

SCHOOLS AND MENTAL WELL-BEING

This edition of CASENotes is chiefly concerned with the relationship between schooling and children's mental well-being.

According to a report in *The Guardian* on July 13th, the number of under-19s being treated by the NHS for mental illnesses, such as anxiety, depression and eating disorders, has reached the record total of 400,000 a year.

The charity "Young Minds" warns that this total represents an underestimate of the true scale of need as many more children who would benefit from treatment are unable to access it.

The charity's Five Recommendations to Government are on pages 3 and 4.

NHS England admits that only 25% of children with a diagnosable mental health problem ever receive treatment, largely because the number of psychiatrists who specialise in the treatment of young people is insufficient to meet demand and, indeed, has been declining. The period from 2013 to 2017 saw a 6.6% fall in the numbers of such specialists.

The government's green paper of last November proposed that tackling this growing problem should be a priority and, among its proposals, is an increased role for schools in identifying pupils with problems. However, "Young Minds", while welcoming this development, point out that what is needed is long term investment, both in schools and in the NHS.

"Schools", says Tom Madders, the charity's director, "must be given the resources and recognition they need to make children's well-being a genuine priority".

No-one looking at the current state of school finances could feel much optimism about this coming to pass and there is growing evidence that, for many young people, school is more likely to be part of the problem than of the solution.

How seriously the government really takes matters can be seen in its treatment of **Natasha Devon**, whom it



Natasha Devon, MBE

appointed in August 2015 to inquire into and report on the state of children's mental well-being.

Addressing a conference of private school heads in 2016, Devon said,

"We need to ask ourselves what is causing mental health problems in the first place.

Time and time again over recent years young people – and the people who teach them – have spoken out about how a rigorous culture of testing and academic pressure

is detrimental to their mental health.

"At one end of the scale we've got four-year-olds being tested, at the other end of the scale we've got teenagers leaving school and facing the prospect of leaving university with record amounts of debt. Anxiety is the fastest growing illness in under 21s. These things are not a coincidence."

The conference was told that though drinking, smoking, drug taking and teenage pregnancy were down among young people, rates of depression and anxiety have increased by 70% in a generation, admissions to hospital as a result of self-harm have doubled in four years and calls to the counselling service **ChildLine** about exam stress have tripled.

Devon condemned those who said the younger generation needed to toughen up to deal with the stress of life, and misused words such as 'character', 'grit' and 'resilience', as it implied having a mental illness "is somehow a defect of the individual".

Shortly after giving this address, Devon was sacked by the government.

CASE believes in a fully comprehensive, locally accountable and democratic education system.

DECLINE OF PLAY AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

A VIEW FROM AMERICA by Peter Gray

In the first part of his article Gray points out that anxiety and depression among young Americans have steadily increased throughout the last 60 years.

This rise has been in spite of unparalleled improvements in prosperity and life expectancy. Underlying this rise is an increasing sense among young people of lacking control over their own lives.

*Gray suggests that there has been a gradual shift in America from the pursuit of **intrinsic** to that of **extrinsic** goals. **Whereas intrinsic goals are set by people for themselves and have to do with personal development, extrinsic goals are culturally imposed and have to do with material rewards and the judgements of others.***

They include goals of high income, status and good looks, all things which the culture suggests are essential for happiness. Gray believes that the ease with which young people accept extrinsic goals is related to the decline in opportunities for children to experience free play and the increased time and weight given to schooling.

Gray continues:

Free play and exploration are, historically, **the means by which children learn to solve their own problems**, control their own lives, develop their own interests, and become competent in pursuit of their own interests. Play, by definition, is activity controlled and directed by the players and is directed toward intrinsic rather than extrinsic goals

By depriving children of opportunities to play on their own, away from direct adult supervision and control, we are depriving them of opportunities to learn how to take control of their own lives and increasing the odds that they will suffer from anxiety, depression, and other disorders.

During the same half-century or more that free play has declined, school and school-like activities (such as lessons out of school and adult-directed sports) have risen continuously in prominence.

Children today spend more hours per day, days per year, and years of their life in school than ever before.

More weight is given to tests and grades than ever. Outside of school, children spend more time than ever in settings in which they are directed, protected, catered to, ranked, judged, and rewarded by adults.

In all of these settings adults are in control, not children.

In school, children learn quickly that their own choices of activities and their own judgments of competence don't count; what matters are the teachers' choices and judgments.

Teachers are not entirely predictable: you may study hard and still get a poor grade because you didn't figure out exactly what the teacher wanted you to study or guess correctly what questions he or she would ask.

The goal in class, in the minds of the great majority of students, is not competence but good grades. Given a choice between really learning a subject and getting an A, the great majority of students would, without hesitation, pick the latter.

That is true at every stage in the educational process, at least up to the level of graduate school. That's not the fault of students; that's our fault. We've set it up that way.

Our system of constant testing and evaluation in school—which becomes increasingly intense with every passing year—is a system that very clearly substitutes extrinsic rewards and goals for intrinsic ones.

It is almost designed to produce anxiety and depression.

School is also a place where children have little choice about with whom they can associate. They are herded into spaces filled with other children that they did not choose, and they must spend a good portion of each school day in those spaces.

In free play, children who feel harassed or bullied can leave the situation and find another group that is more compatible; in school they cannot. Whether the bullies are other students or teachers (which is all too common), the child usually has no choice but to face those persons day after day.

A few years ago, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Jeremy Hunter conducted a study of happiness and unhappiness in [state] school students.

The lowest levels of happiness by far occurred when children were at school, and the highest levels occurred when they were out of school and conversing or playing with friends.

Time spent with parents fell in the middle of the range. Average happiness increased on weekends, but then plummeted from late Sunday afternoon through the evening, in anticipation of the coming school week.

As a society we have come to the conclusion that children must spend increasing amounts of time in the very setting where they least want to be.

The cost of that belief, as measured by the happiness and mental health of our children, is enormous.

It is time to re-think education.

Part of an article entitled 'The Decline of Play and Rise in Children's Mental Disorder' written in 2010 by Peter Gray, a distinguished American psychologist)

RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE “YOUNG MINDS” REVIEW

YoungMinds is the UK’s leading charity committed to improving the emotional well-being and mental health of children and young people at www.youngminds.org.uk/



We are calling on the Government to re-balance the education system, so that the well-being of students is considered as important as academic attainment.

To tackle the mental health crisis in our classrooms, and to transform outcomes for young people, the Government must put well-being at the very heart of the education system. We know that many schools are delivering high quality, innovative programmes to make sure their pupils are happy and healthy, but too often they face significant barriers.

Currently, schools are incentivised to focus on exams, without the capacity, time, and resource to invest in students’ social and emotional development.

These five key recommendations are necessary so that all schools can help their students build resilience, promote emotional well-being, and respond effectively to mental health problems.

These changes would mean all young people leave school with the skills they need to thrive in adulthood.

Recommendation 1: The Government must update existing legislation to enshrine well-being as a fundamental priority of schools.

Primary legislation must contain a clear duty on all schools to promote well-being and good mental health for their pupils. The Government should also develop new, detailed statutory guidance, so that schools have a blueprint for delivering this duty.

Recommendation 2: The Ofsted inspection framework should be updated to emphasise the importance of a whole-school approach to mental health and well-being in schools.

To enable the well-being of students to become an integral part of school improvement and develop-

ment plans there needs to be a much stronger emphasis on mental health and well-being within the Ofsted inspection framework.

Schools must be inspected on how effectively they promote good mental health and well-being, as well as their academic results.

The Ofsted inspection framework must include a description of how schools can create a positive learning environment, which fosters resilience, well-being and healthy development.

Recommendation 3: The Government should develop, trial and establish a well-being measurement framework by 2020.

Schools will have different baseline standards of well-being, based on demographics and other factors. Comparing schools directly may be misleading, but measurement is essential to drive improvement.

The Government should provide schools with the tools to measure their own progress in this area, and results should be published and available to pupils and parents.

Recommendation 4: Embed an understanding of well-being, mental health and resilience in all teacher training.

The framework of core content for Initial Teacher Training (ITT) is inadequate. To ensure all teachers are able to confidently support their students’ mental health and well-being needs, the ITT framework should be expanded to include a designated component on mental health awareness.

However, simply upskilling newly qualified teachers is not the whole answer and will lead to further inconsistencies in the provision of well-being.

All teachers should have a fundamental understanding of mental health and well-being and this needs to be reflected in mandatory Continuing Professional Development such as INSET days.

CASE MEETINGS

Our 2018 Annual General Meeting will be as usual on Saturday 10th November.

At that meeting, we will be looking to appoint an NEC Member to act as Membership Secretary to oversee the new arrangements that need to be put in place. New NEC members will be welcome.

For the following year, the NEC has provisionally agreed to move the date to early summer, probably around 18th May 2019. The current NEC intends to bring forward proposals for the meeting on 10th November.

A PRIMARY HEAD'S VIEW

Is testing of 10 and 11 year olds necessary?

It could be said that it's preparing them for the future but all I can see is unnecessary stress and the mental health of young people at crisis point.

My current school has one of the highest rates of deprivation in the country and I have seen for the first time how adverse childhood experiences affect a child's mental health.

As a Head teacher I am judged on my school's performance. My teachers and I spend a lot of time getting children into school. Once they are in school we are given the task of teaching them about 'complex sentences'.

The children in question have complex lives, are unsure of where their next meal is coming from. Is their mum-my going to have a black eye in the morning? Or is that the mould on the wall in their bedroom will cause them to stay up all night coughing? Complex sentences are the last thing they want to learn: rather than spend the day worrying about complex sentences, they will spend it worrying about their complex lives.

On top of this anxiety there is pressure to do well in their SATs, so that the school can be judged, as well as the teachers and children.

As a Headteacher, I judge it a success if the child has completed the year in one piece.

- Success is when our intervention about their well-being has allowed them to talk to someone who cares and believes that their worries are real.
- Success is allowing my outreach worker to deliver a food parcel so that a family of four can eat.
- Success is about the individual child not the SATs test.

MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS IN SCHOOLS PUBLIC MEETING AT HoC

CASE believes that there is a mental health crisis in schools that needs to be urgently addressed and we have convened a meeting at **6.00pm on**

Monday 10th September at the House of Commons in Committee Room 9 to discuss it.

The following speakers have been invited:-

- Emma Murray, Headteacher of Primary School in Tottenham
- Madeleine Holt, Parent Campaigner
- Naomi Burgess, Educational Psychologist (children)
- Max Coates, Education Psychologist (teachers)

Book your free ticket at

www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/mental-health-crisis-in-schools-tickets-47948909479?aff=ebdssbdestsearch

Who We Are

Campaign for State Education

www.campaignforstateeducation.org.uk

Email:

contact@campaignforstateeducation.org.uk

President: Joan Sallis, OBE

Chair: Melian Mansfield, MBE

Vice Chair: Peter Thomson

Secretary: Keith Lichman

Treasurer: Paul Martin

Membership

To join CASE please send £18 (£6 concessions) with your name, address, email and phone number to CASE at 11 Wilderton Road, London N16 5QY

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