

# “Resilience is *the* building block for **life**”

**Marilyn Tucknott** explains how every early years setting can nurture lifelong positive mental health...

**H**ave you noticed how often mental health is mentioned in the news these days? And how often it is about children's mental wellbeing? Maybe you have heard about teenage depression and self-harm, and the sad fact that one child, between the age of 10 and 16, will attempt suicide every 20 minutes in this country. The problem is often rooted in deprivation – still the most significant determinant of poor mental health. It is exacerbated by Post Natal Depression, leading to poor attachment disorders – still the most significant factor in the behaviours of young offenders. It results from isolation, the very thing that social networking sites were intended not to cause.

Sometimes it seems that these problems are more than any one person or any one setting can reverse. These facts imply that clinical services should be trebled and that many of the children we care for should be referred to a specialist facility. However, in the current financial climate this is not going to happen and, actually, it is



not needed for most of these children.

We are in danger of over-professionalising the situation and the solutions. We need to hear the real need, not just the presentation of behaviours. The real needs are loneliness, longing, disappointment and hopelessness. As loving human beings we do not need to be 'experts' to understand this. We do not need to refer young people to 'experts' to help them find comfort, and we do not need to give them something different from children with good mental health. Indeed, we need to give them much, much more of the same.

And it needs to start early. We need to teach all children how to make sense of their experiences, how to choose and make healthy relationships, and how to keep them going, how to tap into good influences, how to belong and how to cope, so that they can develop a sense of their emotional core. They need to be able to empathise - whether with teddy who has fallen over and needs a bandage and a cuddle, or with a playmate who is feeling sad. This is the curriculum of the nursery environment.

## Promoting resilience

Resilience, or bounce-back as it's often called, is a collection of attitudes and skills that enable us all to manage the roller-coaster of life's happenings and emotions. Resilience is the key to positive mental wellbeing. It enables us to know that we are not going to drown in the feelings of the moment, that we can survive and thrive. Yes we will feel the depths of sadness and loss but, at an inner level, we will also know that we have a relationship with ourselves and others that continues on and comes out the other side of such experiences.

It only takes one good relationship to build resilience - someone to give you positive regard, to give you the early learning experiences of success and managing failure, and who looks at you with the belief that you can be all that you can be. Holding up the mirror of *how* to love is of prime importance for vulnerable children. Some children are more mentally vulnerable than others because they lack strong attachment with parents and carers. We used to think that having poor attachment meant that the bond wasn't as strong as it might be and, therefore, the children would feel the loss. Today, with our new understandings from neuroscience we know that babies are hard-wired for love. We know that children believe that the care that they receive *is* love. And so, when they grow up, they give the same kind of love to their children. In this way, we get inter-generational patterns of parenting, passing vulnerability

down from one generation to the next.

Not all parents can respond to their young. Temperamental differences between infants and those adults who are majorly concerned with their own wellbeing mean the latter are not well-placed to meet the mental health needs of their children. The 'script' running in the adult's head about being loved and seeking approval does not allow the child the space to explore their own needs. This adult is not in a position to give reflective interpretation of events and social interaction. Such parents need support rather than blame, and both the parents and the children need a nursery environment that overtly sets out to reverse this trend. Children who have not learned to make good social/emotional contact by the age of eight are at extreme risk, both cognitively and emotionally.

As children grow beyond three years of age, personal agency is a key feature of life - coming to realise that you can achieve what you want by yourself. Nursery children learn through experimentation and they need to get it wrong just as much as to get it right. Getting the 'exploration and keeping safe' balance requires sensitivity and responsiveness on an hour-by-hour basis. Parents who are uncertain of their parenting skills can feel powerless at this stage. Downward spirals of coercion and antagonism can lead to loss of self-esteem for all concerned. And this pattern may be repeated at ages seven and 14.

Good mental health is built up across the life-cycle of an individual and human relationships are the cornerstone. Satisfying the need for connectedness and the belief that an individual can influence events in their life will mean they cope better with challenging life events than those who see life as random and with some people having more 'luck' than others. People with a strong sense of self-efficacy show less psychological and physiological strain in stressful situations. Children can be helped to learn 'bounce-back' capability. Resilience is an entitlement for all children. It is *the* building block for life. Think of it as 'mental wealth'.

## What can you do?

To reach the standard of being a mentally wealthy nursery will require a whole-setting culture that has addressed leadership and management of this area, has a mental health policy, provides a rich emotional curriculum, supports vulnerable parents and carers, develops the voice of the child and collects meaningful data within best practice from the mental health world and

## Health check

**IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO BE CONFIDENT THAT YOUR NURSERY PROVIDES A MENTALLY POSITIVE ENVIRONMENT, CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS...**

- **Have you defined what are the 'givens' of successfully being human - and can you track those in the child's learning experiences you provide? Do you provide those for the nursery community too?**
- **Do you allow opportunities for vulnerable parents to model your interaction with their child, explain to them how to manage safe exploration, and give them the language patterns that avoid downward spirals of behaviour?**
- **Does your team have a shared view about psychosomatic symptoms such as headaches and stomach aches, have they had any mental health training, do they know what might constitute mental health vulnerability?**

educational frameworks. The latest government initiative in this area, 'Closing the Gap', sets out how important it is that the mental needs of the very young are met and that this will be monitored at a local and national level.

You know how important the early years are; you probably chose to work in this field because it makes a difference. And now we know even more about the kind of difference we can make. We can change the life chances of each child, we can enable them to see that they are in charge of their inner world, we can give them opportunities for empathy, and we can give them the gift of resilience - lifelong mental wealth.

Next time you watch some sad statistics on the news, think what your setting could have done to reverse that trend. What can you do today for the teenagers of tomorrow?

**Marilyn Tucknott M.A. is an educational mental health consultant, Koa Ltd.**

## find out more

***Mental Health Standards for Early Years Settings* is a way to ensure that you are providing a mentally healthy climate for growing and learning, and can be used as a whole-centre development plan. The handbook (£9.99) is available from Butterfly Print Ltd. For more information, call 01706 817 248, email [enquiries@butterflyprint.co.uk](mailto:enquiries@butterflyprint.co.uk) or visit [butterflyprint.co.uk](http://butterflyprint.co.uk)**

We can **change** the life chances of each **child**, we can **enable** them to see that they are in charge of their **inner world**