

Persistent Fear and Anxiety Can Effect Young Children's Learning and Development

Only a child who is happy (calm, contented and self-aware) and who is living in the present moment can learn and remember.

Purpose - to raise awareness, knowledge and strategies in working to recognise, prevent and manage children presenting at our schools with emotional and social disorders, usually masked as bad behaviour.

My desire is to help schools understand their role in providing a safe, informed and structured environment that supports and understands these children who suffer from the debilitating, emotional distress of a range of anxiety disorders from severe trauma to mild generalised continuous anxiety.

A Way of Thinking - We need to frame our work as more than just education. As Principals we are asked to ensure that our children are safe. Today this means much more than fences - e.g. physical safety. Finding ways of ensuring our children are safe emotionally and socially and spiritually is a complex issue which can only be solved by using current knowledge around the development of our brains, emotions and responses combined with developing self-knowledge our own and others.

There is a strong scientific case for expanding core education into teaching children to be intelligent about emotions, and how to develop their own intra and inter personal skills using a knowledge base. The more children know about how and why they function in different ways the easier it would be for them to keep themselves happy and safe. Because their personality develops as a function of the personal relationships in the very early years, it is vital that key social skills are taught as absolute need. The early bond established with their parents forms the basis of this capacity for growing other loving relationships through life. Some children do not have this bond due to reasons beyond their control, they come to school with a very insecure experience of belonging no core attachment to an adult and have a very fragile fearful view of their world. During the ages of 4-7, developing relationships with peers, (unaided by a trusted adult to guide) can be fraught with anxiety and fear for children who have come to school with lots of history of damage and broken trust and relationships. Unless we move into supporting these pupils, (and often their families) providing primary care protection in our schools, these children are at risk at living unsafe dysfunctional lives and not receiving the specialist help they need. I see it as national importance that an enlightened group of educational lists and medical specialists put together a soundly researched programme for teaching mental health that would be universally delivered in all NZ classrooms.

We need to start thinking about our pupil's mental health as a public health issue.

For the majority of children, this type of programme would explicitly build on their already developing personal skills, and strengthen their immunity to mental disorders and help them understand the need to develop resilience. But for those who are suffering insecurity - poor attachment etc, this programme would help them learn the language of emotions, learn to recognise and manage them and eventually be able to respond to the emotions of others. Self-regulation of emotions can be taught if the teacher has the skills.

Reflecting on the subjects covered for teaching certification it is sad to note that nowhere do student teachers learn about the developmental stages and needs of the children they will have so much influence over, so many opportunities to intervene and change lives. There is no information given about the rapidly growing science of how the body and the brain work to create successful learners, happy resilient and at peace with themselves. There is a growing sense that despite the huge effort and workload of our teachers, something is not working for a percentage of our children. The number of pupils leaving school without a sense of who they are, where they are going, without drive or qualifications is an educational and social issue that needs to be viewed differently.

It is time we changed the agenda and placed the formation of our children, their self-image, their happiness, their thoughts, feeling and emotions, where it should be as the foundation of their being. Children not curriculum should be our focus. Then maybe learning will not be the stressful, uninteresting work that it is for so many - maybe on-going learning would happen naturally. All human beings have an innate desire to learn - only we others put barriers in the way. Schools should be teaching deliberately, emotional, social and spiritual health as their prime reason for being.

For years we have focussed on insisting that children manage their negative emotions - anger, jealousy etc. Concern about bullying and violence is driving the budget and many kinds of approaches are being developed to stop the bullying, often with little effect. But have we investigated programmes that focus on a school ethos based on keeping ourselves happy. Provide programmes that focus on managing our minds, our brain and our relationships. This would be a different way of thinking and being in our interactions with the children and each other. Keeping happy is hard work entailing the use and understanding of how we operate in our environment. Teaching training would need to change, attitudes about what is learning would need to be altered. It would not be just about positive fluffy feeling and expecting to be happy, but also about having an environment where we can raise children of hope. Creating schools that allow people to experience happiness and hopefulness, as top priority would enable

children to stay emotionally safe. A confident child taught to be resilient and self-aware will not allow themselves or others to be bullied for example or be afraid of taking risks.

The push to achieve academic grades over and above the well-being of the child means that the intervention programmes that are available and being used in pockets of schools around the country are too few only happen for a short time, often introduced too late in a bid of quick fix way to bullying, making friends etc. The effect is short lived and often just a token with minimal effect on helping the troubled child.

On-going problems with poor health, anxiety, depression, poor behaviour, low resilience would be better managed if this was the focus of the school ethos.

The most effective way to help the troubled child is to constantly and relentlessly expose them to the feeling of total unconditional love and compassion both within the school and if possible within the home. Teachers must have a visible constant care and concern for the child willing to be their advocate through the good and the bad days. This kind of compassion is a significant effect in lowering the fearful anxiety that many children bring to class every day. Compassion can't be taught, a teachers actions will always be heard, and provide examples to other on how to respond. So a compassionate approach to educating our children would see brain based programmes, managing the mind, understanding our thinking, etc as part of the curriculum.

OUR SCHOOLS ARE UNDER STRESS, OUR TEACHERS ARE UNDER STRESS, OUR FAMILIES ARE UNDER STRESS

As a country we have an epidemic in the levels of children experiencing stress - 1 in every 5 up to the age of 14 have psycho-social problems related to stress - many are on prescription drugs or are being 'labelled' in some way. Teenagers are turning in droves to find ways to alleviate the pressure that our system is putting on them, alcohol, drugs etc. AN UNHELPFUL WAY OF BLOCKING OUT A PHYSICAL ANXIETY RESPONSE.

So we need to be teaching children what stress is and how to have control over it. In any classroom or playground at school often high levels of stress are caused by the natural environment of expectations our children are over stimulated and under pressure to perform. The anxious child will display sensory issues, withdraw, frustration, and often tears. They spend their day in a hyper vigilant state, constantly looking for what might go wrong or "what might expose to the others that I am no good really? I must not let myself be in a situation where my fearful inner self is exposed."

So this stress leads often to lack of self-control, resulting too loud aggressive behaviours such as screaming, yelling, kicking, hurting others. More than

anything else this behaviour should be used as a flag - what is happening here? Too often they are taken away for their bad behaviour and left to cool off in a scary space - often alone. Other children then choose not to play with the ones who explode, cause trouble, hit without warning and therefore the problems with the naughty child escalates. He thinks I am bad, I can't cope, I don't have friends and so on, the child spirals downwards. It is critical the child get the help he needs to cope with these meltdowns, and is given time, strategies and information to help him regain calm.

ANGER, ANXIETY ATTACKS ARE THE BODYS BURGLAR ALARMS

"I have something happening in me that I don't understand and can't cope with. A calm, informed, understanding adult needs to know how to help this child or where to get help for him. He does not need detention, punishment etc. This further compounds his already poor view of his own ability to control himself.

SO WHAT IS STRESS AND WHERE DOES IT COME FROM?

Commonly stress is explained as ones reaction to life events, how one preserves, reacts and copes with life pressures, real or imagined. It is a physical, chemical, and emotional factor that causes mental and bodily tension releasing excessive amounts of stress hormones into the body setting up a state of "fight and flight"

FIGHT AND FLIGHT - This is our body's primitive inborn, survival response that prepares our body to survive - to fight - or to flee from any perceived threat to our safety. In the past this response kept us safe from the real dangers in the world e.g. - wild tigers etc. But today our threats are of a different kind usually not physical at all. However the same stress response happens in our body and suddenly we are on full alert. This body is unable to access the rational part of the brain and is unable to think clearly and make rational choices, the body is being flooded with stress chemicals, namely adrenaline, noradrenalin and cortisol. Our body undergoes very dramatic changes. The natural response now is too run. All our muscles are primed to run not to think. We are aggressive, hyper vigilant and over reactive. If unable to vigorously exercise or access a relaxation response e.g. breathing - we stay in this overloaded state for too long. Science proves that this is damaging to the cells in our brains and our bodies. So therefore it is vital that a teacher responds to a child in this state by sending them for a run or some other physical activity, simply being with them calmly and keeping them safe, giving them the techniques that will bring them back calm.

There is a danger that childhood anxiety is seen as a passing complaint-that is just a trivial difficulty that could be overcome if the child made more effort. Data below supports in evidence that excessive anxiety is the greatest threat

to successful intellectual, social, emotional, sexual, physical and personal development that any child faces. Chronic anxiety makes it extremely difficult, often impossible, to understand lessons, solve problems, make decisions, play competitive games, make friends and get along with grownups. It has devastating long term effects on self- image and self- confidence.

Abundant child development research now highlights the effects of stress, as well as environment and genetics upon whether children's lives get off to a promising or troubled start. Research tells us that excessive stress impacts on the developing brain and is likely to impact on well-being, general functioning and factors specific to learning e.g. impaired executive function, thought processing and working memory.

Given that many children exhibit learning, behavioural, attention/and/or mental health problems that are stress-sensitive or stress induced, the school setting offers an ideal environment for utilising interventions that promote healthy brain development and function and stress resilience.

Evidence is accumulating that mindfulness training is a cost-effective practice that allows children to develop the capacity to relate to any experience - whether pleasurable or stressful in a way that is responsive and not re-active.

Use of these practices develops emotional self-knowledge and self-regulation of emotion-related arousal.

The emergence of this skill set is the core goal of social and emotional learning.

Nurturing teaches inner resilience via mindfulness training would create a relational foundation in the classroom that would benefit teachers as well as pupils. Programmes that combine strength- based programmes such as Mindful Schools or Inner Kids, Friends, initiatives such as CARE, MBWE any inner-resilience programme would assist the ease with which mindfulness could be integrated into the curriculum.

Significance

- Important psychosocial implications for both clinical and non-clinical samples (e.g. wood, 2006):
 - Impacts negatively on academic performance
 - Associated with low self-esteem, physical problems and social isolation.
- Poor prognosis
- Childhood anxiety predicts other forms of pathology in childhood, adolescence and adulthood.
- >80% of anxiety-disordered children never get treated.

LIVING MINDFULLY / HEALING ANXIOUS MINDS MINDS AND BODIES

What is Mindful Living? It is an approach to life, based on the understanding that "the present is the only time that any of us have, to be alive - to know anything - to perceive - to learn - to act - to change - to heal" (Kabat-Zinn)

Children cultivate skills to increase awareness, calmness, and kindness. "Mindfulness is paying attention here and now with kindness and curiosity" - Association for Mindfulness in Education.

Mindfulness helps one become more aware of the breath, emotions, and thoughts that arise and dissolve in the mind. Through mindfulness, children learn to recognize when they are feeling uneasy or upset. This awareness allows them to choose how to react. They learn to replace negative ways of reacting with positive ways.

Through the mindfulness program, children cultivate skills to increase:

- Attention
- Awareness
- Stress Management
- Positive social skills
- Well-being

Mindful Living is a powerful way of managing one's emotions. I believe that all teachers and pupils need to consider this approach to peaceful living. Simple techniques taught effectively and very easily can alter one's physical, emotion and spiritual experience of living. Understanding mindfulness is accepting that nothing is static - everything is constantly changing - seeds are sown, plants grow, flowers bloom and leaves fall and so it is with our thoughts and emotions. Living mindfully we just accept these thoughts and emotions and notice that they are there. We don't fight them or engage with them for that gives them power over us. So we accept them and let them remain like passengers on a bus - we are driving the bus and the passengers are simply there. The more we are at peace with this idea the more we are free to live the lives we want to. Often we get tangled up in our thoughts we worry too much, we judge our thoughts are they good thoughts or are they bad thoughts, are our emotions are they good or bad, what should we do about them etc. All of this in a talk leads to constant worrying. Teaching children that thoughts are just thoughts, they are not facts even, not absolutely true, that living mindfully one doesn't challenge ones thoughts, we just let them pass. Teach the children that the mind thinks all the

time, but in the same way that hearts beat, muscles contract, we breathe, none of this needs conscious thought and we give no power to it. Once we start living in our past or examining our future, dwelling on our fears, we are a prisoner of your own mind, we are missing the moment of **NOW**; we have not shown fully as ourselves to the present moment.

Mindful living is being in harmony with your life. There is peace and dwelling in the present moment noticing things around. You can practice mindfulness no matter what faith or tradition you believe in. While it draws from Buddhist teachings, Mindfulness techniques are separate and not religion per se. Instead, Mindfulness is a way to live in the present moment, meeting our mind with open eyes and open arms....

By living mindfully we are open to a way things are in each moment, without trying to manipulate or change the experience. To live mindfully is to live each moment with kindness and compassion. It is practicing without neither judging our thoughts and feelings, nor grasping or pushing them away but rather by being with your thoughts just as they are. This a very peaceful approach to be used when calming children. To quieten the mind and let thoughts pass by like floating clouds ,mindful children will be taught to simply focus on the breath, the in and the out of air. Notice if it's fast or slow, coming from your stomach or the top of your lungs. This simple technique taught and practised in a classroom will bring relief from tension and allow all children, but especially our anxious ones, to feel the calm that they need to be themselves-to be relaxed and happy.

CHOOSING HAPPINESS ON A SUSTAINED BASIS HAS IMMEASURABLE BENEFITS-IT IS A MENTAL HEALTH PROGRAMME THAT ALLOWS THE SEEDS OF GREATNESS THAT ARE WITH-IN ALL OF US TO GROW, AWAY FROM THE NEGATIVE PULL OF WORRY AND FEAR.

Too many children are disabled by irrational thoughts and beliefs with false, pessimistic views of themselves. We can teach children to think empowering thoughts of self-belief success and happiness as well as help them to recognise the power of their emotions in understanding themselves and their behaviour.

Choosing our reactions rationally is a long way from the new-age belief in creating your own happy reality--rational thinking is reality thinking and results in growing children who are optimistic, resilient, coping children who have the tools to bounce back from stress, unhappiness and adversity. It is the children who have a strong sense of being in control of their inner world who have capacity to dare to dream and hope-to know with certainty that they can cope. All children, not only our anxious, fearful ones need to be immersed in a community where they are taught first to love themselves - they are precious

and everyone (school, family, parish) must bathe them in unconditional love and be a mirror back to them, reflecting all that is good in them, their uniqueness and special gifts - the image of God that we see in them. To know how to keep one-self happy and motivated one must know who they are, how they operate and what their basic needs are. This knowledge is at the very core of being mentally healthy-in a child's words, being happy.

Louise Hay in her children's book 'I think, I am - Teaching the power of Affirmations' this is a useful text that illustrates her belief that thoughts create our lives. Self-worth is created by the way we think and earlier the children understand this power the easier their journey through life will be. I have used this book with many children and am always amazed how quickly they 'catch on' and begin to use personal affirmations. Affirmations are the thoughts we use in our daily lives, inner thoughts of worry, anger and fear are negative affirmations are repeated often enough allow the child to believe them. Optimistic words of hope, happiness and love are positive affirmations which give the child a positive view of their world. This is a quick simple way of engaging children in the self-talk that goes round and round in their heads. They can choose the message they hear - change the disc in the hard drive - it is fun.

Mind Your Mind - Why is it important to learn how to mind your mind?

It may seem that minds have somehow managed themselves to date; after all, who of us ever learned to mind our mind? The truth is our minds frequently don't manage themselves very well at all, and when our minds aren't managing well we experience emotional disturbance and discomfort / stress. This can not only be unpleasant but also often manifest itself in what we do and how we behave. The primary aim of educators needs to include the basics of mind / thoughts / feelings / behaviours as part of the way children learn to manage themselves.

RESILIENCE

I found it very interesting that Daniel Goleman (Emotional Intelligence) and the Dalai Lama, have been meeting and discussing the links between Western and Eastern understanding of what it means to live happily. These discussions have evolved into research into the prevention of mental and physical illness. They emphasised the importance of including resilience programmes in all levels of schooling. Such programmes would be based on social and emotional skills, especially the development of empathy and compassion towards all living things. As mentioned earlier in this paper, a rapidly growing number of children and adults are developing mental health problems in response to life stressors. The

term resilience has become topical in research circles. Resilience is the ability to not only bounce back from adversity, to grow from overcoming these challenges. To be resilient means to go through the daily ups and downs and feel strong enjoying life and relationships with others while maintaining a positive attitude. We can place all children on a continuum of being those who exhibit distress at the least little thing, 5 being children who cope reasonably well with life's issues and 10 a small group of children who have high levels of resilience and can withstand the majority of life stressors.

Leaders and educators must embrace a paradigm shift in their approach to well-being and happiness, and take a proactive approach to teaching children how to be (themselves). Learning to be resilient to survive is like learning to swim so you don't drown. The group of children (1 in 5) who are born with a temperamental sensitivity react so quickly and strongly to adverse circumstances that they stay emotionally aroused for long periods of time. These children are at risk for developing anxiety disorders in the first few years of school. These include signs of excessive worry difficulty in dealing with change, not being able to fall asleep, shyness, perfectionism, psychosomatic complaints and avoidance of any challenge - NOT CONDUCTIVE TO LEARNING. Depression entails sadness, lack of interest in the class activities, irritability, hopelessness or helplessness, not enough sleep and social withdrawal. These children will carry this distress into adulthood; have troubled adolescence unless they learn resilience life skills and coping strategies.

Blessed as we are to be working in a Catholic School, at St John Bosco we base our charter on the four cornerstones of Catholic teachings together with the command that Jesus gave us 'I have come so you may live to the fullest joy. This is my command, love each other' John 15. We are known as 'The Happy School' we have made a conscious choice to be Happy - we have found keeping happy to be hard work and means that all staff need to understand and support the children in their emotional health.

Our main curriculum is to grow pupils who are strong from the inside out, by ensuring that a child's basic human and spiritual needs are met'. We are focused on:

- The development of all human dignity nurturing each child to be authentically human [Cornerstone 1]
- We liberate all forms of oppression [Cornerstone 2]
- We nurture human community [Cornerstone 3]
- We provide integral quality education [Cornerstone 4]

Together this provides us with an atmosphere of unconditional love in which the striving to meet each child's needs is made possible - their need for belonging, for love, for fun, for choice, and for boundaries.

How we do this takes many forms/much specialised knowledge/much patience and love. I would be happy to share any of these things with other schools should you be interested.

To Conclude:

Our children belong to all of us - they are tiny humans relying on us to meet their needs. They are born, little open learning machines, constantly learning, constantly adapting intrinsically, motivated to explore, experiment and try new skills. We must nurture this peak state for learning that they are born with, not fill their path with blocks and barriers. It is our duty to understand what is happening in their little minds, to have knowledge of the development of their mental health, in partnership with their social and spiritual development. There is a great deal of information available from the Mental Health Foundation in New Zealand.

It is apparent that most of the emotional distress and resulting problematic behaviour experienced by humans is caused by faulty or irrational thinking styles together with the physical pre-dispositions that are inherited.

Once a person is taught to identify and change irrational beliefs, the destructive emotional responses will become significantly less frequent and of lesser duration, as will the self-defeating behaviour. To put it simply, thoughts cause feelings, feelings lead to behaviour. Thinking is the core of all that we do, yet it is less than believable that we rarely examine the ways in which our children think. Much anxiety and psychological disturbance is simply the fault of under-developed and irrational thinking patterns.

I would like to challenge all adults in a position to mentor/guide/teach or lead children to give them the most empowering responsibility they can own - that is the power of their own mind to live and respond to life-events in a positive, confident (as opposed to fear-filled) focused, happy manner.

For more specific knowledge or help please contact me at our 'Happy School' St John Bosco. I have a model of a HAPPY SCHOOL and how to get there, plus have the ability to help you implement specific social and emotional programmes in your own school or just with your own family.

Any start to understanding and addressing our own and other's mental health development will be a start to enabling our world focus to be happy!

World Peace begins with a smile - give somebody one of yours today!