

September 2007

## Young people **growing strong**: the role of positive, structured activities

### Summary

- Emotional wellbeing is the ability to make and keep relationships, use and enjoy solitude, become aware of others and empathise with them, play and learn, develop a sense of right and wrong and face problems and setbacks and learn from them. It is far more than the absence of mental illness. It is a positive and strong element in a child or young person's development.
- Policies to tackle social exclusion, deprivation or lack of social mobility are undermined by children and young people's lack of emotional wellbeing, because it is a key determinant in explaining current social problems and longer-term trends like social mobility.
- Building a young person's emotional wellbeing is a continuous process, often starting with parents, guardians or figures in a child's life who represent important positive relationships – but extracurricular structured activities have proved to be very beneficial.
- Positive structured activities for young people take place in a group setting, have a clear hierarchy, have clear well-defined aims (so that the group is working towards something such as a final performance), take place on a consistent basis and make a positive contribution to a person's self-esteem and belief that their actions impact on the world around them (known as the locus of control).
- It is never too late for young people to benefit from these types of activity. That is why we believe every young person (aged from 11–16) should have access to at least two such activities a week.
- We want a UK strategy that ensures that the most vulnerable young people are not prevented from taking up these opportunities because of the availability of free transport, access to financial help to take part in an activity or problems caused by a young person's caring responsibilities. It is often the case that those who would benefit the most from structured activities are the least able to access them.
- Therefore, we also want action plans to see how government and local authorities are addressing the barriers young people face.
- The activities young people require if they are to grow strong are placed within our calls for a broader strategy which is universal, serves the needs of younger children and teenagers, works with parents and in the community, is based on structured activities, targets vulnerable groups of children and young people and disadvantaged areas, offers services which overlap in terms of age groups, creates opportunities for young people to have their say and ensures all young people have someone to talk to about their problems.

growing**strong**

# Emotional wellbeing and what we know about it

Emotional wellbeing is about inner strength. It is what allows us to relate easily to others and to develop strong relationships. It helps us to empathise with others and to care for them. It allows us to be self-aware and self-confident and take pride in ourselves and our achievements and to manage our feelings. Being emotionally healthy helps us accept and cope with stress, adversity, tragedy and trauma. It helps us to control our reactions and behaviour and makes us motivated. These are the qualities which grow out of what is also called resilience.

Laying the foundation of emotional wellbeing in childhood allows us to grow as adults who have a firm place in society and can face, with strength, what life brings us. It also means that we can contribute, as citizens, partners and parents, to the wellbeing of others. There is evidence that those who are resilient will also be socially mobile and that they will experience good mental health. Negatively, there is a link between the lack of resilience in children and young people and the fact that one in 10 of them suffer from mental health problems.

We know that even when people have had a disadvantaged start in life, those with emotional and personal qualities like application and self-esteem, and who believe that they have control over their own lives and behaviour, are more likely to succeed both at work and in their social lives.

## Why is emotional wellbeing important?

Policies to tackle social exclusion, deprivation or lack of social mobility are undermined by children and young

people's lack of emotional wellbeing. NCH's research demonstrates how emotional health became four and a half times more important in determining the relative life chances of those born in 1970 compared with those born in 1958. Indeed emotional wellbeing is becoming an increasingly more important factor in explaining social mobility for children born since 1970.

The effects of the lack of emotional wellbeing can also be seen in the increase in anti-social behaviour, rising drug and alcohol misuse and the decline in personal interactions by young people.

Strong, supportive family relationships are key to children growing up emotionally healthy. These positive relationships, often starting with parents, are built on:

- consistency in rules and the way the parent behaves
- warmth and interest
- stability and security
- authority without hostility

Thus, interventions that build positive relationships are likely to impact positively on how children develop socially and emotionally. This, in turn, builds up young people's

## What can teenagers across the UK expect from their governments? The UK Policy context

**Scotland:** Among the key documents that will direct the future of youth services in Scotland is *Moving Forward: a strategy for improving young people's chances through youth work* (2007) which has very little explicit reference to building young people's emotional wellbeing. However the Scottish Executive has led the way in encouraging meaningful participation in Scotland.

**Wales:** We are very pleased that one of the three main measured outcomes of *The National Youth Service Strategy for Wales* (2007) is 'enhanced emotional competence', and we support many of the Welsh Assembly Government's proposals. However we are still concerned about how the strategy will be implemented and about the need to address the barriers that prevent young people accessing these services.

**Northern Ireland:** We hope that the new NI Assembly will be far more explicit in tackling emotional wellbeing and not be content simply to reduce mental illness and emotional distress as defined in *Our Children and Young People – Our Pledge: a ten year strategy for children and young people in NI 2006-2016*. It must amend and update the Strategy for the *Delivery of Youth Work in NI 2005-2008* to address the issues being raised by NCH.

resilience to mental illness. It also makes it more likely that children and young people brought up in this way will achieve well at school and ensures that they grow to mature, resilient and self-confident adulthood.

## What can be done? The role of structured activities

Structured activities are very important in developing emotional wellbeing. This is because, apart from the enjoyment of engaging with others and gaining a sense of achievement, they help young people to be constructive, relate to authority figures, acquire skills, and understand the need for hierarchy when it is appropriate.

### Positive extracurricular structured activities:

- take place in a group setting
- have a clear hierarchy
- have clear well-defined aims (so that the group is working towards something such as a final performance)
- take place on a consistent basis
- make a positive contribution to a person's self-esteem and belief that their actions impact on the world around them (known as the internal locus of control)

Different groups have noted that many of these qualities are embodied within the Scouts and Guides movements (where long-term goals are set and skills are acquired), or Cadet training such as Army or Police Cadets or Boys' Brigade (which demand all of the above things: regular attendance, skills acquisition and working toward long-term goals). Yet many of the qualities that lead to improved emotional wellbeing in young people can be seen in sport, drama and arts based activities, where attendance is regular and skills are acquired.

Formal activities, of which these are only a few examples, also encourage children to develop a moral compass by understanding how others react and understanding their feelings and needs. They help them to understand about looking ahead and planning for the future, and they also help them develop self-control. There is evidence, too, that extra-curricular activity helps children and young people do well at school.

## An ambitious strategy

In England the government has announced a 10-year strategy, which will include a youth centre in every area. NCH welcomes and fully supports this big step forward, and would encourage the devolved administrations across the UK to take up similar proposals. However, we are concerned at both the 10-year span and also the problems of implementing the strategy. We also don't think that it goes far enough.

NCH would like the government to be more ambitious in making the changes that we know will work. Although educational attainment and children's wellbeing have been priorities of governments since 1997, rates of children's mental ill health are still consistently far too high, and there are far too few structured activities available to children of the types described above. While such activities do exist, provision is patchy and there is little evidence that structured activities are available in disadvantaged areas or accessible to the most vulnerable and disadvantaged young people. In fact, they are far more often available at independent – rather than state – schools, and in more affluent areas.

Any strategy intended to impact on emotional wellbeing through providing structured activities must work for children and young people – especially those from vulnerable groups.

## Dover Family Support Service – Young Chefs

The project's vision: Weekly after school cookery sessions for young people aged 13–18, designed to improve the emotional and psychological wellbeing of vulnerable young people by helping to build self-esteem and resilience, having fun, reducing isolation, making friends in a small supportive group and learning new skills.

Bradley is a bright, confident 14-year-old boy who up until recently was prone to feeling down.

Early in 2007 Bradley was referred to Young Chefs by his support worker.

Bradley's main aim was to feel good about himself and to feel confident when making new friends. 'I'm more confident and more settled now, I'm happier about myself. Young Chefs has been a real starting point for me to build on my self-esteem. I really wanted to learn to cook and that's been brilliant and making friends too. The thing is you can't do anything wrong at Young Chefs, the

staff are brilliant, they reassure you so you can't fail, I don't like failing'.

'Throughout Young Chefs we were working towards putting on a big banquet at the end of the course which was really good. I got certificates saying that I had reached a level of cookery, I find it really good having something telling me what I've achieved'.

*'I've learnt how to cook but most importantly I have learnt how to talk to people. I go out with friends now, I join in and have fun. I never used to do that'.*

A strategy to support emotional wellbeing must be holistic, co-ordinated and universal, aimed particularly at children of primary school age but also offering activities for teenagers. Parenting interventions need to be combined with community-based interventions, because we know that parents have little impact on children's emotional and social development after the age of 10, whereas activities have a major impact.

Too often we intervene when a child's lack of emotional wellbeing has crossed the line and become a major behavioural, educational or mental health problem. Instead, we must reach all children and young people to build their resilience to mental illness and enhance their emotional wellbeing. Our aim must be creating a sure foundation, not just patching up or fire fighting.

In order to make this work, and react to children's individual needs, we must get away from arbitrary age-related definitions of childhood and adolescence. But equally as important, we must never think that it is too late for us to help a young person. While we can do a lot to build up emotional wellbeing in a child's early years our research shows that structured activities lead to successful outcomes.

Because provision is patchy and because disadvantaged children are least likely to benefit from it, far greater investment is needed in structured activities. This does not mean youth clubs which are unstructured and often unsupervised, yet currently the importance of youth clubs is emphasised, even though they are not beneficial to emotional and social development, particularly for the most disadvantaged.

## Gael Og Mentoring Project

**The project's vision: The Mentoring Project works with young people aged between 14 and 18 who have had difficulties with substance misuse or offending, but have made progress through the help of Highland Council Youth Action Teams. Mentors offer young people opportunities to identify goals and offer support to reach them.**

14-year-old Lisa was referred to the project following a piece of more intensive work with the Youth Action Team. 'I had family issues and I found it hard to get along with my mum, there were other problems too. It's cos I'd been lifted for assault and was finding it hard to do what I was told that I got a mentor'.

Lisa was matched with a female mentor who engaged her in regular exercise and discussion around her ongoing situation. Lisa is currently in foster care and is working towards moving back with her mum.

'Mentoring shows you another way, it gets you back into a routine cos I used to like running and all that, but I got lazy and I was smoking cos there was nothing to do'.

'Mentoring helps you think of yourself in a different way, you change gradually over the time that you spend with your mentor cos you think you can at least try'.

Lisa's mentor: 'Lisa and I talked about what we wanted to achieve and one of the things was fitness and it gave us a goal to do something. Lisa was very involved in planning everything we did and that is confidence-building too. Lisa also worked through the John Muir Award programme and achieved a middle level award. She's been a star'.

## What NCH is calling for

NCH calls for a broader strategy which:

- is universal
- serves the needs of younger children and teenagers
- works with parents and in the community
- is based on structured activities
- targets vulnerable groups of children and young people and disadvantaged areas
- offers services which overlap in terms of age groups
- creates opportunities for young people to have their say
- ensures all young people have someone to talk to about their problems

NCH's strategy is about what children and young people can contribute to their local community, as well as about creating activities and opportunities they can take part in.

This means, first, that participation by young people must be meaningful; it must be more than a forum to discuss a set range of issues. They hold opinions and views on a variety of issues about where they live – from crime and disorder to homelessness and from health services to transport – and opportunities must be created for their voices to be heard.

One very practical aspect of the government's 10-year youth strategy in England is that by 2018 young people will determine up to 25 per cent of the children and young people's services' budget. This is too little and too late. Again, we can be more ambitious: NCH wants the percentage raised to 50 per cent by 2012.

A strategy to create structured activities, and plans at national and local level to achieve this, will ensure children and young people have the opportunity to contribute as well as participate.

### **We want:**

- children and young people to be guaranteed access to two positive, structured activities a week
- barriers to be identified which prevent children and young people from taking up activities, especially those who are vulnerable and those living in disadvantaged areas
- these barriers to be overcome by comprehensive plans including the creation of ring-fenced budgets for children in care, allowing young people limited and supervised access to their Child Trust Fund savings before they are 18 for items that will help them in transition and free transport for under-18s in all areas so that they can travel to activities

- support to be given to young carers to participate in activities as a matter of course. A volunteer programme should be established in which young people support others – for example young disabled people – to use activities that already exist
- local authorities across the UK to produce action plans to show how they will tackle barriers and implement the 'two activity promise'. These plans should also include a strategy to promote positive images of, stories about, and role models for children and young people in every community
- all consultations with children and young people – by any service provided, whether universal or targeted – to specifically find out whether their emotional needs are being met, whether they have someone to talk to about any problems, and how any proposed change will affect their emotional wellbeing
- government to ensure that no young people are barred from taking part in these activities. For example, being subject to an ASBO may mean a young person is excluded due to time and place, yet these are precisely the young people who would benefit most. Likewise, efforts must be made to ensure that unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people can take part

Emotional wellbeing is sometimes seen as vague and woolly and it is believed that definitions of happiness are hard to pin down. However there is increasing research evidence that this is not so. Public policy is now placing emotional wellbeing on a par with physical health and economic wellbeing. It recognises that the pursuit of material wellbeing has often been at the expense of emotional health or at least has caused that to be neglected. This has brought enormous distress to many children and young people, causing difficulties which last throughout their lives and impact severely on wider society.

But what we are now learning means that interventions are possible. NCH believes that the government's recent policy announcements are a good start, but we look beyond these to a strategy which, we believe, would bring measurable gains to every child and young person in the UK. It's time to place our resources and direct our efforts into the right kinds of service, and change their lives for good.

## Gloucester Children's Fund's Young Reporters

The vision: To give children and young people a say by involving them in decision making and by getting their views on what happens to them whether it is in their home, school, project, club or community.

When 14-year-old Daisy became an NCH Young Reporter in 2004 life was very different for her than it is now. 'I was shy, nervous of meeting new people and I didn't want to talk to anyone, I was just too shy', but now, three years on, Daisy's confidence has soared. Her list of achievements is endless, and includes writing a quarterly newsletter. Daisy says her goal is

'to make sure that children have a say in what's going on in the council, social services, youth clubs, their general areas'.

'Before I came to Young Reporters I got bullied and that really made my confidence low. With Young Reporters we do lots of public speaking and we're listened to, it's really helped talking to people about being nervous and underconfident. I know how to tackle situations a bit more easily than I used to. Like if someone just said a silly comment about me, normally I would run away and now it doesn't matter because it's what I think in my head that

counts, and that has got better since I've been a Young Reporter'.

One of the members of staff said that 'the project is really proud of Daisy, she is one of the project's strongest Young Reporters; when she joined us her confidence, self-esteem and self-belief was among the lowest in the group.' As for Daisy, she says that Young Reporters 'gives you more opportunity to get involved, with a youth club you don't really do anything big, but with this it's like, wow'.

## NCH, the children's charity

**NCH is the UK's leading children's charity. We work passionately through our services and campaigning to bring hope into the lives of the children and young people who need it most.**

**We aim to meet the emotional and physical needs of all 160,000 children, young people and their families that we work with.**

**We are committed to ensuring that each child and young person has an equal chance of realising their full potential by enabling them to cope with uncertainty and adversity, and recover more successfully from traumatic events or episodes.**

'The lack of emotional wellbeing among our children and young people is undermining the foundations of any social policy to combat social exclusion, deprivation or lack of social mobility. We urge the new prime minister to commit to tackling this hidden and fast-growing problem. The emphasis must change from social class to social skills, self-esteem and resilience if we are to give the next generation the chance they deserve.'

'This is why we need to investigate this issue further and invest in services that really do work. The aim of NCH's work and campaigning is to improve children and young people's emotional wellbeing now and for the next generation.'

Clare Tickell, NCH Chief Executive

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the children's charity

For more information about our Growing Strong campaign, please contact the NCH Public Affairs team on 020 7704 7132 or at [publicaffairs@nch.org.uk](mailto:publicaffairs@nch.org.uk)