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# Action for Children briefing

## Developing emotional wellbeing in vulnerable children and young people – the Action for Children approach in three specialist schools

### Background

Emotional wellbeing is seen increasingly as key to children successfully adapting to adult life, achieving educational success, positive relationships and mental health. In fact, the term 'wellbeing' features strongly in policy and delivery documents and is now a feature of the everyday political discourse and beyond.<sup>1</sup>

Action for Children is committed to prioritising the emotional wellbeing of children, including campaigning for greater recognition of emotional wellbeing through all children and young people's services in our Growing Strong campaign.<sup>2</sup>

Anecdotal evidence showed that Action for Children's schools were delivering good practice in supporting the emotional wellbeing of their pupils. On the basis of this evidence, Action for Children decided to review practice in its schools to understand what this good practice was and how it supported young people's development.

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 in three of its specialist schools in England and Wales, namely Headlands School, Westwood School and the Cotswold Community School.

An emotionally well child or young person has empathy and self-awareness. They are able to manage their feelings, are motivated and have good social skills. A child or young person who is Growing Strong is one who works well, plays well, loves well and expects to achieve their full potential.<sup>3</sup>



<sup>1</sup> [www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/DCSF-RW073%20v2.pdf](http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/DCSF-RW073%20v2.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Action for Children's Growing Strong campaign highlights the huge impact emotional wellbeing has on young people's futures. For further information see: [www.actionforchildren.org.uk/content.aspx?CategoryID=76](http://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/content.aspx?CategoryID=76)

<sup>3</sup> *Emotional wellbeing and social mobility – a new urgency to the debate*, Action for Children, 2007

## The review

The review took place in late 2007 with the aim of evidencing the schools' work in promoting the emotional wellbeing of their pupils. It also sought to draw conclusions about the applicability of these approaches across specialist schools in general, as well as across all Action for Children services for vulnerable children.

## Methodology

The researcher visited each of the schools to investigate how they were promoting the emotional wellbeing of their students. This involved a number of structured individual and group discussions with senior and junior staff members, as well as discussions with the young people attending the schools.

These discussions centred on the schools':

- ▶ understanding of emotional wellbeing and how interventions work
- ▶ measurement of emotional wellbeing
- ▶ what works and for whom
- ▶ improving the emotional lives of the young people
- ▶ approaches for boys, girls and children from different ethnicities

The findings from the schools were also contextualised with analysis of the schools' approaches to emotional wellbeing, published in previous pieces of research.<sup>4</sup> Each school provided the researcher with the assessment tools they used to measure emotional wellbeing, such as the Beck Youth Inventory.

## Action for Children schools

Action for Children runs five schools across the UK. The children and young people who attend Action for Children's schools are among the most vulnerable and excluded children in the UK. Accredited academic departments work with pupils on a wide range of subjects that follow the National Curriculum as well as providing therapeutic teaching. The schools encourage children and young people to make their own choices and achieve their own positive outcomes.

### The schools who took part in the review are:

**Cotswold Community** – an independent special school and therapeutic community offering flexi-boarding and 52-week placements for children and young people with challenging behaviour aged nine to 18

**Headlands School** – an independent special school offering day- and term-time residential placements for children and young people with challenging behaviour aged 11 to 19, specialising in Asperger's syndrome (ASD)

**Westwood School** – a non-maintained special school offering day placements for children and young people with challenging behaviour aged 11 to 16

## Key findings of the review

The review analysed the approaches within the schools that appeared to be successfully improving children and young people's emotional wellbeing. Key findings were grouped under the following themes: self-esteem, peer relationships, targets and rewards, multi-disciplinary approach, healthy lifestyles and adult role models/staff groups/communication.

<sup>4</sup> *Emotional Literacy at the Heart of the School Ethos*, Dr S Killick, 2006 and *Therapeutic Approaches in Work with Traumatized Children and Young People: Theory and Practice*, P Tomlinson, 2004

## Self-esteem

A common approach for all Action for Children schools is to begin by looking at the child's self-esteem. There is a clear indication from schools of the value of using reliable baseline information developed with young people themselves and reviewing this information as a young person develops, in order to gauge progress.

Each school gauges emotional wellbeing in slightly different ways but all attempt to measure each child's self-esteem when they enter the school, and that information is used to set realistic targets to help the child build up their self-esteem, self-belief and confidence. For example:

- ◉ Cotswold Community looks specifically at the history of attachment in early life and then develops a therapeutic management plan for each boy
- ◉ Headlands develops an individual crisis management plan
- ◉ Westwood completes a baseline assessment of self-esteem using the Beck Youth Inventory

## Peer relationships

Each school promotes the development of positive peer relationships, for example using an interactive curriculum model that recognises that children have primary, social and interactive needs that all need to be addressed if they are to effectively access the academic curriculum. All the schools use assemblies as a public forum to report on and celebrate achievements.

### Practice example: Cotswold Community

There are several meetings each day with all the house staff and boys. The boys are encouraged to participate in decisions about all aspects of their lives, including practical things such as menu planning.

### Targets and rewards

Each school includes the children in the setting of targets for behaviour and achievement, and these targets are included in the child's individual crisis plan or daily living plan.

### Practice example: Headlands

The young people receive both planned and spontaneous rewards for meeting their targets; rewards are not taken away for subsequent challenging behaviour.

### Practice example: Westwood

The school operates a points system where children can gain points throughout the week, recorded in a booklet they hold. The booklets are colour coded yellow, blue and green, with those holding green booklets having achieved more of their targets. Points can be banked or exchanged for gifts that the children have chosen themselves. The children fully understand the system and respond very well to their rewards. Children can also receive 'caught you' cards, giving instant rewards for things they are doing well.

## Multi-disciplinary approach

All our schools have a multi-disciplinary staff group working onsite. There is tremendous advantage in being able to access services immediately and not have to refer on to outside services with waiting lists.

It also means that everyone has a better understanding of the approaches needed to contribute effectively to the children's care plans.

### Practice example: Cotswold Community

The community has a multi-disciplinary approach, using a variety of interventions onsite as they are required. A psychotherapist meets with staff individually and in groups, and also provides individual psychotherapy sessions for pupils. A psychiatrist is available at short notice and oversees any medication a boy may be on. An art therapist is currently working with six boys, and a play therapist a dietician and a paediatrician are also working at the school.

## Healthy lifestyles

A common theme within the schools was the promotion of the Healthy Schools programme, covering a range of issues such as diet, smoking, exercise, bullying and self-care skills.

### Practice example: Westwood

The school has a Healthy Schools audit where the outcomes relate to Every Child Matters, covering a range of health issues such as smoking, diet, exercise, bullying, self-care skills and participation.

Each month the children complete a questionnaire, and the results are tabulated and colour coded to give a quick visual assessment of progress, showing problem and achievement areas.

### Practice example: Cotswold Community

The school participated in a three-month trial of Omega oil supplements and found a significant improvement in the pupils' behaviour. A nutritionist, Jackie Stordy, analysed records of the boys' behaviour, and their scores for hyperactivity, impulsiveness and oppositional behaviour were compared before and after the trial.

After 20 weeks, the boys' scores for impulsiveness and hyperactivity improved by 20 per cent, said Dr Stordy. For nearly all the boys, there was a small but significant improvement and three boys showed dramatic improvements; two boys who did not take the fish oil showed no improvement. According to Dr Stordy, the boys' scores moved into the normal range for the population, which is a remarkable change.

The school fed into the Government review *The Links Between Diet and Behaviour: the influence of nutrition on mental health*<sup>5</sup>

## Adult role models/staff groups/communication

The benefit to the children of having consistent, caring staff available in both caring and teaching capacities cannot be underestimated, although it is undoubtedly a difficult area to measure. All the schools emphasised the need to keep close and good working relationships with the children's parents and carers, as well as professionals involved with each child, and had systems and staff in place to enable this.

The availability of positive adult role models, consistent and positive care, and close liaison with family and other professionals should greatly benefit a child's emotional wellbeing. As anecdotal evidence of this, all the schools receive feedback from ex-pupils that their time with them had an overall positive effect on their wellbeing.

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.fhf.org.uk/meetings/inquiry2007/FHF\\_inquiry\\_report\\_diet\\_and\\_behaviour.pdf](http://www.fhf.org.uk/meetings/inquiry2007/FHF_inquiry_report_diet_and_behaviour.pdf)

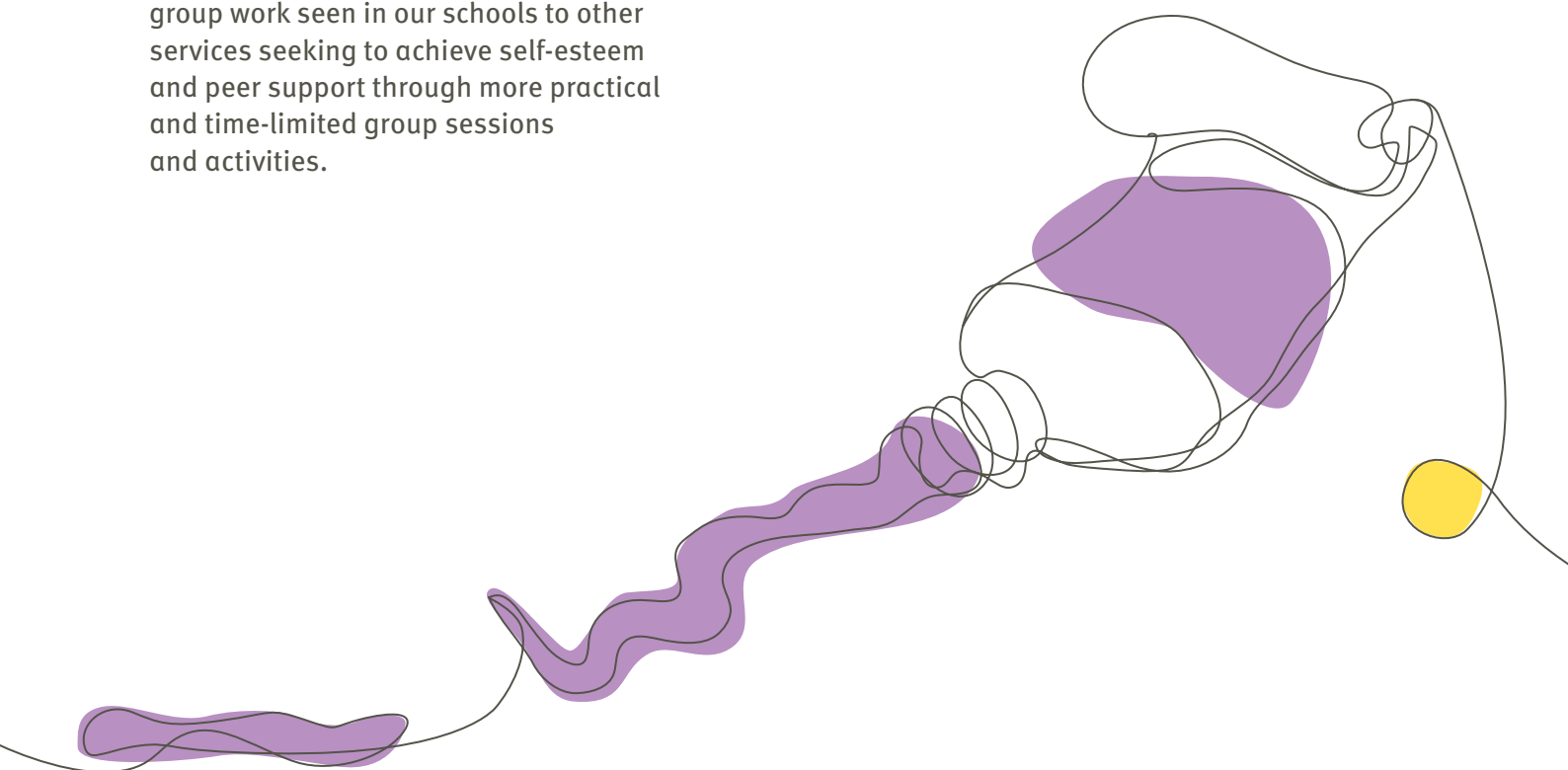


The key message from the review is the need for consistent professional involvement with a child, one of the most difficult things to achieve in practice. It is a message that ties in with the earlier study undertaken for Action for Children's Growing Strong campaign, namely that research and experience both show that the most effective means of raising children's self-esteem is to develop a trusting and lasting relationship with one or more carers or professionals.

## Recommendations

These recommendations highlight how other school settings and services for children and young people may benefit from the approach taken by Action for Children schools in improving their pupil's emotional wellbeing.

- 🕒 **Self-esteem** – baseline information must be collated about the young person's self-esteem when they enter the school or service in order to set realistic targets to help build up the self-esteem, self-belief and confidence of the young person.
- 🕒 **Peer relationships** – group work should be used to promote the development of positive peer relationships. The scope of group work can range from the specialist group work seen in our schools to other services seeking to achieve self-esteem and peer support through more practical and time-limited group sessions and activities.
- 🕒 **Targets and rewards** – a mechanism should be put into place across children's services to enable children to contribute to setting targets and be rewarded for achievements as a method of improving individual emotional wellbeing.
- 🕒 **Multi-disciplinary approach** – the benefits this approach can have within a school setting is evident. It should also be replicated across other services to prevent delays in children and young people's support and to ensure there is a real working relationship between all the professionals supporting a child.
- 🕒 **Healthy lifestyles** – the healthy lifestyles approach seen in our schools should be replicated by other services working with children and young people.
- 🕒 **Adult role models/staff groups/communication** – consistent professional involvement with a child is the most effective means of raising children and young people's self-esteem.



## External evidence findings

Reports from Ofsted and ESTYN (the office of Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales) have all concluded that the three Action for Children schools involved with the review have a strong background in the effective use of therapeutic approaches.

### At Cotswold Community, Ofsted found:

'The school uses a wide variety of therapeutic approaches to help pupils move forward with positive attitudes. Most pupils manage to modify their behaviour and are able to contribute successfully within the school community.'<sup>6</sup>

### At Headlands, ESTYN found:

'All pupils make progress in their personal, social, moral and spiritual development. As they progress through the school, their behaviour and attitudes improve and they become more confident in their own abilities.'

'All staff are committed to helping the pupils to make progress to overcome their difficulties. Staff are sympathetic to the diverse and complex needs of the pupils.'

'The good teamwork between education and care staff helps pupils to become calmer, to develop self-confidence and to improve their social skills.'<sup>7</sup>

### At Westwood, Ofsted found:

'Pastoral support is good and a strength of the school. An unfaltering focus on the needs of pupils as individuals and a passion for supporting their emotional wellbeing through a therapeutic approach enable the pupils to do well in their personal skills, often from very low starting points.'

'It is their [pupils'] willingness and confidence to re-engage with staff following a problem which are particularly impressive. Pupils can do this because they independently use the strategies that they have been given to modify their behaviour.'

'By becoming more responsible for their behaviour and solving problems when things get tough, they are better prepared for life outside school, and for education or employment.'<sup>8</sup>

## Conclusion

The review, backed by external inspection reports, shows that Action for Children is developing good practice in improving the emotional wellbeing of pupils in our schools.

Action for Children services across the UK, including our schools, are raising the emotional wellbeing of large numbers of children and young people. These services are achieving this through the skilled use of a range of interventions with children, young people and their families that could be incorporated in other service settings.

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6 *Ofsted Inspection Report*, December 2007, [www.ofsted.gov.uk/oxedu\\_providers/full/\(urn\)/131470/\(type\)/16384,32768/\(typename\)/Independent%20education](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/oxedu_providers/full/(urn)/131470/(type)/16384,32768/(typename)/Independent%20education)

7 *ESTYN Inspection Report*, January 2007, [www.estyn.gov.uk/inspection\\_reports/Headlands\\_School\\_2007.pdf](http://www.estyn.gov.uk/inspection_reports/Headlands_School_2007.pdf)

8 *Ofsted Inspection Report*, February 2007, [www.ofsted.gov.uk/oxedu\\_reports/display/\(id\)/76664](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/oxedu_reports/display/(id)/76664)

