



Building opportunities for positive mental health

Embracing a holistic approach to education

Set in the leafy inner suburb of Deakin, Canberra Girls' Grammar School is committed to providing challenging, enriching and supportive learning experiences and encourages students to become informed, resilient, forthright, resourceful and ethical global citizens. The school has a broad and enthusiastic community of students and embraces the need for strong physical, emotional and mental health. "We have students from a range of backgrounds at our school. As an independent school, parents make considerable sacrifices for their children to attend. Like any school, we have students with a range of difficulties, including mental health concerns. We have always placed a high emphasis on the wellbeing of students and are dedicated to a holistic approach towards the education of our students," Head of Junior School Heather Ablett explained.

The Anglican school comprises an Early Learning Centre for 3-5 year-olds, a Junior School from Prep to Year 6 (which is co-educational until Year 2) and a Senior School finishing at Year 12. Approximately 1500 students have access to an indoor heated swimming centre, gyms, sports courts and purposely built buildings for the performing arts, art and textiles, and information and communication technology.

The school's motto, 'A future built on opportunities', reflects a strong commitment to the holistic development of each child. There is a focus on pastoral care and social and emotional learning opportunities that begin at the Early Learning Centre.

KidsMatter is currently implemented in the Junior School (which includes the Early Learning Centre) with approximately 540 students. The school features a high level of transience; many students come from families on temporary postings, such as those with the embassies or in the defence force. "We have as many as 30 or 40 students moving in or out of the Junior School per year. Many new families come into the school each year, with many languages and cultures represented," Heather said.

The school is also part of the International Baccalaureate Primary Years Program – a program designed for students aged between three and twelve years old. The program focuses on the development of the child, encompassing social, physical, emotional and cultural needs in addition to academic development in key learning areas. KidsMatter was a perfect fit for a school already embracing a curriculum that had a holistic focus to student wellbeing. "KidsMatter seemed a great framework to base some of the work we had planned to do around pastoral care and personal development across the school years," Action Team Leader Damaris Patterson said.

The school conducted an audit to see what was happening around social and emotional learning – specifically where the gaps and overlaps were. The school now has two structured half-hour blocks each week incorporating the programs. For example, the Reception Class (3-4 year olds) is implementing Playing and Learning to Socialise while Year 4 focuses on the Friends for Life program. There are many other age-appropriate programs for the different year levels across the school. Each week the children are encouraged to use the skills they have learnt through the specific program via various activities with other students. "KidsMatter resources have given us a great framework to structure our activities. They have provided us with focus and clarity. Working through the component plans was a great tool – the process opens up discussion and provides a strategic direction for initiatives," Damaris added.

Mindful of the high number of students who do not have English as a first language, the school set up a library with resources in a range of languages including Korean, Chinese, Turkish, Greek, Arabic, Italian and French. This was a valuable process for the school to understand what life is like on campus for a student who does not have strong English skills.

Strengthening relationships with parents

The school is also keen to maintain connections with the parent community and has made it a priority to invite parent representation on the KidsMatter Action Team. "Having the parents' perspective is always really important for us. We are strengthening relationships with the parents and are providing a cohesive program of events for parents," Damaris said.

The school has always had parents involved in many aspects of school-life. "Now there are two parent representatives for each class and, through the KidsMatter Action Team, we have developed a role description for these reps. For instance, parents of new students are approached by the reps and asked if they would like to meet for coffee and then they are offered assistance in any area they may need it," Damaris said.

Informal social events such as picnics on the weekends are organised to help develop social relationships and networks. The school has also held afternoon teas and education evenings for parents in order to disseminate information about KidsMatter. "Another strategy which is working well is an information board where we put up KidsMatter resources, fact sheets and flyers. We are using it as a vehicle to get information to parents and are constantly changing the content to keep it interesting," Damaris said.

The school's counsellor, Paula Morelli, also plays an important role in the implementation of social and emotional learning. Paula teaches the Friends for Life program to Year 4 students and contributes a regular article to the school newsletter focusing on a related issue such as separation anxiety. Each article contains information for parents on how they can assist their child in relation to the issue.

Helping kids reach their full potential

KidsMatter has assisted the school in reframing the way it looks at early intervention strategies. "Often early interventions are more likely to come about because teachers may have picked up on a child's learning difficulty. For example, they have noticed that a child was struggling with maths and thought it was a learning issue. We look more closely at what might be stopping the child from learning. Is something happening in the child's life that is impacting on him or her at school? Staff at Canberra Girls' Grammar are looking at all aspects of a student's development," Heather said.

The school strongly believes that if a child does not have a positive attitude to learning then he or she cannot reach their full potential. It encourages the children to be risk-takers, enquirers and reflective thinkers. It also places enormous value on public speaking and playing sport on the weekends in a school team. "We want our children to be proud, confident and articulate members of the community. We want them to think locally and then globally. There is a very strong and tangible feeling here that the children are part of the community – this has a lot to do with sporting activities on the weekends and extra curricular activities. Friends at school are also friends out of school," Heather said.

Embracing the KidsMatter initiative is an example of the school's commitment to the holistic education of the student. Canberra Girls' Grammar School has a proud tradition and reputation of being a school of excellence. "The school offers great opportunities for the holistic development of a child. In order for the child to best access these opportunities, positive mental health is vital. As educators we have to get that foundation right," Damaris said.



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