

healthy care briefing

Promoting the mental health and emotional well-being of looked after children and young people, and dealing effectively with any mental health problems they may have, is essential for their healthy development. Mental health is as important as physical health in achieving a good quality of life.

Healthy Care

This briefing is for all who are involved in Healthy Care Partnerships and:

- identifies what is known about the mental health and emotional well-being of looked after children and young people
- provides a description of mental health and emotional well-being
- describes children and young people's views of mental health and emotional well-being
- gives examples of how healthy care can promote and protect the mental health and emotional well-being of looked after children and young people
- offers signposts to resources and further information.

The Healthy Care Programme, funded by the Department for Education and Skills, is a practical means of improving the health of looked after children and young people in line with the Department of Health guidance *Promoting the Health of Looked After Children* (2002). Through partnership working, policy development, and with the participation of looked after children and young people, it will ensure that services are child-focused, provide a healthy care environment and support the National Healthy Care Standard.

The National Healthy Care Standard is based on a child's entitlement to:

- appreciation, love, respect and consistency
- a safe, protective and healthy care environment
- opportunities to develop personal and social skills to care for their health and well-being now and in the future
- effective healthcare, assessment, treatment and support.

Mental health

Many looked after children have experienced neglect, harm and distress. They are particularly vulnerable to poor mental health and poor emotional well-being and some may need the support of specialist services.

Unresolved mental health problems in childhood can cause continuing difficulties for children, carers and families. They may lead to further problems in adult life such as homelessness, poor educational outcomes and employment prospects, unsatisfactory personal relationships and even contact with the criminal justice system.

What is mental health and emotional well-being?

Mental health

Mental health influences how we think and feel about ourselves and others and how we interpret events. It affects our capacity to learn, to communicate and to form and sustain relationships. It also influences our ability to cope with change, transition and life events ... (Department of Health 2001)

[Emotional or mental health is] the ability to grow and develop emotionally, intellectually and spiritually; to make relationships with others including peers and adults; to participate fully in education and other social activities; to have positive self-esteem; and to cope, adjust and be resilient in the face of difficulties. (Weare 2004)

Well-being

[Well-being is] a holistic, subjective state which is present when a range of feelings, among them energy, confidence, openness, enjoyment, happiness, calm and caring, are combined and balanced. (Stewart-Brown 2000)

Resilience

Resilience refers to a person having the capacity to resist or 'bounce back' from adversities.

(Gilligan 2000, 2001)

A resilient child can adapt and thrive, even in circumstances that may cause a less resilient child to become depressed and introverted. Looked after children have often experienced trauma or adversity and have low resilience. Consistent support using a range of activities can nurture and promote resilience.

The mental health of looked after children and young people

Children with mental health problems are more likely than others to have experienced a combination of factors such as:

- poor physical health
 - special educational needs
 - learning difficulties
 - parents with mental health problems
 - family discord, instability or disruption
 - greater-than-average experience of punishment by parents
 - stressful life events
 - any form of physical, sexual, emotional abuse or neglect.
- (MacMillan and Munn 2001)

Many looked after children and young people will have experienced several of these factors and therefore may have a greater likelihood of mental health problems (Richardson and Joughin 2000).

The mental health and emotional well-being of looked after children is widely acknowledged to be poorer than that of any other group of children. The

evidence for this is well documented and unequivocal, as summarised below. A fuller discussion can be found in 'Promoting the mental health of children in need', a *Quality Protects Research Briefing* (Payne and Butler 2004).

The evidence

A national study of looked after children and young people, aged 5 to 17, found that 45 per cent were assessed as having at least one psychiatric disorder and about 66 per cent of those living in residential care were assessed as having a mental disorder – much higher than those living in foster care or with parents (Meltzer and others 2003).

Other studies indicate that between three and nine out of ten looked after children and young people have mental health problems (Arcelus and others 1999, Dimigen and others 1999, McCann and others 1996).

Many children and young people enter care as a result of previous traumatic experiences, including neglect; sexual, physical and emotional abuse; or family discord. These experiences are highly damaging to a child's mental health (MacMillan and Munn 2001).

Risk-taking behaviours – such as running away, alcohol and drug misuse, unsafe sex, sexual exploitation and offending behaviour – can be both a symptom and a cause of low self-esteem and mental distress (Richardson and Joughin 2000).

Just under one in five young people leaving care have mental health disorders such as depression, eating disorders and phobias. Over a third have deliberately self-harmed since the age of 15 (Saunders and Broad 1997).

Looked after children in foster care are generally more likely to describe themselves in terms of positive attributes, and less likely to highlight negative states, than children and young people in other types of placement (Shaw 1998).

Children and young people's view of mental health and emotional well-being

Looked after children and young people have identified mental health and emotional well-being as the most

important aspect of healthy care. The National Healthy Care Standard reflects this. Children and young people who participated in the consultation about the standard identified the following five issues as key in promoting their mental health.

1. A supportive and stable living environment with caring and consistent relationships – Children should have at least one secure attachment to an adult. They should feel safe with that person and be able to develop a trusting, loving relationship. A stable placement is crucial to allowing relationships to develop.

2. To be included and remembered – Isolation and loneliness was a key theme identified by children and young people. They want to be part of the communities they live in and to feel they belong and to have opportunities to meet with other looked after children. They also need help with feelings about the experiences and events that led to separation from their family.

3. Opportunities to express themselves – Play and leisure activities – including sport, art and drama – promote emotional well-being by developing confidence and self-esteem, and by giving opportunities to develop supportive friendship networks, learn social skills and find positive role models.

4. Support and encouragement with education – Positive school experiences improve career options in later life, they also boost self-esteem and confidence, provide friendship networks and opportunities to develop and practice social skills.

5. Preparation for leaving care – Young people need to prepare for independence and the many challenges they will face. They will continue to need support and encouragement into early adulthood.

Promoting mental health and well-being

There are two key areas to focus on when promoting mental health and emotional well-being for looked after children and young people, those of:

- enabling these children to develop the resilience and the emotional and social skills they need to cope with life and prevent mental health problems

- ensuring that when mental health problems do occur, they are identified and appropriate treatment provided.

There are a number of factors that can have a protective influence on looked after children and young people's mental health and emotional well-being. These are explored below.

Feeling safe and valued

The ability to learn is affected by mental health and emotional well-being. Emotions such as sadness and anger can block learning, while others such as feeling safe and valued can promote learning (Weare and Gray 2003).

Play and participation in the arts

Repetitive, consistent, predictable and nurturing experiences are essential to the healthy development of children and to release and express their underlying potential. Play and participation in the arts can provide invaluable opportunities for learning and development. (Perry and others 2000)

Social and emotional skills

Department for Education and Skills guidance (DfES 2003) has identified a range of social and emotional behavioural skills that contribute towards children's emotional health and well-being:

- being an effective and successful learner
- building and sustaining friendships
- dealing with and resolving conflict effectively and fairly
- being able to solve problems with others and alone
- managing strong feelings such as frustration, anger and anxiety
- recovering from setbacks and persisting in the face of difficulties
- working and playing cooperatively
- competing fairly and losing with dignity and respect for competitors
- recognising and standing up for your rights and those of others
- understanding and valuing the differences between people, and respecting the right of others to have beliefs and values different from your own.

Children and young people need opportunities to develop these skills in order to build and maintain their emotional health and well-being. This is supported by research into what young

people think promotes their mental health; and echoes the views of the children, young people and carers who were involved in the development of the National Healthy Care Standard.

What young people think promotes and maintains their mental health

- Feeling safe – both physically and emotionally
 - Being able to talk to an adult of their choice in confidence
 - Access to sports centres and youth clubs that can provide interesting and meaningful activities
 - Personal achievement
 - Being praised
 - Generally feeling positive about oneself
- (Kay 1999, Ahmad and others 2003)

The role of Healthy Care Partnerships

A healthy care environment provides a sound base for the promotion of mental health and well-being because, for children and young people, it:

- provides supportive personal relationships
- strengthens their sense of self
- stimulates their curiosity and desire to learn about the people and world around them
- provides opportunities to exercise choice and learn about responsibility
- is free from fear or violence
- offers a safe living environment
- promotes and protects their physical and mental health.

Healthy Care Partnerships can promote and protect the mental health of looked after children and young people by ensuring that it is addressed in Healthy Care audits and Healthy Care action plans. This will include training and professional development for carers and residential social workers so as to support them in providing a healthy care environment and understanding the importance of their role.

The National Healthy Care Standard

A child or young person living in a healthy care environment is entitled to:

1. feel safe, protected and valued in a strong, sustained and committed relationship with at least one carer;
2. live in a caring, healthy and learning environment;
3. feel respected and supported in his/her cultural beliefs and personal identity;
4. have access to effective healthcare, assessment, treatment and support;
5. have opportunities to develop personal and social skills, talents and abilities and to spend time in freely chosen play, cultural and leisure activities; and
6. be prepared for leaving care by being supported to care and provide for him/herself in the future.

Examples from Healthy Care Partnerships of action to promote the mental health and emotional well-being of children and young people

Policy

- Local policies relating to mental health specifically include responding to the needs of looked after children and young people.
- Relevant local policies about looked after children and young people include mental health and well-being.
- A local policy decision resulted in all foster families, children and young people being given a card for reduced rate access to leisure, fitness and cultural activities. This is based on evidence that involvement in physical activity and other community activities enhances well-being and promotes social inclusion.

Partnership

- A youth worker for looked after young people encourages and supports them to use mainstream youth, arts, sports and leisure provision. The project is a partnership between the youth service, the PCT and social services.
- Preventive mental health teams are working with carers and professionals to train and support them in their understanding of looked after children's mental and emotional well-being.
- An 'Arts in Health' project is working with vulnerable young people in partnership with local organisations and includes a visual arts project for care leavers. Outcomes for the young people have included: greater self-esteem, improved resilience and better ability to make and sustain relationships, and it has stopped bullying.

Practice

- A community therapist has been appointed under the CAMHS strategy to work exclusively with the carers of looked after children. This includes running workshops around stress relief and anger management.
- All children who are being placed for adoption can be referred for play therapy to help them understand why they are in care, their feelings and the transition to a new, permanent home.
- A creative participatory music project in a residential children's home aims to improve low self-esteem. Feedback from the group has shown that members realised their musical potential, improved their self confidence and ability to listen.
- A training resource for staff to promote emotional health and well-being in secure units was developed from good practice in five secure units.
- Training for foster carers and residential social workers includes mental health and emotional well-being.

Participation

- Foster carers developed a folder about themselves and their home (including photographs) for children and young people to see before they came to the placement. Young people who took part in a Healthy Care consultation identified moves to new placements as distressing and said that they needed to know where they were going and they suggested the folder.
- Monitoring of a specialist CAMHS has been introduced and includes feedback from looked after children and young people using the service. This is informing the development and improvement of the service.

National Policy

The National Healthy Care Standard contributes to the achievement of:

- **The five outcomes for children and young people described in Every Child Matters**
The outcomes are to: be healthy; stay safe; enjoy and achieve; make a positive contribution; and achieve economic well-being.
- **The National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services**
Standard 9 of the framework refers to services for children with mental health problems and the need for mental health promotion for all children.
- **Choosing Health: Making healthy choices easier**
The public health White Paper identifies the need to promote the health and well-being of children and young people and to improve mental health for the whole population. It refers to looked after children and young people's high rates of emotional and behavioural difficulties and the need to improve their self-esteem, social skills and emotional well-being.

Useful websites

www.ncb.org.uk/healthcare

Information about the National Healthy Care Standard, including briefings on key topics and resources.

www.childline.org.uk

Helpline offering counselling for children and young people, as well as publications and campaigns for professionals and carers.

www.childtrauma.org

American organisation offering training, resources and innovative approaches.

www.dfes.gov.uk/mentalhealth/

Links to DFES guidance on promoting mental health for schools and others.

www.mentality.org.uk

Publications, campaigns and training for the promotion of mental health.

www.mentalhealth.org.uk

Information and resources about mental health and learning disabilities.

www.mind.org.uk

Resources, training and campaigning on mental health issues plus local groups.

www.nelig.com

Resources from the National Emotional Literacy Interest Group.

www.ncb.org.uk

The National Children's Bureau has a project on children's emotional health and well-being plus resources and information relevant to mental health.

www.nhs.uk

Links to NHS services across the country plus health advice and campaigns.

www.readthesigns.org

Mental health website for young people: information, quizzes, young people's stories, where to get help and advice for parents/carers.

www.rcpsych.ac.uk

The Royal College of Psychiatrists offers an information service and leaflets on common

mental health issues including difficulties in adolescence.

www.teenagehealthfreak.org

Information and advice on health issues for young people, including dealing with stress plus answers to common questions.

www.tsa.uk.com

The Trust for the Study of Adolescence provides resources and training about understanding adolescence.

www.youngminds.org.uk

Resources and training to improve children and young people's mental health.

www.wiredforhealth.gov.uk

Health information (including how emotional well-being enhances education) for teachers. Plus Mind, Body & Soul: a website for young people about well-being.

www.rhrn.thewhocarestrust.org.uk

Resources and a website for looked after children and young people

Useful resources

Improving the Emotional Health and Well-being of Young People in Secure Care: Training for staff in local authority secure children's homes.

Bird J, and Gerlach L (2005) National Children's Bureau.

Improving the health and well-being of young people leaving care

Broad, B (2005) Dorset: Russell House Publishing.

Developing Children's Social, Emotional and Behavioural Skills: Guidance

Department for Education and Skills (2003)

Making it Happen – A guide to delivering mental health promotion

Department of Health (2001)

Promoting Emotional Health and Well-being through the National Healthy School Standard
Health Development Agency (2004)

Promoting Resilience: A resource guide on working with children in the care system

Gilligan, R (2001) BAAF

Emotional Intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ

Goleman, D (1996) Bloomsbury

'Mental health services – what children and young people want', Highlight, 210

Street, C (2004) London: National Children's Bureau

What Works in Developing Children's Emotional and Social Competence and Well-being?

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Perry, BD and others 'Curiosity, pleasure and play: a neurodevelopmental perspective' (June 2000). <http://www.childtrauma.org/CTAMATERIALS/Curiosity.asp> (accessed 20 December 2004).

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Shaw, C (1998) *Remember my Messages*. London: The Who Cares? Trust.

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