

## **Children's Mental Health: How Physical Educators Can Make a Difference**

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At the 2017 SPEA Conference held last May in Saskatoon I was privileged to present a break out session dealing with mental health issues within the K-12 school system in Saskatchewan. I was pleasantly surprised at the session turn out! The room was full of physical educators from across the province, interested in learning more about mental health issues at the school level and how physical educators could play an important role in the instruction and support of children and youth suffering with mental health issues. As I began my presentation I quickly realized from the participant responses that there was a definite need for the content of the presentation for both physical educators, their students and fellow staff. The physical education teachers were obviously dealing with student and staff mental health issues on a daily basis and were looking for strategies and instructional supports to take back to use immediately within their schools, homes, and communities.

Physical and Health Education Canada (2014), in its' national scan on Canadian perspectives on mental health education in the Canadian school system, reported that 84% of Canadians felt that the teacher plays an essential and important role in the positive support of the mental health of their students. This is an important statistic. Many teachers realize the responsibility to help their

students out but many feel they are inadequately trained or prepared to deal with their student's personal mental health issues. This became evident in the responses from the physical educators attending my session. Many in the room felt ill equipped to help their students or fellow teachers deal with anxiety, depression, addiction, self-harm, and suicidal thoughts and behaviors.

Besides educators feeling the pressure to help their students suffering with mental health issues, PHE Canada (2014) also reported that 3 out of 4 Canadian schools need to do more in this area and that Canadians believe that just over half of their teachers are creating an emotionally safe and caring learning environment for their students. The current situation within our schools is quite complex. Educators realize that there is a need for more knowledge, training, and supports to help their students. Parents and the general public feel that the role of educators is important and valued in this area but they also want more done within the school system to support children and youth with mental health issues.

So as an educational system and physical educators where do we start? We need to understand that teachers are on the front line of noticing when their students are struggling and in need of help in dealing with mental health issues both at school and at home (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2012). As educators we may feel frustrated and confused as to how to react and ultimately support our students with mental health issues. This is a normal reaction but there are things

we can do to make a positive difference. Even if we realize that a problem exists yet we feel uncomfortable or inadequate in providing the right resources, when all stakeholders within the school are invested in making a positive change, educators can reach out to a network of fellow staff members and resources to get help to our most vulnerable and at risk students. Search out support. Reach out to others and fellow agencies. Call for help and surround yourself with other colleagues and students who are there to help. Mental health issues should never be tackled individually, team support from all invested stakeholders is the key to making a positive difference at the school level. So what more can we do?

The stigma of mental health issues for youth is an especially complex problem that needs to be addressed by all stakeholders. For this reason we need to talk as often as we can with all of our students about mental health issues. Physical educators have an incredible advantage in this area because of the importance of the affective domain and their development with quality personal relationships with their students. The greater the awareness these discussions generate the more opportunities educators and students will have in supporting children and youth suffering with mental health issues. As a school system we need to focus on the mental health needs of our children rather than labelling them with a diagnosis or specific illness or ailment. How many educators realize that there is a problem with a child or within their school yet after identification of the problem there is

little in the way of systematic and tangible support for children, youth, and their families?

We also need to start these discussions early in a child's life. It must be done on a consistent and systematic manner throughout the school. Following a prescribed mental health curriculum or program from K through to 12 provides a solid construct upon which all educators can provide the correct information, terminology, and supports for all of their students. It is essential that everyone within the school, all staff and students, are on board. Reducing stigma, opening up proper communication channels, and using the correct terminology is essential to creating a safe and inviting learning culture within the school and community as it pertains to mental health. Besides educators, the role of school counsellors, support staff, clerical assistants, janitorial staff, and bus drivers is also critically important.

Early identification of mental health concerns and issues are extremely important in the process of getting the correct resources and support to students. When everyone within the school is working towards the same goal of reducing stigma, opening communication, and supporting each other, there is an increased opportunity for reducing anxiety and truly reaching out to those in need with supports that are sustainable and appropriate. In Saskatchewan the information retrieved from the Our School data on student engagement at the school level can

be invaluable in identifying mental health issues within the school and ultimately tracking intervention results over an extended period of time. Strong communication, proper instruction, correct terminology, and early identification can all be supported by using internal formative assessments to ultimately monitor students and intervention strategies. Understanding how mental health interventions work and whether they are successful or not is critical to the proper planning of responsive lessons to meet the needs of mental health issues to individual students and to the whole school environment.

What role can physical educators play specifically in the support of student mental health? For starters the best prescription for children and youth suffering from mental health issues is exercise! Physical activity helps to decrease anxiety and help students have a greater focus to learn. The positive physiological benefits of exercise on student and adult mental health is well documented (PHE Canada, 2014). Physical educators can help support this through their physical education classes, intramural program, and extra-curricular programs that are open to all students. Leadership in this area is essential as the benefits can be felt throughout all classes and the whole school. Using exercise to support individual students is so important and the benefits can last a lifetime.

In closing it is important to remember that as physical educators and teachers we must also look after our own mental health in order to be supportive of

others and to be role models within the school and community. If we do not look after our own health and wellness we will be of little help to those we serve and ultimately entrusted to our care. Mental health issues are much easier to address when we all become involved in whatever capacity we hold within the school setting. Education, knowledge, team support, and engaged communication is a start. As physical educators we cannot underestimate the power of physical education and physical activity on the health and mental wellness of our students. Together we can all make a difference in our greatest investment, the children we work with every day!

## References

Ontario Ministry of Education (2012). *Mental Health Assist.* Center for Addictions and Mental Health. Toronto, ON: CAMH.

Physical and Health Education Canada (2014). *The responsibility to promote resiliency. Public perspectives on mental health education and the Canadian school system.* Ottawa, ON: PHE Canada.