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Introduction

A mentally healthy school is not created through a single role, initiative or programme. It is built through the everyday actions, relationships and decisions of every adult and every child in the community. This handbook brings together the essential elements of a whole-school approach to mental health and wellbeing and translates them into practical, accessible guidance that schools can use immediately and sustainably.

The material in this guide is grounded in evidence, legislation, psychological theory and the eight principles that underpin national mental health frameworks. But its purpose is not to replicate policy. Its purpose is to help schools create cultures where children and adults feel safe, connected and able to thrive regardless of resources, staffing pressures or external constraints.

Why this handbook exists

Schools are facing increasing complexity: rising levels of need, stretched services, staff burnout, and families under pressure. At the same time, children's mental health is shaped by their relationships, their environment, their sense of belonging and the consistency of the adults around them. Schools are uniquely placed to influence these protective factors every day.

This handbook exists to support that work. It offers a coherent, relational and trauma-informed framework that any school can use, without requiring specialist training or additional roles. It is designed to strengthen what schools already do well, fill gaps where confidence is low, and provide a shared language for staff, families and partners.

What this handbook is and what it isn't

This handbook is:

- A practical, whole-school guide to creating a mentally healthy culture.
- A resource that translates theory into everyday practice.
- A tool for leadership, staff teams, governors and families.
- A relational, trauma-informed approach that centres belonging, safety and resilience.

- A flexible framework that can be adapted to any school context.

This handbook is not:

- A replacement for specialist mental health services.
- A diagnostic or clinical manual.
- A role-based framework tied to the Senior Mental Health Lead initiative.
- A checklist to be completed once and forgotten.
- A burden added to already stretched staff.

It is a guide to doing what schools already do, but with greater clarity, consistency and confidence.

How to use this handbook

The chapters are organised so that schools can read the guide from start to finish or dip into the sections most relevant to their current priorities. Each chapter includes:

- Clear explanations of key concepts.
- Practical strategies that can be used immediately.
- Reflection prompts for staff teams, leadership meetings or INSET.
- Tools, templates and examples that can be adapted to your setting.
- Links between everyday practice and wider whole-school culture.

Schools may choose to:

- Use the guide as part of a whole-school development plan.
- Explore one chapter per staff meeting or half-term.
- Share selected sections with governors or families.
- Use the tools to support pastoral work, curriculum planning or policy development.
- Revisit chapters over time as understanding deepens and needs evolve.

The guide is intentionally written in a warm, accessible tone. It recognises the pressures schools face and offers approaches that are realistic, sustainable and rooted in compassion.

The values that underpin this guide

Across all chapters, three values run through the work:

- **Belonging** — Every child and adult feels seen, valued and part of the community.
- **Safety** — Emotional, relational and physical safety are prioritised in every interaction.
- **Resilience** — Children and adults develop the skills, relationships and environments that help them cope, grow and thrive.

These values are not abstract ideals. They are the foundation of a mentally healthy school and the thread that connects leadership, curriculum, behaviour, relationships, staff wellbeing and family partnership.

Unit One: Foundations

What a Mentally Healthy School Is

A mentally healthy school is one where every child and adult feels safe, connected and able to thrive. It is not defined by a single initiative or role, but by the culture, relationships and everyday practices that shape how people experience school life.

Mental health is not just the absence of illness — it includes emotional wellbeing, the ability to cope with challenges, and a sense of belonging and agency. In a mentally healthy school:

- Children feel seen, heard and valued.
- Adults model emotional literacy and relational safety.
- Staff wellbeing is recognised as essential to pupil wellbeing.
- Families are welcomed as partners, not judged as problems.
- Mental health is embedded in curriculum, environment and leadership - not bolted on.
- Protective factors are intentionally built into routines, relationships and systems.

This approach is not about perfection. It is about creating a culture where mental health is understood, supported and sustained through everyday actions.

Reflection Prompt

Think of a time when a child or colleague felt truly safe and supported in your school.

- What made that possible?
- What relationships, routines or values were present?
- How can that experience be replicated more widely?

The Whole-School Approach: Principles and Pillars

A whole-school approach means that mental health is everyone's responsibility, not just pastoral staff or designated leads. It involves leadership, curriculum, environment, relationships, and systems working together to support wellbeing.

The eight core principles are:

Principle	What it means in practice
Leadership & Management	Mental health is championed at senior level and embedded in policy and planning.
Ethos & Environment	The school culture promotes safety, respect, diversity and belonging.
Curriculum, Teaching & Learning	Mental health is integrated into learning and taught safely and age-appropriately.
Student Voice	Pupils are heard, valued and involved in shaping their environment.
Staff Development	Staff are supported to understand mental health and care for their own wellbeing.
Working with Families	Parents and carers are engaged as partners in supporting children's wellbeing.
Targeted Support	Children with additional needs receive appropriate, compassionate support.
Identifying Need & Monitoring Impact	Systems are in place to notice, respond and reflect on mental health needs.

These principles are not separate silos — they are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. When schools embed them consistently, they create a culture where mental health is part of the everyday fabric of school life.

Activity: Mapping Mental Health in Your School

Use the eight principles to map where mental health is already supported in your school.

- What's working well?
- Where are the gaps?
- Who is involved?
- What do pupils and families experience?

This can be done as a staff team, in small groups, or with governors and pastoral leads.

Understanding Mental Health, Wellbeing and Resilience

Mental health is shaped by relationships, environments and experiences. It is dynamic influenced by protective factors, adversity, and the consistency of support around a child or adult.

Wellbeing includes emotional, physical and social health. It is supported when people feel safe, connected and able to express themselves.

Resilience is not a fixed trait. It is built through:

- Secure relationships
- Opportunities to succeed
- Healthy coping strategies
- A sense of agency and hope

Protective factors such as positive school culture, trusted adults, routines, and peer connection help buffer the impact of adversity and promote mental health.

Children build resilience when they:

- Feel safe and supported
- Are recognised for their strengths
- Learn how to cope with challenges

- Experience consistent, trusting relationships

Adults build resilience too through reflection, peer support, and environments that value their wellbeing.

Activity: Protective Factors Brainstorm

In pairs or small groups, list all the protective factors your school offers from relationships to routines, spaces to systems.

Then ask:

- Which of these are intentional?
- Which are accidental?
- Which could be strengthened?

Reflection Prompt

What does resilience look like in your school?

- Is it celebrated or expected?
- How do children learn to cope?
- How do adults model resilience?

Reflective Page: Foundations

Use this page to reflect on your school's current culture and your own role within it.

1. What does a mentally healthy school mean to you personally?

Write freely — this is for your own reflection.

2. Which of the eight principles feels strongest in your school? Why?

3. Which principle feels most challenging? What might help?

4. What one small change could you make this term to strengthen belonging, safety or resilience?

5. Who could you talk to about this? What support might you need?