

Mental health provision for Irish school children – a new approach

Irish Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy CEO, Lisa Molloy, is campaigning for joined-up thinking and inter-departmental collaboration when it comes to our school-going children's mental health. In a solution focused approach, Ms. Molloy calls for resilience mental health programmes to be introduced in primary schools and for counselling to be made available to all secondary school students who need it. Ms. Molloy outlines that while School-based counselling provision is at present available in Ireland, it's fragmented and operates on an ad-hoc basis in the absence of Governmental support. Counselling/psychotherapy roles have grown organically in some schools, but these are very much the exceptions. They are funded on a discretionary basis and are funded by different resources in various schools.

We are experiencing rising rates of emotional distress in children and young people as well rising rates of prescription medications to tackle this. Our society is faced with a challenge and an opportunity to respond in a more appropriate holistic manner. Other public figures have openly highlighted the key issues of concern when it comes to the mental health of Irish children. Senator Joan Freeman has spoken about the reform of children's mental health care. She noted how Irish 11-15-year olds are the second highest in Europe to present with emotional issues on a weekly basis. She called for 'care underneath' so that children are much less likely to end up in crisis care. Care underneath includes talk therapy – and she noted the absence of this in communities as well as an over reliance on medication. Sen. Freeman has stated that children are our future and talk therapy needs investment. Recent HSE figures released show that more than 6,300 children were waiting for a psychology appointment in Ireland (at the end of August, 2018) and that 1,607 children and young people had been waiting for more than a year for an appointment. She noted that currently CAMHS is viewed as the primary means of intervention, but it should be considered the last resort. She called for a 'rethinking outside the box' and 'joined up thinking' when it comes to providing services for children.

Patsy McCaughey – a deputy Principal at the High School, Dublin, and an Educational Psychologist speaks about raising the awareness of the absence of a coordinated and inclusive approach to mental health within schools. Furthermore, he emphasises that it is most obvious place to implement such programmes. Schools are where the most change can occur. Mr. McCaughey's assertion is compounded by "Counselling within secondary schools has been shown to bring about significant reductions in psychological distress in the short-term, and help young people move towards their personal goals" (UK Department of Education, 2015: *Counselling in schools: a blueprint for the future*). He speaks about the need for a sustainable culture of awareness and effective communication within schools so that pupils, teachers and parents are empowered to know how to react and act in certain situations. Limiting the need to access acute services should be part of this culture.

Ms. Molloy has drawn attention to a Royal College of Surgeons Ireland research report - 'The Mental Health of Young People in Ireland' (2013) - which discovered that by

the age of thirteen, 1 in 3 children will have experienced a mental health difficulty. By the age of twenty-four, this has risen to 1 in 2 young people. Ms. Molloy also highlighted the findings of a recent study in which almost 900 adolescents aged 15-17 across 11 Irish secondary schools completed a survey, while some also took part in qualitative focus groups. It found that help-seeking in school is uncommon due to pupils' concerns about confidentiality and the dual role of class teacher/counsellor. There were similar concerns with school guidance counsellors, as they are also 'staff'. The study finds that if mental health and help-seeking were to be 'normalised' in the school setting along with targeted mental health promotion inputs that help-seeking would be viewed as less stigmatising and its rates would increase. Irish school-goers are calling for increased mental health education as part of the curriculum, and for independent, non-staff counsellors/psychotherapists for those experiencing difficulties (L. Doyle, M. P. Treacy and A. Sheridan 'It just doesn't feel right': a mixed methods study of help-seeking in Irish schools, 2017, *Advances in School Mental Health Promotion*).

Research that is available from areas where school-based counselling is Government funded and currently available appears to back this call. Children and staff in schools in Northern Ireland and Wales see it as accessible, non-stigmatising and effective, with positive impacts on studying and learning, attendance, behaviour and attainment.

Ms. Molloy is clear to stress upon the economics of early. A UK report from Barclay's Wealth found that 'specialist counselling in schools can help to tackle child behavioural problems...71% of children improve their behaviour in a year, and the long-term savings are likely to be in the region of £3 for every £1 invested.' Ms. Molloy suggests ways to remove the common barriers or the 'buts' that often accompany the push for new initiatives such as this one - ownership, funding and resources. As part of the solution she suggests that the IACP which is the leading body for counselling and psychotherapy in Ireland is very well positioned to deliver mental health resilience programmes and school-based counselling programmes. More than 2,700 of their members are fully accredited professional counsellors/psychotherapists. Ms. Molloy states that the suggested programmes would be a vital support for children, parents and teachers.