



MENTAL HEALTH IN EDUCATION POLICIES

Key messages

- The mental health of Europe's children and adolescents is its most potent yet least systematically developed resource.
- The mental health and wellbeing of children and adolescents has a value in its own right, and children and adolescents should not only be seen as future adults.
- The educational setting is the most important arena outside the family for the development of children's mental health.
- Solid evidence is now available to guide day-care centres, pre-schools, and schools in how to promote social-emotional learning and wellbeing, and how to reduce and prevent mental distress, violence, bullying, conflict and aggression. However, few children and adolescents receive such interventions.
- Inclusion of mental health in educational policies - nationally, regionally and locally - has a very favourable cost-benefit ratio as it releases large societal resources in terms of wellbeing, cognitive, emotional and social skills ("mental capital"), which again have a broad range of positive impacts, including educational outcomes.

What is mental health?

Mental health requires the development of cognitive, emotional, and social skills for which educational settings make an ideal context. Mental health may be defined as a state of wellbeing in which every individual realises their own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community (WHO). Thus, mental health is not just the absence of illness.

Importance of mental health in education

Educational settings promote mental health when they provide children and adolescents with a sense of identity and self-respect, direction and meaning in life, mastery, belonging, safety, social support and participation. Good mental health is associated with better educational and behavioural outcomes. A range of effective interventions are available to promote mental health and to prevent and reduce mental illness. However, very few children and adolescents receive such interventions in the school setting.

Benefits of incorporating mental health into educational policies

Mental health promoting pre-schools and schools have a wide range of positive impacts on children's development, including large impacts on educational outcomes and equity. Incorporating mental health into educational policies contributes to developing, maintaining and protecting society's most potent and least developed resource, the mental health of children. There is solid evidence that the cost-benefit ratio of mental health interventions in educational settings is very favourable.

Recommendations

- Provide a system of affordable, available and accessible high quality public day-care centres for all children.
- Implement evidence based anti-bullying programs and whole-school based interventions to promote mental health and wellbeing, and prevent mental disorders in school.
- Routinely assess day-care centres and schools on whether they promote mental health, providing young people with a sense of identity and self-respect, direction and meaning in life, mastery, belonging, safety, social support and participation.
- Include children, adolescents and their families in planning school environments which promote mental health and wellbeing.
- Collect regularly data on children's and adolescents' mental wellbeing and any problems.
- Train school staff to support children's psychosocial development.
- Include mental health promotion in national school curriculum.



Facts

- The foundation of good mental health is laid in childhood years, and has a major impact on multiple outcomes later in life, including educational outcomes and employment.
- Nordic countries have remarkably high labour force participation rates of mothers and a moderate decrease in fertility rates compared to other Western countries. This has been attributed to family friendly policies, i.e. the availability of generous parental leave schemes, and to the high provision of public day-care, which makes it possible for mothers to return to work early.
- Early learning in high quality day-care centres/kindergartens strengthens social-emotional coping, cognition and school grades, have strongest effects on disadvantaged children and good effect on advantaged children, reduces social inequality in health, may compensate for negative home environments, stabilises difficult periods in life, has long term effects on mental and physical health, educational outcomes and employment, and is economically very cost-effective.
- There is now clear evidence that well implemented both universal and targeted mental health initiatives in schools enhance social-emotional skills, self-esteem, self-confidence, prosocial behaviour, mental health and wellbeing, and may reduce and prevent mental health problems, violence, bullying, conflict and anger. Such mental health initiatives are best linked to academic learning, start early, are anchored in the school and community leadership, are skill centred, and are implemented within a whole school approach.
- Mental disorders affect 10% of children and adolescents in Europe with a much larger proportion experiencing sub-threshold mental disorder. A significant minority of children and adolescents experience poor mental wellbeing due to mental disorder or sub-threshold mental disorder. Mental disorder severely hampers children's education.

Positive mental health and well-being is a key factor for social cohesion, economic progress and sustainable development in the EU



Examples of a good practice to foster inter-sector collaboration

Mental Health in School Programmes (MHISP) for teachers have been implemented in several countries. MHISP is most frequently organised as a cooperative initiative between the central government of health and education, respectively, in collaboration with NGOs. MHISP have been created especially for both teachers and students. The goal of the various programmes is to foster knowledge of how students can promote their own mental health, where they can get help, and how they can provide support for each other. These programmes are adapted to students' levels and needs, and are suitable for students at lower and upper secondary levels alike. Courses have been designed especially for teachers, aimed at improving their knowledge and skills to support mental health of pupils in the class room setting. The most frequently used programs are Zippy's Friends, Mental Health for Everyone, Very Important Problems (VIP), STEP, Friend1, What's up with Monica? Link: www.psykiskhelseiskolen.no/english.asp?id=2471

Further readings

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- Melhuish E C (2011). Preschool matters. Science 333, 299. DOI: 10.1126/science.1209459
- NICE (2008) Promoting children's social and emotional wellbeing in primary education. London: NICE.
- NICE (2013) Antisocial behaviour and conduct disorders in children and young people. Recognition, intervention and management. National Clinical Guideline 158. London: NICE.
- Weare K, Nind M (2011). Mental health promotion and problem prevention in schools: what does the evidence say? Health Promotion International 26 No. S1. doi:10.1093/heapro/dar075.