

Mental Health Promotion in Schools

Support MENTAL
HEALTH PROMOTION
in Manitoba Schools



Healthy Child Manitoba
Putting children and families first

Manitoba 

Comprehensive School Health*

Healthy Schools is rooted in comprehensive school health (CSH) which is an internationally recognized framework for supporting improvements in students' educational outcomes, while addressing school health in a planned, integrated and holistic way. CSH helps educators, health practitioners, school staff, students, and others work together to create an environment that makes their school the best place possible to learn, work, and play. CSH is not limited to the classroom – it addresses the whole school environment with actions in four interrelated pillars that provide a strong foundation for healthy schools:

- social and physical environment
- teaching and learning
- partnerships and services
- healthy school policy

Taking action in all four CSH pillars, rather than in just one, is working in a holistic or comprehensive way. This increases the impact of healthy school initiatives. As a result, students are better supported to realize their full potential as learners and as healthy, productive members of their community.



Healthy Students are Better Learners

Health and education are interdependent: healthy students are better learners. Research has shown that CSH is an effective way to tap into that linkage, improving both health and educational outcomes and encouraging healthy behaviours that last a lifetime. In the classroom, CSH facilitates improved academic achievement and can lead to fewer behavioural problems. In the broader school environment, it helps students develop the skills they need to be physically and emotionally healthy for life. While this may seem like additional work, it is not. It is a new way of working that soon becomes everyday practice.



* Source: The Joint Consortium for School Health www.jcsh-cces.ca

What is Mental Health?

The Public Health Agency of Canada defines mental health as “the capacity of each and all of us to feel, think, act in ways that enhance our ability to enjoy life and deal with the challenges we face. It is a positive sense of emotional and spiritual well-being that respects the importance of culture, equity, social justice, interconnections and personal dignity.”

What is Mental Health Promotion?

Mental Health Promotion is about creating environments that promote and sustain positive mental health for everyone. Activities and interventions are designed to enhance protective factors and minimize risk factors (individual, family related, environmental and economic in nature). Schools are an ideal setting in which to promote mental health for children and youth, providing an opportunity to reach large groups of children during their formative years of cognitive, emotional and behavioural development.

The most effective school based programs for promoting mental health are comprehensive and target multiple health outcomes, involve the whole school, focus on personal skill development, include parents and the wider community and are implemented over a period of time.

Research Shows that School Based Mental Health Promotion Programs:

- Increase mental well being
- Enhance regulation of emotions
- Enhance coping and problem solving skills
- Increase engagement, achievement and attendance
- Enhance empathy and respect for diversity
- Decrease bullying and aggression

There is ample evidence that school based programs in elementary, middle and high schools can influence positive mental health and reduce risk factors and emotional and behavioural problems through socio-emotional learning and ecological interventions (World Health Organization, 2004).



Whole School Approach to Mental Health Promotion*



<p>Social and Physical Environment</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allow and encourage students to participate in decision-making. • Foster an atmosphere of trust, tolerance, co-operation and empathy. • Have a welcoming, student-centred environment (e.g. sofas, decorative plants, student artwork, quotes and photos on display). • Showcase student achievement and unity. • Design physical spaces so that students can access facilities, manoeuvre within them, and participate fully in planned learning activities.
<p>Teaching and Learning</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide students with an enhanced understanding and appreciation of diversity. • Incorporate culturally-relevant themes into instructional practices and activities. • Offer students the chance to learn and practice social skills. • Accommodate individual learning needs and preferences. • Support autonomy by minimizing control, listening to and validating student perspectives.
<p>Healthy School Policy</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide alternatives to zero-tolerance policies that allow for continued school connectedness and restoration. • Ensure that all students and staff members are held accountable for upholding and modeling rules pertaining to respectful behaviour. • Have policies that contribute to the physical and emotional safety of all students. • Accommodate the learning and social needs of all students, including those with exceptionalities. • Offer ongoing professional development related to positive mental health. • Establish a Healthy Schools Committee to look at creating healthy school policy, including priority health topics such as positive mental health (for other topics visit www.manitoba.ca/healthyschools).
<p>Partnerships and Services</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interact with the home regarding student learning issues. • Collaborate with families in the design of school improvement and learning initiatives. • Adopt policy to ensure collaboration with community and government organizations. • Offer opportunities for participation in school-community action groups or committees.

* Source: The Joint Consortium for School Health www.jcsh-cces.ca

Resilience

Supporting and enhancing resilience is a core component of fostering positive mental health. Resilience is the ability to “bounce back” after hardships, disappointments and stress. Helping children learn how to manage the inevitable ups and downs of life and how to build their coping skills will enhance their mental well being into adulthood. Resilient children have good feelings about themselves, trust others and generally feel optimistic about the future. School based programs with a focus on the enhancement of social skills, emotional literacy and problem solving all contribute to the development of resilience.



How Can Schools Integrate Mental Health Promotion?*

Many schools are already integrating mental health promotion and planning into their current curriculum and activities. However, this may be happening in an ad-hoc or incidental manner. Environments that promote mental health are safe, inclusive and empowering. Schools can integrate mental health into their current activities by:

- acknowledging integrated health promotion (including mental health promotion) as an area of priority in strategic planning processes
- discussing mental health promotion as part of school well-being team meetings and exploring possibilities for cross curricular approaches to integrated mental health teaching and learning
- developing lesson plans and delivering curriculum in a way that links mental health to other health activities. This might include:
 - discussing how physical activity and healthy eating affects mental health
 - outlining the connection between mental illness and drug use, outlining the connection between mental illness and substance use
 - discussing the link between body image and mental health
- exploring mental health in the context of promoting positive and respectful relationships. This may include exploring the negative effects on mental health of bullying and cyberbullying. Subjects such as Drama and English can allow students to act, watch, read or write about mental health issues
- promoting positive mental health through inclusive group sporting activities encourages team work, new relationships and physical activity

* Source: www.education.vic.gov.au/school/principals

What Can You Do?

Mental health promotion is not about planning a series of individual, unrelated activities. To be effective, mental health promotion activities are complementary to other health promotion activities and are part of a larger strategic framework. Students and others need to understand the purpose of any activities. In the context of a health promotion framework, the following activities/ programs could be considered:

Build a Sense of Community*

Have a class discussion about the uniqueness of each student, teacher and employee in the school. A linked string of paper doll figures is provided to each class in the school. Every child can be encouraged to be creative and decorate an image of themselves. When classes are finished decorating their dolls, each string of figures can be joined as one continuous string of images and fixed around the walls of the school. Include all staff of the school too! Students, teachers, families and visitors are reminded with a visual image that your school is a community made up of many unique and valuable individuals.



Establish “Community Builders” Awards*

A Community Builders Award is presented to a student in each grade who shows that they care for, and include other people. The goal is to highlight the activities of individuals who contribute to the community by their actions. Throughout the year, teachers observe the activities of students who take responsibility and show awareness of, and respect for others in groups. Their actions and initiatives as community builders might take place in the school or in the wider community, as volunteers or helpers.

Create a School Based/Community Mentor Program

Link students with school or community mentors who have specialized knowledge or skills related to areas of student interests or strengths.

Develop Intergenerational Activities

Plan activities that bring together children/youth and seniors in the school setting or community settings. These types of activities have mental health promoting benefits for children and seniors alike. Partner with seniors organizations, personal care homes and others to brainstorm about the best activity to meet everyone’s needs.

Other Ideas:

- Organize a school wide “Pay it Forward” event
- Have students create murals or posters which illustrate positive mental health
- Host a mental health week with different activities highlighting aspects of being mentally healthy

* Source: www.kidsmatter.edu.au/primary/states-and-territories/qld/school-stories

Case Study

The following case study describes a scenario that may occur at school, and outlines mental health promotion strategies that can be used in the school setting.

Cherry Creek Middle School is located in an urban setting and has approximately 200 students. The school administration is concerned about increased reports of weight-based bullying. The victims of this bullying and their parents report that there is ongoing teasing and harassment related to the children's' body size and shape. Several of the children report that the teasing is worse during physical education class. Some children also mentioned that they were embarrassed when they were required to be weighed or have their body fat measured as part of their physical education program. This is causing some children to worry about going to school and not want to attend their physical education class. What would be helpful?

- Promote a school wide approach that respects the diversity of body shape and size. Creating a body friendly culture in a school requires that everyone is involved in promoting positive body image messages regardless of body weight or shape.
- Ensure that school anti-bullying policies/practices address weight-based bullying and teasing.
- Photos and other images of children or adults in the classroom or hallways should reflect all body types in a positive way.
- Adults should be mindful not to associate physical activity with being thin or losing weight. Fun and healthy activity is for all children of every size and shape.
- Provide age appropriate education about puberty and body changes which include growth spurts in weight and height; normalize these changes and help children be more comfortable with their size diversity.
- Body measuring of any kind whether in physical education class or in other classes causes children to make comparisons that can invite immediate and long-term negative impact on a child's body image. Rather than weighing or measuring, it is important to create a healthy environment that supports children of diverse shapes and sizes to feel safe to participate and to have fun.
- Ensure that physical activities don't support exclusion of children who are larger bodied or less athletic. For example:
 - Avoid games where children are eliminated or find a way to get them back into the game quickly.
 - Integrate fun and active energy breaks into the classroom.
 - Reward the group with extra playground time or a walking field trip instead of using food or a video as a reward.



The Pan-Canadian Joint Consortium for School Health (JCSH) Positive Mental Health Toolkit*

The Positive Mental Health (PMH) toolkit has been designed to promote mental health perspectives and practices in the school context. The use of the PMH toolkit does not simply represent another program or initiative to be added to the workload of staff or implemented through a rigid structure. Instead, the toolkit is meant to facilitate a shift in practice, and to set in motion a process for engaging school and community strengths in fostering the positive growth and development of children and youth.

It is derived from evidence informed practices and is linked with a partner document entitled *Schools as a Setting for Promoting Positive Mental Health: Better Practices and Perspectives* (JCSH 2010). The references and citations indicated throughout the toolkit can be found in the Reference section at the end of the Better Practices document. These practices can be embedded into your everyday routines and implemented over time, at your own pace. They are founded in a strength-based approach that looks beyond simply addressing problems in the school community. Rather, this approach recognizes that both schools and students already have strengths and gifts that can be built upon and nurtured.

Adopting an approach that promotes mental health in a positive way will not only serve to strengthen student engagement and academic functioning, but also will proactively address key relationship concerns such as the prevention of bullying and oppositional behaviours and attitudes. The application of these PMH perspectives and practices contributes to the development of environments where individuals experiencing personal distress and challenges can find supportive connections, use and develop their strengths, and develop a greater sense of autonomy or self-determination.

It is not necessary that you implement all sections of the toolkit or that you complete them in the sequence they are presented. We encourage you to take the time to peruse the toolkit, including both its written and video components. By doing this you'll be able to identify and complete the sections that best fit your school needs and goals. In the future, you may later return to the toolkit to identify new priorities and areas for action. We hope that you find the toolkit both useful and enjoyable!

Visit www.manitoba.ca/healthyschools or www.jcsh-cces.ca to access the Positive Mental Health Toolkit.

For more information about Healthy Schools, please visit www.manitoba.ca/healthyschools



* Source: The Joint Consortium for School Health
www.jcsh-cces.ca