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# Structured wellbeing curriculum in schools

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**Abstract**
Some argue that school is a means to an end, and time spent in lessons may be unpleasant, but it helps these children in the future. The question is 'to what end'. Are school years something which have to be tolerated in order to have happier lives later in life, or something which have to be tolerated to add to the productivity of the UK economy? Others (such as the authors of this book) would even argue that it is desirable for children to be happy even during their school hours and school years. The wellbeing of children matters in its own right, as well as the impact on later adult outcomes and wellbeing. The current government has proposed the wellbeing of children as a priority. For this, schools will play an important role.

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This paper provides background analysis to Value for Money: how to increase wellbeing and reduce misery (D. Frayman, C.Krekel, R. Layard, S. MacLennan and I. Parkes). CEP Special Report 44. (2024).

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# Structured Wellbeing Curriculum in Schools:

**VfM Chapter 3 supporting paper. LSE.**

## Background

### Introduction and background

The prevalence of mental health disorders is increasing. In 2023, about one in five children and young people aged 8 to 25 had a probable mental health disorder, up from one in nine in 2017[1]. This would mean, in an average class of 27 pupils, a teacher is managing around 5 children with a probable mental health disorder, on top of their existing teaching requirements. Over half of mental health problems experienced in adulthood start before the age of 14, the median age for the onset of anxiety is 11.[2]

Evidence from UK longitudinal data (Clark et al, 2018) shows that the best predictor of an enjoyable adult life is emotional health in childhood, which with the child's behaviour, is more important that the qualifications that the person obtains.[3]

Yet a key focus of schools in the past years has been on attainment. The 2022 priorities for the Department for Education were to drive economic growth, to level up education standards, support the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children, and provide early years education to raise standards and help parents to work.[4]

Currently, UK household surveys report that children were unhappy with school than with any other aspect of life examined[5]. The Children's Society reports that the percentage of those reporting low happiness with school appears to have increased.[6] At the same time, wellbeing of children in the UK has been decreasing.[7]

Does this matter? Some argue that school is a means to an end, and time spent in lessons may be unpleasant, but it helps these children in the future. The question is 'to what end'. Are school years

[1] Newlove-Delgado (2023) et al, Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2023 - wave 4 follow up to the 2017 survey - NHS Digital
Females have higher overall levels of psychological distress: analysis of the Millenium Cohort Study shows that 22.1% experienced high levels of psychological distress in the last 30 days, compared to 10.1% of males
Mental-ill-health-at-age-17-–-CLS-briefing-paper-–-website.pdf (ucl.ac.uk)

[2] Kessler RC, Angermeyer M, Anthony JC, De Graaf R, Demyttenaere K, Gasquet I et al. Lifetime prevalence and age-of-onset distributions of mental disorders in the World Health Organization's World Mental Health Survey Initiative. World Psychiatry 2007;6:168–76 referenced in Ellins et al (2023)

[3] An increase in qualifications does have a significant but small association with individual wellbeing, including direct effects as well as the knock-on implications on wellbeing through higher income and better health (Clark et al, 2018. They estimate that a 1 SD increase in qualifications has a direct effect on wellbeing of 0.04, as well as a mediated effect through additional income (0.03), lower likelihood of unemployment, criminality (0.01) and higher physical and mental health (0.02). The total is a small but significant impact on wellbeing (Table 3.2 from Clark et al, 2018). However this is small compared to the impact of relationships and mental health. Clark et al (2018)

[4] E.g. DfE Outcome Delivery Plan: 2021 to 2022 - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

[5] Good Childhood Report 2022 and 2023 GCR-2022-Full-Report.pdf (childrenssociety.org.uk)
Good-childhood-report-summary-2023_0.pdf (childrenssociety.org.uk)
14.2% scoring below the average. Other areas surveyed were happiness with Time use, Home, Family, Friends, Health, Future, Choice, Things, Appearance
Analysis for the Good Childhood Report found that children's happiness with how much they are listened to made the largest contribution to happiness with school in general

[6] (The Children's Society, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022).

[7] See e.g. The Good Childhood Report 2023.pdf (childrenssociety.org.uk) page 18, based on analysis from Understanding Society, 2009 - 2021

something which have to be tolerated **in order to have happier lives later in life**, or something which have to be tolerated to add to the productivity of the UK economy? Others (such as the authors of this book) would even argue that it is desirable for children to be happy even **during** their school hours and school years. The wellbeing of children matters in its own right, as well as the impact on later adult outcomes and wellbeing. The current government has proposed the wellbeing of children as a priority. For this, schools will play an important role.

The supporting document for chapter 2 sets out the analysis for **early mental health intervention and effective support**, with analysis of Mental Health Support Teams in schools. This chapter focuses on the roll out of **Structured Wellbeing Curriculum in schools.**

**Context and need**

More people die each year in the UK from suicide than in traffic accidents[8]. Yet most schools do not yet have a specific curriculum focussing on mental wellbeing.

As a proxy for the wellbeing effectiveness of a structured wellbeing curriculum in schools, we use RCT evidence from the 'Healthy Minds' programme.

**Overview of intervention**

The Healthy Minds programme aims to improve pupils' wellbeing and health-related outcomes. The intervention forms a personal, social, and health education curriculum for Year 7 to Year 10 pupils (age 11 to 15). This comprises a set of 14 modules, bringing together individual elements that have been identified to be effective through previous research (Coleman et al., 2011). The programme uses the principles of cognitive behavioural therapy and theory from positive psychology to help students improve their resilience, understand the link between thoughts feelings and behaviour, so they understand themselves better and have more empathy for others. The resilience skills form the basis and thread through the curriculum into the full range of personal, social, and health topics. Lessons are taught by school staff (teachers or learning support assistants) who receive in-depth training in each element.

**Benefits**

Lordan and McGuire (2019) analysed the impact of the programme on health-related outcomes through a two-arm cluster randomised trial, finding positive effects. Life Satisfaction increased by 0.18 standard deviations after 4 years, a 0.36 change on a 0-10 scale. Across the significant outcomes, most of the effects had occurred by the 2-year period and were consolidated at the 4-year period.[9]

*Calculation:*

0.364 WELLBYs (year 3) + 0.364 WELLBYs (year 4)

=0.70 WELLBYs (discounted)

**Costs**

[8] In 2022, there were 5,642 suicides registered in England and Wales (10.7 deaths per 100,000 people); Suicides in England and Wales - Office for National Statistics (ons.gov.uk); Those killed in a road accident in 2022: 1,695 from Reported road casualties Great Britain, provisional results: 2022 - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

[9] Personal correspondence with Alistair McGuire and internal CEP seminar (2018)

The external evaluation estimated the costs of providing training and resources to deliver Healthy Minds at ~£28 per pupil per year[10], each year over the four years of the programme[11]. As a high range, the average estimated cost of running a school based emotional learning programme is used, £183 (per child, per year).[12] The central estimate which we use for these calculations takes the midpoint of these values, £106 per pupil per year, a total present value of just over £400 per pupil over the 4 years of the course.

**Cost Effectiveness**

Taking the results of the randomised control trial and assuming that the wellbeing benefits remain for year 3 and 4 results in a central cost per WELLBY of £572 and a BCR of 27[13]: an incredibly good investment.

**Future benefits**

Such an intervention is important not only for the improved wellbeing during the years of the intervention, but also the potential impacts on later adult wellbeing. We do not have findings from healthy minds, since these would only be available years into the future, with a longitudinal study. However, we can use evidence from the British Cohort Study (Clark et al, 2018), which found that a 1 sd change in emotional heath at age 16 is associated with a 0.1 sd change in adult life satisfaction. This would mean that a 0.36 change in WELLBYs at age 16 could be associated with 0.036 higher WELLBYs per year in adult life. There is lower confidence in these future estimates and they are not included in the value for money estimate above.

There may also be future cost savings associated with such a programme[14]. Specifically, the evaluation of Healthy Minds found that General Behaviour from the CHQ-CF87 increased by 0.15sd. Although measured in different ways, we know from analysis of the British Cohort Study that an extra standard deviation of 'good behaviour' reduces the number of convictions at age 30 by 0.13[15] – if these were to be equivalent and the association were causal, this improvement in behaviour through healthy minds could represent 0.02 fewer convictions at age 30, with associated cost savings to society – and wider wellbeing benefits for others. Paull and Xu (2017) use evidence suggesting that an increase in social skills at age 7 is associated with a lower probability of truancy, exclusion, crime and smoking at age 16 and a lower probability of crime, depression, unemployment and a higher hourly wage at age 42[16] each of which is associated with later cost savings.

The high uncertainty surrounding these future estimates and cost savings means that no impacts beyond the 4 years of the course have been included. However, even with conservative assumptions

[10] £23.50 in 2019 prices in the report, uprated to 2023 prices
[11] A total PV of £106 in 2023
[12] Uprated to 2023 prices. Using Manchester Unit cost database, ultimately from "Mental health promotion and mental illness prevention: The economic case (Knapp et al, 2011) Layout 1 (publishing.service.gov.uk) Total Present Value of £697 over the 4 years, per pupil
[13] See methods chapter. with BCR, WELLBY has been monetised using the Green Book Guidance recommended value of £13k in 2019 prices, which translates to £15,258 per WELLBY in 2023 prices.
[14] Pupils in schools receiving the programme had higher average self assessed general health than pupils in schools not receiving the programme (an effect size, ES, of 0.25 standard deviations after four years, as measured by the Child Health Questionnaire-CF87). Positive effects were also found for many secondary outcomes capturing physical health and externalising behaviour as measured by the subscales of CHQ-CF87, including for physical difficulties (ES = 0.30), general behaviour (ES = 0.15), general health (ES = 0.15), and family activities (ES = 0.12).
[15] Clark et al 2018, Table 7.2
[16] In combining these links, it was necessary to assume that different measures of cognitive and social development at the same age have a one-to-one association in terms of standard deviations. That is, it has been assumed that a one standard deviation difference the SDQ and the BSAG social skills score at age seven.

of wellbeing benefits and higher estimates of costs than were reported in the evaluation, this represents very good value for money in wellbeing terms.

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