

Making mental health a priority at Bangor Central Integrated Primary School

In this practice example, we talk to Sharon, a primary school teacher from Bangor Central Integrated Primary School in Northern Ireland to talk about the importance of mental health and wellbeing among students.

While mental health can be promoted through the PDMU and PE curricula in Northern Ireland, it is not a standalone area of learning. Sharon, with the support of her colleagues, goes all out to ensure that her pupils feel their mental wellbeing is supported and nurtured.

I'm fortunate to work in a school which places value on the mental health and wellbeing of the children in our care. Although mental health is included on the curriculum in Northern Ireland, we'd like a greater emphasis on it.

SHARON DOWIE



Speaking about the real need for free mental health resources, Sharon commented, "As services become more and more stretched in underfunded schools, there are fewer outside agencies coming in to support children. As a result of this, teachers are having to broaden their knowledge base to meet the needs of the children in their classes. The Mentally Healthy Schools resource bank is ideal to support this. I especially find the search utility so useful. There is a wealth of information and resources for everything to do with mental health."

Sharon has spent quite a bit of time honing her personal mental health and wellbeing goals for her pupils, using Mentally Healthy School resources to help reach those goals. "I want my children to be able to recognise and name their emotions, as well as realise that it's okay to have these feelings. I want them to know that if an emotion feels too big or they don't like the way it makes them feel, that there is something they can do about it."



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Mentally Healthy School Resources that have helped

What Sharon likes most about Mentally Healthy Schools resources is that there is good balance between the theory of a mental health concept (for example: separation anxiety), and practical ideas to implement them in school. Here, she shares some of the resources she's found useful this year.

The Coronavirus Toolkit



"During Lockdown the Mentally Healthy Schools Coronavirus Toolkits were invaluable. I run our school's social media accounts so having all the resources related to, for example, resilience for parents, children and teachers in one place was brilliant. We were able to provide support to our school community during that challenging period by sharing resources from the toolkits via our Facebook and Instagram pages and our school website. Our parents (and the wider community!) made so many positive comments about the mental health resources we shared throughout Lockdown. We definitely couldn't have provided the same support without the toolkits."

Breathing Exercises



"The children in my class love breathing exercises (you can find lots on the MHS website!). We started the year just taking three slow breaths using our breathing ball and now they can sustain focus on a breathing practice for 5 minutes. It's amazing!"

Separation Anxiety



"I teach Primary 1, the youngest children in our school. Every year we strive to plan for a positive transition from nursery into school and this year we were very much aware of how big an impact separation anxiety was going to have on our children. We found the separation anxiety resources really useful this year and used them as the foundation for our transition planning. As a result of the Mentally Healthy Schools separation anxiety resources, our Primary 1 team worked together to plan how we could transition the children into school as happily as possible! We asked parents to send in a family photograph to display in our classrooms so that children could see the link between home and school. We also allowed children to bring a soft toy or comfort into school to stay in their box and if children were having a bit of a wobble, they could spend a bit of time with their toy until they felt happier.

The separation anxiety resources also talk about the importance of teaching children emotional literacy. We spent the first few weeks of school reading *The Colour Monster* and *The Colour Monster goes to School*. We taught children to recognise and name their emotions and they now have their own little stone which they can place into a jar as an emotional check in. Following on from this we have spent lots of time teaching muscle tension and relaxation exercises as well as breathing exercises to help build the children's capacity for managing their emotions. At the end of each day, we get out our breathing ball and take some deep breaths, tense and relax our muscles and then think back to our happiest memory for the day. We point to where we felt that happiness and set the intention to take that feeling home with us. My classroom assistant and I find that this really helps us with our own self-regulation!

We were really surprised that so few children actually spent time looking at their family photograph or going to get their comfort toy. After talking about it in our P1 team, we felt that perhaps parents seeing that we were putting the emotional needs of their children first, combined with the children just knowing that the photos and comforts were there even if they weren't needed, limited the amount of anxiety that children presented with."

Teacher Profile

Sharon Dowie is a Primary 1 teacher at Bangor Central Integrated Primary School which is a 3-form entry school in County Down, Northern Ireland. Apart from being passionate about making mental health and wellbeing a priority among her pupils, she also runs a Mindfulness Club for pupils in Key Stage 2 which have had to be put on hold due to Covid-related restrictions. She is also a co-ordinator for Play-Based Learning in Foundation Stage and Home & Community Links.



Sharon is a member of the MHS UK-wide education panel, who have helped to shape the direction and content of Mentally Healthy Schools for her area.

If you would be interested in joining the panel in 2021, we would like to hear from you on mhs@annafreud.org.

