ Stevenage ESC shared their [Positive Emotional Wellbeing and Mental Health Policy](#) as part of their successful Kitemark accreditation submission.
- ✓ [Laurance Haines Mental Health Lead](#) shared the changes the school have made to embed a whole school approach.
- ✓ The Hertfordshire & Essex High School and Science College shared their [Emotional and Mental Wellbeing Policy](#) to demonstrate their strong leadership around supporting positive mental health in their setting.

Whether you are a young person, parent, carer or professional, or more information on looking after your mental health during COVID and the 'Hertfordshire Five Ways to Wellbeing', visit www.justtalkherts.org