Mental health promotion in schools
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When people think of mental health, a negative picture of madness or depression tends to come to mind. However, just as physical health creates an image of strength and vitality, mental health should be associated with strength of mind and vitality in the way that individuals interact with others and as they deal with the challenges of everyday life.

When children have the opportunity to attend school, education provides them with information, instruction and exercises to assist the development of knowledge and practical skills. They may also be lucky enough to learn about health and healthy lifestyles. Unfortunately, only a minority of children will be taught how to deal with the demands of everyday life: for example, how to cope with stress, how to communicate with others, how to solve problems, how to express their feelings or how to think critically. Sadly, there has been a long-standing assumption that people just acquire these “how to” skills for life as a natural process while they are growing up. As witnessed by the scale of mental health problems of both children and adults, the “how to” of life is often a rather weak component of human competence.

Life skills education in schools enables children to protect and promote their own health and well-being. They must have the opportunity to practise such skills in the classroom as well as in homework assignments. Teaching methods therefore need to be interactive for learning such skills, rather than just acquiring knowledge. The ideals are defined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child: “the education of the child shall be directed to... the preparation of the child for a responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of the sexes, and friendship amongst all peoples...”

Unfortunately, schools do not always match these ideals, and for many children the school is experienced as a harsh and unsupportive environment. As part of the broader WHO Global School Health Initiative, WHO’s Mental Health Programme is urging all schools to become mental health-promoting and “child friendly” by promoting cooperative and active learning, life skills education, tolerance, caring, creativity and – above all – the self-esteem of children. Such schools will provide an education that is relevant to children’s lives, will work in close consultation with parents, and will work to prevent all forms of violence, especially bullying.

When all schools are health-promoting in this way, a major improvement is anticipated in the mental health status of children, and of the adults that they will become. By that time, “mental health” should lose its negative image and the real significance of mental well-being for human societies will be acknowledged.

Documents and other materials on mental health promotion in schools are available on request from the Division of Mental Health and Prevention of Substance Abuse, WHO, Geneva.

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