

IO2 Well-Be Teacher's Guide

'Well-Be Project'
(Supporting Students
Emotional Health, Well-
being and Resilience in
Times of Global Crisis)



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EDITOR

Well-Be Teacher's Guide

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FOREWORD

Guidelines for working with secondary school students who have experienced the COVID-19 crisis - online repository of How-TOs to support youth's psychological wellbeing and to keep positive climate at school.

The purpose of this product is to provide systematic information on adequate interaction approaches, training methods and specific thematic developments to overcome the effects of the crisis, restore mental well-being and develop personal resilience of students between the ages of 14 and 19.

The content of this product is based on the analysis of the research results (IO1). It is a logical upgrade with specific recommendations and working materials to serve teachers, parents and those interested in supporting and fully interacting with young people in the post-epidemic situation and new realities.

The national specifics of each partner country have been taken into account, as well as the general trends in the ongoing processes of young people in a European context.

Secondary education teachers will be direct users of the collected database, but actual users can be all involved in the process of training and/or upbringing of adolescents. The information is comprehensive, providing guidance for the recovery and maintenance of young people's mental well-being, regardless of the specific learning environment.

Emphasis is placed on social interaction, on approaches and methods that, taking into account the new realities and needs of the target group, achieve the desired positive and constructive effect on young people.

As a result of the extraordinary circumstances experienced as a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic, it was evident that teachers and schools were not prepared adequately (pedagogically, methodologically and technically) to support youth's psychological wellbeing and to keep positive climate at school.

With this guidebook we want to open the door for the correct implementation of supporting and fully interacting with young people in the post-epidemic situation and new realities, but also creating new learning environment for students.

Mónica Moreno

On behalf of guidebook coordinators

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MODULE 1 Summary of the I01 results of the study and its conclusions

Introduction



The COVID-19 epidemic began in late 2019 and has very quickly grown into a pandemic that has hit the entire world hard and shaken the education sector at all levels. In order to control the spread of the pandemic, many schools and colleges were forced to remain closed and switch to e-learning. A number of physical distance measures were introduced which severely restricted social activity.

This Module presents the results of a survey on the **impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the psycho-emotional state of secondary school students (14-19 years) in Bulgaria, UK, Italy and Spain** and their strategies and resources for coping with stress. This snapshot makes it possible to identify young people's social, psychological and educational needs to minimise the damage of the pandemic on their development and maintain their sense of well-being.

The summary results of the survey provide information on the **overall impact of the pandemic, sources of stress and coping strategies for children experiencing stress, and resources for children to adapt and maintain well-being** in the project countries. Based on this, risks and vulnerabilities among students, adolescents' learning and support needs in the pandemic and post-pandemic situation were identified, which were the starting point for the development of Well-Be Teacher's Guide.

The main aim of the research survey was **to study the impact of the pandemic crisis on the current mental state of secondary school students**. The assumption of the research was that in the context of a pandemic and its accompanying restrictive measures, students are under intense stress. The resources and coping strategies used by them are reduced and insufficiently effective in the new conditions, which negatively affects their well-being.

The study has the following research tasks:

specifics of the experience of stress in adolescents - sources of stress and symptoms of experienced stress;

specifics of the adaptation strategies used;

level of subjective well-being and resources for its improvement.

The target group of the project is secondary education students (14-19 years of age). This is the period of middle and late adolescence, which is characterised

by an acute drive for independence and more radical behavioural and emotional expressions. This is when more concrete ideas and plans for future studies and careers are formed. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, the lifestyles and habits of adolescents are changing dramatically, which is linked to learning in electronic environments and measures of physical distance causing social isolation.

Parents and teachers are included to examine the overall picture, as their first-hand observations of the children are significant in assessing the impact.

The research approach combined quantitative and qualitative measures.

The methodology is developed in the context of stress and resilience theory, mental well-being and motivational dispositions.

Stress as a construct is defined in various theoretical approaches as a stimulus, as the result of a cognitive appraisal, or as a physiological response. In cognitive transactional theory, on which the present analysis is based, stress is viewed as a product of the interaction between the individual and the environment, refracted through the evaluations that the individual makes of himself and the environment (Lazarus, 1993). The coping behaviours undertaken by the individual are most often oriented in two aspects: towards solving/avoiding the problem and towards managing the emotions provoked by the situation.

Coping strategies can be implemented through active or passive behaviours and their effect influences the duration and intensity of the experience of stress, respectively the processes of adaptation to the changes taking place. A criterion for distinguishing types of coping strategies may also be

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the direction in which an individual invests his or her efforts to cope with stress - toward approaching, accepting, and engaging with what is happening and its consequences, or toward distancing and avoiding the events and their threat (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010). There is also "meaning-focused coping" (Folkman, S., Park, C., 1997), in which efforts to cope with the experience of stress are focused inward, toward better understanding and finding connections between what is happening and personally valuable things, toward finding likely benefits in the context of values and beliefs.

In psychology, "**well-being**" is seen as a multidimensional phenomenon, the result of subjective experience and evaluation, which brings it closer in essence to the construct of stress. Subjective well-being is "the quality of life in terms of the presence and frequency of positive and negative emotions and one's general satisfaction with life" (Diener et al., 1985). According to researchers in the field of the hedonistic perspective, engaging in activities that elicit positive emotional experiences and achieving desire satisfaction are important for leading a well-being life. In a pandemic context, it is assumed that opportunities for this are reduced, and coping mechanisms for adolescents to deal with stress and adapt to the situation are still being constructed.

The research methodology consisted of **three single markers** to examine the overall impact of the pandemic, stressful events, and students' physical and mental health, and **seven scales (5-item Likert-type)** to examine sources of stress, symptoms of stress, coping strategies, personal resources, and subjective well-being, as well as a section on demographics. For this purpose, **3 questionnaires** - for students, parents, teachers, and templates for standardized interview were developed.

The collected data were processed with **statistical software - SPSS 26**, using descriptive methods (frequency analysis), analysis of variance (ANOVA), classical factor analysis and correlation analysis. A content analysis was done on the interviews data.

Three interview forms were developed -for each of the target groups. They contain a series of open questions for self-assessment and evaluation of the impact of the pandemic and changes in children's lifestyle, mood and self-esteem and their needs. Questions for teachers focused primarily on the impact of distance learning on the children they were observing and their own experiences as participants in this process.

The survey was conducted online between **May and December 2021** on a random sample of 1562 students /854 pp/, parents /330 pp/and teachers / 378 pp/ from across the countries. 101 interviews were conducted too.

Consortium Results

The analysis of information on the evolution of the Covid-19 crisis in the participating countries shows a high similarity in the dynamics of the pandemic and the nature of the counter-epidemic measures that have been adopted. The difference is that in Bulgaria the lockdowns were shorter and less widespread than in the UK, Spain and Italy, as well as the low vaccination coverage in the population.



Everywhere, since the beginning of the crisis, distance education has been introduced for large numbers of students for varying lengths of time, forcing children into isolation. Health experts warn that this results in increased risks to their mental health and development. In particular, distance learning negatively affects their stress levels and emotional state, the quality of their education, and their communication skills.

The comparison of the results of the questionnaires shows the following:

- About half of the students and parents rated the **impact of the pandemic on young people** as very negative or negative. This is also shared by teachers, who believe that the negative effects of the pandemic are manifested in a decline in motivation to learn, activity in
- the learning process and their general activity, coping with learning material and academic performance, communication and self-expression skills, sense of well-being, and mood fluctuations. On average, 1/4 of participants rated children's mental health as impaired.
- In terms of adolescents' sense of **subjective well-being**, positive evaluations predominate.
- The most pronounced **symptoms of stress**, according to students and parents, are in the emotional and intellectual spheres. Frequently or consistently, the respondents observed tension, distraction, laziness and reluctance to act, irritation, learning problems, and fatigue. Respondents from the UK and Spain also reported physiological symptoms related to sleep and appetite disturbances.
- According to young people, the **most serious sources of stress** for them are: lost of living contacts with people and meetings with friends,

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entertainments and favourite food and drinks from restaurants outside, clear vision of the future and freedom of action.

- According to teachers, sources of stress for students during pandemic period is mostly in an e-learning environment as follow: monotony, social isolation, lack of physical activity, maintaining continuous/permanent concentration, the need for self-organisation and self-discipline, need for additional support for learning.
- The participants are unanimous, that the **restrictions** imposed by the pandemic that affected students entirely negatively or rather negatively were: limitations on meeting friends, limited live contacts, limitations on sports activities, lack of freedom of action, not going to school.
- According to all three groups of respondents, the following **changes in the children's lifestyle** had a negative impact: long staying in front of a computer, pressure from prohibitions, physical distancing, wearing masks, home isolation, limited personal space at home, physical distance, fears and insecurities of adults and the constant presence of parents.
- Regarding **coping strategies** to deal with stress during the pandemic, students indicated that the following activities were consistently and frequently practiced: watching TV/movies/podcasts/TikTok, "chatting" with friends, surfing the Internet, listening to music.

Rarely or not practiced at all are the following: meditation, prayer, yoga, experimenting with forbidden things, joining training courses and seminars.

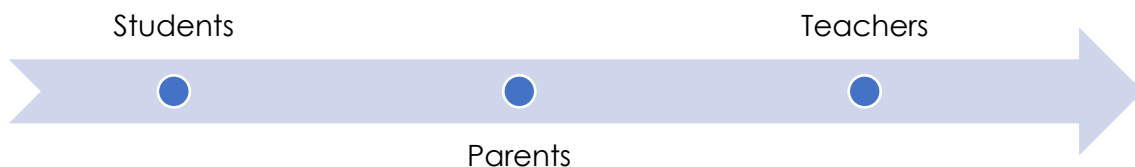
- To deal with the pandemic situation **and resources for adapting** and maintaining well-being, the most valued by students and parents were those related to social support and the auto attitude: family support, the ability to find things that are interesting, own will/persistence and own sense of humour, learning and ambitions to develop, the pursuit of a clear goal and plan for the future, optimism and faith in the future, own ability to quickly get used to changes, own ability to quickly overcome a bad mood, insult, anger and hobbies.
- The self-description of the students tells us that about their **personal potential is** rather positively, being optimistic about the future. According to their self-assessments, the following characteristics fully and largely apply to them: diversity in life is important, I feel that what I do makes sense, I deal with the important problems I encounter, I feel confident that

I will succeed in life and I work consistently to achieve my goals and believing that better things are coming soon.

This is shared by parents and teachers, but they feel that participation in courses and group activities that they choose, art activities and work on school projects, contacts with teachers, psychologists, doctors, Physical activities were resources that does not apply to their child.

Over 40% of teachers felt that the topics of environmental and economic issues, as well as art remained weak in engaging the interest and attention of students.

The data from the interviews conducted with students, parents and teachers also show great similarity between the participating countries and come to confirm the results of the questionnaire survey:



- **Students** highlight as a positive aspect being more with the family and as negative aspect the fact of seeing less friends/other relatives, boredom when not leaving the house and not doing their usual activities. Furthermore, all students mention the negative effects caused by isolation: not seeing each other with friends (an aspect that is repeated), distance classes are complicated, less physical exercise. The negative effect of isolation is particularly evident on the emotional level and the ability to plan. Children describe themselves as more depressed, anxious and agitated than before the pandemic. Uncertainty and insecurity block any ability to imagine the future: attention is focused on the uncertainty of the present.

- **Parents'** comments in general are related to emotional/ personal changes that have affected to their children being the loss of personal relationships/social skills one of the main ideas expressed. Parents says that children feel more alone and has missed his friends a lot/has lost social skills and this is one of the most important children' needs expressed by parents: recover social activities/see friends-relatives. We have to add to children' needs to obtain a psychological support/ know how to manage stress/fear. Secondly and although parents expressed some positive aspect of distance learning (they have to organize themselves better and learn to follow schedules, has gained autonomy/develop patience, have

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everything available in one click), we see that apart from the idea of slowing down the learning rhythm, the idea of not having direct contact between teachers and students/ worsening of personal relationships is repeated again.

A number of parents have highlighted the strong emotional distress felt by their children during those months, with a considerable increase in behaviours such as poor concentration, boredom, mood swings, frustration, dependency and need for help, melancholy and feelings of loneliness.

Although they agree that distance learning was an opportunity to implement technologies and increase their children's digital skills, unfavourable adjectives seem to predominate, seeing remote learning as an unpleasant, demotivating, useless, ineffective, and ultimately ugly experience.

- **Teachers** are more critical and pessimistic towards the other participants, which also applies to the scores on comparable variables, where there is a tendency for teachers to give more extreme values. Although mediated through the online environment, teachers monitor students' performance, involvement and coping in specific work tasks.

They are explicit in their assessment of the pandemic's destructive effects on their social and emotional skills, on motivational attitudes and learning habits, and more generally on the existential and moral aspects of schooling and the education system.

As a negative aspect, they also focus on parental passivity and lack of communication with them.

The positives for all participants in the educational and educational process are clearly outlined in two directions - development of adaptability to changes and digital innovations and attention, care for health - one's own and other people's. In this sense, teachers' evaluations are more rational than emotional. Teachers' suggestions for necessary changes in the education system are concrete, constructive and targeted.

Teachers' suggestions are focused on the educational system (organization /regulations) and the emotional support (for students and teachers): motivation, participation, communication, remove the residual fear, make a positive reading of the experience and re-establish personal relationships (although students have used videocalls and use digital learning, the personal contact is an important point for teachers).

Finally yet importantly, there was a lack of specialised figures, such as school psychologists, who could have supported students, teachers and school staff and families in general at such a critical time, as well as a lack of psychological preparation in teachers who felt they did not have adequate tools to help and support their students.

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The results of both parts of the research (quantitative and qualitative methods) confirm the initial hypothesis that the pandemic, the accompanying measures to limit it and the changes in lifestyle have an impact on the mental state of adolescents by intensifying the experience of stress and weakening the sense of well-being.

Students recognize the negative impact of the pandemic, but try to positivize it by highlighting the benefits of: saving effort and stress in connection with the usual daily engagement of traditional school life; the benefits they find in online testing; the pleasure of caring at home and meeting their household needs. This is in line with their dominant self-preservation attitudes, focus on entertainment, distancing themselves from important life topics and the preference for passive strategies to deal with stress and trouble, which poses **a risk for their adaptation in the long run.**

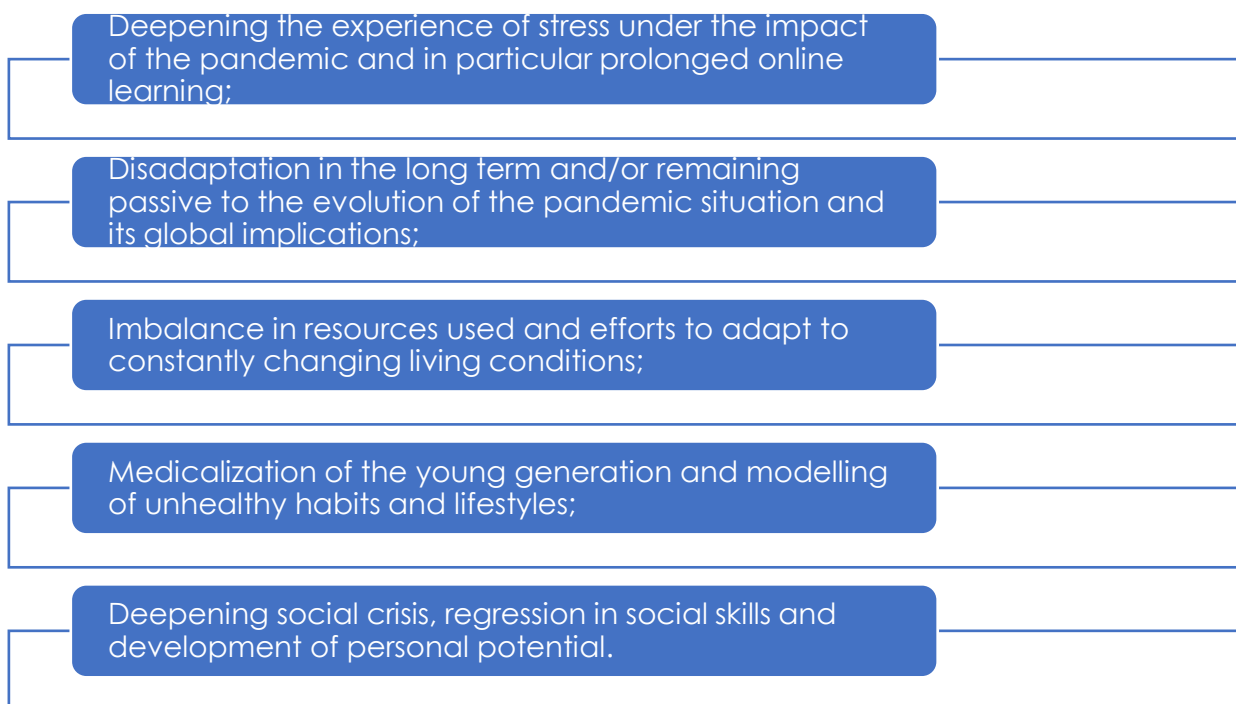
Parents and teachers are much more negative about the overall impact of the pandemic, restrictive measures and lifestyle changes, which is a prerequisite for the risk of **victimization and/or medicalization of children**, especially since they are negatively affected by fears and insecurities of adults. At the same time, probably as a defensive reaction, students show relatively low interest in the development of the pandemic, on current social, environmental and economic issues, which may lead to **unjustified underestimation of the current and long-term consequences of the global crisis.**

The presence of stress symptoms is observed in students and the most pronounced are the emotional, behavioural and cognitive symptoms of stress. Sources of stress for them are restrictions and changes in lifestyle, as well as relationships with adults. According to teachers, the most negative consequences of distance learning are home isolation and monotony. There are some discrepancies in the assessments of the three groups on these issues, which reflects **communication deficits** and is indicative of the need to improve communication between students, teachers and parents.

Passive coping strategies with an emphasis on comfort zone and satisfying hedonic needs are prioritized by students. In the short term, these types of activities have the effect of emotional relief, distancing from problems and temporarily postponing their solution, but in the long term - **they question the ability to adapt quickly and adequately to changes.** On the other hand, the use of active constructive strategies positively influences adolescents' physical and mental health and sense of subjective well-being.

Higher assessments of students' subjective well-being and mental health also resonate with the active use of internal resources, determined in manifestations of purposefulness and organization, positivity and flexibility, interesting and meaningful activities. Among the resources for adaptation, social support definitely dominates - relationships with friends and family. **The coping potential of external resources for adaptation has been neglected** - work on school projects, interaction with teachers and psychologists, participation in schools, courses and interest groups, spiritual practices.

The results of this analysis make it possible to identify the following **risks in the development of adolescents**:



Minimizing these risks requires intervention in the broad spectrum of psychological and pedagogical support to develop adolescents' mental resilience and improve their social interaction, actively involving and synchronizing the efforts of all stakeholders in the process.

The comparative analysis between the participating countries shows complete consistency regarding the identified **vulnerable groups** of young people, namely:

- Girls who report more symptoms of stress, poorer physical and mental health, lower sense of subjective well-being and use more passive coping strategies than boys;
- Older students (18-19 years old), who have a more negative assessment of the impact of the imposed restrictions, changes in lifestyle and the pressure of external coercion compared to younger ones;
- Children living with one parent or without parents who experience more symptoms of stress;
- Children with siblings who share a stronger negative effect of the pandemic than adolescents who are the only children in the family;

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- Students who experienced a decline in performance reported poorer mental health, significantly more symptoms of stress, more unsatisfactory relationships with adults, a lower sense of mental well-being, and more difficulty tolerating restrictions and lifestyle changes, compared to students who increased their performance.
- Students who feel that they did not improve their knowledge during the pandemic, who report poorer physical and mental health, significantly more symptoms of stress and a lower level of subjective well-being compared to those who perceive their knowledge as improved.
- Students who have experienced more stressful events report more intense symptoms of stress and a more negative overall impact of the pandemic on their family, deteriorating their physical and mental health, and a lower sense of subjective well-being

Guidelines on student support measures

Based on all the data and analysis, we have united around the thesis that Support measures should integrate training, communication and administrative activities addressing the following stakeholders and actors:

I. Training activities

To students

Training measures focusing on the development of:

- Self-knowledge in order to stimulate confidence in children's personal potential;
- Critical thinking, social engagement and self-discipline in adolescents in order to build a more active personal and civic position;
- Stress resilience - presenting the benefits of active, problem-solving and meaning-related coping strategies and relaxation techniques to encourage the application of a wider range of stress management strategies;
- Internal adaptation resources with priority on goal-setting skills, planning and organizing, positivity and flexibility, techniques to maintain concentration to increase confidence in them and their application;
- Communication skills to improve interactions both with each other and with older adults - parents and teachers; giving and receiving social support;
- Self-regulated learning skills in order to maintain motivation to learn and to cope autonomously with learning tasks.

To Parents:

Training measures focusing on the development of:

- Improving parents' skills for meaningful communication with children in isolation and for improving the home climate (school for parents or other socially engaging activities, training materials). Encouraging open communication between students and parents, as well as teachers and parents, so as to attract attention to experience of stress and anxiety and better explain behavioural concerns. Recognising the significance of independence and distancing of children during teenage years.
- Raise awareness among parents about children mental health and give them tools and resources to help them

To Teachers

Training measures focusing on the development of:

- The degree of empathy that helps teachers to display professionally useful behaviours;
- Strengthening the basic emotional skills of students and emotional management as a vehicle for the prevention of emotional/mental problems;
- Learning to understand and communicate emotions in a face to face and digital context for teachers and students;
- Offer teachers resources and tools for transforming its training programs and its teaching profession itself;
- Enhancing teachers' digital communication skills in order to improve interaction with students in the context of on-line learning

II. Communication measures:

- Applying a variety of approaches and channels to correctly and accurately inform students about the effects of the crisis - health, social, economic; the importance of prevention and healthy lifestyles in today's ongoing crisis. Careful consideration of the messages conveyed by relevant adults in order to minimise uncertainty and flight into illusion.
- Expanding channels and forms of communication, redefining roles and responsibilities to improve interaction between parents and teachers;

- Enhancing communication between teachers, parents and stress prevention and crisis management professionals to raise awareness and sensitivity about children's risk factors and timely identification of the vulnerable among them;
- Promotion of the role of school psychologists with emphasis on proactive prevention.
- Promote multi-stakeholder dialogue between parents, educators and the children themselves.

III. Administrative changes in traditional educational approaches aimed at:

- Personalized learning - identifying the individual needs of students, their skills and interests in order to preserve and nurture their inner motivation for learning and development; Develop focused plans to ensure that adequate learning accompaniment is provided in more personalized systems.
- Application of flexible models of cooperative learning as a prerequisite for increasing student engagement, social interaction and shared learning;
- Encouraging work on school projects, participation in extracurricular activities, courses and interest groups, including arts and spiritual practices (such as yoga, mindfulness) in order to improve the attractiveness and quality of school life;
- Prevention of the processes of victimization and medicalization of adolescents (by activating the interaction with teachers and psychologists, setting and maintaining clear boundaries in relationships and principles of interaction; refining the messages of adults with a focus on children's strengths and positive attitudes to new challenges, stimulating the processes of self-reflection and understanding the benefits and harms of excessive protection and care of adolescents);
- Changes in the curricula in order to adapt them to the form of distance learning and the current needs of all stakeholders and participants in the learning process; planning synchronous learning in e-learning and hybrid learning as an alternative for periods of high pandemic risk.
- Support teachers with teaching training resources using digital tools, as well as encourage access and use of digital collaborative platforms that allow teachers to share their resources and give and receive feedback from their peers;
- Offer resources and tools to strengthen resilience and support to deal with psychological and social damage;

- Review the focus of the curriculum and prioritize learning objectives taking into account limitations, while ensuring a good balance between academic learning, social-emotional learning and psychological health.

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from crises

before; or they rely on hasty remedies to get through the moment. Sometimes we do one and the other at the same time, taking refuge in temporary practices that we recognise as not very effective, waiting to return to tradition as soon as possible. In this way, two mistakes are made at once. The first is to ignore the fact that genuinely restoring previous customs, practices and habits may simply be impossible, and this is even truer when it comes to a crisis. A crisis could not be momentary but it could last for years, and deeply affect relations between people, their coexistence and their communications, inevitably imposing new customs and new ways of acting on individuals, groups and institutions. Human beings and societies are by definition (and fortunately) adaptable and adaptive: when they are forced to live in new conditions they take on behaviours that are different from the past, which take root over time. The second mistake is not to take the opportunity to critically rethink a world made up of norms and habits, hence also of unwritten rules, which had appeared 'natural' and taken for granted until then. Schumpeter's observation underlines precisely this: crises make us, or rather should make us, think because they interrupt the presumed normality, because they can stimulate an effort to 'start living again', including a planning effort.

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The resulting anxieties students as well as teachers bring into their classroom in response to a crisis can affect student learning, as documented by psychological, cognitive, and neuroscience research. Individual crises, such as coping with the loss of a family member or recovering from a difficult break-up with a significant other, can affect an individual class member's learning and performance. However, communal crises, such as the pandemic situation of Covid-19, the shock of the Ukraine-Russia war, the devastation of natural phenomena, can affect everyone's well-being—personal and academic.

Such events affect students' cognitive load, as their working memory capacity is reduced immediately after an acutely stressful experience. This awareness may lead teachers to be lenient with due dates or adjust the syllabus for the week following the crisis in order to reduce the workload, both in terms of introducing new concepts and expecting students to practise typical study habits.

A survey by Therese A. Huston and Michelle DiPietro (2007) reveals, "From the students' perspective, it is best to do something. Students often complained when the school did not mention the crisis at all, and they expressed gratitude when the school acknowledged that something awful had occurred" (p. 219). Students report that 'almost anything' is useful, regardless of whether the teacher's response requires a relatively small effort, such as asking for a minute's silence, or a great deal of effort and preparation, such as making the event part of the lesson plan. Students consider the 'lack of response' or not acknowledging that the crisis has occurred and pretending nothing has happened to let the class proceed, without any mention of opportunities for revision or additional help, to be totally useless. Silence is never the best choice.

The Covid-19 pandemic has made us explore new realities primarily that of distance learning, but we often do not ask ourselves enough about the impact of the pandemic on students' mood and how they reacted to the return to 'almost' normality.

In their studies, experts have found deficits in students' ability to concentrate memorise and maintain attention for a long time. The cause is an excess of emotional tension: anxiety, stress, worry are factors that negatively and directly affect students' concentration and motivation.

There are many possibilities for how to address a crisis in class, from activities that take only a moment to restructuring an entire course, and plenty in between. Again, consider that students appreciate any action, no matter how small.

How important supporting emotional proximity is in teacher's teaching

Emotional proximity is a connection between a person and a disaster event. This connection can be mediated by an interpersonal connection, i.e. a close relationship with someone who is physically affected by a disaster, or through an experiential connection to the geographic location of the event. The teacher's first step is to understand students in need, all different, each one unique, with particular characteristics, sensitivities and issues. In crisis situations, it is fundamental to conceive the teaching/learning process from a relational perspective - i.e. to outline an educational action aimed at taking care of the mind, but also of the psychological personality and affections of the student - means embracing the hypothesis of "an idea of (educational) relations in which the qualitative dimension guarantees a virtuous circularity between relations-development-learning-health¹". The quality of the learning environment plays a crucial role in promoting high doses of intrinsic motivation for commitment and success in the students' perception of competence, interest and the development of self-regulation strategies, animates and supports the genesis of self-determined behaviour. An educational relationship charged with emotional closeness and reassurance contributes to structuring a climate of familiarity in the classroom environment and helps to promote the raising of levels of emotional intelligence, self-efficacy, self-esteem and the propensity to collaboration and participation, facilitating the restoration of normality and the 'mental readiness' to return to learning. Engaging students emotionally has substantial pedagogical advantages. Students will typically be more intrigued by material and gain interest. It is easier to generate discussion among an emotionally stimulated group.

Research has shown that **emotional engagement** is associated with positive outcomes for student success, including learning achievement. Emotions can spread among peers via 'emotional contagion': the transference of moods within a group and the subsequent influence on behaviour.

It follows from the above that teaching at extremely critical moments, in order to be effective, must include the emotional dimension in its processes, paying the utmost attention to the inner dimension of students and the appreciation of all forms of diversity. Even studies carried out in the last three decades propose an overcoming of the bifurcation between cognition and emotions, arriving at a unitary perspective of totality where empathy becomes a radical experience that has characteristics of totality, where cognitive mediation and affective sharing intersect. Emotional education is about a successful combination, not necessarily simultaneous, of mental and emotional states, contemplated precisely by multidimensional approaches and confirmed by the studies on the Theory of Mind and current neuroscience.

¹ Damiani P. (2011), Le dimensioni implicite e affettive nelle relazioni a scuola ed il successo scolastico, *Formazione & Insegnamento IX – 2 – 2011*, p.77-89, Pensa Multimedia.

There is interdependence between **emotion and cognition**: it is cognitive processes that direct emotions, but these influence cognition by initiating, directing or interrupting the processing of information. Depending on the interpretation assigned to stimuli from the external world, emotions change and cognitive content also varies. In emotional experience, there is always a cognitive processing and an affective memory relating to the same situation experienced. The memory of emotions that are already known, and therefore recognised, influences the way in which we label a given situation.



Referring to today's school means taking into account precisely this multidimensionality and how complex the situations it faces are. Emotional and empathic competences produce active listening and storytelling of one's own feelings and emotions and lead to a non-superficial observation of others' states, attitudes and behaviour. They prepare for the in-depth process of 'thinking', investing in the non-linearity of processes, of all processes: from personal ones, to formal and informal relational ones, and to the more extensive aspects of socialization.

The educational task must rise to a sort of proxemics understood as precognition of the relationship with the other and as an outcome: positive, equal, active in listening, and involving the complex construct of being competent in a meaningful framework involving knowledge, knowing how to do, knowing how to be, and knowing how to communicate.

It is above all in moments of crisis that the teacher must show that he or she has empathic competence, empathy as a process would also foster the educational relationship as a helping relationship. Having emotional awareness and an empathic style trains one to recognise the other. Empathy translates the ability to project oneself into that which is other than oneself so as to understand the other through a process of identification, in which the culture of feelings is placed as the psychic material of values that are projected in civil coexistence and in the educating community.

Appropriate interactional approaches and teaching/training methods

There are many possibilities for how to address a crisis in class, from activities that take only a moment to restructuring an entire course, and plenty in between. Again, teachers should consider that students appreciate any action, no matter how small it will be.

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There are steps that a good teacher should be aware of during the most critical moments to maintain a favourable classroom environment and ensure a productive and reassuring learning experience.

Taking a moment of silence

Pay attention to cognitive load

Assigning relevant activities or materials

Facilitating a discussion

1. **Taking a moment of silence** interrupts a class very little, but offers everyone a chance to reflect as part of a community and demonstrates the teacher's sense of humanity.

2. **Pay attention to cognitive load.**

Crises such as pandemics affect students' cognitive load, because it is proven by neuroscience studies that their working memory capacity is reduced immediately after an acutely stressful experience. This awareness should give a teacher pause and cause him/her to be more lenient with due dates or invite him/her to adapt the syllabus so as to reduce the workload, both in terms of introducing new concepts and in terms of expecting students to practise typical study habits. It may also be useful to organise a review session of the material covered during the crisis.

3. **Assigning relevant activities or materials.**

According to two academics, Huston and Di Pietro, there are specific activities that can help students in their most critical moments. Their statement comes from observing the activities that helped American students cope with 9/11: at

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the time, students who participated in a diary-writing exercise or listened to a story that addressed issues relevant to the terrorist attacks showed greater improvement and fewer signs of trauma. It is an invitation for teachers to consider how they can use their discipline as a lens to explore the events surrounding a tragedy, e.g. by assigning a relevant poem, linking it to a similar historical moment or examining the medical-scientific concepts in a similar pandemic (the avian influenza virus A(H5N1) emerged in 1996).

4. Facilitating a discussion.

If teachers would like to **talk directly with their students about a crisis**, they might consider contacting the competent bodies often recommended by their schools or the Ministry of Education for ideas on how to approach such a conversation. Additionally, the information below gathered by the Well-be consortium may also be useful in discussing a tragedy with your students. There are a number of factors that can affect how a conversation about a crisis might go.

However, Israeli professor Deborah Shmueli has listed in her essays some elements to take into account:

- ⇒ Students' perceptions about how the crisis has affected them personally
- ⇒ Students' perceptions about others whom they consider to be affected
- ⇒ Issues deemed important to each person or group
- ⇒ Institutional, financial, and other impediments to successful communication

Considering these factors, researchers and experienced communication practitioners suggest the following cues to investigate in difficult conversations:

- *Consider how much time the conversation might take:* Teachers willing to create a safe environment for dialogue need to consider how much time a conversation on sensitive issues will take for their students and how

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much time they can devote to that conversation over the course of a term. Since a single conversation may not

be enough to fully address the issue, teachers should be flexible, extending the conversation to later classes. The teacher should allow sufficient time for each conversation to include students who have difficulty opening up to their classmates or who need time before starting to talk about their experiences. Particular attention must be shown to Special Educational Needs and Disabilities students who must be given equal opportunities; therefore, the cooperation of the support teacher is essential.

- *Acknowledge both verbal and nonverbal communication: In a discussion or conversation, silence may not embarrass the teacher because silence as well as other non-verbal behaviours can be just as vital to a productive conversation as words. The teacher is often tempted to fill the silence with variations on the question asked, but this might inhibit the students' ability to reflect on the question and prepare to share their thoughts with their peers. Students' need for repeated even extremely long silences may occur and despite this, the teacher should invite discussion of the reason for such a discomfort and invite sharing with peers.*
- *Prepare the class for debating: there are three main stages to be considered:*

1) Pre-debating stage: the teacher should establish clear goals, provides pre-discussion activities to shape the conversation, establishes discussion guidelines, and be open with students about the challenges ahead.

2) While-debating: the teacher should provide frameworks and guiding questions for the discussion, actively manage or moderates discussions, pause for structured reflection if tensions rise, and be ready to confront inappropriate language.

3) After-debating: the teacher should synthesize the discussion to demonstrate value, reflect on the conversation's dynamics, and share relevant support resources on campus for students who need them².

- *Let students set the ground rules:* may not only support students in creating a safe and secure setting in which to share their thoughts, emotions and ideas, but may also help students find self-confidence at a time when the crisis has made them feel powerless. Ground rules should be established before the conversation begins and reiterated each time it progresses.
- *Encourage students to be empathetic listeners:* while talking, students often think about what they want to say in response rather than fully listening to the individual who is speaking. Moreover, if the crisis is difficult to handle emotionally or if peers feel defensive, empathic listening becomes even more difficult. Pointing out these dynamics to students can at least encourage them to reflect on their position as listeners.
- *Allow freedom of participation:* if students feel uncomfortable, teacher should not force them to participate, as they are likely to withdraw from the conversation or carefully control what they say.
- *Balance the power in the classroom as much as possible:* the teacher must ensure that no student or group of students has more rights than the others and ensure that everyone receives equal respect.
- *Provide a predictable forum:* the teacher should provide a format and an environment that is familiar and predictable for their students so that they feel more comfortable sharing their thoughts and experiences.

Teachers may even want to identify or even facilitate a way to **help those most affected by the crisis**, such as collecting money, donating goods, volunteering to help at the crisis site, or other ways of supporting rescue and relief

² For a detailed exploration of this topic: <https://ofasd.msu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Handbook20for20Facilitating20Difficult20Conversations2.pdf>

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efforts. Such “problem-focused coping” is among the most helpful responses identified by students and one explanation for the “lower levels of long-term stress” among people “indirectly affected”.⁷

Teaching through times of crisis requires a flux pedagogy dispose to integrate teaching agility and a radical growth mindset.

With all that's going on in our world, today's teachers needs to carefully examine and challenge beliefs about who they view as knowledgeable and how they believe learning happens. They must do so with authentic curiosity in order to examine their own mindsets critically and their tacit knowledge and value hierarchies.



Teaching from an enquiry stance means that the teacher presents him/herself as a curious and engaged learner, not as a dispenser of knowledge. The teacher who adopts a distributed wisdom approach co-creates an

ethos and skill sharing that engages the entire class group. In times of crisis, it is crucial to create the conditions for students to be agentic and authentic and comfortably share a range of perspectives and experiences for their learning and vital to their positive development and well-being.

Suggested strategy: thought experiments in which you, as a teacher, take time to consider your own communication style and behavioural patterns to understand how students from a range of backgrounds may perceive you. Reflect on how social identity influences classroom dynamics from different perspectives. Note patterns of conflict, as well as defences and deviations, and invite authentic self-reflection and constructive dialogue. To avoid, for instance, a single racial lens, actively seek the opinions of trusted peers with different backgrounds and levels of power before bringing ideas into the classroom.

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In times of collective trauma, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic and the turmoil and divisions induced by the Russian-Ukrainian war, students need a place where they can process stress, where their emotions are validated, and where they can come into contact with a world that seems frightening and gross. To learn and develop, students need an environment that supports learning and allows them to build inner resources to cope with stress.

The classroom should be that place and to do this, teachers need to embrace radical compassion and radical self-care. Radical compassion is the ability to fully understand the crisis in order to alleviate the distress and pain of their students. On the other hand, radical self-care refers to the practice of applying that radical compassion toward oneself. Practicing self-care has never been more urgent than in these socially, politically, economically, medically, and spiritually troubling times.

Teachers today are able to make a huge difference in students' overall experience, helping them to cultivate a safe internal place of growth even within insecure external realities. Teachers may be true educators who engage their students as whole persons when we are able to see them and meet them where they are at any given moment, not when we keep them static in our own pedagogical thinking.

Teachers must learn how to engage in calm, non-judgmental, constructively critical, and disciplined curiosity toward themselves and their students—to notice and challenge their judgments of them and their negative self-talk, to understand how both are based in socialized beliefs and implicit biases that can liberate themselves and each other from. Once built, this inner-management system, students (and colleagues) could be ushered into this growth process through pedagogy.

Suggested strategy: Work to notice student body language, consistent eye contact (or lack thereof), and engagement. Check for signs of wellness, self-care, anxiety, withdrawal, sadness, anger, and confusion. Check in with

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students privately (really, it matters). One way is to email open-ended questions and free-write prompts asking students to share pressing questions, needs, ideas, and concerns. Follow up with students and have a current list of on- and off-campus resources on hand.

Learning happens best when it is active, responsive, and contextualized. In a moment of global, institutional, and personal induced stress, teachers must pause to consider the ways a crisis lands into each student's life, how it lands differently given status and finances, and whether or not students have family and community support. It is important to focus mainly on students in moments of crisis so that it will be possible to help them face their realities calmly and with a sense of structure, agency, and support.

Learning experiences must approach emotional wellbeing as central—help students traverse complex systems during chaotic times, build relational trust, and view pedagogical flexibility as an ethical stance. This applies to changes in assignments, responsibilities, and presentations. Be aware of how a student's situation, especially as it changes over time during a crisis, may influence their ability to collaborate on group projects. This is about being student-oriented and flexible in times of chaos, as teachers work to understand students' individual experiences in a certain context of broader forces, so that an actively support will be offered during this time.

Suggested strategy: engage in active listening and perspective taking with intention. Find a thought partner (or two) to debrief class sessions and plan forward. Re-envision communication and process norms to push into power asymmetries such as equitably considering, distributing, and sharing in learning-facilitation tasks in case of remote learning/teaching. Ask students what they need. Discuss online norms and establish norms for group work. Remember to breathe and give stretch breaks to honour physicality, as students learning online often sit much of the day.

The assumption that in times of crisis the best teaching strategy to adopt is that of **cooperative learning** remains unquestioned. Cooperative learning involves students working together to accomplish shared goals, and it is this sense of interdependence that motivate group members to help and support each other. When students work cooperatively they learn to listen to what others have to say, give and receive help, reconcile differences, and resolve problems democratically. However, groups need to be structured to ensure that members will work interdependently. The role the teacher plays in establishing cooperative learning in the classroom is critically important for its success. This involves being aware of how to structure cooperative learning in groups, including their size and composition the type of task set; expectations for student behaviour; individual and group responsibilities; and the teacher's role in monitoring both the process and the outcomes of the group experience.

Among the most frequently, used forms of cooperative learning in times of crisis are peer tutoring, circle time, problem solving and chunked lesson.

The impact of COVID-19, the real starting point of our project which has since broadened to include all crisis scenarios in general, has led many schools to make use of a variety of tutoring models. Nevertheless, not all types of tutoring are effective in a given social context. True peer tutoring is needed to fully support students. To understand why peer tutoring is important in a time of crisis, we must first understand what it really is. Peer tutoring takes place between students from the same institution. In its purest form, tutors and tutees have followed a similar curriculum. They may even have studied with the same teacher. They may even be classmates. It can take place online, in the classroom or in a wide range of contexts. Simply put, tutors and tutees have dealt with similar expectations and topics and have had a common experience of some kind. This common bond is an important part of the formula for learning and emotional development in the face of a crisis. Emotional resilience and academic growth go hand in hand. This is so important to keep



in mind during a crisis. Tutoring models that tend to the social and emotional aspects of learning are absolutely necessary.

Circles are ideal space to bring students together. When underpinned by the values of positive peace, equity, equality, respect, dignity and inclusion, they can offer a space for building connection and community. Circles happen in schools for different reasons, among these for meeting, inquiring, for restoring. They can be used with the whole class or for small groups. Circle time is a good activity to carry out with young people since they can reflect on their experience. Pupils can say what is working well for them and what is not, knowing they will be heard. Circle time is recognised as one of the most efficacious techniques to be used to overcome trauma.

Problem solving is a familiar methodology to help students process the huge changes they are addressing. Do not forget to use the 11 Problem-Solving Steps:

1.	STOP and think.	
2.	Identify the PROBLEM. (collect lots of information)	
3.	Identify the FEELINGS. (your own and other peoples')	
4.	Decide on a GOAL.	
5.	Think of lots of SOLUTIONS.	
6.	Think about what MIGHT happen next.	
7.	Choose the BEST solution. (evaluate all the alternatives)	
8.	Make a PLAN. (think about possible obstacles)	
9.	TRY your plan.	
10.	SEE what happens. (evaluate the outcome)	
11.	TRY another plan or solution if your first one does not work.	

The last methodology, the chunked lesson, is perhaps the least known, but recent studies have identified it as the most successful in terms of blended learning. The chunked lesson³ originated in 1996 from the idea of two educational scholars, Joan Middendorf and Alan Kalish, who devised this system of organising lessons, which was later found by various scientific studies to be very effective in responding to students' problems of attention, concentration or motivation. They observed, in fact, that by applying the didactic model of continuous-flow transfer of knowledge (the teacher explaining for more than half an hour), the students' attention begins to wane after 15-20 minutes and then falls inexorably. They therefore thought of the possibility of structuring the lesson in rhythmic segments of 15-20 minutes each, some dedicated to group activities to consolidate the concepts learned in the previous segments. Here is the typical lesson structure:

5 minutes to review previously acquired knowledge or assigned preparation exercises.

Lecture by the lecturer, 10/15 minutes.

Small group activity, 10 minutes.

5 minutes in which the lecturer offers feedback after the group activities, responding to observations and solving problematic passages.

New Lesson-Activity-Review session, 20 minutes.

A time in which the students, perhaps by means of notes, communicate what knots in the topic they would like to unravel, what new things they have discovered or what issues they would like to explore further.

³ <https://aulalettere.scuola.zanichelli.it/sezioni-lettere/idee-didattiche-digitali/la-lezione-segmentata-o-chunked-lesson>

It may seem a rigid scheme and difficult to apply, but Middendorf and Kalish themselves suggest not to take this pattern literally since anything that becomes predictable has less impact. Variety is a powerful force.

It proves effective in both face-to-face and remote learning as it focuses on student attention and motivation.

The creativity of the teacher and his or her common sense remain at the heart of any educational action and a methodology must be a tool and not the ultimate goal.

Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic was a historic shock to education systems. In many low- and middle-income countries, it dramatically set back learning levels. The COVID-19 pandemic has further arrested learning progress. More than 1.6 billion children across 180 countries were out of school at the height of the pandemic⁴.

The education response during the early phase of COVID-19 focused on implementing remote learning modalities as an emergency response. These were intended to reach all students but were not always successful. As the pandemic has evolved, so too have education responses. At the time this passage is written, schools are partially or fully open in many countries.

A complete understanding of the short-, medium- and long-term implications of this crisis is still forming. This crisis has amplified inequalities

⁴ *Journal of Human Resources* (Andrabi, Daniels, and Das 2021)

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as well as supplied a unique opportunity to reimagine the traditional model of school-based learning.

However, the pandemic represented a moment of reflection for the entire school sector, brought critical issues to light and, above all, strengthened the teaching skills of teachers, who found themselves with tools that may come in handy in other critical situations.

What is the lesson learnt and findings from the questionnaires?

- ✓ Availability of technology is a necessary but not sufficient condition for effective remote learning: technology opens new opportunities for delivering education at a scale. However, the impact of technology on education remains a challenge.
- ✓ Teachers, regardless of the learning modality and available technology, play a critical role. Regular and effective pre-service and on-going teacher professional development is key. Support to develop digital and pedagogical tools to teach effectively both in remote and in-person settings.
- ✓ Education is an intense human interaction endeavor: for learning to be successful it needs to allow for meaningful two-way interaction between students and their teachers; such interactions can be enabled by using the most appropriate technology for the local context.
- ✓ Parents as key partners of teachers: Parent's involvement play an equalizing role mitigating some of the limitations of (remote) learning. As countries transition to a more consistently blended learning model, it is necessary to prioritize strategies that provide guidance to parents and equip them with the tools required to help them support students.
- ✓ Exploiting a dynamic ecosystem of collaboration: Ministries of Education need to work in close coordination with other

educational entities (multilateral, public, private, academic) to effectively orchestrate the different actors and ensure the quality of the overall learning experience.

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MODULE 3 Wellbeing and resilience at schools

Introduction: can you imagine?



What is known about the human brain is far exceeded by what is unknown. But as we continue to make discoveries in the field of neuroscience, the more we recognise that this knowledge also has a place in classrooms, not just laboratories, it is relevant to school leaders and policy makers, as well as academics.

The evolution of the human species is underpinned by our amazing capacity for learning. There are 86 billion neurons inside the newly born brain, and the majority of these have the capacity to make infinite and continuous connections with other neurons throughout the course of a person's life.

Science tells us that from birth, we are hard-wired for learning, curiosity, imagination, the desire to ask questions, solve problems, and to think creatively. But of course, many children would choose not to be at school if they could. They might say that it is boring or they do not find what they learn interesting.

But why?

One of neuroscience's most significant findings is the realisation that it is not merely our DNA, but the environment and the quality of our experiences that have the deepest impact in shaping our brains—the children we once were, the people we are, and who we will become.

Thus we are starting to understand that the reality for many children who “struggle” in some way, is far more complex than just being a “slow”, “disengaged” or “difficult” learner. More often than not, “problem behaviour” is the result of a misfiring brain, while mental and emotional wellbeing is the neurological scaffolding on which “good learning” is built. The fundamental truth is every thought, action, decision, behaviour and belief that comes from a child's brain; if we want to change any of these—whether we are concerned with learning, wellbeing or behaviour—it ultimately means changing what is happening in their brains.

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Understanding The Creative Brain

The rapid developments in **neuroscience** that are helping us to understand what is happening inside all of our heads, are also teaching us about the role of creativity in the human experience—and not just as part of our self-expression. Creativity both increases and accelerates synaptic connectivity. Essentially, it is the creative brain that powers young people to think and learn well. Thus, questions are being raised about how we grow and nurture creative and cognitively diverse brains; questions that, as we emerge from a global pandemic, are perhaps more pertinent now than ever.

Whether we are focused on the present, with *what* children are learning, *how* they learn, and how to strengthen wellbeing in ways which *support* that learning. Or on the future, with how we equip our young people with the competencies they will need to thrive in the world—*now* is a timely opportunity to rethink the role that creativity should play in their lives.

While **creativity** may not be a priority when the aftermath of Covid has left many schools with “gaps” to close, weaknesses to strengthen, and a mental health crisis to respond to, we do not need to choose creativity to the detriment of either learning or wellbeing. On the contrary, creativity may prove to be the much-needed ingredient to support schools with *both* elements at this critical point in time.

Supporting students after COVID-19 crisis: questions arising from the pandemic

With extended school closures, the formation of bubbles—and continual bursting of those bubbles—the reaction to Covid-19 has largely dismantled *how* we teach in schools. The education sector has had to respond rapidly and creatively to solve problems concerning what we teach, how children learn, and how we quantify that learning. However, the impact of Covid on young mental health must also remain at the forefront of our minds and there is a valid argument that addressing the scale of young mental ill-health must be our priority.

The DfE’s “**Transforming Mental Health**” green paper of 2017⁽⁵⁾ is arguably even more relevant now than it was then. It is certainly a step in the right direction that the government has committed to fund training for senior mental health leads in school from 2021–2025,⁽⁶⁾ in alignment with Public Health England’s “Promoting

⁵ [Transforming children and young people’s mental health provision: a green paper — GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/640442/transforming-children-and-young-peoples-mental-health-provision-a-green-paper.pdf)

⁶ [Senior mental health lead training — GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/640442/senior-mental-health-lead-training.pdf)

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Positive Mental Health Indicator Framework: the Relationship Between Learning and Wellbeing

[illegible]

The truth is that mental health and learning are two sides of the same coin. It is through the lens of brain development that we can understand how engaging more readily, learning more effectively and bouncing back from adversity, are all pieces of the same puzzle. While neuroscience is a complex field of study—regardless of whether we are senior leaders or classroom teachers, or if it informs our policies or our day-to-day practice in schools—we do not need to know all that much about brain science for it to redirect or reinforce what it means to educate and be educated.

Imagine if children's education—our curriculum, our policies, our relationships, values and ethos—were all built around one simple goal: to cultivate strong, healthy, creative, learning-ready brains?

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The Learning-Ready Brain

Our youngest and littlest have evolved with all they need to learn by themselves. It is not a coincidence that they are born with 86 billion brain cells inside their heads. They are equipped to think, engage, investigate, question, to be curious and creative. It may not be a reality in every classroom, but we know instinctively, that enriched environments are the force behind "good learning".

But *why*?

The development of the brain relies heavily upon its environment, and its experiences play a significant role in shaping and influencing how well it functions. The developing brain has a huge appetite for experiential learning, pro-social activity and moving the body. When we enrich children's diet with such opportunities, the neo-cortex, AKA the "thinking brain", is on fire!

The neo-cortex is the machine through which learning happens, making up to a million neural connections per second⁸. Known as "neuroplasticity", this phenomenon allows the neo-cortex to continually reconfigure itself, tailor-making our brains for maximum efficiency according to the environment in which we live. But, in spite of its superpower, the thinking brain is also a very lazy organ. Once it has learned how to think or what to do, it defaults to that position—effortlessly. Well-established neural networks allow us to function on "autopilot", for example, if you have ever arrived at work alarmed that you have virtually no memory of your journey, that is why. If you have ever struggled to adapt to seemingly insignificant change, like rearranging your kitchen drawers, that is also why.

Changes that may seem insignificant or trivial still demand a lot from your brain: the formation of new neural connections and the disintegration of redundant networks means that part of your brain must completely restructure itself with new "neural pathways of least resistance". And, as long as we're activating those pathways by using them regularly and consistently, they stay in place—but not if we do not use them,

In other words: Use it or lose it!

What this means for children, whose sensory, social and emotional enrichment in the world has been considerably diminished, is inevitable. Lack of use weakens neural connections. Their brains have changed and are no longer primed for classroom life. A generation of children have lacked the stimulation to keep their brains functionally optimised for school life. **Why should we expect anything less than cognitive decline?**

⁸ <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/brain-architecture/#neuron-footnote>

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Rebuilding the “Learning Brain”

The wonder of neuroplasticity is that brains have evolved to learn rapidly. With a conducive environment of enriched sensory, social and emotional input, synaptic connectivity can be turbo-charged. However, learning-readiness is not compatible with stress or boredom or monotony. Brains are built for multi-modal and multi-dimensional learning which activate all the different sensory areas of the brain simultaneously and stimulates imagination, play, novelty and creativity. Learning is activated by different sights, smells, textures, being outside; from different materials, gravity, space, using their bodies; from laughter, connection, joy, wonder and intrigue.

Imagine if learning looked like that, every day? How can we stimulate multiple brain regions, get neurons firing and wiring, and help young brains be more ready to learn anything?

Unhealthy Brains: Why Wellbeing Matters

Problems

Poor emotional health can be found in every classroom in the country. It is reflected in children’s attainment, attendance, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours. In 2018, long before we had even heard of Covid-19, mental health charity Young Minds⁽⁹⁾ reported that 1 in 8 children had a diagnosable condition. But the added dimension of a global pandemic has been especially unkind to children and young people, with children’s Commissioner Anne Longfield’s annual report 2021⁽¹⁰⁾ concluding that the “1 in 8” figure had risen to 1 in 6, and to 1 in 4 in some areas.

It is inevitable that brains that are not well, do not learn well—especially in the aftermath of a turbulent time, which has been deeply damaging for young mental health. We cannot effectively address “lost learning” without first addressing the intrinsic relationship between wellbeing and learning.

The Impacts of Stress on Learning

As you read these words, an extraordinary thing is happening inside your head, the home of—by some considerable distance—the world’s most powerful computer. Eleven million bits of information are passing through your brain every

⁹ <https://www.youngminds.org.uk/about-us/media-centre>

¹⁰ <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/2021/01/28/damage-to-childrens-mental-health-caused-by-covid-crisis-could-last-for-years-without-a-large-scale-increase-for-childrens-mental-health-services/>

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second, all of which are being continually filtered, without any awareness on your part. Before conscious thought even registers, your subconscious "survival brain" is deciding whether you are in danger or not. Like a neurological traffic light, information tagged "safe" gets the green light, at which point it makes its way to your thinking brain. Then, and only then, can learning happen.

This is the journey of cognition, at any age.

At the opposite end, the proverbial "red light" activates the "fight, flight, freeze" response—a full-on emotional hijack which can completely disable learning capacity. The amber light is the middle ground: the fringes of "fight or flight" with a little too much anxiety and pressure. This is where most of us reside (more often than is good for us), as we navigate the demands of 21st century life.

While not resulting in an emotional hijack, this state certainly inhibits learning, arousing the survival brain—which neither thinks nor learns—and generating biochemicals which slow down neural connectivity.

Of course, all children will encounter difficulties at some point, but far too many are permanently functioning at this level. This diluted stress response easily disguises those who struggle passively or quietly, simply because they are not causing enough problems for adults to notice they need support.

Toxic Stress

There are those children for whom high levels of enduring stress is an almost perpetual state of being. Now more than ever, in the aftermath of a crisis for which we were ill-prepared to support them through, many continue to live with worry, anxiety, pressure, distress, uncertainty, sadness and grief. And inside the head of every child who is emotionally unwell is a brain that cannot learn well.

Neuroscientific research, such as Stephen Porges' "Polyvagal Theory", (often visually interpreted as a traffic light diagram) confirms that we do not need to choose learning—real meaningful, authentic learning—over good mental health, nor should we. "Wellbeing leads to well doing" is not just a nice sounding slogan, it is a scientific fact.

THIS TO BE CREDITED TO: Parenting Works (<https://www.sheenahill.com/>)



Response Decision-Making

How can you best help your child?



Your response directly depends on your child's needs and behavior.

Many settings have introduced—or are in the process of introducing—practice and policies that align with a growing body of evidence involving trauma, Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), neurodiversity and attachment.

Imagine if this knowledge was in the possession of every teacher, every school leader... Could we use this knowledge to underpin the policies, ethos and culture of every school?

Biochemistry of Stress

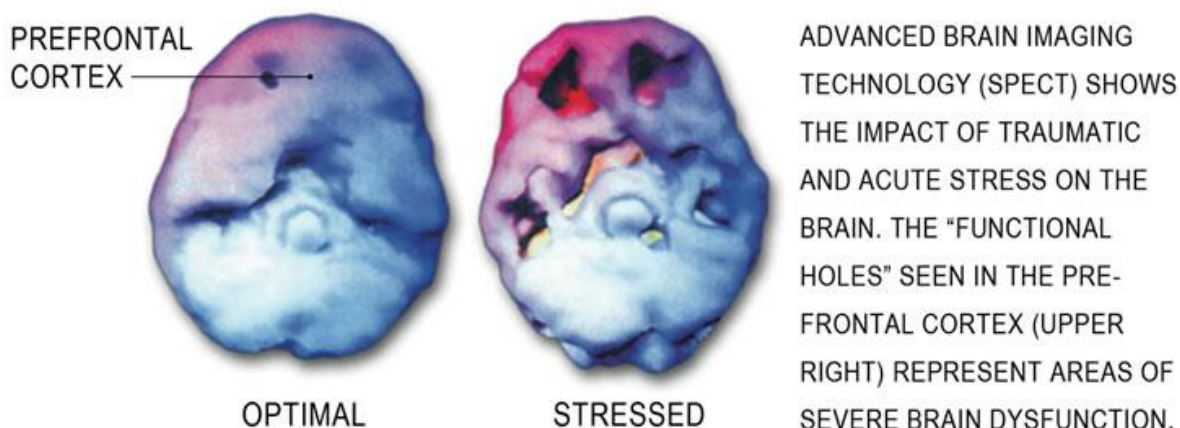
Whether brains are immersed in learning, firing and wiring with optimum synaptic connectivity, or responding to the call of the "inner panic-alarm", biochemicals play a huge part in maximising a brain's efficiency. These biochemicals, or "neurotransmitters", are generated according to how we interpret our world in that moment. When an experience involves an element of stress, it generates neurotransmitters such as adrenaline and cortisol. Although these are acidic, neither are harmful when used as nature intended—that is, by the body in response to short-term stressors, or as part of the natural patterns and biological rhythms of the day. Nature did not, however, intend for that acid to linger in the system, and when it does, it can cause havoc. Even at low levels, excess acid starts to slow synaptic connectivity and in the short term, cause problems with memory, focus, attention and learning.

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A child's brain experiencing chronic or enduring stress may essentially be sitting in a bath of acid. The intensity of this stress can significantly impair the brain's ability to function well. Eventually, continual toxic stress will compromise immunity, which then has ramifications for school attendance. Excessive cortisol can literally burn pockets of brain tissue which then require a process of healing before becoming fully functional again.

The image below—published by the Global Union of Scientists for Peace to promote “Brain Based Approaches to Peace”—demonstrates the impact of acute stress and the resultant “functional” holes seen in the pre-frontal cortex and the “Executive Brain”.⁽¹¹⁾

CREDIT IMAGE TO: Global Union of Scientists for Peace
(<https://www.gusp.org/defusing-world-crises/stress-impairs-brain-functioning/>)



And yet, school is often a source of stress for many children, for numerous reasons, especially as we—and they—try to overcome the obstacles of post-Covid life. Thankfully many schools are intentionally working against the “catch up” agenda, but others have felt the pressure to shorten breaktimes and extend school hours; many led by concerns from parents—and even children themselves—who have been worried by the media’s “lost generation” rhetoric.

We know that nobody—child or adult—is at their best when they feel “behind”, or that they are under-achieving or failing. We also know that if school becomes the place where they feel those things, it has the potential to rupture their relationship with learning. All of our young people, and especially our most

¹¹ “Known as the Executive Brain, the frontal lobe is responsible for high-order functioning, governing judgment and ethical behaviour, and enabling individuals to set goals, plan, monitor and assess outcomes ... imagination, empathy and judgment”, Dr. Kevin Fleming, *The Executive Brain: A Postmodern Approach* published online at: <https://www.all-about-psychology.com/the-executive-brain.html>

vulnerable, like those growing up in troubled families with distressing and difficult home lives, need to be protected from the toxic impacts of emotional distress.

Imagine if school was the place that sluiced out the toxic stress of vulnerability, or the stress left in the wake of Covid? How do we create environments that nurture and nourish, that help to heal those children when they are hurting?

The Power of Powerlessness: The Impact of Adversity and Stress

The developmental nature of childhood is to progressively become more independent and autonomous—to make more decisions, not less—to become more responsible and more powerful, not less. So, while the Covid safety measures may have been necessary, they have also inadvertently gone completely against the grain of healthy childhood development.

“Powerlessness” is not an expression that has been used extensively in the aftermath of Covid, but the pandemic has presented all of us with powerlessness on an unimaginable scale. When we are subject to the unexpected, especially when it is unwelcome, worrying and frightening. When making reality stop, go away, or even slowdown is not an option; we feel helpless and powerless. Even as an adult, this can be deeply disarming, but every one of our young people now has the lived experience of that behind them.

We may not think of a child's (or our own) experiences during and after the pandemic as “traumatic”, and of course, not all children have been traumatised by Covid. On the contrary, many have weathered the storm with startling adaptability and resilience. However, a trauma response occurs in the brain much more readily than many of us realise, and it is *always* a reaction to powerlessness in some shape or form.

While *our* logical minds may rationalise that “everything is ok now” or “we just have to get on with it”, these beliefs are the work of a mature, “thinking brain”. Those children who are coping or even thriving; who are “getting on with it” or feel that everything is ok now”; are firing from that ‘thinking brain’.

But many are not.

To what extent can any child really be expected to understand the rationale behind the closures of schools, parks, shops and borders? Is it fair to expect them to feel safe in the world which, for a significant portion of their young lives, has taught them it's a dangerous place to live?



In his work on trauma⁽¹²⁾ Bessel van der Kolk refers to the fear and terror associated with the sense of helplessness. We must always remember that brains do not *think* safe, they *feel* safe. And they must *feel* safe before they can think rationally. Only when they feel safe, can thinking and learning—problem-solving, logic and decision-making—happen.

Vulnerability on Top of Vulnerability

A great many young people were particularly vulnerable before the arrival of Covid. How many do not have the experience to make sense of what has been happening in the world—in *their* worlds?

Where are those children *still* being raised in troubled or traumatised families, those living with domestic discord, bereavement, job losses, money worries, or just day-to-day struggles for parents to meet the needs of their children?

They are everywhere, and we can only imagine how the brains of those who already lacked support and nurture, security and reassurance have processed their experience.

In reality, they may be safe in school, but their traumatised, distressed or anxious brains cannot *feel* that way. They can instead be “trapped” by their brain’s most basic instinct—to stay alive.

On the outside, they may be defensive, distracted, disruptive, needy or withdrawn. They are probably under-achieving or not “on-task”. Yet, on the inside, they are helpless, incapacitated by an aroused “fight, flight, freeze” response which perceives threat and alarm everywhere. Their brains respond to that perception, not to reality. Thinking capacity is immobilised, or at best, it is clouded.

Through our mature, adult state, we may see the struggling child as one who is overreacting or out of control, rather than the distressed child that they are.

We see our reality, not theirs...

But whether we, as adults, agree that this response is proportionate or valid is irrelevant. Efficiency wins out over accuracy, just as Mother Nature intended. Survival needs are prioritised over learning needs, every time.

¹² *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (2014) Bessel van der Kolk

Promoting emotional health, wellbeing and resilience: Solutions

The Neurobiology of Emotionally Healthy Brains

So how do we make brains feel better and do better? The answer is: we get the dopamine flowing. Dopamine is gold dust for the brain, for no other reason than it is our feel-good hormone. It stimulates, among other things, engagement, motivation and joy. But dopamine also optimises a healthy brain, and so, if it is good for brain health, it is good for learning, *and* it is good for wellbeing.

Dopamine neutralises the acid in adrenaline and cortisol that immobilises neural connectivity. You know how you feel better if you take a walk when you are stressed? That's why. You give yourself a dose of dopamine, stressor hormones are flushed out and your "learning brain" can come back online. Dopamine strengthens neural connectivity too. In 2018, the Medical University of Vienna outlined their findings^[13] that dopamine is related to "reward processes, tackling demanding problems in a targeted and motivated way, expressing itself in the form of curiosity and willingness to learn".

Our results indicate a close correlation between dopamine, exhilaration and creativity. Our results provide the neural mechanisms explaining why the Aha! experience is more salient, facilitates long-term memory storage and reinforcement. An Aha!-moment is therefore more than just a simple feeling of joy or relief but is a special form of fast retrieval, combination, and encoding process.

Generating Dopamine

So how do we generate more dopamine? Well, it is easy: when we move our bodies, when there is time for pro-social connection and laughter, space for creativity and play, a surge of dopamine runs through our brains and bodies. It turns out that so many of the activities that are ever diminishing in children's lives are the very activities that get their brains cells connecting!

Creating environments which pump dopamine through the system do not need to be reserved only for playtimes, breaks and golden time. Why should they be, when they speed up neural connectivity and unlock children's amazing capacity for learning?

Imagine if we started every day with a dopamine boost, if we used that to flush out the toxicity of stress and stimulate young brains, ready for the day and ready to learn?

¹³ <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2018-04-dopamine-producing-areas-brain-creativity.html>

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Generating Serotonin

Serotonin is another brain-balancing hormone great for neutralising an acidic brain. More often than not, many of us charge through life at hectic speeds, tackling impossible “to do” lists and demands on our time which drain our inner-resources, leaving us far too close to the fight or flight state than is healthy.

We barely have the time to catch our breath.

But what happens if we make space in our lives and the classroom, to simply slow down?

For everyone to stop, and just be... still, be silent, to take notice, to be in the moment?

When we just connect with or ground ourselves, or intentionally take a few meditative breaths, the serotonin flows. These activities—which can often be a game-changer in just three or five minutes—deserve so much more than to only be reserved for wellbeing days, special occasions or the occasional visit from a yoga teacher.

Imagine the difference it could make to our days if they started with serotonin? Can we afford just a few moments together to notice the silence or the sounds, a bit more often? What might happen if we all took two minutes to land in the moment, breathe deeply, and notice the colours a bit more often?

How can schools promote wellbeing and resilience?

How can creativity help? Some practical activities you can try out in your school...

Generating Dopamine

Drama activities and games are some of the most dopamine generating (and therefore brain-building) exercises out there.

When bodies are in motion, powered by imagination and unique ideas, all the sensory areas of the brain come to life, simultaneously. A flicker of good-natured competitiveness that comes with games; name games, team games, whole group games; create eye contact, laughter and motivation which illuminate that mighty social brain!

Don't wait for the tiny windows of time to bring these activities into your learning spaces!

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Begin and end the day with movement, novelty and excitement. Create an imaginary space or a different place. Re-arrange the furniture, put an invisible box in the middle of the room, or give everyone a new name for the day!

Or reset stressed-out brains with a dose of anticipation or a burst of the unexpected. Stop for an impromptu Conga, a classroom song or a treasure hunt outdoors!

Whatever you choose, (or even better, your children choose!) a regular 5 minutes of fun to weave such activities into the day is not time wasted! That's how fuzzy brains become fizzy brains that are ready for learning!

Generating

Serotonin

Together, take a few moments to slow down, attend to your breathing and just observe the stillness. ... We can sometimes feel the vibe change, instantly. You're not imagining it... As serotonin begins to flow, nervous systems settle and the electromagnetic energy field that exists between everyone starts to synchronise.

Take your class on a guided imaginative journey... Help everyone slow down and tune in, setting a scene that feels safe and an experience fit for the moment... Might a trip to the seaside lift everyone's spirits? Listen to the seagulls, smell the candy floss...

Would a woodland walk restore calm? Look up! How tall are the trees? Notice the knobbly bark, the pine cones on the ground... Will a space adventure spark curiosity? Is it biting cold or scorching hot out there? Take ten steps... What does weightlessness feel like?

Get out the paper, the paints, the colours. Play some relaxing music. Set a timer... not to count it down, but to protect the time for your children to immerse themselves in the moment... To go *slowly*, to transfer their imaginations, to observe their visualisation as it materialises...

Generating Oxytocin

Humans have been making music together for millennia because it brings the collective together, which is how humans function at their best. Use music to create a community, to invite a contribution from each child...

We don't need to wait for assembly or 'music', or to 'be good' at it to sing a song!

Reduce self-consciousness, or just have fun by changing some of the words or singing as fast as you can.

Or create a circle and compose a soundtrack within minutes. Set the beat with a clap. As this continues, invite the next child to add their own

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repeating sound, using their bodies, voice, objects or instruments. Keep those sounds going, bringing in each child one by one, until they're all participating and performing to one continuous tune.

Or invent a soundscape. Using the same method to layer the noises, create different environments, even weather conditions. Collectively and wordlessly, can you all re-create a storm at sea, the creaking and rattling as you wander round a really old house or the crackling of a forest fire?

Essentially, this is about integration, so ensure that you notice each child's contribution, holding the space for those more vulnerable children... because our most primitive human need is to feel accepted and to simply *belong*.

The Antidote to Powerlessness

Strength-Based Approaches

While nobody disputes that support is needed, even the term "catch-up" is loaded with deficit. This kind of language can add more pressure to children: the anxiety and fear of being left behind.

While "behind" in some shape or form may be a reality for many learners, failure can be crushing, and the potential for shame in deficit-based approaches is huge. Shame generates the most toxic biochemical composition in the body, a biological reaction that literally prevents the brain from learning.

Pride, on the other hand, generates the healthiest biochemical cocktail possible. Certificates and rewards may have their place, but where is the opportunity for every child to feel proud of themselves, everyday?

Instead of being disempowered and demoralised by the subliminal "not good enough" label that can come with "being behind", imagine what might happen if we all took a strengths-based approach? How can we motivate or help children to strengthen their strengths? Because "managing weakness" starts there. Like Henry Ford said: "Whether you think you can, or you think you can't, you're *right*."⁽¹⁴⁾

Those who feel capable of growth and change are capable of growth and change.

We must never lose sight of the fact that children are born with an innate love of learning—they could not develop without it.

What are your children itching to learn? What puts fire in their bellies? What are they still thinking of when they fall asleep at night? Let's use that.

¹⁴ Emphasis added.

Imagine how much better they could face failure if they start with a strong sense of self. If, from the very core of their being, they proudly believe they are a competent, capable human being?

Self-Expression, Sense of Self and Sense of “Personal Power”

Within schools of thousands, year groups of hundreds and classes of thirty or more, are individual people, each with their own likes, dislikes, nuances and needs. Beyond the confines of a pre-determined curriculum, inflexible timetables and uniform clothing, where are the opportunities for self-expression, to cultivate individual identity?

Children—like any of us—thrive when they have a sense of personal power within them, rather than when we have power over them. Young people's voices need not be limited to special occasions, or the school council. How are we embracing the rights of every child to think independently and freely express their needs and individuality?

And while there will always be those children who struggle to conform and comply, we should keep in mind that none of us are born with the skills of self-awareness, or emotional regulation. Where is the space to develop a strong sense of self—knowing yourself, being self-aware and developing the self?

Traffic light systems and red cards may be effective in “managing” young people, but such sanctions are ultimately intended to gain or maintain control. Sadly, it is sometimes neither realistic, fair, nor even possible for a child's brain to “make good choices”, so how can we expect them to learn better self-control by taking control away from them? Especially in a post-Covid world, where so many are still grappling with the loss of personal agency?

Children who have mastered the skills of knowing themselves, identifying their own needs, expressing themselves appropriately and exercising self-control do not need the threat of “going on red” or “in the sin-bin”.



How do children learn the skills of self-expression?
Through creativity.

How do they experience “choice and voice”, or exercise agency in their learning?
Through creativity.

How do they produce unique and individual pieces of work?
Through creativity.

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Imagine what a difference we could make if, deeply embedded into the daily experience of every child, were the opportunities to express themselves and their needs with agency, make meaningful decisions, and the expectation that their voices were valuable and valued?

How can creativity help?

Some practical activities you can try out in your school...



Strengthening Strengths

Responsibilities can feel wonderful when they help children feel included and competent. We all thrive when we feel our contribution is valued, so how do we make that possible for every child?

Beyond their 'learning', identify together all the different tasks that children do - or could do - in the setting. Level of interest, skill or importance is irrelevant. It's time to re-frame these seemingly insignificant tasks, because it's ownership; designating those responsibilities to a particular child; that can give them permission to bloom!

Now give each task a job title! Having fun with this transforms the most mundane of responsibilities into opportunities that children relish. Who is your *Head of Crayons*, *Paper Distribution Specialist* or *Attendance Analyst*? Which class doesn't need a *Communications Officer*, *Chief of Chairs*, *Ventilation Co-ordinator* or *Electronics Engineer*?

Autonomy and a sense of agency do very powerful work here, so never exclude children from this activity. It is *strengthening strengths* that manages weakness, so pay close attention to how those vulnerable children; those who often feel like they're failing; rise to particular a challenge, and give them more of it. Find a way to embrace the unique gifts and strengths that each child brings.

Developing Self-Expression

The arts can provide a powerful way for young people to express themselves – providing a space where there is no right or wrong and enabling personal expression.

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What's your children's vision for *their* future? While they may not be able to create their own curriculum or timetable, there are countless opportunities for young voices to meaningfully imprint what it means to be in your school.

Could they have a role in determining the name of *their* classes, *their* school teams, *their* form names? The photographers, graphic designers, artists and writers of tomorrow are in your classrooms. How is that expressed in your school's identity; your colours, logo, website? Your motto, values and ethos?

Self-expression and decision-making need not require lengthy discourse and debate. Create a poll. Stick your multiple-choice answers up in different zones or corners of the room. Within just a minute or two, and with no need for words, children can express a lot; their opinions and ideas, what they agree with, what changes would work for them, not against them...

There are plenty ways we can say "*I'm listening*". What do you need to ask?

Enhancing A Sense of Pride

It's always good to hear "*I'm proud of you*" but "*I'm proud of myself*" is quite different. What's your children's proudest achievement; today, this week, this year, in their lives? Make sure it's alive in your spaces.

Does the work *they're* most proud of have a place to be seen; a classroom gallery, the head teacher's office, the school newsletter?

Why aren't certificates ever self-awarded?

Have regular award ceremonies for the self-certification "*I am proud of myself for...*", "*I'm brilliant at...*", "*My great achievement is...*"

End the day how you want the next day to begin...

Make a version of 'Appreciations' part of your daily ritual. Create a circle. Anyone can start;

*"I appreciate *choose one other person* for *choose one thing*...*

*I appreciate myself for *choose one thing*."*

Don't focus on attainment... Bring effort, personal qualities, uniqueness and acts of kindness to the table.

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Some children, especially those children who don't have a strong relationship with their own success, may feel resistance around this. You might too.

Model it anyway... *"I appreciate myself for being here"* is a fail-safe, if nothing else is forthcoming.

Enhancing positive relationships: peer, teachers, schools and parents

The Brain Behind the Behaviour

While it is still too easy to dismiss vulnerable children as reactive, dramatic or "badly behaved", there is a growing awareness of subjects such as Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE)s and trauma, much of which is underpinned by our knowledge about how such experiences affect young brain development.

Increasingly, we are recognising that all behaviour is a form of communication, and that there are more effective ways to facilitate "behaviour change" than traditional, punitive approaches. Led by a growing body of evidence which suggests that those old approaches simply do not work.

So why don't they?

While nobody disputes that everybody benefits—children included—from good personal conduct; a fundamental flaw of "behaviour management" strategies is, that they are largely built on the premise that young people have conscious and autonomous control of their behaviours at all times.

While some children undoubtedly upset others or hurt people, the vast majority of them do not actively make this decision. Self-management, impulse-control and the ability to make appropriate choices in the moment are not skills within reach of a dysregulated brain, and the outcome is almost always determined by the environment which makes those demands. Consequently, stressor hormones are much more likely to increase, magnifying rather than minimising, the likelihood of a fight-flight response.

Imagine if, beyond the "problem behaviour" that we can see, we supported the unseen impairments within the brain. As sure as we'd provide a ramp for a wheelchair-user, how can we ensure inclusion for those children who are simply at the mercy of a misfiring brain?

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Why Belonging, Connection and Emotional Safety Come First

The tide is beginning to turn. Increasing numbers of schools are now introducing restorative and relationship-based models of practice, such as Nottinghamshire County Council's "Understanding Behaviour in Schools Toolkit".⁽¹⁵⁾

While relationship-based approaches may be a stark contrast to more traditional measures of discipline, they are not about "rewarding" bad behaviour or opening the floodgates for classrooms full of unruly, over-indulged children. Through the lens of brain development, we can simply recognise "badly behaved" children as ill-equipped to express themselves appropriately, that they have needs that are not being met and skills that have not yet been mastered.

Meeting those needs and learning those skills is within our reach, but the green light of safety must be reached first. And so very often, it is the quality of connection and relationships that drive us there.

Connections Count

Although lacking the survival tools of many other species, like sharp claws, big teeth, highly attuned senses, immense speed, strength or agility; humans are still arguably the most successful species on the planet.

Why?

At birth, a baby is equipped with—albeit a very blunt instrument—the "survival brain", to stay alive. The presence of an available human being is all that is needed, and that connection is the difference between "safe" and "unsafe".

From then until the end of life, this remains the case for every one of us. We are not meant to survive in isolation, much less thrive in it. The key to our success is down to one simple human characteristic, and that is our social capacity: the ability to function co-operatively and collectively, for the safety and wellbeing of ourselves, and everyone else in our "tribe". Nature designed us to function as our most productive and fulfilling version of ourselves, *together*.

Whether through our understanding of how the social brain develops from infancy, in direct response to the interactions with their care-givers, or through theoretic approaches such as, Attachment Theory⁽¹⁶⁾—first coined by John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth in the 1960s but progressively being more fully understood through the lens of neuroscience—one thing of which we can absolutely be sure is that *relationships matter*.

¹⁵ [Wellbeing for Education Return Nottingham | The East Midlands Education Support Service \(em-edsupport.org.uk\)](https://www.wellbeingforeducationreturnnottingham.org.uk/)

¹⁶ [Bowlby & Ainsworth: What Is Attachment Theory? \(verywellmind.com\)](https://www.verywellmind.com/bowlby-ainsworth-attachment-theory/)

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The quality of adult-child relationships is critical in how the child will develop, not just in childhood, but potentially for life.

The Impact of Social Isolation

The effect of isolation on the brain is becoming better understood, with various researchers concluding that the "Isolated Brain"⁽¹⁷⁾ struggles to such an extent, that its growth and functioning can be impaired. Thus the potential for harm caused by enforced and prolonged social starvation has raised numerous questions about how humans connect with and treat one another.

Young people's relationship with their learning starts with the quality of the relationship with the other people in the environment—who they learn with and from—and we *must* consider the role that those connections play in classroom life.

Imagine being the child who only ever feels like they "belong" when they are in school? Some do.

Many children have a stronger sense of acceptance in school than anywhere else in their lives, and yet schools are also the places where a multitude of relationships have been suspended and severed. But repairing these ruptures is not difficult.

Is there not a more profound human experience than, "You are important to me, and I care about you?"

How does it feel to be greeted with warmth every morning—the simplicity of a smile, soft eyes, and a kind voice?

Imagine what a difference we make to some children, and how easily we can relieve the stress that the beginning of the day can bring. How can we help children to know they belong, or ensure that every moment in school feels connected, accepting and secure?

The Social Brain

Pro-social relationships are key to the healthy development of all human beings. In fact, 40% of our neo-cortex—the frontal lobes, AKA the "thinking brain"—is dedicated to social and emotional processing. This means that nearly half of the learning brain is stimulated, simply by providing an enriched social and emotional environment. The argument to give space for children to reconnect with friends, to enjoy free and outdoor play is not just a moral one.

¹⁷ <http://www.brainfacts.org/search?q=isolation>

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And what about brain biochemistry as well?

When we intentionally and meaningfully connect with our learners, we give them a healthy dose of oxytocin. Although largely produced by

physical touch and expressions of love, this acid-neutralising marvel is also generated through warm, accepting relationships, by a sense of community and interconnectedness.

Working With, Not Against the Brain

It may be courageous, out of the box, defiant even, when set against the backdrop of "lost learning", but those schools which are stimulating young brains with fun and play; refilling the cup of missed human connection, and placing creativity at the heart of classroom practice, are fuelling children's brains with healthy hormones.

And while they are, those young brains are gradually being reprogrammed. New neural connections become established, imprinting the belief that school is a place of acceptance and belonging, where they are invited to develop and grow.

The green light says "safe", "survival brains" switch off, "thinking brains" switch on.

Imagine how we could strengthen young brains if person-centred relationships were the beating heart of school life? How can we ensure they are at the core of our policy, our practice, and the whole value system of our schools?

How can creativity help?

Some practical activities you can try out in your school...

Child-Adult Relationships

Children need to feel that they not only matter, but that; even if only for a short time; they are central to the attention, interest and care of a significant adult.

How do you bring that level of connection; be present and available; especially for those children who frequently need it so badly?

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What do your children know how to do that the grown-ups don't? What do they understand better than you? Children so often have so much to tell us or teach us, and reversing the roles need not mean undermining your authority.

Implement a regular 'Teach the Teacher' session, enabling them to take on a role of guide or facilitator.

Give your children a genuine sense of agency and the experience, and expectation of *really* being heard. Create an anonymous post box in the classroom to pass on complements or even file a complaint (because we *are* listening).

Have some fun with children deciding a rule for the grown-ups for the day. Yes, this needs to be facilitated carefully, but show them you trust them.

It's ok to be a little vulnerable; you're human too, and connection with another really '*human*' human can be deeply profound.

Building Friendship Skills

Friendship groups will always form and children will always gravitate to the same peers, but there are so many ways of mixing this up without purposefully dividing children. A quick burst of 'keepy-uppy'; keeping the balloon or ball moving and in the air for as long as possible; can bring your group together as one. There are no teams, no winners, just one group goal.

Have your young people organise themselves according to arbitrary facts; a line from the oldest to the youngest, their birth months. Can they arrange themselves without talking to each other; in height order, from the shortest-to-longest hair, the smallest-to-largest shoes? What can they implicitly learn about one another just by observing and connecting in silence?

If pair work is needed, the simplicity of a stick; a short length of bamboo cane will do; can be transformational. Both children use a forefinger to suspend it in the air. From here, they work in unison, taking it in turns to lead; moving around, while their partner follows, both ensuring that the stick doesn't fall. Can they go for a walk, explore height, the floor, speed up? How attuned can they get; can they switch leader without words as they silently improvise a kind of shared dance?

Group Cohesion

Movement and dance activities are great for this. Get them in pairs; A child in front who closes their eyes while the child behind gently places her hands gently on his shoulders. Can they put faith in their partner to guide them around the space and navigate any obstacles, relying only on tapping to communicate when to *start* and *stop*, when to *go left* or *right*? Work on mastering this trust... and extend the activity by increasing the group size.



Go beyond the handprint and murals that typically represents a class. Can your children create their own group identity, constructed of what each of them brings to the whole? Create a photo project. Assemble an image of a single person by integrating a piece of each child in your group. Who is this person? Give them a name and an identity of their own. What do we want to celebrate about them? Start by writing one sentence about them, then fold the paper over, and pass it on to a child... Carry on until you've accumulated a poetic masterpiece.

Tolerating Change and Uncertainty: Why Resilience Matters

A typical childhood is mapped out shortly after birth. From age four onwards, their education manages a huge amount of their young lives: timetables determine their minutes and hours, terms determine their weeks and months.

It makes for a predictable life.

So, of the changes they have faced, it is perhaps living in an unpredictable world that has been more unsettling than anything else—ever-moving goal posts and endless, unanswered questions.

Although the Character and Resilience Manifesto⁽¹⁸⁾ of 2014 acknowledges the role of resilience in schools, the characteristics detailed within, such as, "grit and determination" align more with "academic resilience"—the ability to achieve in school despite adversity—than they do with a broader mindset of adaptability, responding to challenges as they arise and tolerating ambiguity.

¹⁸ A pdf of the manifesto can be found at: [Social Mobility educationengland.org.uk](https://socialmobilityeducationengland.org.uk)

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“Achieving” is not the primary concern for those children who find just getting through the school gate a daily source of fear or worry. A shortage of “grit” is not the problem. The problem is that their anxiety, their fear of separation, and the mistrust in their own ability to adapt (again) is well founded. Why should the belief that they are now safe in the world come easily? While plenty have, why would they all just blend seamlessly back into school and classroom life?

None of us were anticipating a pandemic, but it is those children who went into the subsequent lockdown feeling like confident and courageous human beings—assured of their individual strengths—who are largely the ones coming out that way.

Imagine how many more might be emerging courageously if they had all gone into it armed with a well-equipped “resilience toolbelt”? How can we nurture bouncebackability, promote adaptability, and cultivate the ability to thrive—not just survive—in uncertainty?

Conclusions

Redefining Resilience

We cannot predict the future, but the pandemic of 2020 has changed what it means to be a “resilient child”. We can now see that our young people must be prepared for the unpredictable. It is not simply *what they know* that will prepare them for life, but their ability to navigate *the unforeseen*.

The future-ready child will be able to dance effortlessly over the shifting sands of life; to carve pathways through unknown territory, sudden change and unexpected obstacles.

*If we can incorporate in our schools what neuroscience is teaching us about the brain, we can empower entire generations of human beings not only to explore, question and create; but to empathise, nurture and value themselves and others and our place in this world. A society of emotionally developed and healthy minds that can navigate the world with self-awareness and regulation; to be **in control** of their emotions, rather than being controlled by them.*

What might we achieve then?

The Future of the Creative Child

Creative opportunities are not simply a matter of entitlement limited to self-expression or just fun. With automation ever increasing, it is the creative minds—those that will never be replaced—that we will need to preserve, protect and grow. Creativity is one of the “the four Cs”⁽¹⁹⁾ which, it is speculated, will be

¹⁹ [What Are the 4 Cs of 21st Century Skills? \(aeseducation.com\)](https://www.aeseducation.com/what-are-the-4-Cs-of-21st-century-skills/)

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needed by the 21st century workforce, alongside critical thinking, communication, and collaboration.

Building creative brains is not a task for some point in the future. What we are learning from neuroscientists such as David Eagleman⁽²⁰⁾ and Anna Abraham⁽²¹⁾ should be informing practice and policy in classrooms across the world.

Their insights are teaching us how the creative brain makes rapid neural connections, how those connections migrate across the sensory, social and emotional areas of the brain, between the left and right hemispheres.

While in themselves, arts subjects may not solve the world's problems, creativity must be at the heart of children's learning, right now.

Now more than ever, creativity must be a way of being, a way of life.

The artistic child creates the tangible from a vision in their head. The questions that nobody has yet thought of emerge from a curious child.

Inside an out-of-the box mind are the solutions that nobody else has thought of.

The imaginative child is the thinker of original thoughts and ideas.

Creativity is not merely the stuff of special events, golden time or rewards for good work. It deserves to do so much more than fill the last minutes of the day or the last day of term. It cannot just be the gift of a single forward-thinking teacher.

Not only is neuroscience teaching us that brains that *are* well, *learn* well, but that creativity is the glue which binds both together.

Just imagine if we used what we know to wake and stimulate young brains, to make use of the 86 billion brilliant brain cells that are ready and waiting ready inside each young mind?

Everything had to be imagined before it became a reality.

Just imagine...

²⁰ [The Creative Brain – David Eagleman](#)

²¹ [The Neuroscience of Creativity \(anna-abraham.com\)](#)

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MODULE 4 Emotional Learning Interventions

Introduction

The COVID-19 epidemic has had a profound emotional impact on girls and boys. The prolongation of the confinement situation, the closure of schools and the significant psychological distress arising from the losses, uncertainties and fears associated with the health crisis have significantly impacted on key areas of the development of this essential part of citizenship.

In particular, they have been particularly committed:

- Play and physical and psychomotor activity
- Time organization and daily routines
- Bonds and relationships in the family
- Socialization
- Education
- Emotion management

The progressive recovery of normalcy through the different phases of the decontamination has allowed the gradual rehabilitation of these areas until their normalization. In this sense, the return to the activity of educational spaces and leisure has a special relevance, because its work, precisely, is conveyed through the different elements and can contribute greatly to its recovery and one of the main elements is the implementation of Emotional Learning Interventions.

Educators, monitors and adults in general must be available and willing to talk about discomfort, answer questions from children about their experiences and concerns, without forcing but without avoid the subject, and above all without scaring us. We must therefore create situations conducive to conversation and emotional expression without feeling compelled to follow a closed plot line.

We want to introduce some these kinds of situations: storytelling and Theatre of the Oppressed.

By listening to and sharing stories students can gain better insight into those around them and themselves. Telling a story allows a person to reflect on their thoughts and express them with an emotion attached. Children become successful in communicating their emotions and become aware of the emotions of others is through storytelling. Storytelling assists the child in gaining language that helps children understand their emotions (Peterson & Biggs 2001; Tayler 2015; Whorral & Cabell 2016).

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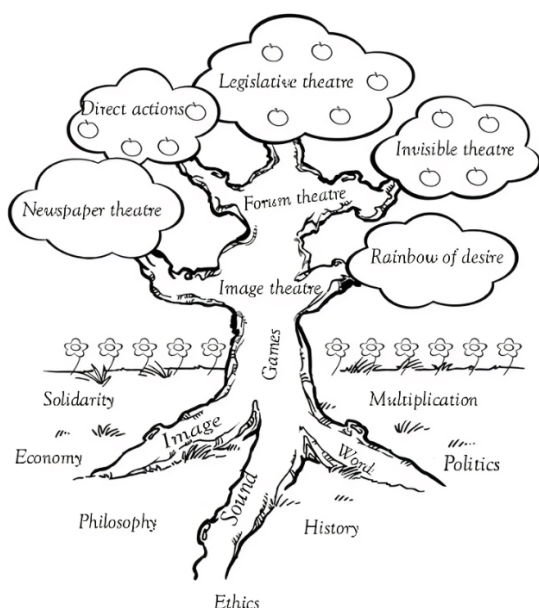
According to Figueroa-Sánchez (2008), storytelling is a way that allows children to listen to the emotions of another and interpret it (Figueroa- Sánchez 2008). Children do not always have the words they need to express their emotions and thoughts, and storytelling is one way that supports them in building that emotional understanding. One way that emotional growth can be fostered is through encouraged discussion between children and adults. Adults can help children navigate and value their feelings and guide children to have a clearer understanding of themselves (Dettore 2002)

Listen this record about how to use storytelling in the classroom:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BBLavLLn9nU>

Drama-based strategies, that include **Creative Drama (CD)** (García-García et al., 2017) and Forum Theatre (FT), based on the Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal, 2006) are a medium of expression of emotions and to discuss students' social problems creatively and critically.

Tree of the Theatre of the Oppressed



Theatre of the Oppressed technique established by Augusto Boal, a well-known Brazilian dramatist, is a kind of social therapy where people are not just watching the play but are also encouraged to participate in the play and give ideas and solutions to the problems.

The methodology of the Theatre of the Oppressed has been used to cultivate empathy through dramatic experimentation, where the spectator becomes a spect-actor and explores different alternatives for understanding and solving issues (Corsa, 2021)

Know the basic of it: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kilg180Mfkg>

Can you imagine how effective can be use this method to create/imitate/play a situation, conversations and emotional moments with your students?

Furthermore, it is especially important to convey calm and serenity when working for good management and emotional regulation.

Since children are very sensitive and receptive, not only to words, but also in nonverbal language, we need to enhance the non-verbal communication through the gaze, facial and body expression, depending on what we say, but also to how we say it, conveying serenity, joy, confidence, sincerity, closeness, availability and respect by the rules. If we are okay, then we will be able to accompany in his affective development, based on achieving emotional self-regulation, the ability to properly manage and channel the emotions and emotional integration, that is, doing that rational, emotional and processing body of each experience are integrated and be consistent. We are conscious that an important problem is that teachers are affected for these difficult and problematic emotional situations that students live. For that reason, they should take care firstly for them self, for keeping their mental stability and secondly to lead this kind of conversations when you are emotionally stable.

We must keep in mind that they may have experienced the loss of a loved one, the illness of a family member or the loss of a job of someone close to them. Some have passed, or still pass, fear of going out, getting infected, etc. Others have been very upset or angry at seeing their routines interrupted (school, extracurricular activities, outings in the parks, meetings with friends or family, etc.), leaving them in a complicated situation and extremely vulnerable.

That is why we must be attentive and act in case of detecting any case among our students.

Now it is the time of knowing more about the emotional learning interventions and its bases.

Acceptance and Understanding of Student Mental Health Need

We cannot separate physical and mental health and like physical health, positive mental health promotes success in life. As defined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), "[m]ental health includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel, and act. It also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, and make healthy choices. Mental health is important at every stage of life, from childhood and adolescence through adulthood." In schools, we prioritize three critical and inter-related components of mental health: social (how we relate to others),

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emotional (how we feel), and behavioral (how we act) supports to promote overall well-being (Chafouleas, 2020)



Emotional stability is the result of good mental health and also there is a personal predisposition for it. It must be taken into account that emotions are made up of a set of conscious and unconscious aspects and have a physiological and cognitive basis. Likewise, emotions respond to neurovegetative, endocrine and behavioral patterns

that allow reactions to events to be displayed, facilitating their adaptation. But there are also aspects of social cognition, where stressors play an important role.

More and more minors suffer from problems related to anxiety, depression or self-harm and they do not always have the appropriate means and professionals at school to deal with them. 'Before the pandemic we had about 10-20% of children suffering from mental illness problems, not all of whom progressed to an impairment,' said Dr Nina Heinrichs, professor at the Department of Psychology at the University of Bremen. 'Now, from the last 2 years, it looks like it'll go up to 20-25%.'

Students have changed the way they relate both outside and inside the classroom. Last year, virtual classes became "normal" and school life changed completely. There were hardly any talks at recess, games in the courtyard, coffee breaks in the cafeteria... Classes and extracurricular activities, the main leisure of many of the minors, were considerably reduced. In short, educational centres ceased to be the main socialization space for students. And the domino effect was clear: the problems related to the mental and emotional health of many students increased. They have had a lot of time to be alone, some have not made good use of social networks and that has harmed them. They have lost study and sleep habits, as well as perseverance and effort in academics, and all these aspects have affected their mental health.

F. Morales, in his work Introduction to the psychology of health (1999) points out that:

"A healthy individual is one who has a good balance between his body and his mind, and is well adjusted to his physical and social environment; fully controls his physical and mental faculties, can adapt to environmental changes (provided they do not exceed normal limits), and contributes to the welfare of society according to his ability."

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Many mental disorders develop in childhood and this is a period that shows many changes both physically and psychologically. It should be noted that up to 20% of children and adolescents have one or more diagnosable mental disorders; which makes it a stage to which you have to be attentive to behaviors, feelings, attitudes...

We are aware that the subject of mental health today is still taboo in some places and is full of stigma, that is why it is either not talked about or talked about in private, because we have been taught not to talk about it since childhood.

If both teachers and students are educated on mental health issues, it will be much easier to ask for help when it is needed. When teachers understand the needs of their students, they are more prepared to support them. This means to include some classes or extracurricular activities with EQ topic. Are you prepared for it?

Please note that our suggests are for work with healthy children, without diagnoses. In case of having these kinds of students, you need to act and organize your classroom and activities in a special way to answer their special needs.

Emotional Safety

What do we understand by emotional safety? Emotional safety in schools is refers to how safe a student feels in expressing their emotions in school. This supposes that students should feel secure and confident as they express themselves and take on challenges that encourage them to try something new.

Emotionally safe learning environments can be achieved by making social and emotional learning (SEL) an essential part of education. SEL is the process through which children and adults acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills they need to recognize and manage their emotions, feel and show empathy toward others, establish positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. SEL can support conditions for belonging and emotional safety when schools are responsive to students' perspectives and needs, affirming of students' full identities, and promote structures that create predictability and consistency. Competence in the use of SEL skills is promoted in the context of safe and supportive school, family, and community learning environments in which children feel valued, respected, and connected to and engaged in learning.

To feel emotionally safe, students need teachers who are responsive to their needs. Responsiveness is grounded in trusting relationships between the teacher and students, and an understanding of how classroom life is experienced by students (Darling-Hammond et al, 2017; Steele and Cohn-Vargas, 2013).

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To develop a responsive environment, teachers can:

Conduct regular student surveys to provide feedback on classroom activities, instruction and climate.

Schedule one-on-one check ins to listen attentively to students as individuals.

Ask students to write a learner autobiography that explores who they are as learners and how past experiences have shaped their sense of themselves.

Engage in professional learning that supports relationship-building.

In relation to these points, it would be more safety if the tasks in exercises are projective, so students start to speak or write about someone for example from chosen pictures, not about themselves directly

Dealing with panic/crisis attacks while in school

It should be noted that emotions, as such, they respond scarcely to logical reasoning and, in change, they are much more sensitive to other emotions complementary and to our attitudes. In other words that is, in front of a very excited child, either whatever your emotion (anger, fear, sadness ...) will be much more useful our attitude than what you let's say. That doesn't mean words aren't important, but they only help if they are in congruence with our behavior.

What is a Panic Attack? Panic attacks are sudden feelings of intense fear or anxiety. They can sometimes happen during very challenging times but it is important to remember they do pass. The key is to stay calm and breathe.

A panic attack can happen for no apparent reason and the person may have sudden and intense physical symptoms that may last 10 to 20 minutes. The symptoms can include:

pounding heart or chest pain (feeling like having a heart attack)

shortness of breath

dizziness, hot flashes, or chills

nausea

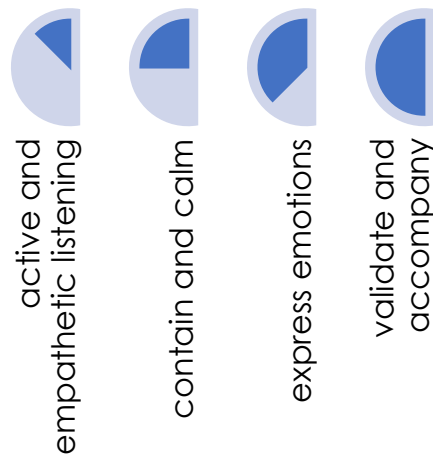
sweating, shaking, or tingling in fingers or toes

feeling like a loss of control, or having a fear of dying or other unrealistic thoughts

There is no magic formula for dealing with discomfort or panic of a child or adolescent but, in front possible emotional demands or overflows that we can find, it is worth bearing in mind that in these situations is much more effective allow and accompany the expression of discomfort from a serene and understanding attitude not to try divert attention, repress or block emotions.

In any case, it is better to leave the reasoning and the explanations for a later time, when the emotion has ceased or calmed down enough so that the child is shown again in dialogue and receptive to the word.

This process can be summarized as follows concepts:



○ *Active and Empathetic Listening*

After a long period of mostly virtual learning, when teachers and students come back into classrooms, they need to build a new relationship and it is basic if we want students to communicate effectively and work collaboratively.

A student's willingness to listen in classrooms, "is a marker of emotional regulation," affirm Frey, Fisher, & Smith (2019). "Unfortunately, for a lot of students, the opposite of speaking is waiting to speak again, rather than listening" (p. 102). Teachers can model effective listening skills, but there is no substitute for having students practice those skills in the classroom with classmates, beginning with pairs.

What does mean to be an active and empathetic listener?

Look at this diagram



Source:

<https://www.educationcorner.com/active-listening-skills-education.html>

Huitt, W. (2009) says:

"Empathetic listening is paying attention to another person with empathy [emotional identification, compassion, feeling, insight]. One basic principle is to "seek to understand, before being understood. Another basic principle is to connect emotionally with another person while simultaneously attempting to connect cognitively. An excellent technique to help one connect cognitively is called "active listening" whereby you repeat back to the person what you think she or he said to make certain you understand. A technique to connect emotionally is to ask how the person feels about the situation or perhaps to make a statement about how you believe the person feels"

How can you be an active and empathetic listener teacher?

To maintain active and empathic listening:

- Thank the trust for trying to communicate to us what is happening to them (use positive reinforcement).
- Offer availability, in time, space and in a receptive attitude.
- Do not judge, interrupt and try to make them feel understood and supported. Create spaces that promote dialogue, where they can express experiences without evaluation or judgment. For example, in leisure spaces will be important to promote assemblies, theatre activities, composition of their own songs, etc.

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- Don't take for granted what your concerns are. We need to listen to them and be careful to let them talk because they will not always express themselves at the time we choose to do so or tell us what we expected.
- Always try to understand the discomfort from the point of view of the person expressing it, not from ours.
- Avoid offering premature solutions, respond before listening or use expressions such as "Surely there is no such thing", "I would not hesitate to ...", "I do not I do not agree at all in ...", etc.
- Use sentence for supporting feelings expression when it is difficult for child to speak about them "If I were you I would ...",
- If we are not asked but we detect a low mood or misbehaviour, we should approach them. We look for different moments and spaces throughout the day, when they are not with classmates / years in an activity, to ask how they are. If they are small, it is good that we help each other with stories or through symbolic play or drawing, as they are good tools for understanding and expressing emotions.
- Encourage them to ask for help if they are in a difficult situation. Remind them that asking for help is something brave and intelligent.
- Maintain an open and trusted channel of communication to continue talking at another time if in the one we foster they do not want. It's good to be respectful when they want to stop talking about something. We can tell them that we will talk about it again at another time.

○ *Contain and calm*

Being able to calm yourself when emotions run high – or self-regulate – is a learned skill and it isn't a simple procedure. Similar to how we taught a child to tie their shoe once they have acquired the fine motor skills to do so, once a child's brain is developmentally ready to self-regulate, they can learn different strategies and ways that work well for them.

However, when the child's eyes well up with tears or he suffers a panic attack, how can teachers deal with this?

- Speak in a soft, serene tone of voice and try to do so at eye level (sitting, kneeling, etc.).
- Help them relax. Ensure that there is a space (in the classroom, dining room, courtyards, etc.) where they are comfortable and can rest if required.
- Practice reassuring activities. Introduce breathing and relaxation techniques throughout the day and among other activities that take place in the leisure area.

- If the child is disoriented and / or overwhelmed, allow him / her to separate from the group / activity and anticipate the activities that will follow.
- If we detect that they are afraid to stay in the leisure space, for fear of contagion or for other reasons, it is also necessary to deal with this issue with their families to make them aware that, with the appropriate protection measures, they can return. to go out, go to leisure, to school and share physical spaces with their peers and monitors and teachers without danger to their health.
- As for fear, rather than waiting for him to leave to do the usual things again, it is better to return to everyday life gradually, slowly and respectfully, but also resolutely, so that the children recover slowly. little feelings of security and autonomy and fear goes away. Let's not let fear block us.
- With preadolescents and teenagers, leave some space so that they can be alone (at this age they usually begin to be ashamed of emotions), but not excessive. The peer group now represents their greatest source of reference and satisfaction. This discovery of the social fact, of one's own identity and of belonging to a group has been interrupted by the crisis of COVID-19. Therefore, it is important to facilitate reconnection with your peer group in physical leisure spaces and offer fun and attractive alternatives to the connection through new technologies, which must be encouraged to use responsibly.
- Also, with preadolescents and adolescents, offer a perspective that helps them calm down by remembering, for example, a previous situation in which they were able to manage their emotions effectively.

○ *Express emotions*



Social emotional learning is an important factor in teaching young children and as a teacher, you're likely to encounter students with a particular social emotional expression. Nowadays, it is basic you spend time educating your students about how to recognize, manage, and express healthy emotions and feelings or psychological problems.

As part of growing up, children regularly find themselves in unfamiliar situations where they have to negotiate and learn strategies for dealing with the

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world and its people. This is how they learn emotional and social skills that will move them towards being strong, healthy adults. In the meantime, a panic/crisis attacks happen while in school it is even more difficult to manage their emotions.

To avoid and help with these situations you can follow these ideas:

- For Preventing
 - o The key is not to get stuck in any particular emotion and to feel various emotions as many times a day as necessary.
 - o Help identify and name emotions, something that can already be done with children over 2 years old.
 - o Giving permission to express fear, which is a functional and adaptive emotion, and which we can express without losing control. And differentiate it from panic, which is of shorter duration, but which is an overflowing bodily experience, which can lead to paralysis or flight, which involves a loss of control, and in some cases even consciousness.
 - o Encourage and facilitate students to experience, express and share their emotions, helping to regulate them, trying not to overwhelm them.
 - o Playing sports regularly generates many benefits for the mind and body, but since confinement has made it difficult for them to bring adequate physical activity to their vital energy, it would be good to include various activities throughout the day that allow this reconnection with the body itself, those of others and sport as a fundamental activity for their psychological stability.
 - o Promote activities that generate hope, laughter, smiles and good humor as a mechanism of resilience. In the leisure area you can do many activities from the youngest to the oldest, creating a good group atmosphere.

- Advices for coping in crisis situations
 - o In a crisis situation, any emotion experienced can be normal.
 - o Letting the complaint express himself to bring out the anger, which is a natural and adaptive emotion, as opposed to aggression, which may come from a lack of emotion regulation but is not justifiable and requires reparation.
 - o Facilitate the release of nervous energy through play, movement and artistic expression. We can help you express your feelings through playful activities. In the leisure space there is an opportunity to do so through drawing and the use of plastic materials, music, dance and play. For example, you can draw, write, model your fears with plasticine and then address how we can deal with them.

- Encourage them to express themselves but without forcing them. If you see that you are making a dynamic expression of emotions and an important part of the group does not want to participate, try again. In particular, with preadolescents and adolescents, you can encourage them to express themselves with special care not to invade their privacy. As we have mentioned, you should never force yourself to speak.

- *Validate and accompany*

Panic attacks are terrible experiences and victims often feel embarrassed or ashamed by them. Ensure that the student does not feel stigmatised by their attacks by being willing to talk about it with them and trying to understand more about how they feel and how you can help.

The more we talk about these things the more we understand and the better we are able to help. Additionally, the more open a student is able to be about their panic attacks, the more likely they are to be able to feel confident telling someone when they feel the early signs of an attack coming on which gives us a better chance of being able to prevent attacks from escalating in the first instance.

No matter how irrational you think their panicked response to a situation is, it's important to remember that the danger seems very real to them. Simply telling them to calm down or minimizing their fear won't help. But by helping them one ride out a panic attack, you can help them feel less fearful of any future attacks.

How can you do this?

– For prevention

- To help the child express how he feels, naming their sensations, emotions, etc., it is important to validate and legitimize their emotions, without minimizing their importance.
- Find moments to explain that sadness it appears naturally, when we miss it something or someone and, if we cry, it is normal and it helps us feel better, just like when we remember happy moments. If the child reacts with great irritability, instead of ignoring it we can gently comment that we understand that she is angry, but that this anger will also happen.
- Explain that there are many ways to be angry, worried, sad or crying without tears "and that sometimes evil humour is one of them. We can tell the child that we understand her and we know she's sad, angry or scared, to help him / her understand how you feel and redirect your conduct.
- Maintain schedules, routines and limits reasonable and flexible. Boys and girls need predictable limits and routines and coherent that help them get organized and the give a sense of order, control and security. Fire posters

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and draw the rules and schedules that you will follow in the morning, in the afternoon and at dining times.

- In the various activities that take place throughout the day, it is good to try to include positive and productive activities, adjusted to their age, that allow them to have control over small things. It is important to encourage and strengthen their autonomy in carrying out daily activities such as organize the material for an activity, check the classroom before everyone leaves, warn a classmate, etc. Assigning small responsibilities will strengthen your self-concept and self-esteem.
 - Enable a corner/ a special room in the school where children can go for a while if they feel overwhelmed. They should have fun material to entertain themselves with: paper and colours, books, stories, graphic novels, puzzles, pillows (to use to rest or to channel anger functionally, etc.), symbolic objects to convey fear (teddy bears, children, costumes, etc.).
 - Encourage preadolescents to explore what activities help them to be better and perform them (cooking, playing an instrument, reading, playing ball for a while, etc.), doing group cohesion activities, and encouraging the contact and time with your peer group respecting the established health measures.
 - Keep in mind that symbolic gestures allow for emotional processing of situations. You can consider organizing a session of favourite songs, poems or stories of the participants, etc.
 - Maintain gratitude and positive reinforcement. Students have largely adapted to the conditions of confinement imposed on us by the pandemic, and have endured the much-needed restrictions on mobility, space, and relationships. They have even gone far beyond what we adults might have thought, and we should be very grateful for their effort. They need to know for us that they are wonderful people.
-
- For reaction in crises situation
 - If they are discouraged or anxious, they can agree on what we can do when they are like this, and what activities or games motivate them and make them more excited about the ones you have in the leisure space.

How we communicate in situations emotionally complicated?

In difficult times, when we are dealing with a child or adolescent in a situation of emotional fragility, it is advisable to choose the words that best help to accompany their discomfort and comfort them.

Following the plot line described so far, we bring you the following recommendations regarding the use of verbal language:

DO NOT HELP	HELP
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be strong, don't cry. You are doing very well. • You will see how everything happens. • This will make you stronger. • I know how you feel. This will make you a better person. • He thinks there are others that are worse. • Being angry, angry and sad will not help. • The same thing has happened to others in recent weeks, and ... it's time to move on. • You have no reason to put yourself like that. So, there aren't any. • Don't cry anymore. • You don't have to be afraid. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I am very sorry for what you are going through. • Count on me to talk. • You must miss him a lot. • I can't even imagine what you're going through. • I know every day is an effort. • People can't imagine how difficult it is. • Do you want to talk? • Sometimes we feel bad even without a clear reason. • Cry what you need, do it by my side. • Being scared is normal, but we must try not to be afraid block us.

The implementation of emotional learning interventions: the emotional education

To start with this last part, think about this question... How is your school/college providing action for emotional health and wellbeing?

We suggest to use this instrument for survey and following discussions in parents' meetings, in teachers' meetings, in classroom discussion with students. Knowing the school's reality, you would be able to implement better the emotional learning interventions.

Please use the checklist below to generate thought, stimulate discussion around what is happening in your school and what would be even better if...

Key to NWC rating N= Not yet started, W= Working towards, C= Completed (achieved)

What we want to achieve	Where are we? (NWC rating)	What we need to do or evidence	Actions by whom and by when
We use a 'healthy school/college' approach to promote the health and wellbeing of all members of the school community.			
Our leaders recognise the contribution that positive emotional and mental health makes to our school.			
We have a designated emotional well-being lead/team who oversees and coordinates the whole school/college approach.			
We show commitment to facilitating emotional well-being by referencing it in our school development plans, mission statement and other key documents.			
Funding in our school/college is allocated to support staff and pupils'/students' emotional wellbeing.			
Our policies such as Emotional Wellbeing and Resilience, Safeguarding, Confidentiality, PSHE, Equality, Behaviour and Anti-Bullying (including cyberbullying) are embedded across the whole school.			
What are the measurable outcomes of these actions? • • •			

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Source: Promoting emotional health, wellbeing and resilience. A whole school and colleague approach. Central Bedfordshire

Now, think about these concepts and what you can do as a teacher: motivation, interest, aspiration, values and self-esteem to make positive emotional learning interventions a reality for your students.

Beyond making known the emotional universe in which we are all immersed, emotional literacy seeks a series of objectives (Carpena, 2001; Vallés, 2000; Bisquerra, 2000; among others):

Identify cases of poor emotional performance.

Know what emotions are and how to recognize them in others.

Learn to classify emotions.

Modulate and manage the level of emotionality.

Develop tolerance to the frustrations of daily life.

Prevent the consumption of addictive substances and other risk behaviors.

Build resilience.

Adopt a positive attitude towards life.

Prevent interpersonal conflicts.

Fostering knowledge of emotions from the classroom aims for us to learn to be smart in order to be happy. An intelligence focused from an integral perspective in which not only the cognitive dimension is important, but it also needs to be nourished by the emotional and behavioral dimensions. By this we mean that it is not only important to attend to what and how we have to experience everything we feel; but its expression, along with how we should process the information that emotions transmit to us and finally, how we manage them influences our psychological well-being.

In addition, not only children benefit from this teaching and learning process, but also the teachers and the whole educational community receive part of the interest precisely by showing it. And somehow, so do parents if they want and try to reinforce with their children what they have learned in class.

Educating affectivity involves:

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a) Promote the processes of personal knowledge and acceptance. Objective to which the Self-Concept and Self-Esteem programs contribute.

b) Provide students with content and information related to values, attitudes and habits that improve their psychological development.

c) Provide them with examples of correct actions in the face of interpersonal conflicts with an emotional component.

d) Encourage feelings of competence, security and self-respect

And, how can this education be a reality?

Three broad categories of SEL interventions can be identified:

School-level approaches to developing a positive school ethos, which also aim to support greater engagement in learning;

Universal programmes which generally take place in the classroom with the whole class; and

More specialised programmes which use elements of SEL and are targeted at students with particular social or emotional needs.

And as a teacher, which actions can you do?

Action Steps for Educators

- Promote habits of connection. Ensure daily connection with others using a regular schedule of communication
- Create, normalize, and prioritize habits of physical and mental wellness for ourselves and others. Consider building habits of positive and proactive practices (e.g., actively engaging children or students in learning,) using positive feedback to promote growth).
- Model understanding and appreciation for mental health and mental health challenge. A consistent message should be shared

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by all school and program staff that taking care of mental health is just as important as caring for physical health.

- Recognize and respond using a similar process across social, emotional, behavioral, and educational supports. Increase mental health literacy and develop marketing campaigns to look for signs and symptoms of social, emotional, and behavioral needs
- Organize practices into an integrated continuum. Ensure that all children or students have opportunities to maximize educational, developmental, social, emotional, behavioral, and physical outcomes
- Address the specific needs of underserved children and students. Develop specific strategies to support children and students from race, ethnicity, socio-economic, and LGBTQI+ groups, who are underserved and disproportionately at higher risk for experiencing harassment, discrimination, mental health challenges, and barriers to effective mental health care
- Engage families and students. Establish two-way communication between schools, programs, and families
- Consider supports for specific contexts. Protective practices and strategies to build resiliency
- Identify and intervene early. Early interventions conducted by comprehensive school mental health personnel are associated with enhanced educational or developmental performance, decreased need for special education, fewer disciplinary encounters, increased engagement with school, and elevated rates of graduation
- Focus on effective teams. Leadership teams are key to implementing this kind of framework

Conclusions

Programs in social and emotional learning (SEL), when effectively implemented in schools, can lead to measurable and long-lasting improvements in students' lives.

The teacher must offer students a climate of security, respect and trust and provide spaces in the classroom for reflection, for communication with others and for teamwork. Teachers must be aware that their attitudes are a model for all the students around them, and specifically in Early Childhood Education, children work by imitation. Emphasis should also be placed on students understanding that individual work is as important as the group and their individual emotions as well as the emotions they feel as a group. The best way to implement emotional education is first to be trained on how to recognise the

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symptoms, how to cope with difficult emotions etc. and then to integrate it into the different academic areas, in this case in the three areas of Early Childhood Education, and to develop it transversally during the different courses and levels.

On this sense, the emotional literacy of students becomes an educational challenge that more and more colleges and schools face through programs in which emotional education is already integrated and becomes a transversal factor in the centres' educational plan.

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'Well-Be Project'
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