

Nurturing emotional wellbeing

My only thought when I first learned about the Paws b programme was not how, but when I would be able to introduce it into the Junior School. Whilst the decision to do so was not without its challenges, on reflection it has proved more worthwhile than I could ever have imagined.

The first step in the process is developing an appreciation of what mindfulness can offer young children. Look it up! The potential benefits are as profound as they are far-reaching. The second step involves choosing how well you want mindfulness to be done. In that sense, I know of no better means of introducing the benefits of mindfulness into schools than the MiSP programmes. Step three - if you reach the conclusion I did - is deciding whether you want to buy in Paws b trained deliverers indefinitely or whether your ambitions are to develop a team of in-house trained colleagues.

I opted for the latter in the hope that we could build a sustainable and organic model that would allow us to introduce mindfulness through Paws b lessons into our timetable, so that all children could benefit.

For that to happen it was important to make it as easy as possible for staff to meet the first prerequisite of applying to train with MiSP – to complete an 8 hour introductory course in mindfulness with a recognised provider. Over the last 3 years we have offered 2 such courses to staff, and most recently the online course, and over 45 colleagues have completed the course. 8 of those, myself included, went on to complete our Paws b training; one of whom received a distinction for her MA Thesis on the benefits of Paws b lessons. 5 more have completed their .b training. This now allows us to deliver the lessons to all of our Year 5 & Year 6 pupils each year, six half hour lessons in Yr 5 over six weeks &

the second six lessons again in Yr 6. It also means that we can deliver the .b course to our entire Yr 7 cohort from September.

Mighty oaks from little acorns grow, and so it's proved to be at Solihull School. The momentum of interest in the emotional wellbeing of pupils and the resolve of my colleagues to do all they can to help children to thrive has taken me, very pleasantly, by surprise – sparked in no small measure by so many staff having a deeper understanding of how mindfulness can be of great benefit to them professionally and personally.

That same momentum explains why five colleagues were hugely energised after completing Penn Resiliency training and over 65 colleagues to date, across the Junior and Senior School, have voluntarily completed the Mental Health Youth First Aid course this year.

Whilst I too share the concerns about the mental health problems besieging our young children and bemoan the fact that the industry of cure is exponentially larger than the industry of prevention, mindfulness is, I believe, every bit as much about learning how to live in the present moment in order to cultivate the personal space to thrive; as it is a clinically proven means of dealing with deficit.



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“You can’t stop the waves but you can learn to surf,” Jon Kabat-Zinn sagely opined, nor by extension should we expect a young child to learn how to surf by chucking them into a great big wave. Ideally, we’d start on land and progress to mild mannered waters before expecting them to straddle choppy seas. Why therefore do educators and health professionals find themselves at the crisis end of the equation far too often, deploying flotation devices in the hope that children will cling on until a big wave runs its course?

Because, in my view, the opportunity to boost the emotional immunity of young children is too often overlooked. To achieve this, I believe, we need to teach children how to think, not what to think.

This is why, for me, the Paws b programme offers so much more than you might expect beyond age appropriate meditative practice. It is a hugely well resourced and well thought out series of lessons for 7-11 year olds, that complements greatly the valuable lessons positive psychology has learned about how we can help young people to thrive.

If you are already discussing the differences between fixed mindsets and growth mindsets with your pupils, learning about parts of the brain and their functions through Paws b lessons reinforces what they need to know about neuroplasticity. When they learn how to manage their amygdali and how to ground themselves after a wobble, they address the genesis of the resilience training we have introduced into our curriculum. And when, in the final lesson they learn about how to grow happiness, they tick many of the boxes that positive

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psychologists such as Martin Seligman advocate for human beings to flourish, which we also teach the children about in our curriculum wellbeing lessons.

We now invite parents to join us for a mindfulness seminar each year, to familiarise themselves with the nature of mindfulness and the content of the Paws b programme and a colleague runs a co-curricular Mindfulness Club for pupils each week. The reception of pupils, parents and colleagues has been very positive. Even for many of those pupils who don’t practise meditation as part of their daily routines, often offer the caveat that they don’t - just yet.

My sincere hope is that should any of our pupils reach the point of ‘yet’, that they will have had a very valuable experience of mindfulness to fall back on. Furthermore, I hope that those in our community who have already embraced it, are more mindfully happy than they would otherwise have been.