**Promoting Mental Wellbeing in the Move from Primary to Secondary Education**

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The research reported on here was concerned with children considered to be at risk of disengaging with education on transition to secondary school. The research was commissioned by the Cambridgeshire Children’s Trust to try and understand the underlying issues for these children. Mental wellbeing is increasingly being seen as the business of schools with programmes that emphasise wellbeing and competence rather than illness (Weare and Markham, 2005).

The concept of ‘wellbeing’ encompasses both physical and mental health. We can think of ‘mental fitness’ in a similar way to ‘physical fitness’, both contributing to wellbeing. Health promotion specialists are increasingly aware that health related behaviours are shaped and constrained by a range of social and community contexts, and that the ways in which individuals relate to wider social networks and communities have important effects on health and well-being. Neighbourhoods where people know each other and trust each other and where they have a say in the way the community is run can be a powerful support in coping with the day to day stresses of life which affect health (Morrow, 1999).

**The case for promoting mental fitness**

* + Promotion of child mental wellbeing has been especially important in UK policy. There is specific concern about children who are at risk or who are disadvantaged and whether promotion of wellbeing at a young age could change and improve their trajectories to achieve better outcomes at later points in their lives. A key part of children’s social networks and communities is their school. The transition from primary to secondary school is a time when children can become disengaged from education and there is recognition that vulnerable young people may benefit from transitional programmes to support the move to the new school environment. Educational success enhances life opportunities and we already know that:educational disadvantage becomes entrenched by age 11.
  + early education is not just about literacy and numeracy but also about developing children’s social and emotional skills.
  + the intergenerational cycle of poverty condemns children to a life without the chance to succeed.

*(Allen and Smith, 2009) not sure how the 3 different affects link or are relevant to the move from primary to secondary ed?*

Wellbeing may beone of the mediators for successsful outcomes. Allen and Smith (2009) focus on the need to intervene as early as possible in a child’s life to break the circle of disadvantage and underachievement to help each child achieve their full potential. Their report emphasizes the importance of working with parents and families to address the cultural and material elements of a child’s home life which impact upon later attainment. The evidence points to the possibility that remedial action at 11 years of age is often too late to make a substantial difference to the child in question, whereas intervention far earlier in childhood will be the most effective. We also know that poor mental health at 16 is a significant determinant for poor mental health outcomes into adulthood (Case Fertig & Paxson, 2005).

The case for promoting mental fitness can be developed, but how do we know which children and young people need such interventions and what would be the best interventions? Early intervention is a difficult concept since if it is universally offered, it is expensive and includes many people who do not need it, but it is unpopular to target early interventions for children.

The rationale for intervention in terms of mental health would include that:

* Children with poorer health have lower educational attainment, poorer health and lower social status as adults;
* Physical health is not as strongly associated with poor outcomes as mental health

The concept of intervention suggests that something needs to change. For example, if a child is behaving badly in school then an intervention could help by working with the child to develop better coping skills to help the child understand why the behaviour is not allowed, helping the child to change their current behaviour.

*Designing interventions*

Poor educational achievement is highlighted in the literature as a risk factor for becoming NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) as adults. Factors which can be linked to poor educational attainment include negative experiences at school, lack of self-confidence and self-esteem, and persistent truancy. The community of school seems a promising area for intervening to promote mental wellbeing although it is hard to separate out the contribution of mental wellbeing to educational outcomes. Should a public health approach be taken (as in vaccination programmes) where all children are offered school based interventions? This is an appealing approach as it does not label children in the way that a more targeted or focussed intervention would. Merry and Spence (2007) found no evidence that universal interventions worked as a promising prevention in schools to reduce depression. This finding is disappointing as using schools as a way to promote mental wellbeing is a promising model and cost effective model.

The transition to secondary school is a moment when poor engagement in education can be consolidated. It is often commented on that teachers can identify children who may have difficulty, and this study was designed to examine the mental wellbeing of children about whom teachers were concerned. These children were offered a summer activity programme to help their move to secondary school.

While popular, there are mixed findings concerning the effectiveness of activity projects:

* It is very difficult to evidence effectiveness for activity programmes on the emotional and social wellbeing of ‘at risk’ youth ;
* It is also very hard to show that early intervention of any sort improves outcomes for students and young people.

*(Lubans, Plotnikoff, and Lubans, 2012)*

Targeted interventions focus on children identified to be ‘at risk’. A child who has more than one characteristic which can be argued to be risky becomes more likely to suffer harm and the risk of potential harm becomes greater (Bynner, 2001).

*Interventions to prepare children for secondary school*

Several summer school projects have aimed to help children transition between primary and secondary school, but while the results are promising the research suffers from being small in scale with fairly minimal outcomes. Rock Up, an Australia project was very small in scale with no control group, but does show how work can be done with children ‘at risk’ to improve their transition (Carmen et al, 2011). The project worked with 13 children, age ten years, and identified by teachers as being at risk of disengaging from formal education as they started secondary school. The children either had individual time with a support worker or group activities to facilitate the transition and promote wellbeing for the children. The support workers also worked with parents to help them learn skills to support their child with the transition. Whilst the sample is small, the results are interesting. The students reported feeling more confident and less worried about the transition. Parents also said that their children seemed to get a lot out of the intervention and that they enjoyed it. The qualitative data collected showed that there was improvement from pre-intervention to post-intervention. The reported benefits were not sustained on follow up. However, sustainability is a common problem in early intervention programs and the benefits the children felt and the findings should not be dismissed due to lack of sustainability. It could be argued that selfreport about confidence and concerns about the transition is a biased measure and this is why in the study described below we have used a standardised measure of wellbeing.

Martin et al. (2013) surveyed 21,065 students who went to summer schools or who were in comparison schools. The majority of the data collected centred on whether the children enjoyed the summer school and whether they felt more prepared for their secondary school. The vast majority of schools and children considered the summer school a success and found them enjoyable. Students did say they felt more prepared for the transition and less worried about attending, but it is unclear whether the children actually had a smoother transition because of the summer school, even though the children thought they would. The study found that, of those invited, more girls than boys took part in the summer school, also that those from an Asian background were less likely to attend if invited. Whilst 83% of those who were invited did attend the summer school it is important to remember that some children who were identified as being from disadvantaged backgrounds did not attend. The children who do not attend universal programmes may well be those who could potentially benefit most.

Another summer school aimed to make sure that children from disadvantaged backgrounds did not experience a reduction of numeracy and literacy skills over the summer. The summer school consisted of numeracy and literacy classes in the morning and activities in the afternoon. There were no significant differences between the intervention group and control data and both groups experienced a loss in skills in numeracy and literacy over the summer (Siddiqu et al, 2014). Whilst ‘summer loss’ is common for children, the results are disappointing. This study is a good example of how early interventions aren’t guaranteed positive results simply because the funding and execution was implemented. It is very hard to design a universal programme that is likely to articulate with the participants needs.

**A Transitions Project for Children Identified by Teachers**

The project was concerned with children considered to be at risk of disengaging with education on transition to secondary school. The children were identified by teachers and the research was designed to look at their mental wellbeing (age 10-11 years), just prior to a summer transitions project and their transition to secondary school, and then again at the end of their first year at secondary school. The project examined whether the children identified had mental health vulnerability and whether the summer transition project and first year in secondary school impacted on this.

10 primary schools were involved in the study, feeding into 2 comprehensive secondary schools. For each child that the teachers were concerned about (n=48), the teachers completed a *Strengths and Difficulties questionnaire (SDQ)* and identified the reasons for their concern. The SDQ is a validated instrument measuring mental wellbeing. Following this the students were offered transitions projects over the school summer holidays and then repeat SDQ’s were completed by the students tutors at the end of their first year at secondary school. Ethical approval was granted by Anglia Ruskin Ethics Committee and consent was sought from all parents whose children were identified as in need of additional support in the transition. For a full report on the project see Akister, 2014.

*Findings*

At the beginning of the project, the SDQ scores indicate *mental health problems* for 48% of the children about whom the teachers were concerned. Additionally, there were significant correlations between the teachers’ reasons for concern and the subscales of the SDQ: high SDQ scores for emotional distress correlated with teachers concerns about anxiety, behaviour and attendance; high SDQ scores for behaviour difficulties and Hyperactivity correlated with teacher concerns about behaviour (Fishers Exact Test, p<0.05; see Akister, 2014).

The change in the *overall stress scores* (from 48% to 13%) and *emotional distress* scores (from 40% to 15%) pre- and post-summer activity project suggest effectiveness for the project, specifically in the domain of self-confidence and self-esteem known to be important for educational attainment.

For some of the children, *behavioural difficulties* and *hyperactivity* are the major reasons for concern. There was little change in the subscales of the SDQ relating to behaviour: hyperactivity (from 42% to 41%); behavioural difficulties (from 23% to 18%).

These results indicate that teachers are accurately identifying children who are vulnerable in the transition to secondary school. This project supports the approach of targeting activity projects on specific needs, as the wellbeing of those children with emotional distress is greatly improved, and maintained over a 12 month period, whereas for those children with behavioural difficulties, no significant improvement is sustained. It is interesting that the measure of wellbeing gives such a clear indication for the success of the project and this suggests that the design of the project which aimed at improving self-confidence and peer relationships is effective. That such a project is not successful at improving behaviour means that we should not place all the children who are of concern in the same project. A project aimed at helping with transition will have mixed results if those with mental health problems are included with those with behavioural problems. Specific projects targeted at behaviour are needed in addition to those promoting self-confidence.

**Conclusion**

*Overall*

* The SDQ (Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire) scores for Overall Stress suggests improved wellbeing for 35% of the students in the study one year after they began secondary school;
* Teachers are accurate in their concerns for vulnerable children approaching the transition to secondary school. There is good correlation between teachers concerns about self-esteem and anxiety with the SDQ scores for emotional symptoms.

*Emotional Symptoms – Internalising Behaviour*

* The transitional Project had a positive impact on student’s emotional distress and self-confidence;
* The subscale where there is most improvement in thehigh category is *Emotional Distress (35%).*

*Behavioural Symptoms – Externalising behaviour*

* + There is no change in SDQ scores for behavioural difficulties;
  + There is no change in hyperactivity.

The mental wellbeing of young people is a major factor in the educational outcomes they are able to achieve and in their life opportunities. Early intervention projects are very attractive as we can identify children with difficulties quite early in the educational process, but the evidence to support universal ‘one-size-fits-all’ interventions is very mixed. Our research suggests that teachers are accurate in identifying young people with poor mental wellbeing and that this includes two main groups: those with emotional distress (internalising) and those with behavioural difficulties (externalising). If targeted ‘early intervention’ approaches are taken focussing either on internalising or externalising expressions of distress, we suggest that the outcomes will be much more positive than in those projects where everyone is offered the same universal early intervention.

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