



# PARENTS' FORUM ON MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Microsoft Teams meeting – 25 attendees

**MARCH 25<sup>TH</sup> 2021**

Jonathan Parr, Deputy Headteacher, and Jackie Fisher, school counsellor, hosted.

Introduction: as mental health/wellbeing is such a big topic, we decided to focus in this session on the more 'psychological' end of wellbeing: supporting children with big emotions and challenging thoughts when things aren't going so well. A future session could be devoted to the positive promotion of mental wellbeing – the school does a lot towards this, often through the NHS 'Five Ways to Wellbeing', as do our families.

Jackie, our school counsellor, introduced three concepts which typify the way she works with children who are experiencing vulnerability – and the approaches she shares with all the staff through training:

**Allowing:** validating their emotional experiences, enquiring about how they're feeling, why they might be feeling that way, meeting the child where they are with that experience, rather than trying to 'fix' things. Being curious about their experience with them, helping them go through that 'what's going on for me?' process.

**Resilience:** as parents/carers, our understandable urge is to want to fix so our children don't have to go through difficult things, but this doesn't in the long-term help them develop: we can jump in too soon. Acceptance of making mistakes and looking for the learning from things that have gone wrong. Asking the children, "What could you do to make the situation better?" This helps them develop their problem-solving, independent thinking. Another way of doing this is to ask them for help with our problems (not too big!)

**Consistency:** this is particularly crucial. It supports emotional development and emotional regulation. Routines offer reassurance. When children understand and know what to expect, it builds the foundations for developing social skills and building relationships. Consistency reduces the potential for overly heightened anxiety, which becomes a barrier to learning.

Jonathan shared three concepts from school experience and training he has undertaken in his role as the school's mental health lead:

**Optimism:** the importance of children knowing that there is the potential for positive outcomes. Not about blind hope or leaving them to struggle through on their own, but conveying the clear message that, with the right support, things get better. At school, we

try to build that into all our interactions with children, no matter how difficult or complex the issue, there's a way forward, rather than leaving them feeling helpless.

Agency: giving children the sense that they have a part to play, if we're going to help them build towards their future: secondary school, teenage years, young adult world, complex choices –feeling increasingly empowered to make good choices. Putting them in a place where they feel they have some control over what happens, some influence over the situation. Allowing that space for them to struggle, but by doing that helping them normalize that and build the skills of finding their own solutions. If we as adults model outwardly the process of sitting with difficult emotions and thoughts, it helps build the children's empathy.

A couple of parents said that it was useful to understand the bigger picture, including strategies like using curiosity, but wanted to explore what to do 'in the moment', when the child is experienced heightened anxiety and the rational brain isn't engaged.

This led seamlessly into Jonathan's third word which was 'Chimp'. This was a reference to the social & emotional learning programme the school has developed around the work of among others, Steve Hayes (writer of the 'Chimp Paradox'), which focuses on the relationship between the emotional and the thinking brain (to put it simply!), between triggers, reactions, 'fight/flight/freeze/flop' responses etc.

We discussed how the school approach is always: 'regulate before reasoning': if a child is in a heightened emotional state, it is necessary to help them self-regulate i.e. calm their emotions/body/mind, before then exploring their experience and learning from it. So at school, we teach everyone emotional regulation skills and the idea over time is that children will develop the ability to self-regulate.

We teach techniques such as 'square breathing', 'name it to tame it' (labelling the emotion as a way of creating some 'psychological distance' between the experience and the thinking/reacting), and what are called 'grounding' techniques to bring a child back into the present moment, into their body, away from the downward spiral of anxiety, the worrying about being worried.

The work the school does on teaching children how to respond to big emotions in the moment has a foundation in the day-to-day learning we engage with about the interrelation between our thoughts, feelings and behaviours, when it's not a 'crisis' moment,. It builds on the understanding that the children are developing about their personal triggers and physical reactions etc.

A parent asked how to support a child when the child can see that their response isn't rational, but they can't control the anxiety. Many of the emotional regulation strategies being discussed can play a part in getting things under control to a point where reasoning is possible. It may take quite a long time, during which it could simply be a process of sitting with the child, letting them know that you're there for them, and that when they're ready, you can talk. Trying not to become dysregulated ourselves by the child's emotions, modelling calm which can help them through what's called co-regulation. A

particular strategy that can work in these situations is distraction: as with a 'toddler tantrum', distracting the 'childish mind' from the experience.

Jonathan shared some message from training schools had been given earlier that week from our north Bristol Primary Mental Health Specialist, focusing particularly on anxiety:

Normalising emotions. Anxiety is normal, "It's understandable that you're feeling this way". Anxiety is an adaptive response, we have a need for it, but at times it's less helpful. We don't want to 'pathologise' anxiety. That could lead to a sense of shame. At school, we say 'name it to tame it, no shame, no blame'.

Making mental health an everyday conversation, a part of daily life. Talk about it in the same way as we do physical health. Importance of talking about, expressing and allowing emotions.

A parent asked about how to support their child with feeling stressed by academic pressures.

Jonathan shared the key message from Mr Barber's parent forums on curriculum and assessment this year: that as a school, we're not using the unhelpful language/narrative of 'lost learning' and 'catch up'.

The British Psychological Society has stated that this is putting unnecessary psychological pressure on children and the head of the PSHE association has said that now, after the year we've all been through, is not the time to 'fire the starting gun' and give children the message that they're way behind in a race.

It is understandable that parents will be anxious about children's academic progress. But HJS children will get there, they have time on their side – GCSEs, for example, are a long way off.

This was a useful discussion as it highlighted the real importance of the language we use with children, as the words we use can have a powerful impact

Jonathan signposted some particularly useful sources of information and support, also promoted by the PMHS:

Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families

Young Minds

MindEd for Families

A parent added 'Happy Maps' in the chat, and another parent said the [BBC resources](#) the school had recently shared were also good. And another parent shared a perspective coming out of an interesting approach called NVC (non-violent communication) which is focused on attending to the needs going on 'beneath' our feelings and our interactions with each other.

Jonathan showed [this short video](#) to capture some of the key techniques we use at school in talking to children about feelings. Techniques involved:

-Show curiosity "You haven't seemed yourself today."

-Show empathy "That sounds tricky. Can you tell me more about that and how it makes you feel?"

- Label feelings “It sounds like this is making you feel really worried...”
- Explore together: “What’s worrying you in particular?”
- Invite child to think of way forward “What could you do that might help?”
- Agree to speak again “I’ll check in with you tomorrow, okay”

Jonathan’s last point for the session was about how it can be helpful to think about the longer-term process of what we are trying to achieve with our children: growing their ability to approach difficult things in life with a sense that they can overcome challenges without needing them to be ‘fixed’ for them. This can mean that we don’t get so caught-up and anxious as parents in each difficult moment, but feel the value of knowing that we’re always making steps in that direction, if we can model the self-regulation needed – and the normality of difficult emotional experiences, and the sense of optimism etc.

The PMHS had said how easy it is as adults to pass on our anxiety, and to get caught in an unhelpful ‘feedback loop’ with an anxious child. So it is important for us as adults to understand our own emotions and relationship with anxiety. We need to model that calm approach but also speak out loud about how we cope with anxiety. We will manage to ‘surf the tricky waves’, and each of those waves is an opportunity to build children’s emotional and social skills on the bigger journey to being a young adult.

Other top tips from them:

Allow children to have choices and control in their lives.

Keep them in the loop regarding anticipated changes.

Manage your own stress in healthy ways.

Jackie finished by emphasizing the importance of parents’/carers’ self-care. We discussed the analogy of the oxygen mask on a flight safety talk: how the adult has to put theirs on first before helping the child. We need as adults to look after ourselves, both in the wider sense and also, through self-regulation, in the moment that we’re trying to support our children.

Final thought: so much of what was discussed came back to this: children talking and adults listening. What’s *their* experience? We need to understand this if we’re going to support and help them grow.

Additional websites signposted after the coffee morning by the PMHS:

Childline

NSPCC

The Children’s Society

Nhs.uk/mental/wellbeing

Psychologytools.com

Getselfhelp.co.uk

And for Y6 children post-11: Off the Record and Kooth

And then all of the following too (which will go up on the school website. Much of it is already there):

## **Wellbeing resources for children and young people: information for parents and professionals**

Worried about a child's behaviour or mental health - Info and advice available from:

<https://www.happymaps.co.uk/>

<https://www.childline.org.uk/>

<https://youngminds.org.uk/>

Family support <https://www.familylives.org.uk/>

Supporting your child's mental health:

<https://www.place2be.org.uk/what-we-do/parent-carer-resources/supporting-your-childs-mental-health.aspx>

### **Relaxation and stress management for children**

<http://www.moodcafe.co.uk/for-children-and-young-people/relaxation-for-children.aspx>

Mindfulness/Meditation for children

<https://www.headspace.com/meditation/kids>

*A Boy and a Bear* – The Children's Relaxation Book by Lori Lite, Partners Publishing Group:

ISBN 1886941076

*Cool Cats, Calm Kids: Relaxation and Stress Management for Young People:*

Mary I Williams, Impact Publishers: ISBN 978-0915166947

Indigo Dreams (Audio CD): Lori Lite, Stress Free Kids

*The Big Book of Calm:* Paul Wilson

### **Anxiety**

Guide for parents: *Helping your anxious child:* a step by step guide: Ronald Rapee. New Harbinger Publications. ISBN-10-1-57224-575-1

*What to Do When You Worry Too Much: A Kid's Guide to Overcoming Anxiety:*

Dawn Hueber: Magination Press ISBN 978-1591473145

*Worry Guts* by Jan Mark, Longman

ISBN 978- 0582338913

Other books in the *What to do* series -

What to do when you:

- *Grumble too much* – for overcoming negativity
- *Dread your bed* – for overcoming sleep problems
- *Brain gets stuck* – strategies for managing OCD traits
- *Temper flares* – anger management

### **Anxiety: online resources**

Self Soothe Kit

<https://www.thechaosandtheclutter.com/archives/create-your-own-anti-anxiety-kit-for-children>

<https://gozen.com/49-phrases-to-calm-an-anxious-child/>

'Child Anxiety' video (10 mins) from [www.kidsmentalhealth.ca](http://www.kidsmentalhealth.ca)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4VbxjsO9IYI>

<https://www.childline.org.uk/info-advice/your-feelings/anxiety-stress-panic/managing-your-anxiety/>

<https://youngminds.org.uk/find-help/conditions/anxiety/>

<https://gozen.com/8-ways-a-childs-anxiety-shows-up-as-something-else/>

<https://www.facebook.com/youngmindsuk/videos/vb.283661679914/10155070997469915/?type=2&theater>

## **Anxiety: Books**

*Starving the Anxiety Gremlin: A Cognitive Behavioural Therapy Workbook on Anxiety Management for Young People* by Kate Collins-Donnelly, Jessica Kingsley Publishers

### **FOR THE OLDER CHILD – 8 UPWARDS**

*Help! I've Got an Alarm Bell Going Off in My Head! How Panic, Anxiety and Stress Affect Your Body.* [K. L. Aspden](#) ISBN 978-1849053419

### **For younger children: help with managing worries**

*Sweet Dreams and Monsters* by Peter Mayle, Macmillan Children's Books  
ISBN 1556709455

*The Huge Bag of Worries* by Virginia Ironside, Hodder Children's Books  
ISBN 0340903171

*The Panic Book* by Neil Philips, Shrink-Rap Press Australia PLC  
ISBN 9780958560429

*Tim and the Blanket Thief* by John Prater Atheneum, Atheneum Books for Young Readers

ISBN 0689318812

### **Separation anxiety**

*The invisible string:* picture book on separation anxiety: Patrice Karst

### **Emotional resilience**

<https://hbtg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/KAN-Emotional-resilience-toolkit.pdf>

### **Emotion coaching: ways to support developing children's emotional regulation:**

<http://www.parentingcounts.org/information/timeline/five-steps-of-emotion-coaching/>

<https://kidshelpline.com.au/parents/issues/helping-kids-identify-and-express-feelings>

### **Emotional regulation**

<https://heartmindonline.org/resources/turtle-time-a-calming-technique>

[http://vkrponline.org/blog/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/07.-Activity\\_Turtle-Technique-1.pdf](http://vkrponline.org/blog/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/07.-Activity_Turtle-Technique-1.pdf)

<https://raisingchildren.net.au/toddlers/behaviour/understanding-behaviour/self-regulation>

### **Talking about feelings: picture books for younger children**

[\*The Way I feel:\* Janan Cain](#)

[\*The Colour Monster:\* Anna Llenas](#)

### **Building confidence and self esteem**

<https://www.familylives.org.uk/advice/primary/health-and-development/helping-your-child-build-self-esteem/>

<https://positivepsychology.com/resilience-in-children/>

Strategies for parents to build resilience in children:

<https://healthyfamilies.beyondblue.org.au/healthy-homes/building-resilience>

<https://www.psycom.net/build-resilience-children>

## **Sleep Advice**

### **Sleep Routines for primary Age Children**

<https://www.ahaparenting.com/ask-the-doctor-1/building-an-evening-routine-for-kids-of-different-ages>

### **Sleep in own bed**

[https://childmind.org/ask-an-expert-ga/how-do-i-get-my-son-to-sleep-in-his-own-bed/?utm\\_source=newsletter&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_content=Ask%20An%20Expert%3A%20Sleeping&utm\\_campaign=Weekly-01-22-19](https://childmind.org/ask-an-expert-ga/how-do-i-get-my-son-to-sleep-in-his-own-bed/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_content=Ask%20An%20Expert%3A%20Sleeping&utm_campaign=Weekly-01-22-19)

### **Sleep and Nightmares**

[https://www.amazon.co.uk/Ninja-Activity-Children-Struggle-Nightmares/dp/1785925504/ref=wl\\_mb\\_wl\\_huc\\_mrai\\_3\\_dp?ie=UTF8&pd\\_rd\\_i=1785925504&pd\\_rd\\_r=0Q9QSPPFQKSWD7PD3CS0&pd\\_rd\\_w=iKNMi&pd\\_rd\\_wg=M710E](https://www.amazon.co.uk/Ninja-Activity-Children-Struggle-Nightmares/dp/1785925504/ref=wl_mb_wl_huc_mrai_3_dp?ie=UTF8&pd_rd_i=1785925504&pd_rd_r=0Q9QSPPFQKSWD7PD3CS0&pd_rd_w=iKNMi&pd_rd_wg=M710E)

### **Domestic abuse**

Emotional Literacy workbook – anger – feelings programme for children affected by domestic abuse

<https://www.cheshireeast.gov.uk/pdf/livewell/cyp-affected-by-domestic-abuse-6-sessions-feelings-programme.pdf>

### **Domestic abuse 6-12**

[https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Children\\_coping\\_with\\_domesticabuse\\_d3.pdf](https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Children_coping_with_domesticabuse_d3.pdf)  
<https://www.cheshireeast.gov.uk/pdf/livewell/cyp-affected-by-domestic-abuse-6-sessions-feelings-programme.pdf>

### **Managing Aggressive Behaviour**

<https://www.kidpower.org/wp-content/plugins/wp-cart-for-digital-products/download.php?file=Q9vD4zY2HELEkE0ykp4%3D>

### **Discipline/Tantrums**

<https://raisedgood.com/toddlers-meltdowns-brain-development-ditch-traditional-discipline/?fbclid=IwAR100pECJlpM6kFZzTsqu45aBCHmQhziXtNrMB52NUiyMLmbBIX1Dv1KU>

### **Trauma**

<https://www.whealth.com.au/documents/work/trauma/LiteratureReview.pdf>  
<https://beaconhouse.org.uk/child-and-family-trauma-clinic/>  
[https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/fact-sheet/assessment\\_of\\_complex\\_trauma\\_by\\_mental\\_health\\_professionals.pdf](https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/fact-sheet/assessment_of_complex_trauma_by_mental_health_professionals.pdf)

### **Self-regulation for children with sensory issue /ADHD**

<https://www.understood.org/en/learning-attention-issues/child-learning-disabilities/sensory-processing-issues/trouble-with-self-regulation-what-you-need-to-know>

### **Sensory needs**

*The Highly Sensitive Child* by Elaine N. Aron  
*The Out of Sync Child* by Carol Stock Kranowitz

### **Gender identity**

<http://gids.nhs.uk/>

### **Bereavement**

Information for families and professionals:

<https://www.childbereavementuk.org/>

Bereavement: when a child has lost a parent

<https://www.winstonswish.org/about-us/>

Helpline on **08088 020 021**

Local bereavement support (Bristol)

<https://rainbowcentre.org.uk/>  
[www.cruse.org.uk](http://www.cruse.org.uk) or call 0844 477 9400.

Cruse is a national charity that provides advice, information and support to anyone who has been bereaved (children, young people and adults), whenever or however the death occurred. They offer - someone to talk to face-to-face, or on the telephone, online support and groups (some bereaved people find it helpful to talk to others in similar circumstances)

**Attachment: information for education professionals**

*(understanding attachment in school context; working with children who have experienced early trauma)*

*Inside I'm Hurting*: Louise Bomber. Worth Publishing ISBN 978-1-903269-11-4

*Attachment in the Classroom*: Heather Geddes Worth Publishing. ISBN 978-1-903269-08-4

**Support for parents**

**Family Lives** - Confidential Helpline: 0808 800 2222 Web:  
<http://www.familylives.org.uk/how-we-can-help/online-parenting-courses>

**Parenting UK** - Web: <http://www.parenting.co.uk/>

**Netmums** - Web: <http://www.netmums.com/parenting-support/parenting-advice/netmums-parenting-course-about-the-courses>

**NSPCC** - Tel: 0808 800 5000, Email: [help@nspcc.org.uk](mailto:help@nspcc.org.uk) or text 88858

**Mindfulness for parents**-<http://www.connectingwithmindfulness.co.uk/>

**Separation & divorce: help and advice for parents**

<https://www.familylives.org.uk/advice/divorce-and-separation/>

<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/keeping-children-safe/separation-divorce-and-contact/>

<https://www.gingerbread.org.uk/information/separating/support-for-your-child/>