

Helping ourselves to help others



PARENTING is a complex challenge and recent media coverage of our national mental health crisis leaves many parents and those of us who work in education and with young people anxious to do the very best we can for those we care for.

Unlike physical health which often leads us to think of fitness, keeping healthy, eating well, sleeping well and so on the words 'mental health' often invoke negative thoughts such as anxiety, depression and suicide. My belief is that we need to shift that dialogue to one of promoting positive mental health. Organisations such as Action for Happiness are now producing excellent resources and advice on this topic. Many schools are now actively promoting resilience and explicitly teaching emotional literacy skills to young children. It is wonderful to also see HRH Duchess of Cornwall and HRH Prince William promoting mentally healthy schools. <https://www.headstogether.org.uk/programmes/mentally-healthy-schools/>

One aspect we are looking at closely here at St Catherine's Prep School this term is the notion that we all, children included, need to help ourselves in order to help others. We will be maintaining this as a focus with staff and children and suspending some of our normal curriculum to allow time to explore this topic with activities, staff training and a charity cake sale in aid of Young Minds.

We know of the advice as adults that we should fit our own oxygen mask before helping others and are told such whenever we board a flight. Each day for a young child is rather like setting off on a new flight – full of adventure and possibilities but also including some anxiety about the unknown and a leap of faith that the plane will get us to our chosen destination safely. Some days can be a bumpy ride.

So how best to instill this notion of self-care with young children? For toddlers who are ego-centric this can be a challenge as they are really at the stage of development which involves them discovering their own needs and finding the means to fulfill them. Yet as children join nursery schools and step into primary school for their first year they will be expected to share and to look after others as well as to look after themselves more than they have needed to at home. Basic steps may seem trivial but are important. Children should be encouraged pre-school to drink water, to say when they need to visit the toilet, to try new



foods and to initiate games or activities which they enjoy or are curious about. In these very early stages children are learning how to meet some of their own needs.

It can also be helpful for children to be encouraged to express how they feel and to learn to ask what it is that they think would help. Children can be self-centred and some interactions with their peers might seem pretty blunt and direct. What we also see with children at this age is natural compassion and empathy – children can be very sweet-natured towards a teacher suffering with a cold or another child who is upset. We need to encourage this natural empathy but also help the children voice what they need when they find themselves in a conflict or a situation which makes them feel anxious or upset. They might learn how to say, 'that made me feel sad,' or 'please can I join in,' and to initiate a game or activity of their own.

As children progress through primary school we also need to guard against constant target setting and the parent version of FOMOFOMCMO (fear of my child missing out). We cannot do it all and neither can a child however talented and confident they appear to be. Hence, the number of activities any young child takes part in must be handled very carefully. Children need time to 'give something a go,' even if it is hard at first but they also need to be given the option to 'let something go' if it is not something that they are progressing in, enjoying or motivated by. A very important lesson here is the ability to say 'no' to something that is just too much.

My final tip is simply to remember the importance of being a lead role model for positivity. Avoid twenty questions about what happened during the school day and digging for what might have gone wrong. Praise effort, approach and attitude not just outcomes and be as discrete as possible when you are disappointed. None of this is easy or straightforward but it is important and worthwhile. Ultimately a happy childhood will lead to a happy successful adulthood.

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Open Mornings: Thursday 10th March, Friday 6th May, Friday 10th June
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