

Health promotion and education in school

Improvement of health literacy, health behavioural change, creating a supportive physical and social environment to be more conducive to health should be the focus of child and adolescent public health. The concept of Health Promoting School initiated by World Health Organization aims to move beyond individual behavioural change and to consider organisational structure change such as improvement of the school's physical and social environment.

School health promotion could be defined as any activity undertaken to improve and/or protect the health of the whole school community. Health education in a school is a communication activity and involves learning and teaching pertaining to knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, values, skills and competencies. It is often focused on individual health topics; or it may involve reflecting on our health in a more holistic way.

A health promoting school approach includes:

- a participatory and action-oriented approach to health education;
- understanding that students have their own concepts of health and well-being;
- developing healthy school policies which promote health and well-being;
- developing a healthy physical and social school environment;
- developing life competencies;
- making effective links with home and the community;
- making efficient use of health services in the school context;
- developing the health and well-being of students and school staff

A more traditional approach to school health education focused on individual topics such as healthy eating, smoking, physical activity and mental health. These health topics are not separate in the lives of young people or in their health-related behaviours. In a topic-based approach, health may be viewed at the level of the individual and their relationship to the topic being explored, when in fact the social environment may be more powerful in determining behaviour.

Education and health are closely related. The evidence suggests that:

- Healthy young people are more likely to learn more effectively;
- Health promotion can help schools to meet their social aims and to improve educational attainment;
- Young people that attend school have a better chance of good health;
- young people that feel good about their school and who are connected to school and significant adults, are less likely to undertake high risk behaviours and are likely to have better learning outcomes.

Most of the evidence on the effectiveness of health education and health promotion in schools is from work on specific health topics. The most positive evidence is found in the topics of mental health promotion, healthy eating and physical activity and the weakest evidence is in the area of substance use.

Mental health and emotional health

The evidence shows successful mental health initiatives in schools:

- are well designed and grounded in tested theory and practice;

- link the school, home and community;
- address school ecology and environment;
- combine a consistency in behavioural change goals through connecting students, teachers, family and community;
- foster respectful and supportive relationships among students, teachers and parents;
- use interactive learning and teaching approaches;
- help to increase the connections for each student;
- help to develop improvements in achievement tests, social and emotional skills and decreases in classroom misbehaviour, anxiety and depression;
- produce significant benefits in relation to reductions in aggressive behaviour, school drop-out rates and in building a sense of community in the school.

Substance use

Some successful gains in substance use school programmes may include a short term delay in use and or short term reduction in usage; positive effects are more likely to occur influencing tobacco, rather than alcohol or illicit drugs. Specific programmes are more likely to have no effects or harmful effects on alcohol use. Teaching staff who understand mental health issues, achieve higher health and educational outcomes for the students. The evidence shows that school-based drug reduction initiatives are more likely to be effective if:

- the programmes are interactive rather than teacher centred;
- focus on life skills, e.g. refusal skills, assertiveness;
- take a whole school approach;
- link with the family and local community;
- address the improvement of connections for students.

Hygiene

The scientific evidence about the health benefits for children and adolescents of hand washing, drinking clean water and using proper sewage systems is very strong. The evidence indicates that in developing countries, well designed and implemented initiatives, which have included:

- a whole school approach involving the physical environment;
- links with the health sector;
- have suitable policies and curriculum; have increased school attendance rates and reduced worm infestations (mainly through the provision of wormeliminating drugs) .

Sexual health and relationships education

Sexual health and relationships education programmes, when conducted by trained and empathic educators:

- increase sexual knowledge;
- may increase safe sex practices;

- do not promote earlier or increased sexual activity in young people;
- can build school connectedness for students, and this is strongly associated with reduced sexual activity in adolescence.

Healthy eating

Healthy eating programmes that follow evidence-based teaching practices and a whole school approach have been shown to regularly increase student knowledge about food and diet. However, changes in student eating behaviours have been less successful. Girls tend to benefit more than boys and some quality initiatives have reported a modest increase in vegetable consumption. Successful initiatives have some or all of the following features:

- a whole school approach;
- links with parents and food preparation at home;
- consistency between the taught curriculum and food availability in the school;
- programme longevity (over three years) and regular inputs by staff and students in planning and implementing activities;
- on-going capacity building opportunities for staff