

# Creating a 'Mental Health Toolbelt'

Parent Assembly at Holmfirth Juniors

## CASE STUDY SUMMARY

<b>School:</b>	Various
<b>Location:</b>	Pennines Region
<b>School Type:</b>	Various
<b>MiSP Curriculum:</b>	Paws b
<b>Age Group/s:</b>	Primary
<b>Author:</b>	Seth Foster
<b>Role:</b>	School Games Organiser, School Sports Coordinator & Independent Paws b Teacher
<b>Issue/s Addressed:</b>	<b>Student wellbeing</b>

When I began working with the Pennine Sports Partnership over 10 years ago my main role was in organising school sport competitions and developing and running leadership programmes in Primary and Secondary schools. With the cuts in government funding to School Sports Partnerships eight years ago,

our organisation has evolved to meet the health and wellbeing needs of the children in the 67 schools we support. From upskilling teachers in their delivery of PE, to advocating physically active learning and championing the physical and mental health benefits of being active, my role saw me return to teaching PE in schools where my passion began 17 years ago.

I was introduced to meditation a number of years ago by a counsellor I was seeing for personal mental health problems which have challenged me since my early teens. My own 'mental health toolbelt' since these days has included; exercise, my career, volunteering as a Rugby League coach for 13 years, medication, CBT, my cats, counselling and more recently my supportive wife and amazing 19 month old daughter Emmie. Mindful meditation has become a great guide in my life and has helped me through some dark days as well as reducing their occurrence.

Through my career in sport development I have had the good fortune to coach and teach children from nursery age all the way up to under 16s Yorkshire Rugby League performance squads. Though it has been incredibly

fulfilling to see players succeeding and making a career from their talent it has always been the social and emotional development of the young people using the power of sport and physical activity that has been my passion. Since developing my own meditation practice and attending the eight week MBSR course I saw these values grow into my teaching practice more and more through what has become my mantra; 'meet the children where they are, not where you want them to be' - I am even starting to apply this to myself through practicing self-compassion.

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I came across the **Mindfulness in Schools Project** in 2018 through a link I made with a local schools health visitor. She told me all about the upcoming MISP conference in London where Jon Kabat-Zinn would be speaking, and given I had spent the last two years researching his every word I couldn't miss it, I booked my train ticket that day and within the next week I was booked on the three day course to train to teach **Paws b**. Coincidentally, and before I had been on the course, one of our schools was looking for someone to come in and support with a mental wellbeing focus, after meeting with the head teacher my first **Paws b** school was booked for after the summer holidays.

For over 15 years our partnership has developed a close relationship with the schools we work with and this has been integral to delivering the lessons with the integrity and leaving a sustainable impact. As an external deliverer with my own practice and values I felt that I could connect well with the children over the six weeks though the greater impact on the children and staff would be felt in embedding the learning and practices between the lessons and after I had left, making sure the teachers were fully engaged. I booked a whole staff meeting with the school to introduce mindfulness in education and arranged a whole school assembly linking the children's knowledge of physical wellbeing to the importance of looking after their mental health,

introducing mindfulness themes.

Prior to delivering my first **Paws b** lesson we held our annual subject leaders day where each of the PE coordinators from all our schools attend. Workshops on the day included active maths, embedding physically active learning as well as a session on mindfulness in education which I lead - the positive responses blew me away, and the number of schools wanting to be involved meant I was soon booked up for the year and like that I would be teaching **Paws b** rather than PE on my one teaching day every week.

## The positive responses blew me away, and the number of schools wanting to be involved meant I was soon booked up for the year.

During the first week of the summer holidays in 2018 I attended the three day course and being inspired by the tutors and the other teachers there I was ready to get started ... after a restful summer that is!

My first class were Year 5s who I knew from teaching rugby to the previous summer term, it was new for them to see me in their classroom teaching lessons about the brain, talking about their emotions and leading breathing exercises and from that first lesson I felt the messages really connected with the children. One in particular was the discovery that it is in the nature of the mind to wander, something I remember being personally chastised for at school but that we could now discuss and share our experiences openly about without judgement whilst exploring how in our learning and emotional lives we could train the mind to change the brain so that it could be more present.

The children in the lessons have really enjoyed learning about the brain and I've found that being able to link their experiences to the different parts and recognising that we can train the brain in the way we can the muscles of the body gives the children a feeling of autonomy over the choices they have. When I first began leading mindfulness practices I had a sense of trepidation, hoping that the children would be fully



engaged and that they wouldn't giggle! I knew the children but not being their class teacher, this was a concern. I have learnt over time that creating the right environment in the room from lighting, seating position, shoes off (if they choose) and how I guide them into the practices and embody presence myself is important in helping the children become comfortable.

## **I enjoyed teaching Paws b and felt that the lessons were very different to any other subjects the children had experienced.**

During the early days of teaching **Paws b** I enjoyed it and felt that the lessons were very different to any other subjects the children had experienced, though I didn't feel that they were 'mine' yet. It was in my second school where something really connected with me that started to evolve my approach to teaching **Paws b**. During the activity in lesson 1 where the children share what they would like to be better at, a year 6 pupil put his hand up and, without any bravado, shared with the class that "I'd like to be better at being able to behave in class", at that moment I realised how powerful the opportunity to be open without judgement (and in front of his teacher and classmates) would be. Rather than making sure I squeezed every slide of the presentation into the one hour lessons I would learn to be more present with the children's experiences, encouraging teachers to do the same and share their own.

## **I began to recognise that if I had been taught Paws b when I was younger then I would have had the tools to manage my struggles.**

Seeing the children grow in confidence with sharing their worries, thoughts and 'lightbulb' moments as they discover how their mind tells stories through their subjective experiences has been a joy to watch. I began to recognise that if I had been taught **Paws b** when I was

younger then maybe I would have had the tools to manage my personal struggles and develop curiosity over reactivity, what I could do now is be that supportive influence for the children I teach.

During the lessons I have often recognised my younger (and sometimes current!) self in the fidgety, class joker who doesn't know when its time to be quiet and would rather be playing out than learning, but I know that all of the challenges they experience are learnable skills, just as much as long division and writing are. The lessons have provided a safe learning environment for children to be themselves, enjoy stillness through the practices and develop curiosity as they discover the nature of their puppy minds. I feel that being a male role model has also really added value to my connection with the children.

The teachers I work with often reflect that the transition from arriving at school to learning and from break times back to the classroom can be challenging as issues from the playground linger on. On a number of occasions I've seen this myself with children being upset and distressed as they sit at their table. Through my own mindfulness practice I've learn to just be there to connect with them and allow them to do whatever they need to in that moment to look after themselves, whether that be their breathing practices or simply reading a book, they join in with the lesson when they feel ready. Rather than trying to solve the problem they're able to calm their amygdala down and reconnect. I confess to shedding a tear when a couple of pupils I supported in this way wrote made a card to thank me for caring and teaching them these skills.

As an external teacher of **Paws b** I wish I could be there with the children during the rest of the week to embed the mindfulness ethos of being and to continue the practices daily. The challenge in my role has been to develop the teachers value and understanding of practice and the learning from the lessons so that it becomes a lifelong skill. With teachers being so busy, the temptation is for them to mark books while I teach, however their presence during the lessons is just as important as mine. The class worksheets have really helped in this regard and I make sure that each child has a mindfulness **Paws b** folder that they can keep them in, make their own and refer back to during the week. Even if they then gather dust under their beds for the next

five years they can always return to them as a reminder about the lessons and the ways in which they helped them.

In each of the 10 schools I have taught in so far I have also run a whole school and parent assembly at the end of the six weeks recapping the lessons and informing families about what their children have been learning, younger siblings have also attended. The response from parents has been very positive, so much so that I have planned to run parent workshops in the future.

Although the prospect of having KS2 children give their feedback on their experience of the lessons was initially daunting, the schools have really valued the pupil impact surveys and it has been useful for me to see the impact the lessons have had in their comments.

**“When I feel upset, Paws b always makes me feel calm and happy.”** KS2 Student

**“I now know that when I get stressed I can just breath and realise that everything is ok.”**

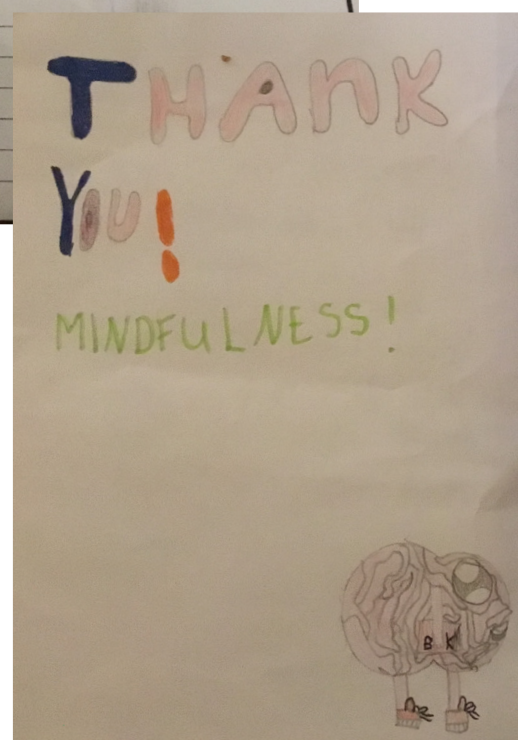
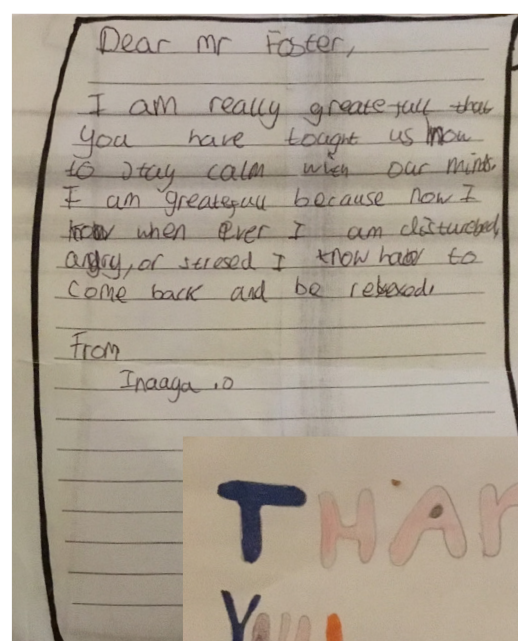
KS2 Student

Over the last 18 months I have taught **Paws b** to 30 classes and over 700 children whilst delivering teacher workshops to over 300 primary school staff, with bookings taken right up to Autumn 2020. One of my colleagues is now also trained to teach **Paws b** and has begun working with schools this year. Whilst being passionate about connecting with as many schools and children as possible, staying true to my values and leaving a lasting impact will always remain my priority. I've grown to see these lessons as not just a nice to do for schools but an essential tool in developing the social and emotional learning foundations of their young people.

I have begun integrating mindfulness practices in PE lessons to introduce the themes to children. Going from the high energy state of running around then into the stillness of counting the breaths or focusing on the sound of the chime, is a really good practical way of

practicing stilling a mind and body that can become stirred up. I plan to develop these practical sessions further as the mind and body connection in a physically active environment fit well together and the children can really engage with the activities.

Being inspired by the experiences I have had and all that the children have taught me, I also continue to learn through reading books and listening to talks around the subjects of mindfulness, education, parenting and neuroscience. Being a mindful presence for myself, those around me, the children I teach and most importantly my daughter will continue to guide me.



**Letter and card from a Year 4 pupil.**