

Creating a mentally healthy culture in your school

A community-wide approach to creating a mentally healthy culture for all.

Hannah Woods

Head of Service: Schools and Colleges Early Support Service, Schools Division, Anna Freud



Anna Freud
building the mental
wellbeing of the
next generation

Who we are

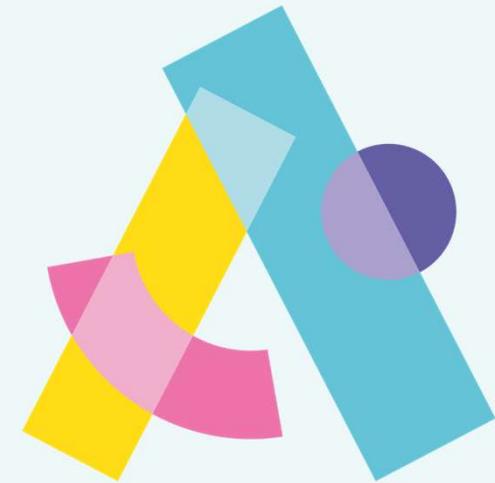
We are a **world leading** children's mental health charity, pioneering mental health care and support for children, young people, and their families for over 70 years.

Our mission is to close the gap in wellbeing and mental health by advancing, translating, delivering and sharing the best science and practice with everyone who impacts the lives of children and families.

We recognise that discrimination and inequality undermine the opportunity for every child to thrive. We aim to be ambitious in driving change in ourselves and supporting change in those we work with, towards a more equitable society.

annafreud.org/about/

annafreud.org/about/diversity/



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Looking after ourselves

The focus of our workshop is the wellbeing of children, young people, families and school staff.

Through our own lens of experience, we will relate and connect to the content in different ways, either personally, professionally or both.

It is important that you participate in a way that allows you to feel safe and comfortable.

Step away or take a break if you need to. Reach out if you need support or would like to skip an activity.

Please be respectful of differing opinions and experiences. **Share with care.**



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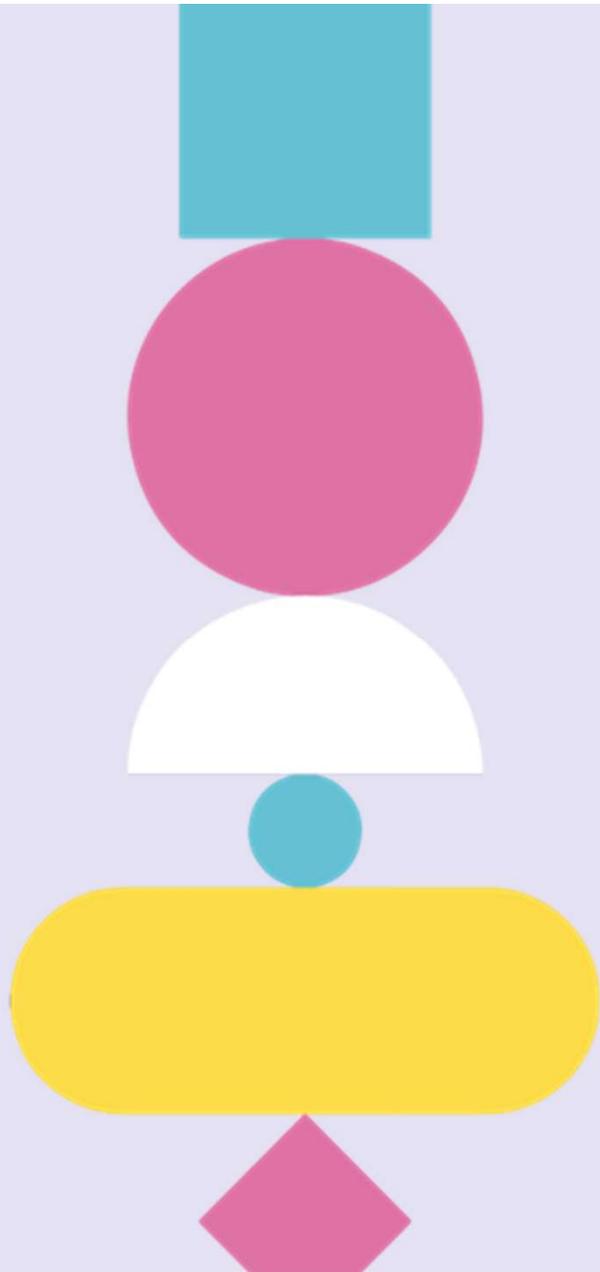
Learning outcomes

By the end of the workshop, you will be able to...

- lead a whole-school approach to mental health and wellbeing
- review your current school culture and ethos
- understand the importance of supporting staff wellbeing as part of a holistic strategy
- adopt a relational approach as part of trauma-informed practice
- embed strategies to enhance connectedness and belonging within your school community.



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Leading a whole school approach

Understanding the role of a leader in creating an environment and culture that promotes wellbeing.



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What is a whole-school or college approach?



Evidence-base



A whole-school approach involves all parts of the school working together and being committed. It needs partnership working between senior leaders, teachers and all school staff, as well as parents, carers and the wider community.

Public Health England. Promoting children and young people's emotional health and wellbeing: A whole school and college approach. London: Public Health England; 2015.



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5 Steps to mental health and wellbeing framework: A whole-school or college approach



<https://www.annafreud.org/resources/schools-and-colleges/5-steps/>



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5 steps and audit tool with action plan

- 1 Leading change
- 2 Working together
- 3 Understanding need
- 4 Promoting wellbeing
- 5 Supporting staff

Conduct a confidential annual staff wellbeing survey

Status

Working towards

Notes

154 /2500 characters

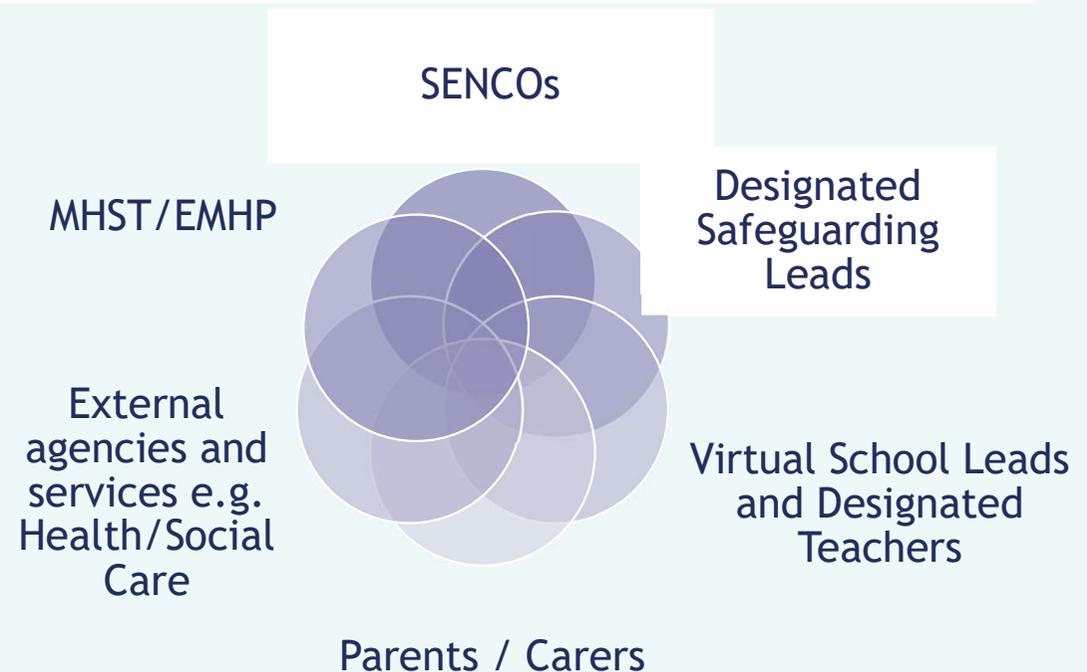
Staff survey has been conducted, the survey had a low response rate, the mental health action group will be meeting in two weeks to consider

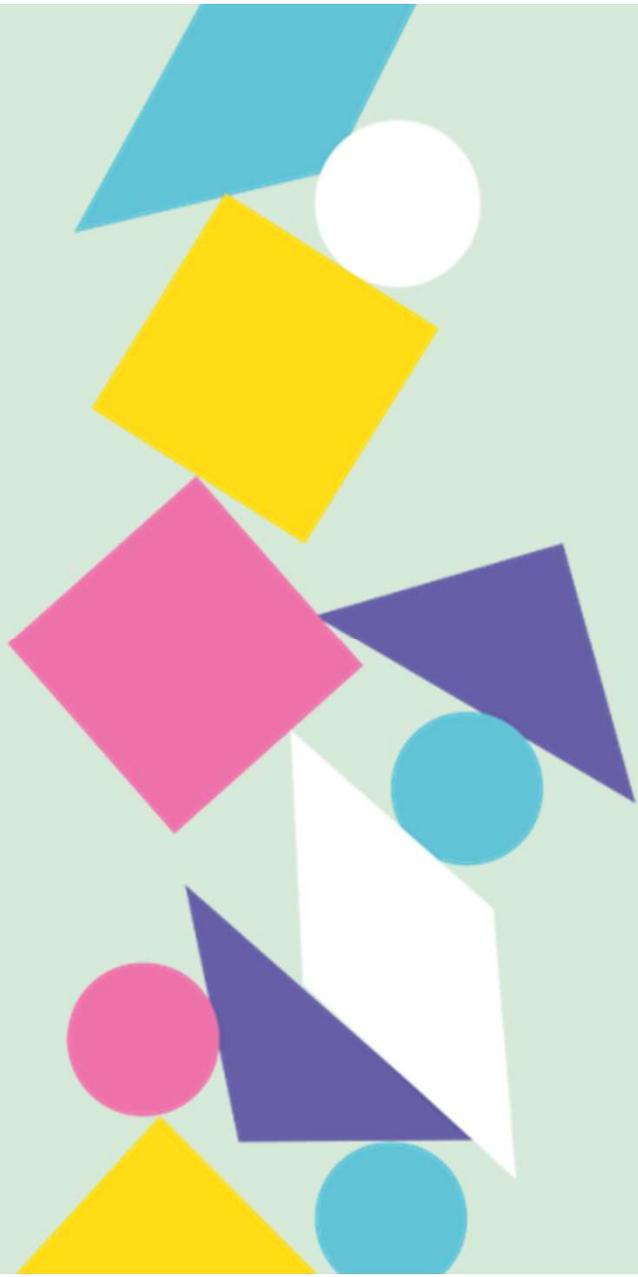
The value of teamwork in your whole-school or college approach

A whole-school or college approach means encouraging participation from the wider school-community.

When preparing for change, you might want to consider the following:

1. How can I involve governors, pupils, parents/carers and other staff members in the process?
2. How can I best work with the leadership team?
3. What do we already have in place to support this engagement?





Leading change

Your role as a leader in creating an ethos and culture in which mental health and wellbeing are at the heart.



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Culture and ethos

As a school leader it is important to cultivate:

- ✓ A safe and open climate, that normalises talking about mental health.
- ✓ A culture where the relationship between student and staff is seen as critical in fostering a sense of belonging.
- ✓ Working relationships with SEMH partners in the community.
- ✓ Policies and structures that work together to support mental health and wellbeing.
- ✓ A values-based approach across the school community.



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Reflection:

Without an honest reflection of your school culture, it's hard to make changes on a strategic level.

What aspects of your school or college culture impact on the mental health and wellbeing of students, staff, parents and carers?



Skills for shifting culture



Build safety: Investing energy and demonstrating you value individuals. Shifting from fear to belonging establishes safety.



Share vulnerability: Leaders play a key role by admitting mistakes first, fostering honesty and creating a safe and open team environment.



Establish purpose: Connecting the present to a meaningful future. Effective leaders reinforce organisational purpose by defining, ranking, and consistently communicating priorities.



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Good practice

Raising the profile of mental health and wellbeing.

Have a name wellbeing school governor.

Create a mental health and wellbeing policy and embed mental health and wellbeing within school development plans.

Ensure staff have extensive local knowledge of wellbeing services and refer for further support when/if appropriate.

Develop specialist support for students, staff, and families who may need a different approach.

Engage in and provide continuing professional development (CPD).



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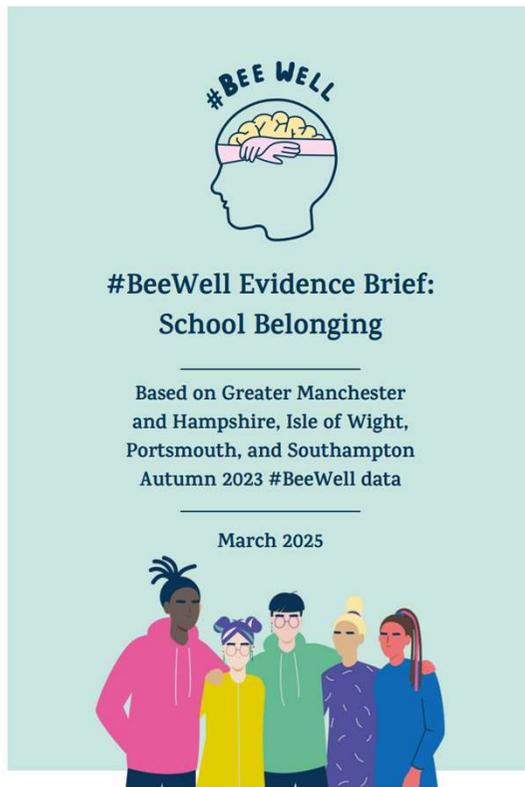
Belonging and connectedness

Embed strategies to enhance connectedness and belonging within your school community.



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School belonging



- Staff wellbeing and connectedness
- Practical ideas to impact the factors that are most strongly associated with students' experiences of belonging
- Different groups belonging differently

The power of connection

Supervision

- Formalised and organised
- Reflective space
- Offered by a trained clinician
- OR peer supervision

Debrief and detach

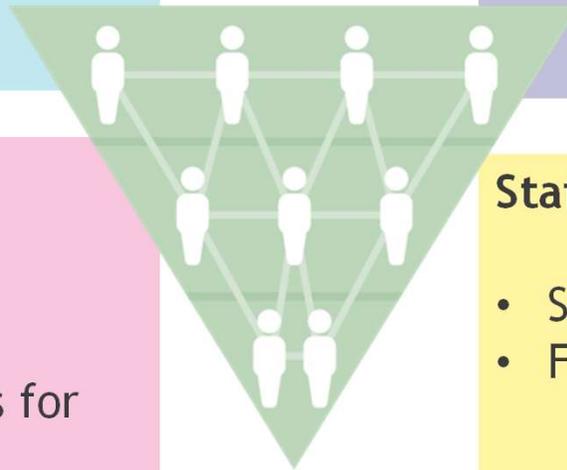
- Informal
- Provided by peers or line-mangers

Staff rooms

- Attractive and purposeful
- Part of everyday practice
- Different social opportunities for different people

Staff voice

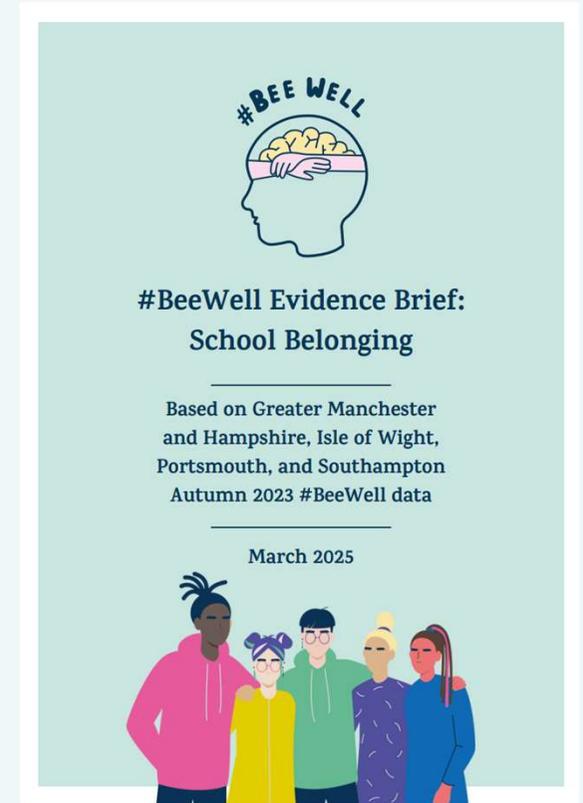
- Surveys
- Forums and discussions



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Factors most strongly associated with belonging

- Relationships with staff
- Happiness with attainment
- Bullying



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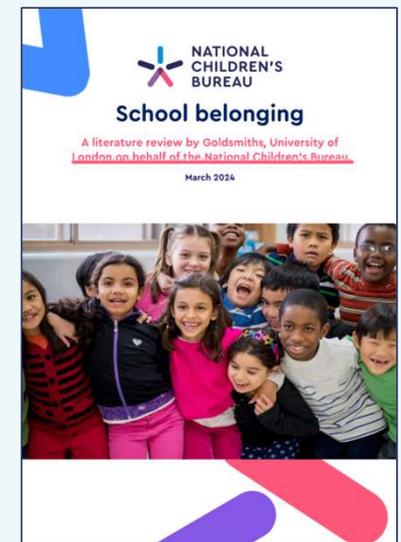
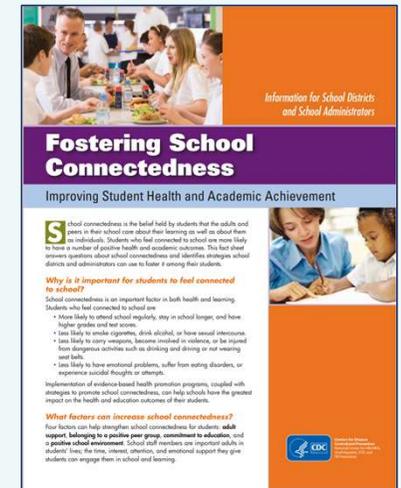
Primary to secondary transition

- Engaging students, staff, parents and carers in understanding wellbeing and in decision making.
- Collectively agreeing and sharing practices and policies.
- Every student has at least one supportive adult at school.
- Small communities e.g. form groups, lunch or after school clubs.
- Curriculum continuity and academic support.
- Provide professional development and support for teachers and other school staff.

[CDC, 2009, School connectedness, Atlanta, GA, US](#)

[NCB School Belonging - A Literature Review 2024.pdf](#)

[EEF Blog: Supporting pupils through transitions - a trio of... | EEF](#)



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Happiness with attainment

What works:

- Choice, self-direction, autonomy
- Feeling competent - *I have the skills I need to pursue the paths I choose*
- Acknowledgement of feelings

- How do we talk about attainment?
- How do we give value to learning and achievements?
- How are students grouped?
- How does the curriculum offer opportunities for choice and autonomy?
- What opportunities for discussion of feelings?

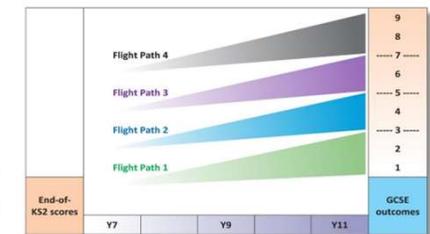
Date: / /

You are working at:

Your target is:

Your School's Name Here

The Flight Paths give an indication of the student's likely progression across the next five years (Year 7 – Year 11) towards a GCSE grade in each subject. The likely progression is given below (please note that the Government have also changed GCSE grades; students will now receive a numbered grade, 9 being the highest grade down to 1 the lowest pass):



[Ryan, R and Deci, E, 2000, Self-Determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation, Social Development, and Well-Being](#)

Bullying

- Developing a shared understanding of what bullying is among the school community
- Promoting a respectful ethos within school and celebrating all differences and challenging all forms of discrimination,
- Prioritising restorative conversations to repair relationships

[Anti-bullying action: top tips for schools - #BeeWell](#)

[NCB Anti-bullying alliance](#)

Anti-racism and mental health in schools e-learning

A free online course tailored for education professionals, focused on understanding and addressing the impact of racism on mental health in schools.

[Read more →](#)

Peer Support for Children and Young People's Mental Health

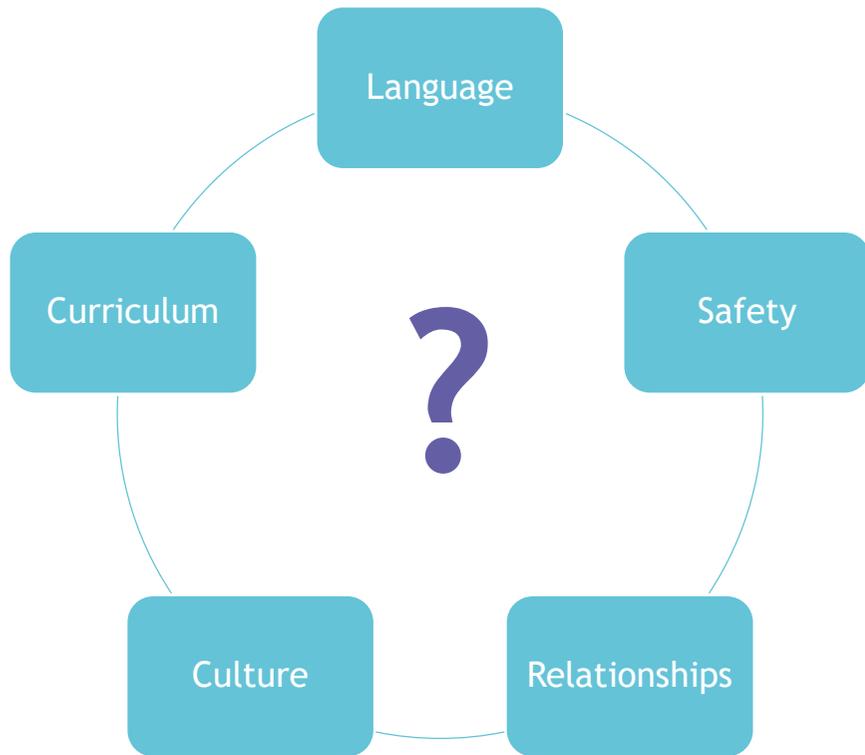
Join our course and learn how to train the young people in your school or setting to become confident, safe and effective peer supporters.

[Read more →](#)



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Different groups belonging differently



Students with SEN

Girls

Students from minoritised groups

Older students

Students who receive FSM



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School connectedness



‘the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included and supported by others in the school social environment’

Goodenow, C. (1993). The Psychological Sense of School Membership among adolescents: Scale development and educational correlates. *Psychology in the Schools*, 30, 79-90.



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School connectedness

- Affective dimensions (e.g. students' feelings about school, teachers and their peers)
- Behavioural dimensions (e.g. observable actions and performance including participation in school activities)
- Cognitive dimensions (e.g. students' perceptions and beliefs including their motivations and expectations relating to school)

Jimerson, S. R., Campos, E., & Greif, J. L. (2003). Toward an understanding of definitions and measures of school engagement and related terms. *The California School Psychologist*, 8, 7-27.



School connectedness - outcomes

- Positive links with academic motivation and achievement.
- Emotional and physical health.
- Negative associations with risk taking behavior including later in adolescence.
- Delayed initiation of cigarette smoking, alcohol and marijuana use, delinquency, and violent behavior one year later.



Chapman, Buckley, Sheehan & Shochet (2013), School-based programs for increasing connectedness and reducing risk behavior: A systematic review. *Educational Psychology Review*, 25(1), pp. 95-114.



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School connectedness - influencing factors

School size

- Small



Disciplinary policies and climate

- Young people feel that they have some influence over institutional policies
- Consistent application by school staff of collectively agreed upon disciplinary policies

Relationships

- Teacher managed the class in a controlled and positive way
- Supportive and positive student-adult relationships
- High expectations from teachers and parents for school performance



School connectedness and epistemic trust

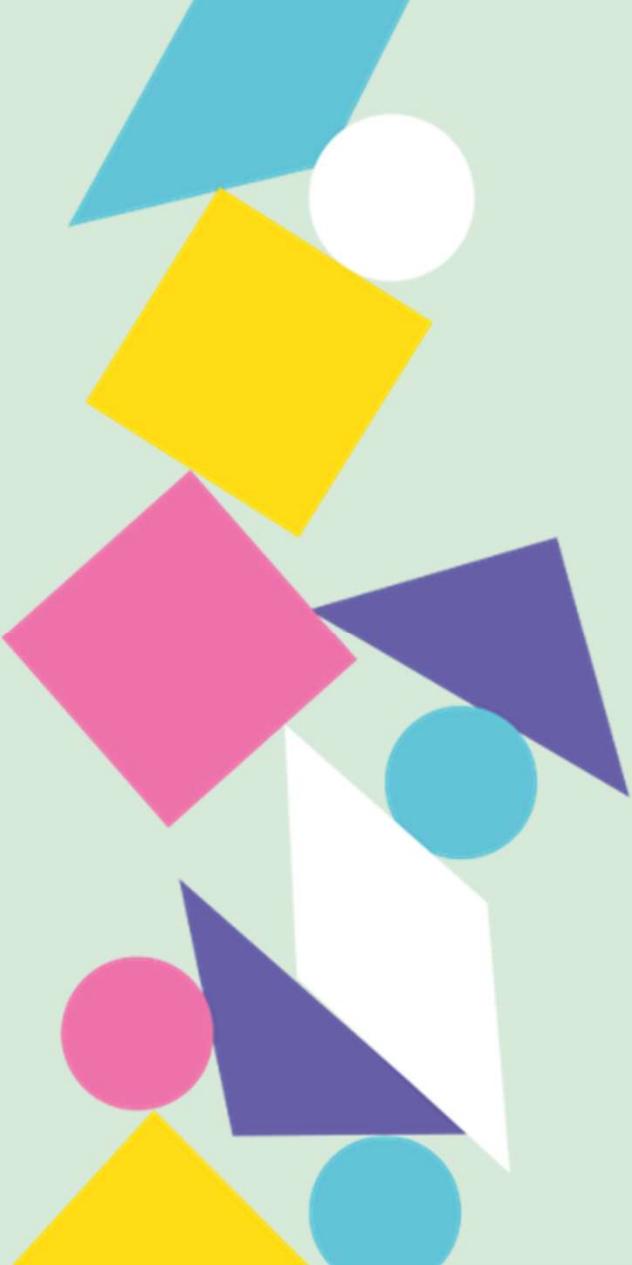
“The ability of a child to learn from a teacher depends on that child trusting the teacher – just the same way that a child trusts their parents or other adults. When we trust someone, we open our minds to them, open our ability to learn.”

“What actually turns out from decades of research in education is that children learn best from teachers who have an accurate and individual understanding of them as a person, as a child.”

- Professor Peter Fonagy



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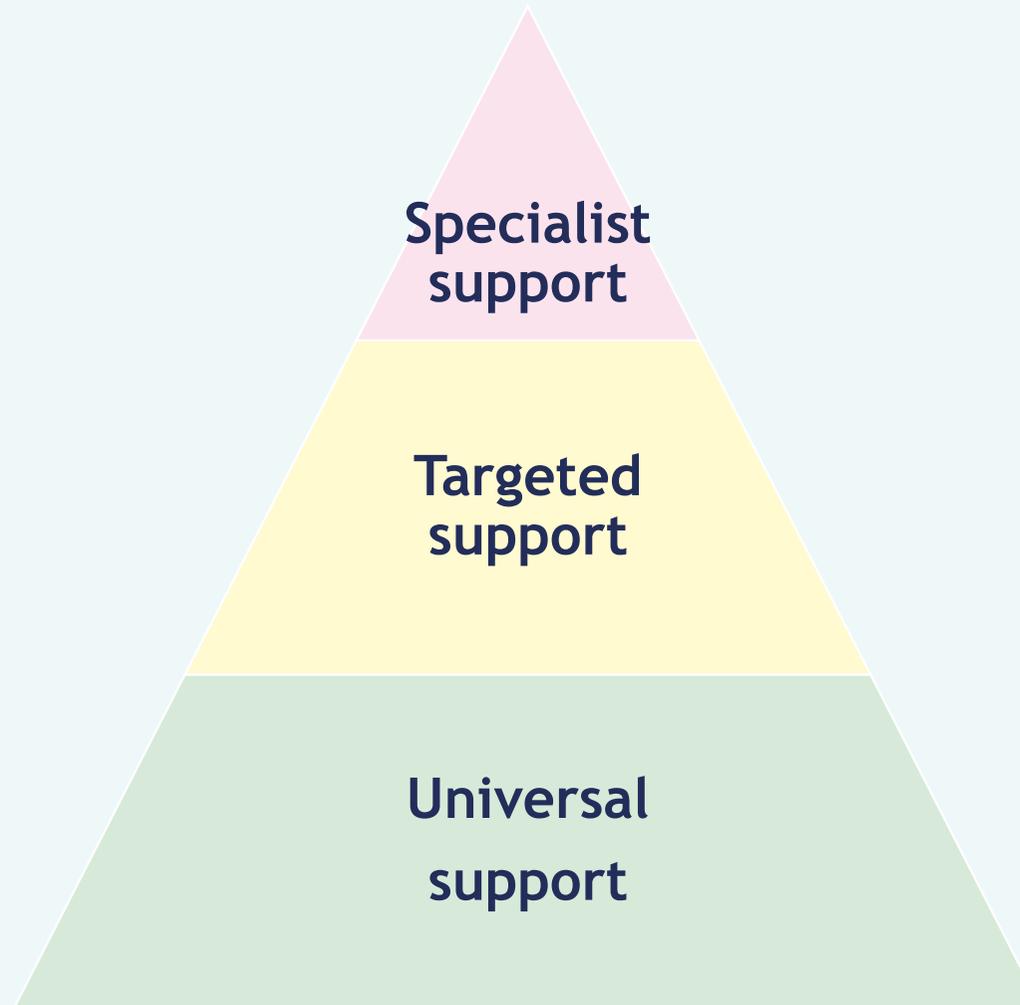
How do we support staff wellbeing?

Universal, targeted and specialist interventions to promote staff wellbeing through a whole-school approach.



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A graduated approach to supporting staff



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Universal support:

Supporting the mental health and wellbeing of all staff

Have **dedicated staff rooms and comfortable spaces** for taking time out.

Hold **drop-in sessions for staff** to share any concerns.

Develop and put into practice a **staff wellbeing policy**.

Create a **staff wellbeing team** and support them to offer **regular wellbeing and social events**.

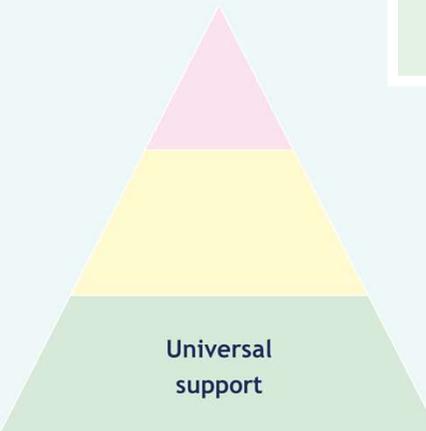
Educate staff about child and family mental health.

Run annual or bi-annual **wellbeing surveys** to monitor wellbeing.

Provide **feedback boxes** (physical or virtual) where staff can **(anonymously)** share ideas for improvement of school/FE college ethos and model good working practices.

Opportunities for **staff CPD**.

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Universal support

Measuring mental health and wellbeing



Evidence-base



Measuring staff wellbeing

Measuring staff wellbeing

Our WMfS staff survey helps schools to understand the wellbeing of their staff and how they feel about the support systems in schools as well as their knowledge of mental health and wellbeing and confidence to support pupils.



Support for schools

Support for schools

Our team provides both free resources and tailored support to individual schools and groups of schools to help them to measure and understand mental health and wellbeing.



Tailored support for individual schools and groups of schools



Resources to support measuring wellbeing



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More from Anna Freud



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[Wellbeing measurement for schools and colleges](#)
measuringwellbeing@annafreud.org

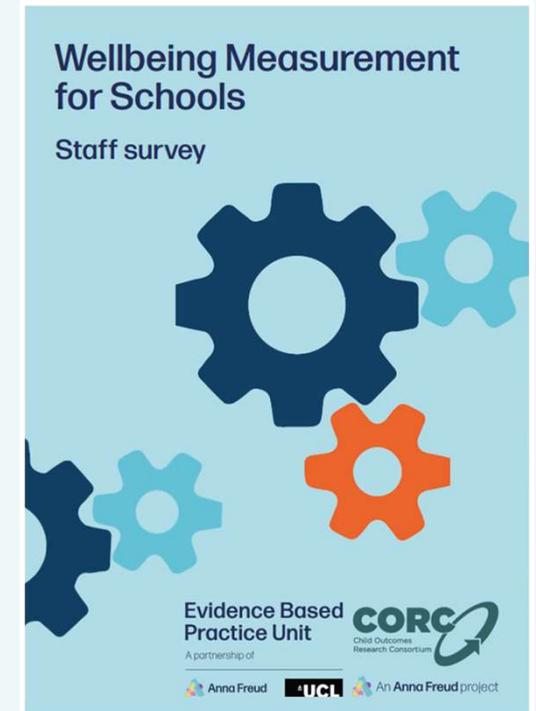
Universal: How do we measure staff wellbeing?

1. The **free** Wellbeing Measurement for Schools online staff survey uses validated tools to **understand how staff are feeling.**

2. It takes about 15 minutes to complete and asks staff questions about their **ability and capacity to support the children and young people in their school.**

3. It also explores **aspects of school culture** that might be affecting staff wellbeing.

4. The staff survey questions can be copied and pasted into your own format e.g. an online anonymous form and sent to staff.



[Measure and monitor staff wellbeing](#)

[CORC for Schools membership](#)

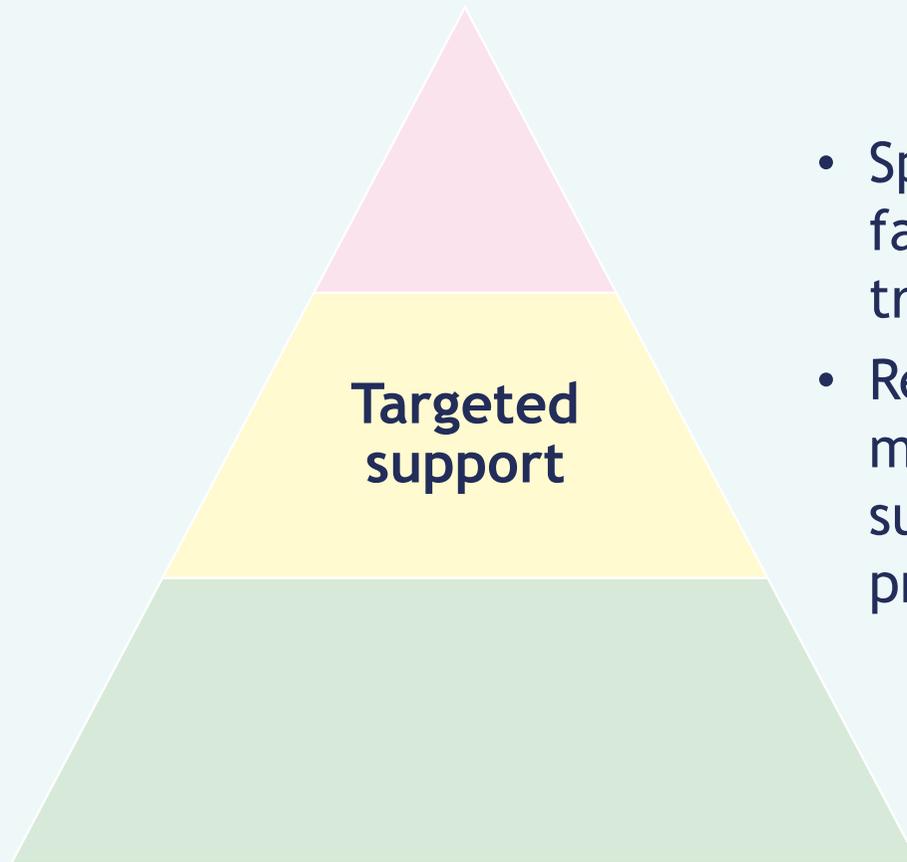
[Become a free CORC network subscriber](#)



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Targeted:

How do we support the needs of specific staff members



- Spotting the signs: compassion fatigue, burnout and secondary trauma.
- Responding to individual staff mental health needs: supervision and reflective practise.



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Awareness of potential risks

It is important to **recognise additional pressures** staff may be facing and offer various avenues of support.

Some staff may be more at risk of indirectly experiencing the emotional distress of others, which can have a cumulative effect on own wellbeing, leading to...

- **Compassion fatigue**
- **Burnout**
- **Secondary trauma**

<https://www.educationsupport.org.uk/resources/for-individuals/videos/secondary-trauma/>



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Evidence-base

What is secondary trauma?

“... the stress caused by helping or wanting to help a traumatised or suffering person. Secondary trauma symptoms are similar to those experienced by the helped person.”

(Figley, 1995)



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What are the signs of secondary trauma?

Feeling

- Overwhelmed.
- Useless and unskilled.
- Jumpy or on edge; like the world is no longer safe.
- Numb or disconnected.
- Helplessness, anger or despair.

Experiencing

- Mental pictures or intrusive thoughts relating to the event(s).
- Disturbed sleep or niggling physical complaints.
- Changes to working, eating or drinking habits.
- Having no energy for self or for others.



Targeted:

Responding to an individual's mental health needs

Supervision

Training around
mental health

Regular mandatory wellbeing
check-in meetings using a
personal or peer support
model



Targeted
support



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Specialist support:

Increasing support to an individual's mental health needs



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Taking responsibility

Learning to say NO!

Take time for yourself.

Providing a time out or opportunity to process negative thoughts and experiences.

Have a 'go to' person or people to support.

Talk about the experience.

Being aware of your personal limitations.

Try to learn new coping strategies that work for you.

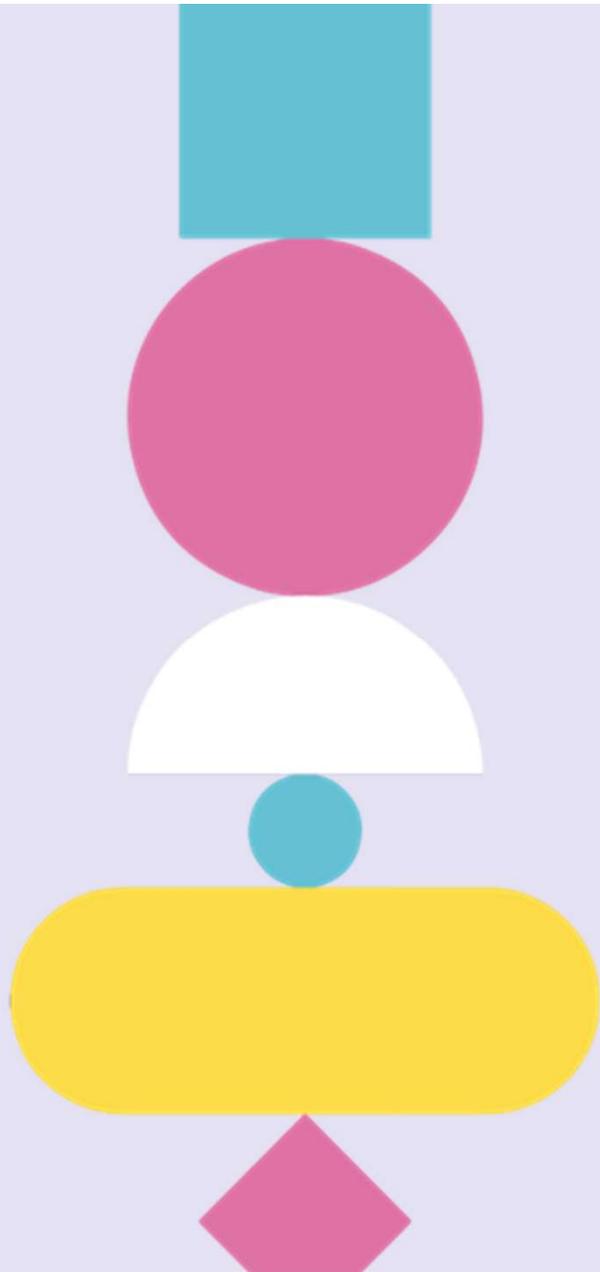
Have a plan for personal goals/interests or hobbies not education related.

Learning how to feel ok with change.

Being flexible and surrendering to things outside your control.



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Relational approaches for supporting children and young people

Definitions and why does it
work?



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What do we mean by a relational approach?

A relational approach puts **relationships** at the heart of every aspect of school life, in order to create an environment where everyone feels they **belong**, are **safe**, **cared for** and **valued**.

This approach emphasises **connection** through interactions and communications that are **respectful**, **honest**, **compassionate** and **inclusive**.

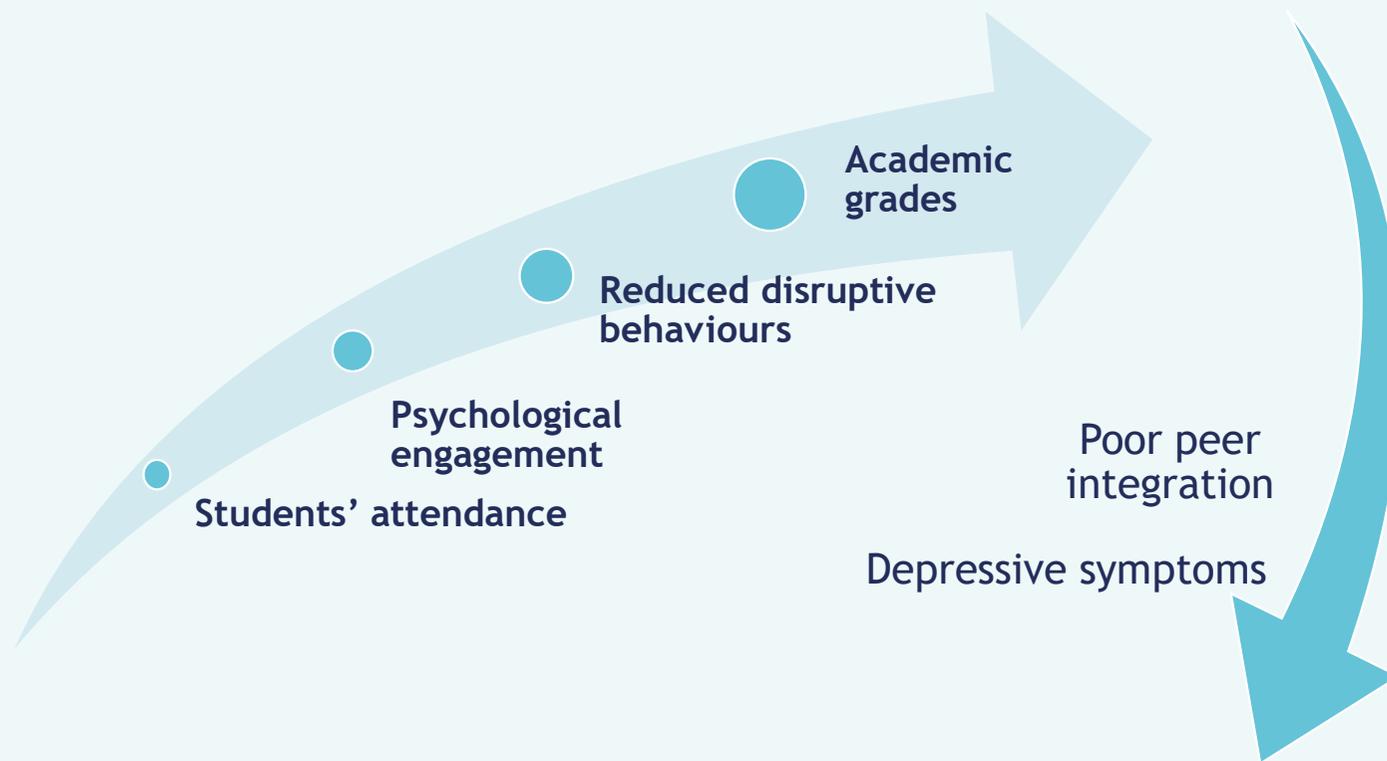
“Ensure that the school has a culture and ethos that reinforces relational approaches and recognises the importance of psychological safety. Approach behaviour as a means of communication.” NICE,

<https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng223>



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Why are relationships and belonging so important to the work of schools?



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Why does it work?



Understanding the behaviour of children / young people, enabling adults to identify what is going on.

The pupils know, trust, feel safe and secure with the adults around them.

There are clear boundaries, and the children / young people know what to expect.

A whole-school relational approach means that children develop positive relationships with many adults, helping them to feel safe all the time.

A whole-school approach also means that staff feel safe too. A relational approach means that staff feel valued, supported and have clear boundaries.



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Behaviour is communication

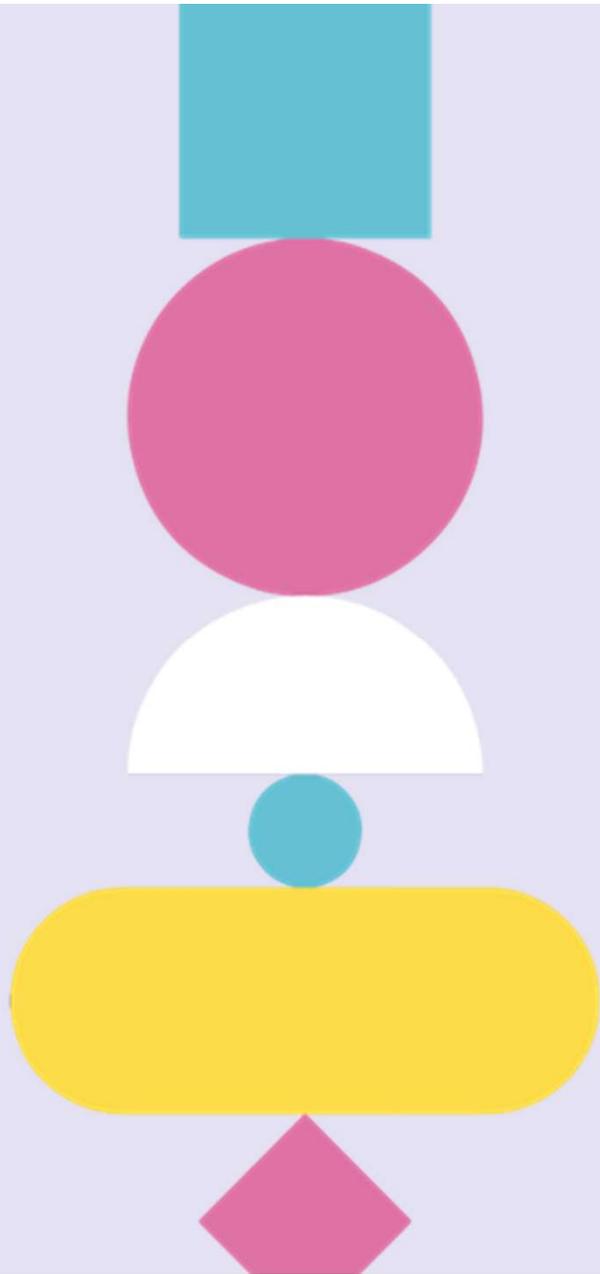
Persistently behaving in a challenging way is often how children and young people communicate that something is wrong - or is a sign that they may be in distress.

The 'bad' behaviour iceberg reminds us to remain curious about behaviour that challenges us.....

Image: Dr Juliet Young



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Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and trauma

Understanding the impact of early life adversities and supporting those affected.



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Trauma

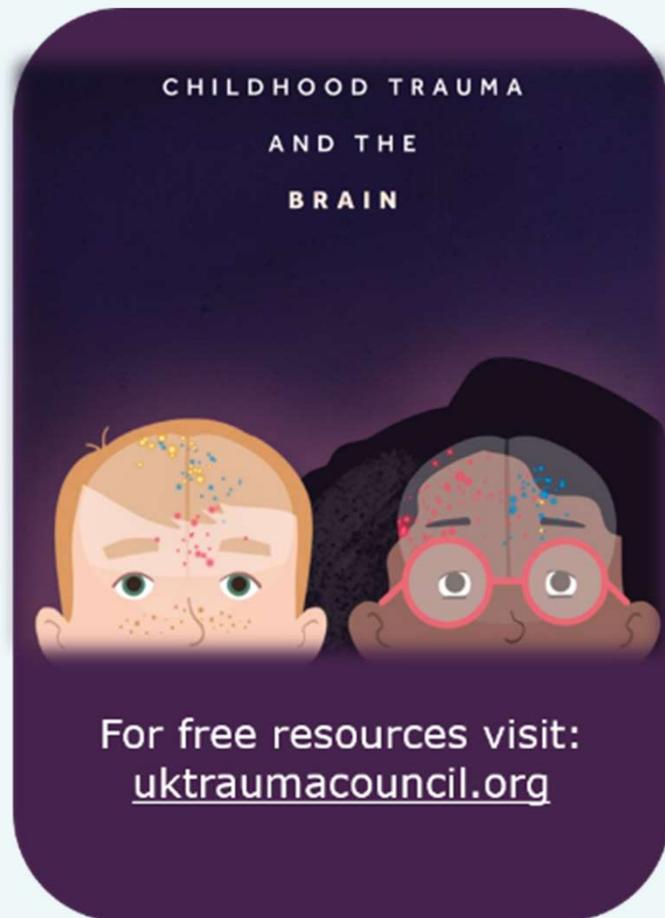


Evidence-base

“Trauma refers to the way that some distressing events are so extreme or intense that they overwhelm a person’s ability to cope, resulting in lasting negative impact.”



ACEs and trauma: What's the impact?



- Exposure to early adversities can impact a child's emotional, psychological, social, and physical development.
- Trauma can have devastating consequences, and is associated with adaptations in brain structure impacting cognitive, emotional and social development.
- This is because the brain adapts to early adverse environments and learns how to respond.
- 1 in 5 children have experienced trauma.



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Identifying the signs of trauma

1

Physical symptoms:
Sleep issues, headaches, stomach aches, regression

2

Cognitive and emotional signs:
Intrusive thoughts, poor concentration, irritability

3

Mood and behaviour:
Anxiety, low mood, emotional dysregulation

4

Self-perception:
Low self-esteem, feelings of shame, guilt, or worthlessness

5

Coping and relationships:
Risky behaviours, difficulty with relationships



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The impact of trauma on the brain

Trauma can lead to enduring changes in how the brain responds to perceived danger, even when the child is in a relatively safe environment like school:

Hypervigilant

more reactive to threat cues and more likely to respond to them with aggression.

Less responsive to reward

which can mean they are harder to motivate.

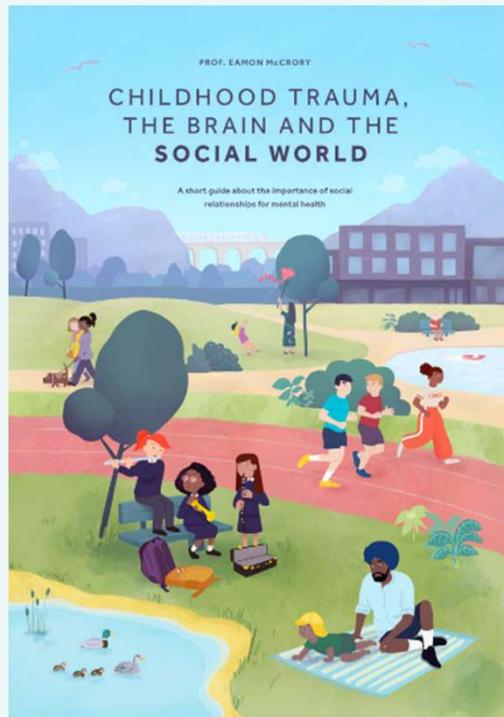
Poorer at recalling past memories

which can make social problem-solving difficult.



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The social impact of trauma



Social Thinning

Experiencing trauma can disrupt the development of healthy and trusting relationships between children and young people, and the peers and adults in their life.

They have fewer social contacts and fewer friends their age.

They report less social support from family and friends.

As adults they are more likely to experience loneliness and social isolation.



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The power of neuroplasticity

The brain's capacity for growth is phenomenal!

Neuroplasticity is the term used to describe the brain's ability to change and adapt.

Research has shown us that the experience of ACEs and trauma does **NOT** have to dictate a child's future. Some children are more vulnerable and have increased risk, but negative outcomes for those who have had challenging starts in life are **NOT** inevitable.

Social experiences (in particular relationships) can alter, reorganise, or grow new neural networks and pathways. Whilst lesser used pathways are pruned away.

Adolescence, in particular is a time of incredible neural plasticity, where the brain goes through a rapid growth phase. Often called "*the second window of opportunity*" to build and establish new neural connections and prune old ones away.



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Trauma-informed practice: Supporting students who have experienced trauma

1

Focus on building trusting relationships, anticipating that this will be difficult and will take time.

2

Understand that brain adaptations may contribute to behaviour that we find challenging.

3

Reframe behaviour as “What happened to you” rather than “What’s wrong with you?”

4

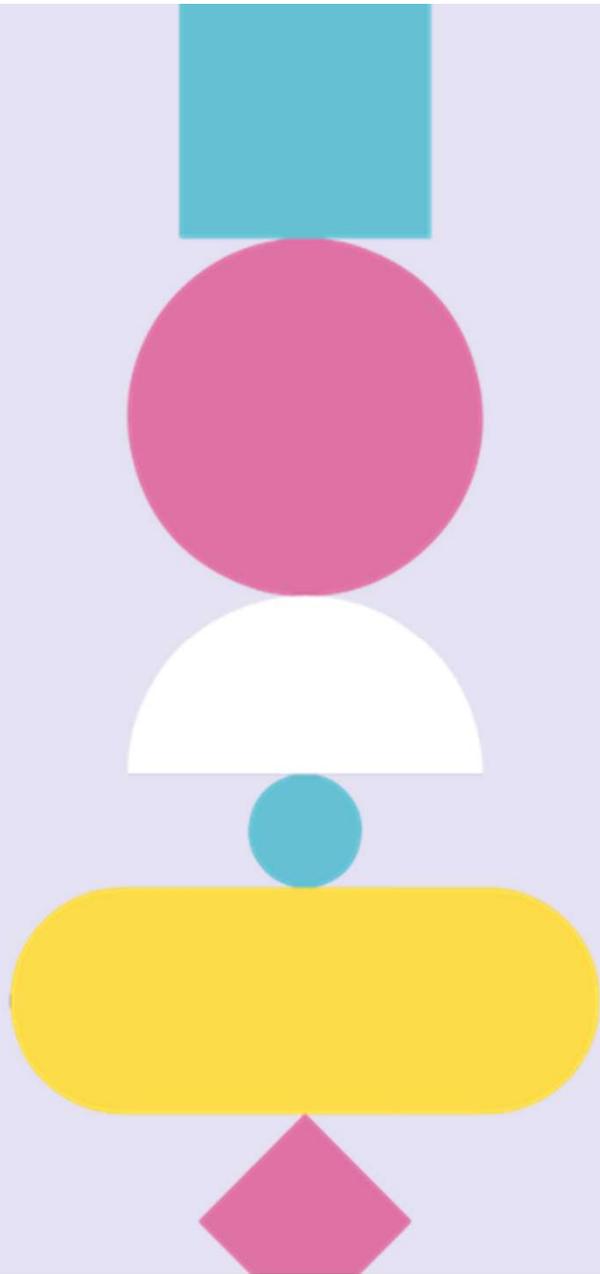
Be curious about learning about each child - everyone is an individual and will respond differently.

5

Seek to respond in a way that builds connections rather than close them down.



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Further resources



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Education support



A free helpline, financial support for short-term money worries, resources and event:

Need to talk?
You're not alone

Education Support

Call us.
We'll listen.
0800 917 4055

Free and confidential emotional support for NAHT members

An illustration of a woman with dark hair, wearing a red top and blue pants, sitting on the ground and looking up at a large, colorful rainbow.

Financial support

Our friendly and experienced team is here to help you manage short-term money worries.

Education Support

School leadership - how to **thrive** and **flourish** in complex times:

interactive masterclass
Wednesday 25th September
9.30am - 12.00pm

Maggie Farrar

Book your place

A portrait of Maggie Farrar, a woman with short blonde hair, smiling.

Resources for organisations

Wellbeing audit & tools

Wellbeing best practice

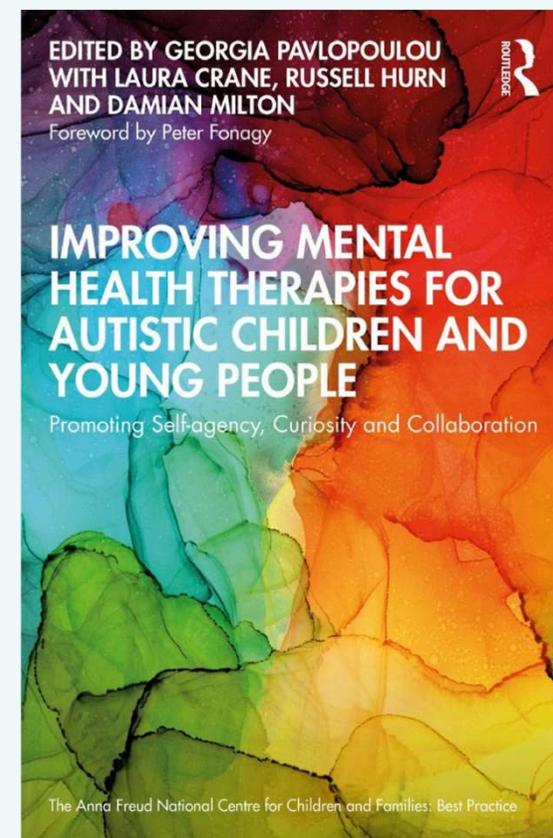
Wellbeing leadership

Staff wellbeing and connectedness

“... dedicated professionals struggling to manage their workloads and often reporting having to endure criticism and blame ... experiencing multiple stressors ... asking for support and guidance and for their voices to be heard.

For us to understand the experiences of teachers it was necessary to listen, develop a dialogue and reflect not judge. Teachers said they often felt isolated, stressed and unable to cope.”

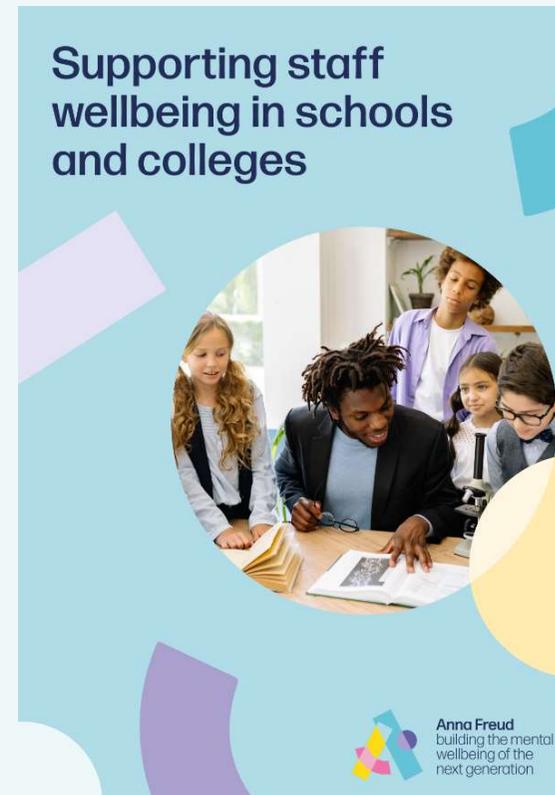
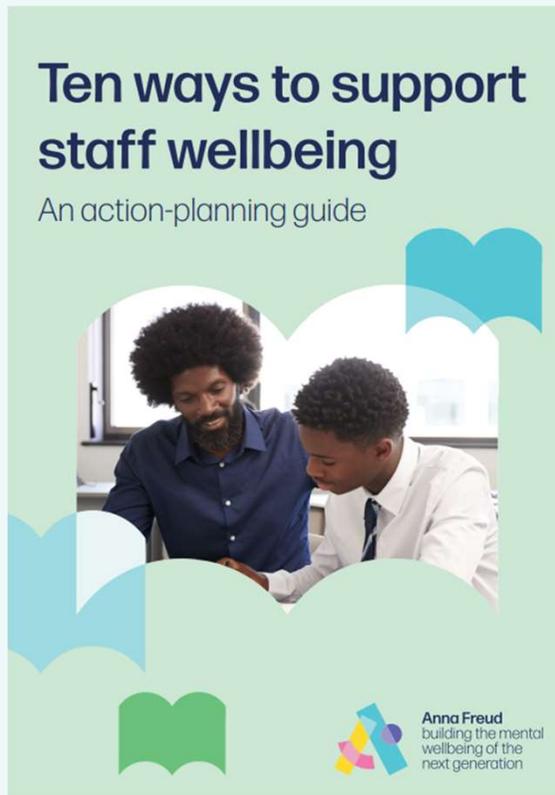
Mills, R. 2025, Working with schools: a synergy approach.



Supporting school staff wellbeing



Evidence-base



[Anna Freud- Ten ways to support school staff wellbeing](#)
[Supporting staff wellbeing in schools](#)



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Leading Change Model



Evidence-base

- Treat expansion as a new process (e.g. move from year group to whole school).
- Support and reward good practice.
- Plan for sustainability and scaling up from the outset.

- Identify change (prioritise using 5 Steps tool).
- Explore process/practice.
- Examine feasibility and fit.

- Deliver and intelligent adaption.
- Reinforce initial training with follow on support.
- Support staff/problem solve.

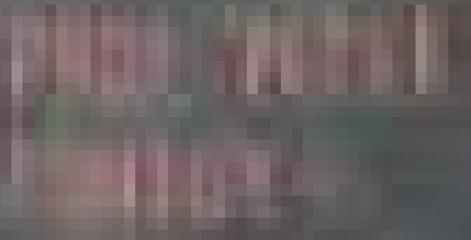
- Develop plan.
- Is it school ready?
- Practical preparation e.g. staff training.



EEF implementation model



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AND QUOTE

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THE PROPERTY OF THE COMPANY OR ITS AFFILIATES

