

# Co-Producing Your Whole School Approach to Mental Health and Wellbeing with Children



A guide and  
practical activity  
for schools



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Co-producing your whole school approach to mental health and wellbeing with children: a guide and practical activity for schools

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# I: Introduction to the guide and activity

## What is a whole school approach to mental health and wellbeing?

A whole school approach means everybody in a school community working together to promote mental health and wellbeing in a positive and proactive way. A focus on social and emotional wellbeing is integrated into all aspects of school life, and children who are experiencing mental health problems are identified and helped to access support. The school environment feels physically and psychologically safe, and fosters acceptance, diversity and belonging.

## Why is it important to involve pupils in developing and assessing the whole school approach in your setting?

The way in which a whole school approach is developed and implemented is crucial to its success. A truly 'whole school' approach is built on, and reflects, what children themselves find most helpful in supporting their mental health and wellbeing. Being able to share their views and experiences and influence decisions also helps children feel heard, valued and connected to their school. This, in itself, is good for wellbeing and supports the development of personal and social skills.



## Co-creating whole school approaches with pupils: the activity

We have developed an activity to help you involve all children in your setting in shaping your whole school vision and approach. This has been developed specifically for children aged 7-11 years, but could be adapted and used with both younger and older age groups.

The activity is intended to facilitate a creative and inclusive conversation with children about what wellbeing means to them, what the school already does to support their wellbeing and what else could be done to further develop and improve your whole school approach.

### What is the activity?

The first part of the activity is a warm-up, to help get everyone focused and engaged and ease children into the conversation. The main activity prompts children to share and explore their views about their wellbeing in terms of:

- **People and relationships:** who helps with your feelings at school?
- **Places:** where are the places in school that are good for your wellbeing?
- **Practices:** what in class helps with your wellbeing?
- **Participation:** how are all children asked what they think about what happens in school?

The activity has been designed so that it can be completed in about 50 minutes. We have produced creative worksheets and a short introductory video that you can use to run the activity. You can find these resources at [www.birmingham.ac.uk](http://www.birmingham.ac.uk)



The learning and insights from the activity will help you to assess your current approach to mental health and wellbeing and think about how this can be enhanced or further developed. We encourage you to use the tools regularly, to enable continuous reflection, learning and improvement. There are some suggestions at the end of this guide about how you might put the learning from this activity into practice.

## How did we develop the activity and this guide?

The activity was co-produced with Year 5 pupils at Harvills Hawthorn Primary School and Linden Primary Specialist School. Over a series of three visits to each school, we collaboratively designed, refined and tested out the activity. The final design of the worksheets, and the images generated from the co-design sessions which illustrate this guide, were chosen by the children.

## Our development process also included:

- Input throughout the project from the University of Birmingham Institute for Mental Health's Youth Advisory Group – they helped us design the co-production sessions at the schools and provided feedback on early versions of the activity worksheets and guide.
- Feedback on the draft activity worksheets and guide from the National Children Bureau's Young NCB group, members of the national Schools Wellbeing Partnership, and from teaching staff at Harvills Hawthorn Primary School and The Linden Centre.

### Listening to the whole school community

We have designed the activity to be engaging for all children, including children who have special educational needs and disabilities, and those who may feel more comfortable communicating their views and ideas in less direct (e.g. non-verbal) ways. This is important for supporting the development of a whole school approach which is inclusive of, and benefits, all pupils.

The children, teachers and other experts we worked with offered practical suggestions and ideas about how schools could talk to pupils about mental health and wellbeing in a safe, supportive and inclusive way. These suggestions and ideas are shared throughout this guide.



## What is in this guide?

This guide provides step-by-step guidance for inclusively using the activity we have developed to co-produce your whole school approach to mental health and wellbeing with all children. It covers how to prepare for the activity, how to run it, and how to use the information you have gathered to inform your whole school approach.

### Preparing for the activity

Timing

Place and space

Relationships

Materials

Preparing the children



### Running the activity

Introducing the activity

Warm-up

Main activity

Wrapping up



### What's next?

Reflecting on the activity

Embedding learning in Whole School Approach

Tell us how you got on



## 2: Preparing for the activity

When preparing for the activity, first think about what you will do with the information that you are going to gather from the children. Consider how you will bring the information together, who you will share it with and how you will use it to shape and develop your whole school approach. The involvement and support of the senior leadership team in this preparation is vital for ensuring that the information you gather can be used to identify actions and make improvements within your school.

The activity asks children to explore issues around their wellbeing, including how school supports and impacts on their wellbeing. It is important that children feel comfortable, safe and supported to talk about their experiences and share their ideas, and are able to listen to others. This means carefully planning the activity, thinking about who will run the session, where it will take place, and how the children will be asked and encouraged to participate. It is also helpful to identify support options in advance for any children who may want to talk to someone about their wellbeing during or after the activity.

### Timing: where could the activity fit in the school timetable?

The activity has been developed with flexibility in mind and can be easily adapted to suit any part of the school day. It could work well integrated into your curriculum offer for Relationship, Sex and Health Education, or you might link it to work within the school to develop a whole school approach to mental health and wellbeing.

The time of day you choose to run the session should also be considered. Ideally, choose a time of day when the children are more likely to be calm, regulated and engaged, and will have an opportunity to reset (e.g. in break time) afterwards.

### Place and space: where will the activity work best?

The setting where the activity is held can play an important part in how successfully it runs.

- Consider whether a familiar environment (e.g. classroom) or different place (e.g. the library) would work best for your children.
- Think about the different needs of your children when planning how the space will be set up and used, and what you will need to take in with you.
- Some children may need a calm, low-arousal, distraction-free environment to focus on the activity. Others may need a physical task and the opportunity to move around.





## Relationships: who should be there?

A key part of the planning is thinking about who should be in the room when the children complete the activity. Consider the right mix and number of staff needed to:

- Ensure the children feel safe and comfortable to share their views.
- Provide support to children who need extra encouragement to share or record their ideas. This may include support to complete the activity on a 1:1 basis.
- Support children with additional needs to participate in the activity.
- Offer support outside of the classroom to any children who withdraw from the activity, become distressed or want to talk to somebody about their feelings.



The children who helped us develop the activity felt it was very important that children have a choice about whether to take part or not. Therefore, arrangements will need to be put in place for any child who decides that they don't want to participate.

## Materials: what will you need?

How you use the activity worksheets is up to you. The black and white versions have been specifically designed for the children to colour in, annotate and personalise to their school. There are also colour versions, which could be displayed on a screen or interactive whiteboard.

Creative materials provide different ways for children to take part in the activity and share their views. They are important for making the activity inclusive, ensuring that all children can express their ideas in a way that suits them as they work through it. Pencils, pens, colouring pens and Play Doh are a helpful mix of materials to have ready for the session.

You might consider providing additional tools to help children express and regulate their emotions during the activity, such as stress balls, fidget toys or visual emotion charts.

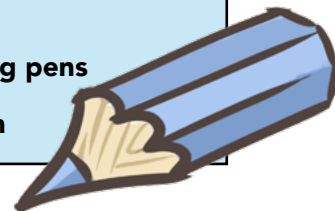
### You might need:

Pencils

Pens

Colouring pens

Play Doh



## Preparing the children

Every school is different in terms of how they include the views of children in the running of the school. It is important to think about how familiar the children in your school are with giving their views and how much help they might need to do this in an authentic way.

It can be useful to introduce the activity in advance so that the children know what to expect and who they can talk to if they have any concerns about taking part. You may also wish to tell parents and carers about the activity and think about how you can engage them in the process of developing your whole school approach.



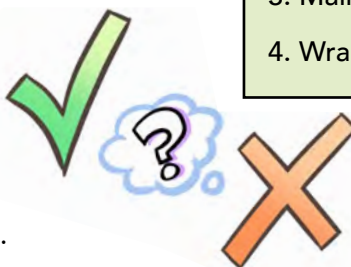
# 3: Running the activity

This section provides suggestions about how to run the activity. The tools have been designed to be used flexibly, so the ideas here can be adapted to meet the needs of your pupils and the resources available in your school. You may choose to run the activity in one session or spread it over multiple sessions.

## Introducing the activity

It is important to set the scene for the activity inclusively to ensure that all children feel able to take part.

- Start by explaining what the children can expect from the activity – what it will involve and how long it will take. Provide the opportunity to ask questions.
- Reassure the children that there is no right or wrong answer – the activity is about finding out what they think.
- Remind everyone to respect each other's views. You may wish to agree ground rules for the activity as a group.
- Remind everyone that they will be thinking about their wellbeing, which might trigger memories or difficult feelings. Remind them who they can speak to or where they can go during or after the activity for support.
- Check that everyone is happy to take part before getting started (and allow those who aren't to join another class or do some individual supervised work). It is important that the children know they have the choice to take part and can change their mind at any time.



## Suggested session plan

Total duration: Approx. 50 minutes

1. Introduction (5 minutes)
2. Warm-up (5-10 minutes)
3. Main activity (30 minutes)
4. Wrap up (5-10 minutes)

We have developed a brief introductory video which explains the purpose of the activity in a child-friendly way. This can be found at: [www.birmingham.ac.uk](http://www.birmingham.ac.uk)

## Warm-up: what does wellbeing mean to you?

Starting the session with a discussion about what wellbeing means is key. Not all children may be familiar with the concept of wellbeing, or they may not have experience of discussing their wellbeing with others. This starter activity will help children ease into the session by building focus, engagement and a shared language.



## Running the warm-up

- **How:** can be done in pairs, on tables or as a whole class
- **Getting going:** ask children to think about what wellbeing means to them, using the activity worksheet to draw or write their thoughts
- **If you get stuck:** if the children are finding this activity difficult, you could share your own ideas about what wellbeing means to you, or prompt with some suggestions. We have also provided a sheet of examples that could be used to help children understand some of the different ways that wellbeing can be understood and connect these to their own experience.

## Main activity: what helps or would help your wellbeing in school?

### Exploring the questions

The main activity is organised into four sections, so it is helpful to structure the activity in four parts, taking each question on the worksheet in turn. The questions can be asked in different ways, depending on whether you are thinking about the whole school approach for the first time, have already started implementing your whole school approach, or are using the tool to review an established whole school approach. You can tweak how you ask them accordingly. For example, you may ask:

- What (already) helps with your wellbeing in school?
- What do you think would help with your wellbeing in school (that isn't already happening)?
- How could the school improve things to help your wellbeing?



It is important to use open questions like these and allow the children time to reflect on their views and experiences. If there are children who find the questions difficult, you could use some of the prompts below to help them to understand better and generate ideas, or consider using visual aids to represent the concepts. Staff providing their own examples of what helps their wellbeing in school can also help children to connect to the questions and feel able to share their ideas.

### Some prompts to help children understand and think if they are finding the activity challenging

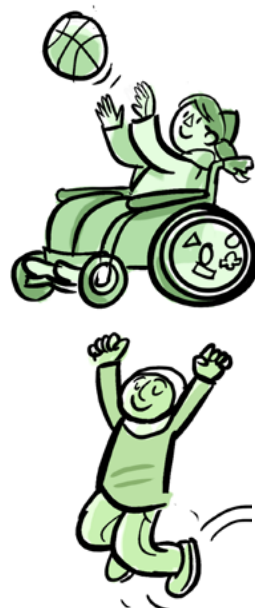
#### Who helps you with your wellbeing?

- Teachers
- Teaching or learning assistants
- Friends, classmates, other pupils
- Headteacher or other senior staff
- Facilities and lunchtime staff
- External staff e.g. a school counsellor
- Parents/carers
- Explore what people do that helps with their wellbeing



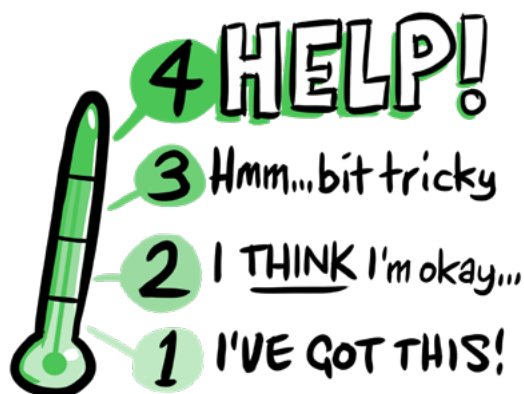
## Where in the school is good for your wellbeing?

- Spaces inside the school e.g. classroom, hall, library, dinner hall
- Outdoor spaces e.g. the playground, field, pitches and games areas, play equipment
- 'Time out' and quiet spaces
- Explore what the spaces that are good for their wellbeing look, sound and feel like, and what they have in them



## What in class helps with your wellbeing?

- Teaching approaches that work for them
- How the teacher supports them with their learning
- Areas or things in the classroom that help
- How the class works together
- What helps when they are stuck
- What helps when they are feeling sad, angry or upset during lessons
- What makes them feel good when doing their work



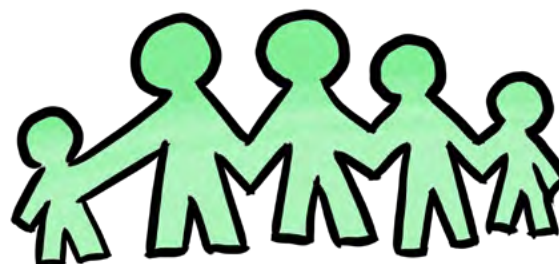
## How are all children asked what they think about what happens in school?

- How the school asks what they think
- How the school gives children choices about what happens in school
- How the school makes sure all children have a voice and are included
- How the school shows it has listened to children and their views
- How the school shows it cares about what the children think and feel



## Including everyone in the activity

There are various ways of running the activity to make sure that everyone is involved, both in terms of ways to explore and ways to record children's ideas. The table below suggests options for you to consider. You may want to use a combination of these approaches, alongside the accessibility strategies and adaptive teaching techniques you already employ, to make sure that all children are able to participate.



### Exploring ideas

**Individually:** Allow children time to think about the questions on their own first, before sharing with others. Make sure that every child is given an opportunity to share their ideas, either verbally or on paper, as a group or 1:1 (with a peer or trusted staff member).

**Sharing and pairing:** Working in pairs or with a 'buddy' can allow children to generate ideas with someone they relate to and increase their confidence to share them by providing a joint voice.

**Groups:** Working in bigger groups may feel more comfortable for some children, by allowing them to discuss their ideas with a wider range of peers, or to take a back seat with less pressure to share.

**Whole class:** You may ask the class to share their ideas out loud, for example by raising their hands, then work round the class one by one to ask each child for their thoughts.



### Recording ideas

**Individually:** The black and white versions of the tool are designed to be printed as handouts for children to record their ideas. We have produced two formats for children to choose from.

**Group or whole class:** The tool could be displayed and annotated (by everyone, or an assigned scribe) on an interactive whiteboard or large printed copy.

**Incorporating movement:** The four parts of the tool could each be assigned to a wall in the room, with the children moving around to annotate a large piece of paper or print-out with their ideas.

**Be creative – anything goes:** it is important that children are able to express their ideas in a way that feels comfortable and safe. This could include talking, writing, drawing, modelling with Play Doh, choosing symbols (e.g. using Widgeit), acting out their ideas, or writing a poem.





Responding positively and consistently to all sharing and recording of views is a helpful way to increase children's confidence to take part. This is especially important when running the activity with children who are not used to being asked how they feel and what they think about school. It is also important to respond positively when children provide critical feedback, using this as an opportunity to explore ideas about what can be done to improve wellbeing in school.

### Top tips: how to make sure everybody is comfortable participating

Ease into the session: e.g. use the warm-up activity to ease everybody into the topic and help them feel more comfortable sharing.

**Make sure accessibility needs are met:** e.g. have somebody read the questions aloud for those who have difficulty reading; use symbols or visual aids (e.g. Widgit) to support non-verbal participation in discussions; break the activity down into smaller steps to support information processing.

**Offer multiple avenues for participation:** e.g. enable children to share and record ideas verbally and non-verbally, providing materials to write, draw or model ideas. Observation of body language and vocalisations may also be used as a tool for staff to gather input from non-verbal children.

**Adapt the session to pupils' needs:** e.g. take notice of all pupils and keep asking questions to encourage involvement; think about pupils who might not have somebody they can trust and how they can be helped to feel comfortable sharing.

### Wrapping up

It is important to end the activity in a way that children leave feeling heard, validated and valued. Thanking everyone for sharing their views, reflecting back some of the ideas you have seen and heard (taking care to include ideas from a range of children) and checking back with the children that this is what they heard too is a good way to do this.



## Collating the learning

This activity is designed to gather information from children to inform your whole school approach to mental health and wellbeing. You will need to think about how you are going to bring all of the information together at the end of the activity, so it can be shared with key people in the school community (such as the senior mental health lead, senior leadership team and governors) and used for action planning.

You may want to consider:

- Collecting the individual worksheets to review
- Creating a single, collective record as a group or class at the end of the session
- Asking the children to prioritise their ideas e.g. by voting or highlighting the three ideas that matter most on their worksheets.



However you choose to do this, it is important that all children's views, not just the majority view, are captured in your record from the activity and taken forward into action planning.

### Extending the activity?

Some children may benefit from more time to complete the activity. You might consider extending the activity into another session, allowing children to take their worksheet home and inviting their parents/carers to complete it with them before handing it back in, or leaving the collective record open after the session (e.g. on a board or wall) for the children to come back and add to.

## Explaining what will happen next

Let the children know what will happen next – how you plan to use their views to inform the whole school approach to wellbeing and how you will feed back to them what has happened as a result of their ideas at a later date.

## Wellbeing check-in

It is important to check that everyone feels ok after the activity and to remind them of how to seek support if it has brought up anything difficult for them.

## 4: What's next?

You did it! You've achieved an important step on your journey towards cultivating and embedding a whole school approach to mental health and wellbeing. So, what's next?

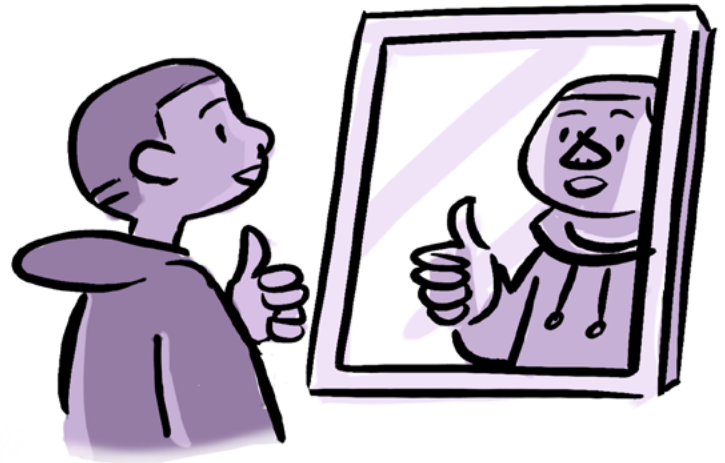
### Reflecting on how the activity went

We encourage you to reflect on how the activity went and what, if anything, you might want to do differently in future. We suggest doing the reflections in two stages: with colleagues and with the children who participated.

#### Stage 1: Reflecting with your colleagues

Shortly following the activity is a good time to meet with your colleagues – those who were involved in delivering the session with you, or who delivered it with other groups or classes. Alternatively you could do this as a self-reflection. The following questions could be used to structure your reflections:

- What went well?
- What didn't go so well?
- What would I/we change in the future?



#### Stage 2: Reflecting with the children who participated

Thinking out loud with children is a good place to start. You might want to consider how you will actively model reflection. For example, you might say 'I was wondering if we spent enough time thinking about what wellbeing means to you when we did the activity, what do you think?'

Encouraging children to write, draw, or build (for example, with Lego or Play Doh) their reflections can also work well. Prompts might include:

- What did you think about the activity?
- Did we spend enough time on each part?
- Did you have an opportunity to share everything you wanted to share with your teacher and your classmates? If you didn't, let's think together about how we can carry on talking about wellbeing in school.
- Do you have any ideas about how we can make sure everyone gets listened to, even if they are shy about sharing what they think?

## Embedding your learning in your whole school approach

In planning your next steps, you could consider:

### In what ways will you use the information and insights you have gathered?

- Developing or updating your whole school approach action or implementation plan.
- Making changes or introducing new forms of support to reflect the things that children said helped, or didn't help, with their wellbeing in school. You may want to keep a change log to record how you have responded to the children's suggestions.
- Revising school policies and procedures (e.g. those relating to SEND, attendance, anti-bullying and behaviour).
- Updating your school development plan or Ofsted action plan.



### Who do you need to share this information with?

- Key staff in the school, such as the mental health, pastoral and safeguarding leads, head teacher and senior leadership team.
- Any mental health and wellbeing professionals working in your setting, including the Mental Health Support Team (MHST) if you have one.
- The board of governors.
- Parents and carers, for example via newsletters, governor updates or parents' evenings. This could also be an opportunity to ask parents and carers for their thoughts on how the school supports mental health and wellbeing and any suggestions for improvement.



### How will you assess your whole school approach and what difference it is making?

- Agree how you are going to review the impact of your whole school approach and any changes you have made. You might use the [Whole School and College Approach Measurement Toolkit](#). You could have a follow-up session with pupils to explore how they could be involved in this process: for example, what evidence could they gather to help assess impact?

- Agree when and how regularly you will review how your whole school approach is working.

### Sharing the learning and celebrating successes

- You may want to co-produce with the children a summary of what was learned from the activity and how this has been used to improve wellbeing at the school.
- The children we worked with suggested that schools celebrate working together on a whole school approach. You could hold a celebratory event, which children could help plan and deliver.
- Share what you have learned with your local networks. This might be through your website, with your school improvement partner, your learning communities, through professional development activities or with other schools in your trust (if you are an academy).



## Key point

This is not a one-off activity. We highly recommend you continually review your whole school approach and involve children in thinking about how best to monitor implementation and impact, and in gathering the evidence to do this.



## Tell us how you got on



We would love to hear about how you are using the guide and activity, and any feedback you and the children in your school might have, so that we can continue to update and improve them.

Feedback can be provided at: [www.birmingham.ac.uk](http://www.birmingham.ac.uk)

or by email to Jo Ellins at: [j.l.ellins@bham.ac.uk](mailto:j.l.ellins@bham.ac.uk)

