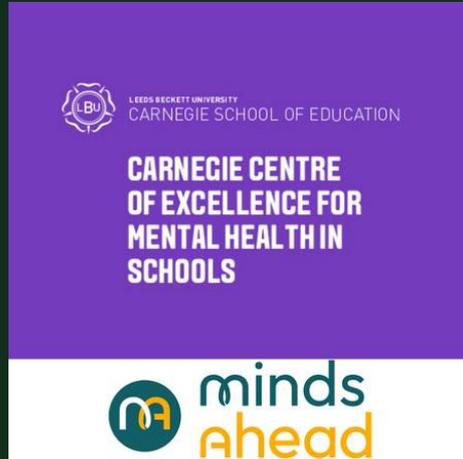




LEEDS BECKETT UNIVERSITY  
CARNEGIE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION



# MENTAL HEALTH INSIGHTS WORKING PAPER

**April 2025**



## Editorial

Since its launch in 2017, the Carnegie Centre of Excellence for Mental Health in Schools has blossomed into a thriving community of over 1,500 members, all dedicated to improving mental health and wellbeing in schools. Our goal is to support and empower school staff as they work to create healthier environments for their entire school community.

This April 2025 collection features some compelling case studies. Discover how the London Borough of Barking & Dagenham Mental Health Leads Network was established. Under the leadership of Olivia Draisey, mental health leads formed a network to share impactful, practical experiences, fostering collective learning and improved student wellbeing. Furthermore, you will learn how one school successfully harnessed character strengths to create a unique and effective "Science of Wellbeing" curriculum, significantly boosting student mental health and resilience.

We also have thought-provoking articles, including research examining the connection between empathy and competition. This piece explores evidence-based practices, developed by a secondary school sports coach and a psychology teacher, that involve reframing competition through empathy. These practices include explicitly teaching empathy in competitive scenarios, encouraging and reinforcing empathy in peer interactions, and cultivating a balanced school culture.

This edition also offers practical digital wellbeing strategies for parents and families. Digital parenting coach, Yetty Williams, who coined the phrase "it takes an e-village to raise a child," reflects on the reality of our children growing up in an interconnected digital world and the necessity of digital wellbeing strategies for parents. Her powerful piece provides actionable steps for parents to foster digital wellbeing, which we strongly encourage schools to share with their parent communities.

In addition to case studies, each edition welcomes Think Pieces and research exploring how we can transform culture and reframe our thinking and approaches to support the mental wellbeing of our students, staff, and parents.

Looking ahead to our Summer 2025 edition, we will be calling for case studies and research documenting the ***impact of Mental Health Leads in schools and colleges.***

The deadline for submissions is May Half Term, so please do share your experiences and contribute to this important conversation.

Guest Editor

Clare Erasmus

## **Case study**

### **Setting up a Mental Health Leads Network**

**Olivia Draisey**

At Jo Richardson Community School, a large secondary school in London, we have always championed mental health and wellbeing, so we were an early adopter of the Mental Health Lead post. We got to work straight away to identify where this role would fit into our current school approach. First, we looked at what other schools were doing, and it became apparent that few schools had adopted the role and those who had, felt a lot like I did – overwhelmed.

The school entrusted me with taking on this role and I was excited to start. However, the scale of taking on a whole school approach was large and the challenge we were facing post-pandemic was huge. Fortunately, early on, I was invited to a meeting with other leads from across the country and we all reported similar worries such as how do we support our staff, how do we write a policy, how do we manage the CAMHS waitlisted students and importantly, where do you start with making this a whole-school approach? Meeting with others allowed me to understand that I was not alone in struggling to focus my time on the role and deal with the overwhelming feeling that we needed more time.

Following a singular meeting, I navigated the role independently for two years. During this time, I developed a school-wide mental health policy and established a provision model with the MHST, which was subsequently adopted borough-wide. Recognizing the value of shared practice, I then founded a mental health leads network for the borough

At JRCS we are open to working with other schools to see, adopt and share promising practice and this was no different. I noted that there were several areas that the meetings could help address and thus, produced the following aims:

- Share promising practice
- Share resources
- Meet and engage new and existing external stakeholders
- Share challenges
- Speak to the people who can help (MHST, CAMHS, LA, etc.)
- Feel less alone!

As I had not had any previous experience of setting up a network before, I worked with the service and clinical lead of the MHST to set the terms of engagement and plan the first meeting. At first, we put the offer out to secondary schools only, as I felt most able to support them based on my experience. Yet, it soon became apparent that primary schools were keen to be involved too. This led to a first meeting attendance of 40+ schools and council/voluntary sector services.

I had recently presented our approach to whole school support at the London Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) conference and so I shared this at the first network meeting. This explained our whole school approach and emphasised the successes and challenges within this approach. The primary focus being our collective need to remain 'Open to learning.' I had described this in the context of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943), where I consider there is space for a new tier on the pyramid – an openness to learning. Without this, how can we expect to have love and belonging if we are not willing to learn from the relationships we have and build on these. This opened the door then into further discussion about what we have in place to support our young people and whether, they had an openness to learn, which becomes a willingness to engage in support.

The MHST then outlined their service, which is sadly not available in all schools, instead, they hoped to share resources more widely to support schools without working directly with them. Most importantly though, was the wealth of external agencies who wanted to present their offer to those in the room. Thus, the London Borough of Barking & Dagenham Mental Health Leads Network was created.

Following the first meeting we recognised the need to meet once a term to share latest ideas, services, and promising practice in our network of schools. Our aims remain the same and we now work with a borough representative to organise the termly meetings. Every meeting has grown in attendance and strength of reach, with attendees including the Integrated Director of Care for our local NHS service.

The aim of our network is to create equality for all the young people in our borough. By connecting schools, our network ensures all young people in the borough receive equal access to effective mental health and wellbeing support.

Post-pandemic, schools face escalating challenges: learning deficits, diminished social-emotional development, and a surge in mental health issues, as highlighted by ASCL (2024). Increased school avoidance and elective home education, linked to declining student wellbeing (Gill et al., 2024), exacerbate these problems. This demands urgent, collaborative action among schools.

The development of the network means we are not facing this challenge alone anymore. Instead, we have a community of like-minded professionals who are open to sharing their knowledge and experiences to work with. The focus now turns to identifying the gaps in our knowledge and experience and branching beyond our borough to get support for these. For example, we have noted a growth in concerns around eating but there are few targeted interventions for this, as a network we can find, trial, and implement new strategies to manage this risk. Together we are stronger.

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Olivia Draisey is the Senior Mental Health and Wellbeing Lead, Jo Richardson Community School.

# **Case Study**

## **Harnessing Character Strengths for Positive Mental Health and Wellbeing in Schools**

### **Melanie Gentles**

#### **A Character Strengths Approach to Wellbeing in Our School**

Supporting students' mental health and building resilience is a top priority in our school. As part of our bespoke Science of Wellbeing curriculum, we have adopted a creative approach to promoting positive mental health through the integration of character strengths. Rather than a reactionary approach to mental health, this approach focuses on each student's signature strengths, empowering them to flourish both academically and personally.

Our goal is to create an environment where students not only overcome challenges but thrive—confident in their abilities, resilient in the face of adversity, and mentally well-prepared for the future.

#### **The Power of Character Strengths in Positive Psychology**

Each person possesses a unique combination of 24-character strengths, which, when used well, can significantly improve one's life. The field of positive psychology has a substantial body of evidence-based research that shows that when students are taught to play to their strengths, they build wellbeing, resilience, and learning and accomplishment abilities. These are all necessary for promoting good mental health and wellbeing.

We draw upon the Values in Action (VIA) Classification of Character Strengths, developed by Peterson & Seligman (2004), pioneers in positive psychology. This framework categorises 24-character strengths into six core virtues:

- Wisdom: Curiosity, love of learning, judgment, creativity, perspective.
- Courage: Bravery, perseverance, honesty, zest.
- Humanity: Love, kindness, social intelligence.
- Justice: Teamwork, fairness, leadership.
- Temperance: Forgiveness, humility, prudence, self-regulation.
- Transcendence: Appreciation of beauty, gratitude, hope, humour, spirituality.

In our school, we focus on helping students identify, develop, and leverage their unique strengths. This strengths-based approach has been integral to fostering a positive school culture where personal growth, wellbeing, and academic success are interwoven.

### **Building Resilience and Positive Mental Health**

Through the Science of Wellbeing curriculum, we aim to build resilience in our students by focusing on their strengths, especially when facing mental health challenges such as anxiety, low self-esteem, or academic pressure. We have found that shifting the conversation away from weaknesses and towards strengths empowers students to see their personal qualities as assets.

Strength-spotting—where educators and peers highlight each other's strengths—has become a cornerstone of our approach. For example, when a student is recognised for their creativity or perseverance, it reinforces their sense of self-worth. This positive feedback loop helps students build confidence, making them more resilient when dealing with stress or setbacks.

By focusing on strengths, we help our students view challenges not as insurmountable obstacles but as opportunities for growth. This has proven transformative, helping them develop a positive mindset that equips them to better manage their emotional wellbeing.

## **Creative Strategies for Encouraging Mental Health Discussions**

Conversations about mental health should be natural, positive, and empowering. Embedding discussions about character strengths within everyday classroom activities has allowed us to facilitate these conversations without stigma. For example, when a student is praised for their perseverance in overcoming a difficult assignment, we use this as an opportunity to discuss how they manage stress or recover from setbacks. By framing these conversations around strengths, we help students explore their emotions in a safe and supportive environment. This has led to more open dialogue about mental health, allowing students to discuss their feelings and challenges more freely and with a focus on growth and personal development.

## **Tailoring Learning to Strengths**

We have taken steps to further engage students in learning by tailoring classroom tasks to their character strengths. This personalised approach increases engagement and promotes a sense of accomplishment and ownership over their learning.

For example:

- Students who exhibit creativity are encouraged to express themselves through innovative projects.
- Those with strong leadership qualities are given the chance to take charge of group activities, fostering a sense of teamwork and responsibility.

This strengths-based learning approach has also helped students experience flow—a state of deep focus where they are fully immersed in a task. Csikszentmihalyi (2002) states, flow occurs when students work on activities that align with their strengths, making learning more enjoyable and fulfilling. For students facing mental health challenges, achieving flow can be a significant change, helping them regain a sense of control and joy in their educational journey.

## **Building a Supportive, Strengths-Based Culture**

One of the key outcomes of our Science of Wellbeing curriculum is its holistic impact on the overall school environment. By focusing on character strengths, we have cultivated a strengths-based culture where students are encouraged to appreciate not only their own strengths but also the strengths of their peers.

This has fostered a sense of community and mutual respect in the classroom, where students support and celebrate each other's achievements. By learning to recognise and value the strengths in those around them, our students have built stronger, more supportive relationships—an essential factor in promoting positive mental health.

In conclusion, our bespoke Science of Wellbeing curriculum has proven innovative and effective in promoting positive mental health and resilience in our students. By focusing on character strengths, we are equipping our students with the skills they need to succeed academically and thrive emotionally and socially.

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*Melanie Gentles is Head of Middle School and the Positive Mental Health and Wellbeing Lead at Orley Farm School in Harrow*

## **Case Study**

### **Between Empathy and Competition in the Classroom and on the Sports Field**

**Purvi Gandhi and Adam Gallagher**

#### **Introduction**

Empathy and competition are often viewed as opposing forces, yet both can play pivotal roles in educational settings. While competition can drive achievement and foster resilience, empathy promotes inclusivity and emotional wellbeing.

Although these concepts are difficult to operationalise, psychologists have defined empathy as a part of a family of positive emotions, including compassion, gratitude, and forgiveness—it removes barriers and expands the capacity for enhancing mental health (Chamine, 2012). Competition, on the other hand, focuses on the act of individuals vying for outcomes, producing a zero-sum interaction that establishes ‘winners’ and ‘losers.’ It requires individuals to examine their abilities relative to their competitors (Garcia et al., 2020). This dichotomy makes them appear as opposing forces: empathy fosters connection and mutual support, whereas competition can create division and rivalry, particularly in high-stakes exams and sports fixtures.

However, research suggests that when educators intertwine these concepts thoughtfully, it can enhance classroom dynamics and student outcomes (Decety & Cowell, 2014; Ghezi, 2022). Empathy creates an environment of belongingness that is crucial for the teamwork necessary for success in competitive environments.

This article explores practical strategies for balancing empathy and competition in schools, supported by evidence-based practices. These strategies, crafted by a secondary school sports coach and a psychology teacher, involve reframing competition with empathy, explicitly teaching empathy through competitive scenarios, encouraging and reinforcing empathy in peer interactions, and cultivating a balanced culture.

### **Reframing Competition with Empathy**

Competition, when perceived negatively, can undermine collaboration and empathy. However, framing competition as a tool for mutual growth can transform its impact. Ghezi (2022) found that developing 'competitive empathy' by integrating empathy into competitive environments helps reduce aggressive tendencies and promotes prosocial behaviours.

### **Practical Applications:**

1. **Collaborative Competitions:** Create team-based challenges where students must work together to achieve a shared goal. For example, a class-wide "Kindness Challenge" can encourage students to collaborate in performing acts of kindness. One example is the 'shoe-box' appeal during Christmas, where tutor groups work together to fill boxes with thoughtful gifts for children in need. These decorated boxes, when collected, create a fantastic display of collaborative competition with a meaningful impact.
2. **Strength-Based Feedback:** Recognize individual contributions in a competitive setting. For instance, tell a student, "Your strategic thinking was crucial in helping the team succeed," to reinforce their value to the group. Alternatively, if a team loses, guide students to reflect on the opposing team's strengths and how they worked together. Encouraging students to notice their own strengths and those of others enhances their well-being and performance.

## **Teaching Empathy Through Competitive Scenarios**

Competitive scenarios provide opportunities to develop perspective-taking skills. Perspective-taking—a core component of empathy—helps students understand their peers' emotions and motivations, enhancing social cohesion. Kidder (2017) suggests using the BABO (“Both Are Better Off”) approach instead of the traditional “win-win” language to foster collaboration and problem-solving.

### **Practical Applications:**

1. **Role-Reversal Exercises:** During debates or competitive games, ask students to argue from the perspective of their opponent. This encourages them to consider alternative viewpoints.
2. **Post-Competition Reflections:** Facilitate discussions after competitions to highlight what students learned from each other. Questions like, “What strengths did you notice in your peers?” promote empathy. After games, when players shake hands with the opposing team, ask them to also acknowledge a standout player or introduce themselves to someone new. This helps students “step out of themselves” and create meaningful connections.

## **Encouraging Empathy in Competitive Peer Interactions**

Empathy can reduce negative behaviours such as bullying and promote prosocial behaviours necessary for thriving educational settings. Students with high levels of empathy tend to be more active in defending victims of bullying, while low levels of empathy often reinforce bullying behaviour or passive bystander attitudes (Hikmat et al., 2024). In competitive environments, interventions that include social and emotional skills training and promote tolerance and respect for diversity can be particularly beneficial.

### **Practical Applications:**

1. **Conflict Mediation:** Train student leaders to mediate disputes during competitions, emphasizing active listening and mutual respect.
2. **Empathy Mapping:** Before starting a competition, ask students to identify potential emotions their peers might feel (e.g., excitement, nervousness) and discuss how to support each other.

### **An Empathetic and Competitive Classroom Culture**

A balanced school culture integrates empathy and competition seamlessly. Educational settings that foster both compassion and healthy competition help students become more socially and academically competent. When teachers role model empathy and create environments underpinned by positive relationships, they empower students to take ownership of their learning.

### **Practical Application:**

1. **Celebrate Collective Achievements:** Highlight team successes alongside individual accomplishments. For example, showcase a winning individual's achievements alongside the support they received from peers.
2. **Gamify Empathy:** Introduce classroom games that reward empathetic actions, such as helping others or demonstrating kindness, to normalise prosocial behaviours within competitive contexts.

### **Conclusion**

The interplay of empathy and competition can enhance classroom dynamics when approached intentionally. By adopting strategies that embed empathy into competitive activities, educators can foster environments where students thrive academically, psychologically, and socially. These practices prepare students not only for success in school but also for collaborative and compassionate interactions in broader life contexts.

For more evidence-based practical strategies to help schools thrive, check out Gandhi, P. (2024). *A Little Guide for Teachers: Student Mental Health*.

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## **Think Piece**

# **Digital Well-being for Parents and Families of School Children: Beyond Laws and Regulations**

**Yetty Williams**

**Digital Parenting Coach, Founder & Author, Digital Savvy Parenting**

Parenting has always been a communal effort, but in today's digital age, the saying "it takes a village to raise a child" is no longer enough. Through my work as a digital parenting coach, I coined the term "it takes an e-village to raise a child" to reflect the reality that our children are growing up in an interconnected digital world. Their influences extend beyond family and local communities to include online friends, digital educators, influencers, gaming communities, and social media networks.

While governments and tech companies debate regulations and schools enforce phone bans, the reality is that children spend most of their time at home. This means parents, not policymakers or educators, must take the lead in shaping their children's digital well-being. Hoping that external rules will protect them is not enough. We must take an active role in understanding, monitoring, and guiding our children's relationship with technology.

### **Digital Well-being Is a Parenting Responsibility**

As parents, we instinctively protect our children from physical dangers. If a child has asthma, we adjust their environment. Such as removing dust-trapping curtains, swapping fabric sofas for leather, and ensuring they avoid triggers. Yet, when it comes to digital health, many parents fail to apply the same level of attentiveness. The warning signs of digital distress, such as disrupted sleep, mood swings, and withdrawal from family activities, are often overlooked until they escalate into more serious mental health challenges.

Cyberpsychology research highlights the profound impact of digital exposure on children's well-being. According to studies:

- 34% of children have experienced cyberbullying.
- 60% have communicated with strangers online.
- 63% of parents believe excessive screen time negatively impacts their child's health.
- 82% of children encounter inappropriate content before age.

Despite these alarming statistics, only 33% of parents actively use parental controls or monitoring tools. This gap in oversight leaves children vulnerable to digital harms, reinforcing the urgent need for parents to be proactive rather than reactive.

### **Recognizing Red Flags in Digital Well-being**

It's not enough to assume that children will self-regulate their screen time or avoid risky online interactions. Parents must be equipped to recognize behavioural shifts that indicate digital distress, including:

- Increased secrecy about online activities.
- Sudden mood swings or changes in self-esteem linked to social media interactions.
- Obsession with likes, followers, or digital validation.
- Avoidance of real-world interactions in favour of screen time.

Digital well-being, like physical well-being, requires proactive intervention. Just as we create asthma action plans for children with respiratory issues, we must implement digital well-being plans tailored to our children's needs.

### **Practical Steps for Parents to Foster Digital Well-being**

Being a digitally savvy parent isn't about banning technology. It's about teaching children how to engage with it intentionally and healthily.

**Here are key strategies to ensure digital well-being at home:**

### **1. Foster Open Conversations, Not Just Rules**

Rules without understanding rarely work and lead to rebellion. Instead of simply limiting screen time, engage in ongoing conversations.

Ask questions like:

- What do you enjoy most about being online?
- Have you ever seen something that made you uncomfortable?
- How do you feel when you spend a lot of time on social media?

By maintaining an open dialogue, children are more likely to seek guidance when they encounter challenges online.

### **2. Build a Family Digital Well-being Plan**

Rather than relying on external restrictions, establish household guidelines that promote healthy tech habits. This could include:

- Tech-free zones (e.g., no screens at mealtimes or before bedtime).
- Scheduled digital detoxes (e.g., one screen-free evening per week).
- A balance of online and offline activities to encourage real-world connections.

### **3. Model Healthy Digital Habits**

Children learn more from what we do than what we say. If they see us constantly scrolling through our phones, checking emails at the dinner table, or reacting anxiously to notifications, they will adopt similar habits. Practicing mindful tech use sets the tone for the entire family.

### **4. Monitor Without Spying**

While it is important to respect a child's privacy, parental oversight is essential. Use age-appropriate monitoring tools and discuss their purpose openly. For younger children, this may mean setting up content filters, while for teens, it could involve mutual agreements on healthy screen time limits.

## **5. Teach Critical Thinking and Digital Literacy**

Many children believe that everything they see online is true. Helping them differentiate between credible information and misinformation is a vital skill. Teach them how to:

- Recognize manipulated images and fake news.
- Question the motives behind influencers and viral content.
- Understand data privacy and how algorithms shape what they see.

### *Parenting in the Digital Age Requires an E-Village*

Raising children in today's digital world is not a solo task. Just as communities once played a crucial role in child-rearing, today's parents need an e-village—a supportive network of fellow parents, educators, and digital experts who can provide guidance and share insights.

Engaging with online parenting communities, attending digital literacy workshops, and leveraging resources on cyberpsychology can make a significant difference. As a digital parenting coach, I have seen firsthand how equipping parents with knowledge transforms their confidence in guiding their children.

### **The Urgency of Proactive Digital Parenting**

Parenting in the digital age isn't about controlling every aspect of our children's online lives. It is about empowering them to make responsible choices. Our role extends beyond keeping them "safe" online; it involves helping them develop resilience, self-awareness, and healthy tech habits that will serve them for life.

The conversation about digital well-being is urgent, and the responsibility lies in our hands as parents. Schools may enforce phone bans, governments may implement regulations, and tech companies may introduce new parental controls. However, ultimately, no one has a greater influence on a child's well-being than their parents.

So, we need to move beyond fear and equip ourselves with knowledge, embrace digital parenting with confidence, and commit to raising a generation that thrives in both the physical and digital worlds.

I draw on my extensive experience coaching parents worldwide, insights from my book ***Digital Savvy Parenting***, and my research into cyberpsychology. It is my hope that by shifting our mindset from reactive to proactive digital parenting and identifying our digital parenting archetype, we can create a healthier digital future for our children. One that is guided by wisdom, intentionality, and the power of an e-village.

\*source: Impact Report - UK Safer Internet Centre- <https://saferinternet.org.uk/safer-internet-day/safer-internet-day-2024/impact-report>

Children's digital wellbeing: 2024 report - Internet Matters - <https://www.internetmatters.org/hub/research/childrens-wellbeing-in-a-digital-world-index-report-2024/>

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