



## Belfast primary school makes mental health the cornerstone of their curriculum

Nicola McKeown is a teacher at Christ the Redeemer Primary School in Lagmore, Belfast. Nurturing good mental health and wellbeing in her pupils is a priority for Nicola, and she has recently introduced a number of initiatives into her school to support the wellbeing of both children and staff.

### The importance of early mental health intervention

Nicola has a passion for mental health and has previously organised whole school events to promote positive mental health for the pupils. The challenge is to not only give children the vocabulary and coping mechanisms to navigate common mental health issues but to also encourage and enable parents to develop this further at home.

"We need to be proactive rather than reactive. We have our children in our care for six hours a day, therefore we as educators are in the perfect position to make a positive impact. In Christ The Redeemer Primary School it is key for us that the conversations initiated in school surrounding mental health are continued at home. We can only do this by equipping the children and parents with the correct vocabulary and a clear awareness of the importance and need for good mental health."

***I utilise many of the resources found on the [Mentally Healthy Schools](#) website and find the site a great focal point to enable us to reinforce the message that mental health is everyone's responsibility. I personally have found that the resources on offer are great conversation starters for both staff, children and parents alike***

NICOLA MCKEOWN





'I think people are now only beginning to realise the impact that Covid may have on children. As teachers, we have the power and ability to teach resilience and how to cope with new situations in a positive manner. Therefore, it becomes more important than ever to dedicate time each day to check on each child's mental health. This has never been as important as during this period of uncertainty and upheaval caused by Covid.'

"To develop good mental health within the school we have implemented a number of positive methods. These include a daily check-in, brain breaks, the introduction of a well-being journal and making a conscious effort to reflect on and extract the positives we can from Covid. Whilst such positives can be hard to find, the increased family time and learning to live life at a slower pace have to be seen as good by-products of the situation we find ourselves in."

## Children's Mental Health Week at Christ the Redeemer Primary School

Nicola, with the help of other like-minded staff, organised a full day of activities to mark Children's Mental Health Week in her school. This week coincided with the release of the [Northern Ireland's Children's Commissioner's report on children's mental health](#).



Marie-Louise Connolly - Look Forward. #FightBack  
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It's not everyday you get to be in the company of superheroes - thanks to @ctrps1 Little people with powerful voices. @ShriekingGreek @bbcnewsline



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Mental Health Week @ctrps1 It's ok not to feel ok - and a call to @niexecutive to act swiftly to divert MH epidemic in NI. More @bbcnewsline



*Photos and tweets from the health correspondent for BBC Northern Ireland taken during school's Children's Mental Health Week activities.*



Speaking on why they decided to highlight Children’s Mental Health Week in the school, Nicola explained, “We realised that our children had no knowledge of how to be resilient. That’s something that has to be taught, and if it’s not coming from home, it needs to be taught in the classroom.”

Nicola and her fellow teachers wanted to make the message easily accessible for children as young as six. With that in mind, they designed a timetable of themed activities demonstrating the link between a healthy mind and a healthy body. Among the activities offered to the children were meditation, making positive choice activities, physical exercise stations and sessions based around the importance of a healthy diet. These activities reinforced the message that our physical and mental health are closely linked.



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Little people with powerful messages about #mentalhealth These kids @ctrps1 are talking about #findingyourbrave @danielbakersf talks football, elevenplus and his mum



Marie-Louise Connolly - Look Forward. #FightBack  
@mlchealth

It’s ok to feel lonely, happy even sad.. young people showing the adults how it’s done @ctrps1 #mentalhealth @BBCNewsNI



*Photos and tweets from the health correspondent for BBC Northern Ireland taken during Christ the Redeemer Primary School's Children's Mental Health Week activities.*

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The staff in Nicola's school recently designed and ran a Mental Health Week with the help of the primary school resources on the Mentally Healthy Schools website. She relies heavily on the toolkit to provide age-appropriate activities she thinks work for her students. They organised mental health-themed activities which proved a great success and a very valuable learning opportunity.

Speaking in relation to the Mentally Healthy Schools website, Nicola said, "It is a key part of what we use when it comes to mental health and wellbeing resources. The website is outstanding. I wish I could get it out to more teachers as there is nothing like what you offer in Northern Ireland."

**Getting started** 

## Supporting children's mental health during the coronavirus pandemic

Supporting students' mental health has become more important than ever in Nicola's school this year because of the mental health toll the Covid-19 pandemic has taken. Speaking on its impact on her students, Nicola shared a story from her classroom which demonstrated the fears any children are trying to cope with at this time. Nicola recalls, "During one of my Literacy lessons I became aware of a pupil who became very upset for no apparent reason. I spoke to her in private and she revealed to me that the reason she was upset was that she was concerned about her mum. Her fear was that her mummy was going to catch Covid and die. She's only seven. I couldn't help but think afterwards that it must be very difficult for young children to carry such worries with them and it reinforced the need for them to discuss and share their worries in a safe environment."

**Risk and protective factors: Coronavirus** 



“Over the course of one day, over two hundred children immersed themselves fully in these activities,” explained Nicola. “It was absolutely amazing – the children learnt so many valuable lessons through a variety of fun activities. It not only had a positive impact on them - it provided a much-needed uplift for us as staff.”

The week concluded with a mental health assembly to showcase their learning, an event that was attended by politicians, the Mayor and members of the local press. Such was the interest and attention gained by the school that the children of Nicola’s P4 class featured on BBC Radio Ulster and BBC News. The children spoke with confidence about how they can respond to negative situations or emotions they might be facing.

[Childrens' Mental Health Week toolkit](#)



## Practical tips on nurturing student mental health



### 1) Use the right vocabulary

Nicola believes using the right vocabulary with pupils to be key. Naming feelings and emotions can encourage children to understand what they are feeling and why they are feeling like that. The ability for children to name an emotion helps develop emotional competence.

### 2) Build a team of like-minded staff

I am passionate about promoting and developing good mental health in the school. However, it is not enough for this to happen in just one class. Having the support for our Senior Leadership Team and the efforts of the whole school community make a huge difference and help keep positive mental health at the forefront of the school. This was never more apparent than the whole school approach to Children’s Mental Health Week.



### 3) Do a daily mental health check-in

Each morning we begin class with a 'Daily Check-in' which revolves around three key questions we ask the children to answer. 1) How did you sleep last night? 2) Are you happy to be in school today? and 3) Do you want to talk to me? Having a daily check-in helps Nicola assess how her pupils are doing and reinforces the message that if they need to talk to her, she is there for them. All this is done in a discrete and supportive manner and the children have responded really well to this.

### 4) Be honest with your students

Nicola has found that being honest with her students has gone a long way towards helping them open up. She will, for example, also answer the first question from her daily check-in, and will be honest and say if she hasn't had a good sleep the previous night. That enables her pupils to feel more confident in sharing their feelings openly. The focus on sleep teaches her pupils about the importance of sleep and how it affects their mood and ability to learn.

### 5) Take care of staff mental health and wellbeing

Nicola has introduced a mental health aspect into the staff developments days at the beginning of each term. Within her school staff were encouraged to pair up with a trusted colleague to check on each other's wellbeing throughout each week. The focus for the next term is physical health and to promote this the school staff are taking part in a team walking challenge.

*Nicola is a member of the MHS UK-wide education panel, who have helped to shape the direction and content of Mentally Healthy Schools for her area.*

*If you would be interested in joining the panel in 2021, we would like to hear from you on [mhs@annafreud.org](mailto:mhs@annafreud.org)*

