

September 2008



# Action for Children briefing

## A review of the promotion of children's emotional wellbeing by Action for Children services

### Executive summary

Emotional wellbeing is seen increasingly as key to successful adaptation to adult life, achievement of educational success, positive relationships and mental health. Action for Children has expressed a commitment to prioritising the emotional wellbeing of children, including campaigning for greater recognition of emotional wellbeing through

all children's and young people's services in our Growing Strong campaign.

In view of this, Action for Children's Public Policy Unit commissioned the organisation's consultancy arm to undertake a review of how Action for Children was promoting the emotional wellbeing of children through its services in the United Kingdom.

Action for Children services across the UK are raising the emotional wellbeing of large numbers of children in contact with our services. Action for Children services are achieving this through the skilled use of a range of interventions with children, young people and their families. These interventions frequently resemble the identified strategies for success in this field taken from the literature reviews.

#### How we did it

During the review we:

- ▶ visited a number of services where emotional wellbeing was key to the interventions being made
- ▶ devised a survey form and analysis of the services visited and a number of other highlighted services
- ▶ held meetings with managers and staff from a wide range of services run by Action for Children

#### What is Action for Children doing right?

The review shows that Action for Children is at the forefront of delivering services based on effective experience, responsiveness to user feedback, and reflection on the key messages in research into children's emotional wellbeing.

Action for Children's Outcomes Framework, which applies to Action for Children services in all four nations and is consistent with the relevant government policy initiatives, will increasingly play an important role in measuring how our services succeed in improving outcomes for children and young people, including improving emotional wellbeing.

## The Vale, Wales

The Vale family support service works with children who are likely to have unclear or inconsistent boundaries, parental involvement in drug or alcohol misuse or criminal behaviour, socio-economic disadvantage and difficulties in adapting to change. The project provides crisis intervention, parenting support, work with children on a one-to-one basis, groupwork, and work at the project and in family homes.

Most of the children at The Vale have poor emotional wellbeing. The service has received awards for its innovative work with very vulnerable and excluded families, demonstrating improved emotional wellbeing through:

- ▶ observation by skilled and experienced staff
- ▶ reports from children
- ▶ reports from parents
- ▶ formal review meetings with family members and the multi-agency network of services involved with a family

The project is valued by local agencies, and particularly by the local authority children's social care service, as it has the skills and capacity to work with children's emotional wellbeing when statutory services lack such time. Nevertheless, there remain funding uncertainties in respect of future local authority commissioning intentions.

The Vale has produced a DVD around its work with young carers and this is useful evidence from young people themselves of the value of the centre's work to develop confidence and peer relationships. Aware of the potential for the emotional needs of young carers to be neglected, the project uses a leaflet by the Welsh Assembly Government to educate teachers and school staff, alongside a collection of personal stories and poems.

## Stories

'I took in our young carers' video to show the class. It made my teacher cry. The others at school, they understood better the problems young carers can have. I was asked to show it again. I used it as part of my GCSE course work. I got an A grade for it!'

(16-year-old young carer)

'I was sick and I was off school for three days. When I returned to school, I gave my form teacher a letter to explain my absence. He said, "Did you write this?" I explained that I had written it and my mum had signed it as this was all she could manage as she was blind. My teacher didn't believe me.'

(13-year-old young carer)

## Coventry After Care Service, England

This service helps young people leaving care, and almost all the young people have emotional wellbeing needs following years of care placements and separation from their birth family. Many had endured abusive experiences while with their birth families and also had needs arising from these experiences.

The service works with young people from diverse ethnic backgrounds and this had in some instances complicated the understanding of young people's mental and emotional wellbeing.

The service has clear and consistent methods to improve young people's emotional wellbeing. These include:

- ▶ focus on practical skills in order to cope with the demands of living alone at the age of 18 or younger – success in managing money, equipping a household or in simple activities such as changing a lightbulb were instrumental in improving young people's self-confidence
- ▶ staff persistence in the face of common initial reluctance by care leavers to engage
- ▶ use of consistent relationship – low staff turnover compared to services in the local authority was identified as a particular strength and was responsible for enabling young people to reflect and grow emotionally
- ▶ use of positive reinforcement of young people's achievements, however small they might be, particularly within the context of a sound professional relationship or in public, such as the awards ceremonies at Coventry Cathedral
- ▶ opportunities to contribute to the running of the service and to individual pathway plans

The service works with young people from diverse ethnic backgrounds and this had in some instances complicated the understanding of young people's mental and emotional wellbeing, for example avoiding eye contact but out of respect and not as a sign of an emotional or relational difficulty. Other service users believed in possession by spirits while some young people, from Eastern Europe in particular, had trust issues because of historic, if not personal, experiences in their home countries.

Staff have also identified that boys find a talking approach more difficult than girls. The service has therefore set up a series of activities for service users of both genders so that 'talk' can happen while engaging in an activity with a staff member, as this is less threatening for many young people.

The service has also developed a specific suicide risk chart for use with young people in view of the service user group's high risk of self-harm and suicide. This chart enables the worker to map changes to a young person's emotional and mental health.



## Sperrin Lakeland Floating Support Service, Northern Ireland

The Sperrin Lakeland service provides floating support services to young people facing uncertain housing or homelessness. The centre works on the principle that resolution of basic needs such as housing often cannot be achieved without resolving emotional and relationship issues, such as family breakdown.

Sperrin Lakeland has adapted a measurement tool for emotional wellbeing called Outcome Star. The Star, which was first developed by the London Housing Federation, measures a journey of change, and uses a scale outlining the key steps in a person's transition from dependence to independence.

There are 10 outcome areas within the Outcome Star, including:

1. motivation and taking responsibility
2. self-care and living skills

3. managing money and personal administration
4. social networks and relationships
5. drug and alcohol misuse
6. physical health
7. emotional and mental health
8. meaningful use of time
9. managing tenancy and accommodation
10. offending

The service user's position on each scale is marked from 1–10, based on factors such as motivation, resilience, managing money, use of drugs and alcohol, and offending.

## What research tells us

Literature reviews carried out for Action for Children looking at the nature of emotional wellbeing and the development of children's resilience show us that, during the pre-school period, the effective interventions to improve emotional wellbeing are:

- ▶ high-quality day care
- ▶ preparatory work with parents on home–school links
- ▶ pairing of children with appropriate peers
- ▶ availability of alternative caregivers
- ▶ food supplements
- ▶ links with other parents, communities and faith groups
- ▶ community regeneration initiatives

Effective strategies for improving children's emotional wellbeing in middle childhood (from ages five to 13) include:

- ▶ flexibility in reception classes to accommodate cultural and community-specific behaviours
- ▶ creation and maintenance of home–school links to promote parental confidence and engagement
- ▶ positive school experiences, whether through academic achievement, friendships or sporting activity
- ▶ development of skills and mastery of tasks in preparation for greater independence, including manageable contributions to the household to promote self-confidence
- ▶ structured routines and fair use of praise and sanctions
- ▶ attachment to a reliable adult
- ▶ moderation of parental disharmony
- ▶ help offered to resolve minor and acute crises
- ▶ provision of breakfast and after-school clubs

Effective strategies noted in research for raising emotional wellbeing of children in adolescence and early adulthood (13 to 19 years of age) are:

- ▶ promotion of strong social support networks for young people
- ▶ provision of unconditional support from at least one trusted carer
- ▶ committed mentoring ('committed' means no or minimal change in mentor and ability of mentor to respond to young person when necessary)
- ▶ continued positive school experiences through academic achievements, friendships and sport

- ▶ development of inner confidence that a young person can cope and make a difference
- ▶ participation in extra-curricular activities
- ▶ reflection on adversities in order to reframe and use such experiences as strengths
- ▶ helping others through part-time work
- ▶ exposure to challenging situations to help develop coping skills

The findings of this review demonstrate that Action for Children services are clearly operating in ways that are consistent with these research findings.

## The key challenges

**While there was evidence of much positive work and many positive achievements in raising the emotional wellbeing of children in Action for Children services, there are also challenges. Action for Children is using this review and its recommendations to build on and develop services that place greater emphasis on children's emotional wellbeing.**

Action for Children will be looking at the possibility of:

- ▶ entering into partnership with an academic institution to develop a longitudinal research study about the effects of Action for Children services on the development of emotional wellbeing
- ▶ ensuring services aimed at improving emotional wellbeing are resourced through contracts with local authority commissioners at levels adequate to meet the needs of the service user group
- ▶ bringing staff together to share and promote good practice around the development of children's emotional wellbeing
- ▶ establishing a consistent definition of emotional wellbeing based in both quantitative and qualitative evidence
- ▶ bringing Action for Children measurement systems into line across the UK so that there is a single system to measure emotional wellbeing, probably with a basis in Action for Children's Outcomes Framework

## Summary

Action for Children services across the UK are raising the emotional wellbeing of large numbers of children in contact with our services. Action for Children services are achieving this through the skilled use of a range of interventions with children, young people and their families. These interventions frequently resemble the identified strategies for success in this field taken from the literature reviews.

For more information about our Growing Strong campaign, please contact the Action for Children Public Affairs team on **020 7704 7132** or at **publicaffairs@actionforchildren.org.uk**

