

# Children's wellbeing in schools



## Overview

- Research data for England suggests that positive wellbeing helps children to engage in learning.
- Research shows that aspects of school culture, including relationships and sense of belonging, are important for wellbeing.
- Short-term outcomes of low wellbeing can include effects on relationships and behaviour, absence from school, and lower academic achievement. Long-term outcomes can include effects on mental health and adult employment.
- More evidence is needed around approaches to improving wellbeing of children in schools, the factors underpinning the most effective approaches, and how best to measure their impact.
- Practices that may improve wellbeing include psychological, social, culture and environment-based practices, and physical health promotion. However, evidence around these practices is mixed and it is challenging for practitioners to determine which practices to implement, and how.
- In December 2024 the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill was laid before Parliament, which contained several proposals related to wellbeing in schools including on provision of breakfast clubs.

## Background

The World Health Organisation describes individual wellbeing as a positive state encompassing quality of life, sense of meaning and purpose, which is determined by social, environmental, and economic conditions.<sup>1</sup> Children with low wellbeing may struggle with issues such as poor concentration, low mood, or difficulty regulating their emotions.<sup>2,3</sup> There are multiple definitions of children's wellbeing and means of measuring it.<sup>4,5</sup> This POSTnote looks at a broad range of literature on children's wellbeing, which have different definitions of, and ways of measuring, this concept.

In 2024, the Children's Society reported that UK children aged 10 to 15 in 2021/2022 reported lower wellbeing in areas such as their life as a whole, and school compared with 2009/2010.<sup>6-8</sup> Evidence from the OECD suggested that UK students have the lowest reported wellbeing in Western Europe.<sup>9</sup> Research also indicated that recent cost-of-living increases have affected levels of wellbeing among school pupils in England.<sup>10,11</sup>

Research investigating the impact of school closures during the covid-19 pandemic suggested that the effects on children's wellbeing were mixed.<sup>12</sup> Some children experienced behavioural and emotional difficulties,<sup>13</sup> and reduced opportunities to play, socialise and learn which led to loneliness and boredom, and which is detrimental to wellbeing.<sup>14</sup> Some children, such as those that are bullied at school, reported improved wellbeing during lockdown.<sup>15</sup>

In 2024, UK children reported having lower happiness with school than with any other aspect of life.<sup>8</sup> Children's wellbeing is broader than their experiences in school. However, schools play a role in promoting wellbeing.<sup>16,17</sup> Data has shown that positive wellbeing helps children to engage in learning<sup>18,19</sup> and is associated with better educational outcomes.<sup>20-22</sup> However, experts have also stated that wellbeing is an important outcome in its own right.<sup>23</sup>

Outside of achievement, schools aim to support children's wider outcomes, or 'thriving', including fostering emotional regulation, positive functioning, purpose, engagement, and resilience.<sup>24-27</sup>

## Policy context

In December 2024 the [Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill](#)<sup>28</sup> was laid before Parliament<sup>a</sup>. Amongst other changes, it included a requirement for appropriate authorities to provide free breakfast clubs for all qualifying pupils in primary schools in England.

A national curriculum and assessment review (Key Stage 1-5) began in September 2024, aiming to ensure the education system is providing a broad and balanced curriculum, meeting children's needs, and supporting them to develop the knowledge and skills required to thrive.<sup>29</sup> Some education stakeholders have expressed concern

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<sup>a</sup> The Bill had its second reading in the House of Commons in January 2024. For more information see [Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill 2nd reading - Parliamentary Bills - UK Parliament](#). The House of Commons Library have also produced this briefing paper about the Bill: [Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill 2024-25 - House of Commons Library](#)

that the focus on attainment brought about by 2013 national curriculum and exam reforms<sup>30</sup> has negatively impacted pupil wellbeing.<sup>31</sup>

In November 2024, the government set out plans to put wellbeing at the centre of its plans for education through the two pillars of 'achieving' and 'thriving'.<sup>27</sup>

## Mental health support in schools<sup>b</sup>

Media reports have noted that NHS data from 2023-2024 shows that the rate at which children are being referred to NHS mental health services for anxiety has more than doubled since before the covid-19 pandemic started.<sup>c,34-36</sup>

Since October 2021, government grants have been available to train senior mental health leads in schools.<sup>37</sup> The 2024 Labour manifesto stated the party would "provide access to specialist mental health professionals in every school".<sup>38,39</sup>

While evidence suggests mental health support in schools is well-received<sup>40</sup>, challenges remain.<sup>d</sup> Stakeholders including parliamentarians, researchers, regulators and those in the third sector, have expressed concerns that provision of mental health support in schools is inadequate.<sup>e 32,43-48</sup> For more information on mental health support for young people in schools, which also addresses wellbeing, see the POST [Horizon Scan](#) briefing ([HS83](#)) and Commons Library Briefing ([CBP7196](#)).<sup>49</sup>

## Scope of this POSTnote

Both physical and mental health affect wellbeing. Wellbeing and mental health can be defined separately and differently from each other.<sup>50</sup> However, these concepts have multiple definitions in the literature and many of them overlap significantly.<sup>51</sup> This POSTnote evaluates the role and aim of school education in wellbeing promotion, drawing on evidence from England, the UK and international contexts. It does not cover the aims of health services in preventing, managing, and supporting those with mental health difficulties.<sup>25</sup>

This POSTnote examines the wellbeing of children aged 5 to 16 in mainstream schools. Education is a devolved policy. This briefing focuses primarily on education

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<sup>b</sup> More information is available in the House of Commons research briefing on Children and young people's mental health: policy and services (England).<sup>32</sup>

<sup>c</sup> The explanatory notes from the July 2024 NHS data on 'Referrals to mental health services for anxiety among under 18s' state that 'Year on year, more healthcare providers have submitted data to MHSDS and hence there has been a general trend of increase in figures over time. Please take this into account when interpreting the changes shown [...]'.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>d</sup> For example, the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy note that a child can fall between the gaps when their mental health needs are too complex to be addressed by Educational Mental Health practitioners who work within Mental Health Support Teams, but do not meet the threshold for higher intensity Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>e</sup> Some research stakeholders have emphasised the need to develop school-based interventions which target adolescents at risk of developing mental health problems.<sup>42</sup>

policy in England.<sup>f</sup> Statistics, strategies, policy and funding refer to England, unless otherwise specified, although much of the evidence referred to has broad applicability across the UK.

## Wellbeing in school

Wellbeing in school has different dimensions and is influenced by internal and external factors.<sup>54–58</sup> These factors can include positive and negative emotions, engagement, relationships, sense of accomplishment, internal traits like resilience, and external factors such as resources and school conditions.

The National Governance Association describes the role of schools in supporting children's wellbeing as including:<sup>16</sup>

- prevention of adverse wellbeing and mental health, such as through personal, social, health and economic (PHSE) education and pastoral care
- identification of those who are experiencing or at-risk of experiencing wellbeing issues
- provision of access to early support and interventions
- working with other agencies to enable access to specialist support and treatment.

Additionally, research stakeholders emphasise the role of schools' in promoting skills that support wellbeing, such as managing emotions, and supporting the wellbeing of all in the school community.

Children's wellbeing depends to a large extent on the home environment. For example, some research associates poor wellbeing with family-related adversities such as child poverty.<sup>59</sup>

While schools are required to promote wellbeing of pupils at school, some stakeholders in the school sector have expressed concerns that school staff are expected to intervene in a wide range of health and social problems.<sup>60</sup>

## Risk factors for low wellbeing

Research from the Office of National Statistics has shown that specific groups are at increased risk of low wellbeing (Figure 1) including children living in poverty, young carers, children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), children who have suffered trauma as a result of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and children with long-term illness.<sup>61,61,61–64</sup>

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<sup>f</sup> Education policy in England is led by the Department for Education, but approaches to support this area may also come from other departments. For example the Department for Culture, Media and Sport's Life Chances Fund<sup>52</sup> funds initiatives including AllChild, a place-based charity which supports the wellbeing of children in deprived neighbourhoods who are struggling socially, emotionally and academically.<sup>53</sup>

Researchers emphasise that there are overlooked groups where evidence is lacking, such as children living at home who have social work involvement, adopted children, children in kinship care<sup>9</sup>, LGBT+ children, and children who experience racism.<sup>65–72</sup> Using an intersectional approach<sup>h</sup> can uncover differences within and between groups in terms of wellbeing, participation, and school learning outcomes.<sup>73,74</sup>

Longitudinal studies have shown that children with lower educational attainment may experience low wellbeing in primary school due to feelings of shame and inferiority.<sup>75,76</sup> Children with SEND<sup>i</sup> including those with conditions such as autism, ADHD and dyslexia<sup>j</sup> may face barriers in school that impact their wellbeing, including bullying and lack of inclusivity.<sup>79,80</sup>

**Figure 1 Factors associated with greater risk of low wellbeing in children**

Poverty and material deprivation	Disability or long-term limiting illness	Experience of emotional abuse, sexual abuse or neglect	Looked after children
Homelessness and living in temporary accommodation	Symptoms of mental ill-health	Low birth-weight	Experience of bereavement
Parents with poor mental health	Young carers	Living in secure children's homes	Membership of a street gang, or know a member of a street gang
Special educational needs	Identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender	Teenage pregnancy or being a young parent	Living in immigration detention centres

Source: Office for National Statistics (2020), Children's well-being indicator review, UK: 2020

While individual factors such as deprivation, family interactions or school experiences are associated with child wellbeing, multiple factors can interact to create a

<sup>9</sup> Kinship carers are family or friends who raise children that cannot live with their parents.

<sup>h</sup> "Intersectionality highlights that different aspects of individuals' identities are not independent of each other. Instead, they interact to create unique identities and experiences, which cannot be understood by analysing each identity dimension separately or in isolation from their social and historical contexts." Varsik & Goročovskij, 2023, p.4.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>i</sup> Further information about Special Educational Needs Support in England is available in the House of Commons Library [research briefing](#).<sup>77</sup>

<sup>j</sup> Further information about support for children with neurodivergent conditions in education is provided in [POSTnote 733](#).<sup>78</sup>

cumulative effect.<sup>k, 56</sup> Therefore, children with multiple identified risk factors are particularly vulnerable to low wellbeing<sup>58</sup>

## Layering of disadvantage

Children may experience multiple forms of disadvantage, such as poverty, family instability, or ACEs, which can exacerbate each other. Researchers highlight that it can be difficult to understand the effects of different types of disadvantage in isolation.<sup>58,82–86</sup>

Certain groups, such as Romani (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller children, face compounding disadvantages within the school system due to factors such as racist bullying and high levels of exclusion.<sup>87</sup> Some groups, such as children of care leavers, may also face intergenerational transmission of disadvantage.<sup>88</sup>

## School culture

Research suggests that school culture influences wellbeing.<sup>18,89–91</sup> School culture encompasses children's relationships, feelings of community, safety and a sense of belonging, teaching and learning, school improvement processes, and the institutional environment.<sup>9,89,92,93</sup>

Feeling part of school and feeling safe in school are core to children's wellbeing. Some research suggests that being recognised, accepted and having an identity that is not solely defined in relation to educational attainment, is important.<sup>94</sup>

The 2017 independent Bennett review on behaviour in schools recognised that relationships and behaviour are inseparable from academic achievement, safety, welfare and wellbeing.<sup>95</sup> The review provided recommendations for school leaders including on creating a vision for school culture and making relationships and behaviour a whole school focus. Building on these recommendations, Department for Education guidance from 2019 provided a tool to help senior leaders to design, model and embed a school culture that aims to create a respectful school community and promotes safe, happy experiences at school.<sup>96</sup>

## Sense of belonging

School belonging is the extent to which a child feels accepted, included, respected and supported within school.<sup>97</sup> School belonging and sense of meaning are associated with positive subjective wellbeing<sup>l</sup> in children.<sup>98</sup>

Belonging is a dynamic concept in schools (**Figure 2**). It is shaped by multiple factors including school expectations, teacher practices, as well as the children's lived experiences that they bring to school.<sup>99–101</sup>

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<sup>k</sup> In 2022 the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) published recommendations for identifying children at risk of poor social, emotional and mental wellbeing including taking into account the number, duration and complexity of risk and protective factors, their cumulative effects, and interactions between them.<sup>81</sup> NICE guidance provides best-practice and is not mandatory. Health practitioners are expected to take NICE guidance into consideration.

<sup>l</sup> Subjective wellbeing refers to how an individual thinks and feels about their life.

Research evidence demonstrates associations between school belonging and children's educational attitudes, motivation, behaviour and academic achievement.<sup>102</sup>

Sense of belonging is a factor in school attendance.<sup>103</sup> A 2024 review indicated that pupils with SEND may experience low sense of belonging in schools, which is linked to poorer mental health, lower engagement, and increased absenteeism.<sup>97</sup> Research suggests this can become a cyclical issue: in 2023, analysis of ten studies exploring the perspectives of children who had direct experience of school non-attendance found that absence from school can result in reduced sense of belonging and may lead to extended non-attendance.<sup>104</sup>

**Figure 2 School belonging as a dynamic concept**



Source: Adapted from Riley, K. et al. (2018). Place & Belonging in Schools: Unlocking Possibilities.

## Teacher-pupil relationship

Schools play a role in helping to foster positive relationships for all children, both those with, and without, supportive home environments.<sup>105 106</sup> Research suggests that teachers' communication at school can significantly influence children's emotional wellbeing, engagement, sense of value and self-esteem.<sup>m, 108,109</sup>

Positive teacher wellbeing is associated with better pupil wellbeing.<sup>93,110</sup> However, data for England indicates that in 2023 teachers working in state schools reported lower average wellbeing than the equivalent adult population in England.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>m</sup> Survey responses from Key Stage 2 children across the period 2018-2022 show that children's self-reported levels of self-efficacy have dropped, suggesting the majority of children surveyed feel some vulnerability about their capability to learn.<sup>107</sup>

## Peer relationships

Evidence indicates that supportive peer relationships positively contribute to children's wellbeing and resilience.<sup>105,112</sup> They provide a source of companionship, support, care and entertainment and are key in building a sense of belonging in school.<sup>113,114</sup>

Peer relationships can have positive effects during educational transitions, for example, between primary and secondary school, which can be challenging for children's wellbeing.<sup>115-117</sup>

Negative peer relationships can have a detrimental effect on wellbeing: for example, experiences of bullying at school or fear of violence are linked to poor subjective wellbeing.<sup>118,119</sup>

Negative relationships or an absence of relationships with peers, can lead to social isolation or loneliness.<sup>120</sup> However children with family or peer connections may still feel lonely. In schools, higher levels of teacher and classmate support, and offline contact with peers, predict lower levels of loneliness.<sup>121</sup>

## Teaching and learning

Education, research, health and third sector stakeholders have emphasised that curriculum pressures in schools result in a lack of time to prioritise wellbeing.<sup>122,123</sup> In 2021, a systematic review of seven international empirical studies found that while teachers value wellbeing programmes, they have a lack of time and training to deliver them.<sup>124</sup>

Evidence from a 2019 national survey of state-funded and independent primary and secondary schools in England, suggested that, since 1995, there had been a reduction in the length of breaktimes in schools to cover learning and the curriculum.<sup>125</sup> This may contribute to reduced face-to-face direct socialisation with peers.<sup>125</sup> Research literature outlines that break times are important for children's sense of belonging and enjoyment, allowing time for social interaction with peers, play, physical activity and movement.<sup>126</sup>

Research commissioned by the National Union of Teachers in 2015 suggested that teaching and learning accountability measures, such as 'high stakes testing',<sup>n</sup> negatively affect children's wellbeing in primary and secondary school.<sup>127,128</sup>

Research literature also points to narrowing of the curriculum as a result of high stakes testing, which can negatively impact children's wellbeing.<sup>129-131</sup>

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<sup>n</sup> Research by the National Union of Teachers described 'high stakes' testing as "tests which have outcomes that will have real impacts on pupils, teachers or schools, and specifically those where test results are used to judge the quality of schools, and sanctions when targets are not met." <sup>127</sup>



## Disciplinary behaviour management

Disciplinary behaviour management approaches may be used in schools to manage pupil behaviour. Approaches may be punitive<sup>o</sup> or non-punitive. Some stakeholders in education have expressed concern around the effects of punitive or 'zero tolerance' approaches on children's wellbeing.<sup>133,134</sup>

There is robust evidence on the negative impact of school exclusions on children's wellbeing.<sup>135-139</sup>

# Impacts of poor wellbeing

## Short-term impacts of poor wellbeing

### Educational outcomes, behaviour and relationships

The association between children's wellbeing and academic attainment is complex.<sup>140</sup>

Research has indicated a positive association between high levels of wellbeing and better achievement. A research report from 2012 found that children "with higher levels of emotional, behavioural, social, and school wellbeing, on average, have higher levels of academic achievement and are more engaged in school, both concurrently and in later years."<sup>18,20-22</sup>

There is evidence that low wellbeing may be associated with reduced academic attainment.<sup>141,142,143</sup> For example, children who are bullied are less engaged at school and achieve less well at primary and secondary school level.<sup>141</sup>

Poor wellbeing is associated with relational and behavioural difficulties in children.<sup>144</sup> Behaviour can impact children's experience of school and is strongly correlated with their outcomes.<sup>95</sup>

Children who have experienced adversity and trauma are more likely to be excluded from school.<sup>63</sup> Some international research has associated school exclusions with poor educational attainment at school level.<sup>145,146, p</sup>

Relational difficulties can lead to social isolation and loneliness. Loneliness can impact learning and have longer-term outcomes relating to educational attainment, and employment prospects.<sup>149</sup> Research has associated loneliness with poor health and health-compromising behaviours such as overeating<sup>150</sup> or reduced physical activity.<sup>151</sup> This can increase the risk of school absence due to ill-health.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>o</sup> A systematic review published in NIHR Open Research stated that "Punitive approaches include strategies such as verbal reprimanding (e.g., being shouted at in class), detentions, isolation rooms, in- and out-of-school suspensions, and expulsion (permanent exclusion)"<sup>132</sup>

<sup>p</sup> Exclusion can affect short-term and future life outcomes, for example increased likelihood of engaging in risky behaviour, which in turn contributes to reduced academic achievement.<sup>136,147,148</sup>

## Attendance<sup>q</sup>

Government statistics show higher levels of pupil absence since the covid-19 pandemic.<sup>152</sup>

Since June 2023, 'attendance hubs' have provided support and resources to improve attendance and reduce absence.<sup>153</sup> In September 2023, the Education Committee published the report from its inquiry<sup>r</sup> into persistent absence.<sup>154</sup>

The 2022 Children's Commissioner's Attendance Audit<sup>155</sup> noted that many local authorities (LAs) were unable to provide an estimate of children missing from education. For the 2022-2023 academic year, estimates of children missing from education were published, adjusted for non-response.<sup>156</sup> The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill laid before the House in December 2024 included a requirement for local authorities to maintain 'Children Not in School' registers.<sup>28</sup>

The causes of absence from school can be complex.<sup>s,119,158,159</sup> Evidence suggests a link between school absence rates and challenges with mental health and wellbeing.<sup>160,161</sup>

Experts have noted that non-attendance at school due to emotional factors<sup>162</sup>, known as emotionally-based school avoidance (EBSA), is showing an upward trend in England.<sup>163</sup> However, school, research and practitioner stakeholders have noted that school attendance codes record whether an absence is Authorised (e.g. illness) or Unauthorised Absence (e.g. family holiday not agreed). The codes do not allow for disaggregation of emotionally-based absences, therefore the number of children absent from school due to EBSA is not known.

A variety of family, school and child factors increase vulnerability to EBSA (Table 1). A systematic evidence review suggested that EBSA is associated with anxiety, however high quality evidence for this is limited.<sup>164</sup> Promoting emotional wellbeing, such as through whole school approaches, may help to prevent EBSA.<sup>162</sup> One-to-one counselling in school may reduce persistent absence and improve attendance for some children.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>q</sup> For more information on attendance, see [School attendance in England - House of Commons Library](#).

<sup>r</sup> The [inquiry report](#) made recommendations including the national roll out of attendance interventions, ensuring that child poverty is considered and exploring methods of support before the use of fines or prosecution.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>s</sup> Analysis of a nationally representative dataset of 4,620 children attending state-funded schools in Scotland in 2007-2008 suggested there was a strong link between socioeconomic status and school absence.<sup>157</sup>

**Table 1 Vulnerability factors for emotionally-based school avoidance**

School factors	Family factors	Child factors
Bullying (the most common school factor)	Segregation, divorce or change of family dynamic	Temperament: reluctance to interact, withdrawal from unfamiliar settings, people or objects
Difficulties in specific subject	Parent physical and mental health problems	Fear of failure, poor self-confidence
Transition to secondary school, key stage or change of school	Overprotective parenting style	Physical illness
Structure of the school day (timetables, break and lunchtime systems)	Dysfunctional family interactions	Age (5-6, 11-12, 13-14 years)
Academic demands / high levels of pressure and performance-oriented classrooms	Being the youngest child in the family	Learning difficulties or developmental problems
Transport or journey to school	Loss and bereavement	Autism Spectrum Condition if unidentified or unsupported
Exams	High levels of family stress	Separation anxiety from parent
Peer or staff relationship difficulties	Family history of EBSA	Traumatic events
Young carer		

Source: Adapted from West Sussex County Council. (2018). Emotionally Based School Avoidance. Good Practice

## Later life outcomes

Research has indicated a link between schools, emotional health at age 16 and adult wellbeing.<sup>166,17</sup>

Researchers and educational psychologists emphasise that feeling socially valued at school may mitigate against later mental health impacts. For example, higher levels of school belonging are associated with lower levels of depressive, anxiety and stress symptoms across young adulthood.<sup>t 169</sup>

There is some evidence to suggest poor wellbeing in school may be associated with adult employment prospects. For example, research indicates that being a victim of childhood bullying can lower the probability of having a job throughout adulthood.<sup>170</sup>

<sup>t</sup> A large-scale review of peer-reviewed literature observed there is not enough research on the long-term consequences of wellbeing challenges such as anxiety.<sup>168</sup>

## Evidence for wellbeing approaches

School-based approaches for improving children's wellbeing can be:

- whole school approaches (see Box 1) aimed at developing a positive school ethos
- universal approaches aimed at all pupils, including those without wellbeing problems
- targeted or selective approaches that focus on specific individuals or groups of pupils<sup>171</sup>

The evidence for wellbeing approaches in schools is mixed. In January 2024 the government identified that more evidence is needed around approaches to improving student wellbeing, the factors underpinning the most effective approaches, and how best to measure their impact.<sup>172</sup>

Much evidence around the effectiveness of wellbeing approaches comes from small-scale studies or from approaches developed and delivered outside the UK, namely Australia and North America. European Commission research suggested the need for rigorous evaluative evidence of approaches developed and implemented in European schools to build evidence on which approaches work, and for whom.<sup>u 177</sup>

Limitations in the current evidence base include:

- a lack of clarity around the theoretical underpinning of many approaches<sup>178</sup>
- a large number of short-term studies with small sample sizes<sup>179</sup>
- a lack of robust study designs or measures for primary school children<sup>180,181</sup>
- the need for evaluative studies to assess the comparative effectiveness of different approaches in the short and longer term<sup>178</sup>
- the need for high-quality long-term research into the benefits of wellbeing approaches for children, and the educational or health systems, and how they can be sustained<sup>173,182</sup>

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<sup>u</sup> The evidence indicates neutral to small effects of many universal, school-based interventions in the UK that aim to promote emotional or mental wellbeing.<sup>173</sup> Research stakeholders noted the importance of effectively targeting support as some evidence suggests that school-based preventative interventions which are universally delivered to children regardless of whether they are experiencing problems may worsen mental health and wellbeing. For example, the My Resilience in Adolescence (MYRIAD) Trial of a school-based mindfulness training intervention found the intervention had negative effects on the well-being of some students with existing/emerging mental health symptoms.<sup>174-176</sup>

Where approaches show promise, many programmes are trialled under ideal conditions. The impact or success may reduce under real world conditions, with implications for the scaling-up of programmes.<sup>183</sup>

### **Box 1: Whole school approaches to improving children's wellbeing in schools**

A whole school approach takes a long-term view, using a coordinated approach to engage pupils, staff, parents/carers, governors, families and the wider community to build a supportive school and classroom environment.<sup>184,185</sup>

Public Health England<sup>v</sup> (2021) guidance recommends embedding a whole school approach<sup>w</sup> using 8 principles to create a school culture where wellbeing is promoted and protected (adapted in Figure 3).<sup>186</sup>

There is evidence to support embedding a whole school approach to promote wellbeing and prevent problems.<sup>184,187,188</sup> Evidence suggests whole school approaches can produce improvements in wellbeing and reductions in mental health issues, although the quality of implementation affects the level of impact.<sup>187</sup>

In 2013, one national evaluation suggested that the effectiveness of whole school approaches can be limited by poor implementation including vague guidelines and a lack of clear and specific instructions.<sup>189,190</sup>

Although Public Health England guidance outlines using the 8 principles (adapted in **Figure 3**) as best practice, in 2022 National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) evidence reviews found large variation in the number of principles present in many approaches.<sup>191</sup> Research emphasises that there is no one 'gold standard' whole school approach; instead any approach must be chosen on the basis of local context and needs.<sup>187</sup> Research literature emphasises the importance of support systems, both at school level and externally, for sustaining a whole school approach.<sup>182,192</sup> Additionally, allowing sufficient time for change is identified as important.<sup>193–195</sup>

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<sup>v</sup> In 2021, Public Health England was replaced by UK Health Security Agency and Office for Health Improvement and Disparities.

<sup>w</sup> Between October 2021 and December 2024, government grants were available to train senior mental health leads in schools which includes training on how to embed a whole school approach to mental health and wellbeing.

**Figure 3 Eight principles to promoting a whole school approach to wellbeing**



Source: Adapted from Public Health England (2021)<sup>186</sup>

## Types of practice for improving wellbeing

There are many practices to improve wellbeing, including psychological, social, culture and environment-based practices, and physical health promotion.<sup>196,197</sup> Evidence around these approaches is mixed and it is challenging for practitioners to determine which practices to implement, and how.<sup>198</sup>

### Social and emotional learning

Social and emotional learning (SEL) practices target improvements in children's self-awareness, interactions with others, self-management of emotions, and decision-making skills.<sup>199</sup> They can be implemented at primary and secondary school, as whole-school, universal or targeted approaches.

Some research has linked universal school-based SEL practices with significant improvements in various wellbeing indicators, including children's social behaviours, academic attainment, attitudes towards self and others, as well as significant reductions in emotional distress and conduct problems.<sup>200,201</sup>

Analysis by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF)<sup>x</sup> indicates that SEL practices can be implemented at little cost. However, the spectrum of practice is diverse and the reliability of evidence<sup>y</sup> is judged to be very low, in part due to a lack of independent programme evaluation.<sup>199</sup>

## Relational and restorative practices

Relational, inclusive and restorative practices are centred on the quality and health of relationships to build connectedness and belonging in schools.<sup>203</sup> In an educational context they can be defined as: "restoring good relationships when there has been conflict or harm and developing school ethos, policies and procedures to reduce the possibility of such conflict and harm arising".<sup>204</sup> These practices emphasise respect, responsibility and restoration to address issues of discipline and conflict rather than traditional behavioural approaches that may use rewards and sanctions to encourage compliance.<sup>205</sup>

Evaluation of trials of whole school approaches, which use relational and restorative practices, suggested positive effects on children's health, behaviour and attainment, including reducing bullying.<sup>206,207</sup> In research published in 2008, restorative approaches showed promise in terms of their positive impact on relationships and reduction in conduct issues in schools.<sup>208</sup> However, some stakeholders have raised concerns about poor use of restorative practices in isolation, which may result in worsening behaviour.<sup>209</sup> NICE recommendations for whole school approaches include using relational and inclusive practices.<sup>81</sup>

## Physical activity

Evidence suggests that physical activity and movement are positively associated with children's wellbeing.<sup>z 211,212</sup> Evidence from Sport England's Active Lives survey 2022-2023 suggested that increased physical activity is associated with increased happiness, for all ages.<sup>213</sup>

A rapid review of evidence between 2007 and 2017 found that school-based physical activity plays a role in protecting school aged children from mental illness.<sup>214</sup> This is also shown in longitudinal research published in 2016<sup>215</sup> in which a weekly 30 minute physical activity-based practice with one child over 5 months led to increased self-esteem and wellbeing, increased relationship development with peers, alongside improvements in English and maths.

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<sup>x</sup> The EEF is an independent charity which supports schools, colleges, and early years settings to improve teaching and learning through better use of evidence.

<sup>y</sup> The EEF assesses security of evidence using four criteria: quality of study design, Minimal Detectable Effect Size (MDES) (the ability of the study to detect a given impact), attrition (overall level of dropout) and threats to internal validity (e.g. missing data).<sup>202</sup>

<sup>z</sup> The 2017 Green Paper *Transforming Children and Young People's Mental Health Provision* acknowledged the importance of physical activity in fostering children's wellbeing.<sup>210</sup>

## Nature-based practices and outdoor learning

There is evidence that spending time in nature is associated with a wide range of positive outcomes including increased physical activity, improved wellbeing, improved behaviours, emotional resilience, school attendance, engagement and achievement.<sup>216–219, aa</sup> Much evidence in this area comes from the evaluation of specific school-based programmes.

Robustness of evidence in this area is limited by small sample sizes, short durations and/or lack of control groups.<sup>217</sup>

However, available evidence suggests that school children engaged in learning in natural environments may benefit from outcomes relating to attitudes, beliefs, interpersonal and social skills, academic skills, positive behaviour, re-offending rates and self-image.<sup>216,221,222</sup>

Ensuring learning in and about nature at every level of education is included in the former governments' Environmental Improvement Plan 2023. In October 2023, the government announced a £15 million fund for the National Education Nature Park to help children and young people connect with nature through their education setting.<sup>223</sup>

Available evidence suggests barriers exist for schools to build in learning outside the classroom, including lack of teacher confidence, curriculum pressures, lack of prioritisation<sup>bb</sup> and concerns relating to cost, health and safety.<sup>226,227,228</sup>

## Creative and cultural practices

There is moderate evidence suggesting that arts participation in schools, such as such as dance, drama, music, painting, or sculpture, can lead to positive attitudes to learning and increased wellbeing, alongside academic attainment.<sup>229</sup> A systematic review published in 2017 indicated that arts activities can develop children's resilience and wellbeing, self-confidence, self-esteem, relationship building and a sense of belonging.<sup>230</sup> However, many studies display methodological weaknesses and limitations.<sup>cc 231</sup>

Evidence suggests that different types of art activities increase different elements of wellbeing.<sup>232</sup> For example, some research published in 2011 suggests dance can improve physical health and self-esteem.<sup>233</sup> Research published in 2015 suggests that

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<sup>aa</sup> The Children & Nature Programme (2019-2022) was a programme funded by the Department for Education and the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, and administered by Natural England. It was underpinned by HM Government's (2018) 25 Year Environment Plan, which pledged to improve children's health by bringing them "close to nature, in and out of school". The programme reported improved student engagement, attendance, health and wellbeing in pupils from disadvantaged schools. Teachers attributed improvements to pupils' social interactions and behaviours to learning outdoors and referenced nature as a tool for focusing children's attention and restoring calm.

Source: Children & Nature Programme Learning Report<sup>220</sup>

<sup>bb</sup> Research stakeholders have expressed concern about low prioritisation in the curriculum across additional disciplines including physical education<sup>224</sup> and the arts<sup>225</sup>.

<sup>cc</sup> Limitations and weaknesses include participants dropping out of the study, a lack of validated outcome measures and a lack of statistical power.<sup>231</sup>



music can improve children's social skills,<sup>234</sup> and research published in 2007 suggests that drama and theatre can positively influence children's personal and social development.<sup>235</sup>

Many groups of stakeholders note the value of art-based approaches in helping vulnerable and lesser-heard children express how lived experiences impact their wellbeing.<sup>236,237</sup> Third sector stakeholders emphasise that creativity can be used as part of a whole school approach to wellbeing.<sup>238</sup>

## Nutrition

Schools play a role in helping children to develop healthy eating habits<sup>dd</sup>, and ensuring that they have the energy needed to participate in school.<sup>240</sup> In September 2024, the government announced the Breakfast Clubs Early Adopters Scheme.<sup>ee</sup>

The duty for the appropriate authorities to provide free breakfast clubs for all qualifying pupils in primary schools in England was included in the [Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill](#) laid before Parliament in December 2024<sup>ff</sup>.

Evidence indicates that improved nutrition is associated with better behaviour, better learning and reduced school absences.<sup>242–244</sup> Evidence from a 2009 systematic review of 45 studies showed that breakfast consumption helps aspects of cognitive performance including memory and attention, especially in children with poor nutritional status.<sup>245</sup> Further research is needed on the effects of school breakfast provision on longer-term learning, academic attainment and health outcomes.<sup>246,gg</sup>

## Other activities

Some evidence suggests participation in extra-curricular activities<sup>hh</sup> is associated with increased emotional wellbeing,<sup>248,249</sup> and helps children to feel valued and part of school.<sup>94</sup>

More research in the UK context is needed.<sup>250</sup> Evidence from a survey of 4,638 young people enrolled in the Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme in the UK found that taking

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<sup>dd</sup> Alongside school meal provision and elements of health education, schools increasingly provide nutrition to families outside of school time.<sup>239</sup> Evidence from nationally-representative survey data of 8,665 teachers representing 4,833 schools in England conducted in May 2023 and November 2023 shows there are more food banks inside schools than outside them.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>ee</sup> The Department for Education will work with up to 750 state-funded schools in England with primary aged-pupils to focus on how breakfast clubs are delivered in a way that meets the needs of schools and parents, and ensures children start the day ready to learn.<sup>241</sup>

<sup>ff</sup> For more information, see [Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill - Parliamentary Bills - UK Parliament](#).

This measure was mentioned by many MPs during the second reading of the Bill on 8 January 2024: [Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill - Hansard - UK Parliament](#)

<sup>gg</sup> Further research is also needed to understand what sort of model of breakfast provision is most effective – for example models that involve wrap around care with associated social interaction with staff and children, or a 'grab and go' approach.<sup>247</sup>

<sup>hh</sup> Examples of extra-curricular activities include clubs or societies such as chess club, book club, film club, young enterprise, debating, gardening, or individual or team sports activities.

part improved participants' wellbeing, confidence, responsibility and ability to face challenges.<sup>251</sup>

Research undertaken for the Social Mobility Commission points to equity concerns, as socio-economically disadvantaged children are less likely to take part in extra-curricular activity.<sup>250</sup>

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