

Empowering strong mental health

Hannah Baker, co-CEO of Partnership for Children, tells NGA's **Fiona Fearon** about the charity's efforts to give schools and trusts the necessary resources for nurturing positive mental health and wellbeing in children, highlighting the essential role of governing boards



five to seven. We have a suite of programmes under our Skills for Life programmes, including supporting Year 6 pupils with the transition into Year 7 and an adapted programme for children with special educational needs and disabilities.

Fiona: How do you know what works when developing your programmes?

Hannah: We work with universities to evaluate our programmes through randomised control trials, which show us what works and what can be improved. It's important to us that the programmes make a difference to children's self-esteem, promote coping skills and reduce instances of depression. We're giving them the skills and confidence to look after their own wellbeing from a young age, and coping skills that they can draw upon internally or in their external network.



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Fiona Fearon: Tell us about Partnership for Children.

Hannah Baker: We are a children's charity established more than 20 years ago. Our work promotes children's mental health and wellbeing; it grew out of suicide prevention, when research was showing that interventions to address

children's mental health started too late and we needed to support them earlier with basic coping skills. Research shows that the better coping skills children and young people have, the less likely they are to develop mental health challenges.

That's how our first programme, Zippy's Friends, was born, supporting children aged

Fiona: What is the current data telling us about children's mental health in England?

Hannah: The Good Childhood Report published by the Children's Society and the Department for Education's State of the Nation report don't paint a positive picture. In the last three years, the likelihood of children having a mental health problem has increased. Children's happiness continues to decline: five children in a class of 30 are likely to have a mental health problem. Half of mental health problems start by the age of 14, which is why early intervention is a key part of our work.

Fiona: Can you tell us about your partnership work with schools?

Hannah: Supporting children who are facing mental health and wellbeing challenges is a big pressure for teachers. It often falls on them to support pupils with challenges, which they don't necessarily have the training for. It's about unpicking what is and isn't their responsibility.

We empower teachers with tools to foster coping skills and wellbeing, ensuring consistency across senior leaders and staff. Boosting staff confidence through open discussions is crucial. Our approach involves sustained collaboration rather than quick fixes. Schools integrate our programmes, enabling a cultural shift. We take pride in our accomplishments, appreciating schools for their invaluable support and witnessing its positive impact on children.

Fiona: How can governors and trustees set a culture that

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promotes wellbeing in their school or trust?

Hannah: A whole-school approach that includes staff is vital. Creating a culture that promotes good mental health and wellbeing can prevent bigger issues. Staff wellbeing has taken a hit since the pandemic; it's important to create space for open and honest conversations between the headteacher or senior leaders and their staff. Staff wellbeing impacts pupil wellbeing.

Mental health and wellbeing should be incorporated into key policies such as behaviour and safeguarding policies. You may not need a standalone mental health and wellbeing policy if it is a thread that effectively runs throughout other policies.


Fiona: How can governing boards ensure that they understand the challenges specific to their school?

Hannah: Collect the right data – look at the school community's demographics and how they overlap with disadvantaged pupil groups. Triangulate data and look at attendance, behaviour and pupil progress – what picture does that build? Also, different year groups may experience different challenges – the transition for Year 7 pupils, or exam stress for Key Stage 4. Meaningful data can

also be collected by listening to staff, parents and pupils.

Understanding the wider community is also crucial. Issues such as deprivation, low employment or high crime rates could impact children's mental health and wellbeing.

Fiona: Finally, what are your top tips for governing boards?

- Hannah:**
1. Have a mental health and wellbeing champion on the board – not so one person has all the responsibility, but so they can steer the conversation so wellbeing is considered throughout the agenda.
 2. Carry out a board skills audit that includes wellbeing; it's a great way to understand the skills and knowledge around the table and identify any gaps.
 3. Consider continuing professional development gaps for school staff and leaders. Encouraging school leaders to use their expertise within their school is a powerful way to embed a culture of wellbeing.
 4. Use learning walks to monitor how wellbeing is built into the curriculum and teaching. 

More information

Find out more about the Skills for Life programmes for five- to 12-year-olds and download free wellbeing resources from www.partnershipforchildren.org.uk

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