



## Making the links between mental health and wellbeing

### Children voice a hidden problem

Daily life at Harrington Street Public School appeared to be humming along nicely. The school had an enthusiastic and cohesive staff, a supportive parent community and a reputation for academic excellence. But, as the school was to discover, some students were not travelling so well socially and emotionally.

Located in the Sydney suburb of Cabramatta West, the school has 850 students. The families of most of these students come from Chinese or Vietnamese backgrounds. The local parent community is well established with a strong respect for education and educators, and a commitment to ensuring their children achieve well academically. The school has a Year 5 and 6 Opportunity Class (or "OC") for which children from other schools can sit for a place in. Enrolment in the class is highly sought after as placement within it supports the child in attempting to gain a position in selective high schools.

It was the collective voices of the children in this class that forced the school to re-think the way it looked at mental health and wellbeing. In 2003, the school conducted the NSW Department of Education and Training's Quality of School Life Survey with some surprising results. "Some of the results made us feel uncomfortable. The survey found that, as a group, the children from the OC felt the most disengaged from the school, the least socially accepted and they had the lowest levels of self-esteem, confidence and optimism," Deputy Principal Laurie Hoffman said.

### Staff take up the challenge

The challenge for the school was to work out ways in which to respond effectively to the survey's findings. "From the perspective of a school, a critical aspect of wellbeing is that it is directly linked to academic performance in all key learning areas. At a workshop held with our teachers, they revealed their unanimous belief that there is a direct link between a child's academic performance and their wellbeing," Laurie said.

The school realised that an effective way to address the mental health and wellbeing of the students was by educating and working with the whole school community, including parents and teachers, in a more structured way. KidsMatter, which they have embraced with gusto, seemed a logical extension to the school's history of wellbeing strategies. "We knew what we had to do and we were really hungry for information on how best to do it. KidsMatter is giving us the opportunity to be more explicit about the meaning of wellbeing and the opportunity to formally teach social and emotional learning," Laurie said.

Co-Deputy Principal Poppy Cassimatis said that being involved with KidsMatter has been an invigorating experience for the school, especially for the Action Team. "Our Action Team comprises ten teachers, although there were about 20 teachers involved in the planning process. In addition, seven teachers were sent to the induction session in Adelaide, which is an incredible sign of commitment from our school's leadership team. Being part of the Adelaide sessions was very powerful for us. We came back saying 'This is just so good!'" Poppy said.

Poppy said the school is particularly fortunate to have a staff group that is passionate about increasing the children's mental health and wellbeing. "We believe we can really make a difference if we provide opportunities to build confidence and resilience. We may see a child who looks sad and realise that he or she often looks sad – but we need to know what to do next. We need to up-skill the next step."

The school is keen to ensure that they have processes in place which will allow them to discuss their concerns about students and look at what they can do to support them. Like many schools, time is a precious commodity. The Action Team meets at lunchtimes or in the afternoons. KidsMatter Component training takes place on staff development days and after school meetings. This ensures that quality time is spent on all four components with all staff. This year, a workshop conducted by a psychologist who specialises in experiential learning helped staff to look at ways to develop and explore their own social and emotional learning. This assisted staff in increasing their readiness to implement KidsMatter across the school.

## Getting student and parents involved

Coming onboard in Round Two, the school's first year focus is on implementing Bounceback with a weekly social and emotional learning session for all classes at the same time. A program of activities is also planned to engage parents and to help them learn more about mental health and wellbeing, as well as the role of social and emotional learning in the whole family. "We have been developing better working relationships with parents over the years. The parents in our community have a great respect for the school. We are also aware that the role of parents in schools can be very different for different cultures and we need to respect that. We are looking forward to having greater interaction with as many parents as we can," Laurie said.

One way the school has worked with parents has been to develop a series of presentations for parents that will be delivered at the same time the children are working with Bounceback. "We will be timing our workshops with parents to coincide with the delivery of social and emotional learning across the school. This way, the parents have the opportunity to gain a better understanding of what their children are learning in this area. These presentations can also provide further ideas for parents on what they can do at home to complement what the children are learning at school," Poppy said.

The school will be focusing the workshops on topics which parents have specifically requested information on and support for. Topics include how parents can help their child be more successful at school (using information gleaned from Bounceback); how to help with reading, writing and maths at home; and dealing with challenges facing children in the 21st century including alcohol use, cyberspace issues and anxiety.

A community room for parents is well stocked with mental health and wellbeing resources in multiple languages. In addition to the KidsMatter resources, there is information available from Multicultural Mental Health Australia. Another successful strategy that brings parents into the school grounds is a twice-weekly fitness class. The class is currently run by a parent and includes stretching exercises in the community room, followed by a group walk.

## KidsMatter: A perfect fit

Poppy said KidsMatter has been a wonderful springboard for the school and a perfect fit for the challenges they are addressing. "The supporting resources are very valuable and are of great quality. Alex, our KidsMatter Project Officer, has been wonderful and encouraging – she is a great friend to our school. Alex is very in tune with the challenges faced with implementing programs and strategies in schools. We are here because we love kids. To do our job properly we want the kids to engage in the curriculum. We know that if they feel safe and happy, then they will be able to have better outcomes in all areas of life."



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