

# 7 WAYS TO BOOST STUDENT WELLBEING



A guide for primary school teachers to support wellbeing and mental health across the whole school community.



# THE FOUR PILLARS OF WELLBEING



This guide offers some high-level ideas for building a positive culture at your school. Our approach to wellbeing is based on four concepts.



## **Connectedness**

Connectedness involves the feelings of belonging that a student develops through their relationships with their peers and teachers within the school community.



## **Sense of self**

Sense of self involves what students think, feel and believe about themselves. Sense of self is formed by the individual and their relationships, interactions and experiences. It manifests itself in the student's values, attitudes and behaviours.



## **Resilience**

Building resilience involves the empowerment of the student to be positive, proactive and resourceful in dealing with life experiences. Resilient students have the ability to reflect on and learn from their experiences and to creatively turn challenges into opportunities for growth and learning.



## **Sense of possibility**

A strong sense of possibility involves an awareness and belief that positive outcomes can be achieved in the future. It empowers individuals to take responsibility for enhancing their sense of self, developing and maintaining positive relationships and turning challenges into opportunities.

# BUILD STRONG RELATIONSHIPS

Relationships are a key indicator of mental health. Positive relationships with others are a significant contributor to our sense of wellbeing.

We all need to feel connected to other humans to thrive and flourish, but it's especially critical for mental health and development in school-aged children.

In students, connectedness is tied to better academic performance when compared to students who have a lower sense of connection. Students with greater connections also report greater feelings of overall health and wellbeing.

In the past few years, we've seen an increase in loneliness and disconnection due to the pandemic and the continued rise in social media and screen use. As adults, we can help kids develop social skills and meaningful connections by providing opportunities for face-to-face interactions.

Making connectedness a priority can look a few different ways. Most often it starts with teachers and staff setting the example to create a positive, inclusive classroom environment. From there, schools can build their own policies and opportunities to improve student connectedness.

The Peer Support Program is a great way to foster student connections across grades.



Feeling connected is vital for our mental health. Connectedness is one of the top predictors of child wellbeing.



# FRIENDSHIPS ARE VITAL TO A CHILD'S ENJOYMENT OF SCHOOL



Friendships formed in the primary school years are significant indicators of adolescent social health.

## **Provide regular opportunities for students to interact**

Research shows children engage in more social interactions throughout the day and have more opportunities to practise emerging social skills if they are given planned and regular opportunities for peer interactions.

Opportunities for forming friendships could include sports activities, clubs and groups such as choir and band, and wellbeing programs. Consider running buddy programs and the Peer Support Program, to create formal opportunities for peers to meet regularly in structured sessions.

## **Teach friendship skills**

There are many ways for students to learn and practise these skills, including via the Peer Support Program.

In our module, *Keeping Friends*, students learn a range of skills over eight weeks.

Skills include:

- Playing in a friendly way.
- Identifying common interests with peers.
- Move in and out of group situations.
- Saying no.
- Being a modest winner and a gracious loser.

Students learn these skills via discussion with peers, activities, practise, and self-reflection.

Friendship skills can be learned. Students can be taught skills in listening and talking, showing an interest in others, cooperating, sharing and helping others and providing encouragement.

# HELP STUDENTS BECOME RESILIENT

Ups and downs are a normal part of life. But it can be hard for children and young people to see beyond an immediate problem or failure.

In fact, many adults are still learning how to effectively manage negative events, like failure and rejection.

Resilience is the ability to bounce back from adversity. It enables us to move on from negative events, making it an important part of our overall sense of wellbeing.

Schools can help children and young people become more resilient via a variety of approaches.

Being connected to peers is an important protective factor for children and young people. Friendships highly influence whether a child or young person will enjoy school.



These protective factors help develop resilience in young people.

## **Environmental**

- Feeling connected.
- Feeling cared for and supported by adults.
- Having a sense of belonging and worth in their family.
- Having at least one caring adult outside the family unit.
- Being involved in community life.

## **Personal skills and beliefs**

- Knowing how to think optimistically.
- Having skills for resourcefulness and adaptation.
- Demonstrating competence in social skills.
- Being emotionally literate.
- Having a healthy sense of self.



# ENCOURAGE STUDENTS TO RETHINK CHALLENGES

Peer Support Australia offers a module that focuses on helping students to rethink challenges. This enables students to develop a mindset that builds their resilience.

The module teaches the concept of having 'open thoughts' as opposed to 'limiting thoughts'.

Open thoughts allow us to embrace challenges, persevere, see the importance of effort, learn from criticism, and be inspired by the success of others.

Limiting thoughts lead us to avoid challenges, become defensive and easily give up, see effort as pointless, ignore helpful criticism, and feel threatened by the success of others.

The module is called *Moving Forward* and is based on significant evidence that the brain can be rewired. The module is run over 8-weeks with groups of 8 to 10 students and led by a pair of trained Peer Leaders.

## What is 'open thinking' and 'limited thinking'?

The scenario below shows an example of the difference between the two thought processes.

The challenge: Tom discovers his soccer boots are in his mum's car and she has left for work. He needs them for soccer training at school.

### Open thoughts

That's annoying. I wonder how I could get my boots?

I don't want to miss soccer training. Is there something else I could wear?

I should have been more organised and brought my soccer boots inside when mum asked me to.

### Limiting thoughts

I feel so stupid. I'm hopeless with organisation.

Now I won't be able to go to soccer training. I'm letting the team down.

I'm the worst team member. The other players won't like me.

### Outcomes of open thoughts

- Tom decides to wear his joggers instead.
- He uses his problem solving skills.
- He recognises areas where he can improve.

### Outcomes of limiting thoughts

- Tom feels helpless to change the situation or prevent it from happening again.
- Tom robs himself of the opportunity to learn something new by problem solving.
- He misses soccer training.

# ENCOURAGE POSITIVE THINKING

Positive emotions include confidence, optimism and hope.

Thinking positively increases concentration and productivity. It also reduces the risk of depression during periods of stress. And it even impacts our physical health.

Positive emotions enable us to enjoy the present and be 'in the moment'. They help us put failure into perspective. They create a sense of possibility for our future.

Adults play a crucial role in teaching and modelling optimistic thinking to children. Thinking patterns become habitual very early in a child's development. It's harder to alter thinking habits the longer they're established.

Optimism is living life with a positive attitude. This enables us to live meaningful lives with purpose and direction. It means we are grateful for what we have in our lives, use our strengths and are engaged in activities.

There are some key differences in the way optimistic thinkers and pessimistic thinkers respond to events.

Event	Optimistic thinker	Pessimistic thinker
Child scores a goal.	"I'm good at scoring goals"	"It was a lucky shot."
Child makes a mistake.	"Everyone makes mistakes occasionally."	"I'll never get this right."



Thinking optimistically is a key protective factor which enhances student resilience and provides a buffer against challenging situations.

We offer a module as part of the Peer Support Program called *Living Positively*. It teaches students about kindness, curiosity and teamwork.

*Living Positively* will help provide young people with the skills to persevere, maintain positive thinking and look beyond themselves with an attitude of gratitude and service to others.



# FOSTER AN ANTI-BULLYING CULTURE

Bullying in schools is a big problem, with long-term repercussions for both victims and perpetrators.

Kids who experience bullying are more likely to develop serious mental health issues later in life, and those who bully are at an increased risk of ongoing behavioural problems.

School culture plays a crucial role in preventing bullying in schools.

Research shows that school culture has a direct impact on the prevalence of bullying. Building strong peer relationships is part of the solution.

#### **Adopt a whole-of-school approach**

Positive student relationships are best achieved through a whole-of-school approach. This means addressing all facets of the school community and its relationships

This includes having a committed leadership team, a focus on culture and the physical environment, and integrated approaches to teaching and learning including professional development and strong partnerships with parents and carers.



During the year, about  
15% of Australian  
school students  
experience bullying.

Australian & New Zealand Journal  
of Psychiatry



# HOW ONE SCHOOL ADDRESSED BULLYING



In 2015, Assistant Principal Michelle, was teaching at a primary school in Melbourne that was experiencing high rates of bullying.

Michelle and her team addressed the problem through a whole-of-school approach, adopting several tactics to change the culture. This included implementing the Peer Support Program, and running the *Stronger Together* module.

In addition to running the Peer Support Program, the school set up a 'bully blocker pledge'.

Michelle said: "The students all brainstormed on a Google form, and then they came up with the top five agreements as a whole school as to what the school would look like in order for it to be a bully blocker school. That went up in the hall on a big sign, and every assembly we refer back to it. These are the behaviors we have here at our school. And it just really helped to change the kids' mindset as well."

Michelle is a long-time supporter of the Peer Support Program, and has implemented it at several schools during her teaching career.

"I've always loved the program, and I've always seen its benefits," Michelle said.

"I think the Peer Support Program really helps. It helps students to say that, 'I can be a leader, I can make a change, I can make a difference.' And when they step into those leadership roles, they become empowered."



# EMPOWER STUDENTS TO BE LEADERS

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Leadership skills include communication, empathy, problem-solving and decision-making.

Empowering students to be leaders means they take ownership and responsibility for the world around them. They become agents of change.

There are many ways schools can provide students with leadership opportunities beyond student representative council positions and house captains.

It's important that all students have a chance to step into a leadership role. This might mean being responsible for a task, like ringing the bell or making sure the computers are packed away at the end of the day. Language matters when talking about these responsibilities. Some schools give these roles a title like 'Technology Captain'.

## **The Peer Support Program offers all students the chance to lead**

The Peer Support Program offers an inclusive leadership model. The program is led by pairs of Year 6 students in small groups, offering leadership opportunities to all students, including those who may not be identified by others as natural leaders.

Students take this sense of leadership into their everyday lives, learning that they can have influence and create positive change.



Teacher Leeann Harde, who implemented the Peer Support Program in 2022, said:

“The seniors that we were concerned about leading stepped up and, once confident, embraced the opportunity to lead, and you could see their confidence increasing each week. These were the students that would never have volunteered for any other leadership jobs in the school.”



# SUPPORT STUDENTS THROUGH CHANGE

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Transition and change are unavoidable aspects of life, brought about by life stages, experiences, unforeseen circumstances or choices.

For example, we've all had to adapt to life amid a global pandemic for the past few years. Many students also experience disruption to their usual lives because of changes at home, such as divorce or moving to a new house.

Uncertain times and new experiences evoke a range of responses, from excitement and curiosity to concern and anxiety.

## **How can we lessen the potential negative impacts of transition experiences?**

Research has found the key skills and protective factors that are particularly valuable in this time include:

- Positive relationships
- Self-awareness
- A sense of agency
- Social skills
- Self-management skills
- Helpful coping skills

Schools can help students develop these skills. Managing change and transition effectively can have a positive impact on a student's personal development.

There are two resources available from Peer Support Australia to support students effectively manage change and transition: *Supporting Change* and *Great Transitions*.



It is comforting to know that the feelings we experience in times of change are normal and experienced by others too.

# SOME CHILDREN NEED ADDITIONAL SUPPORT THROUGH TRANSITION



Transition at school can be challenging for some students, from starting a new grade to moving between activities in the classroom.

We have seen some excellent approaches to supporting children transition throughout their day. Some simple but highly effective approaches include:

- Using a visual schedule so students know what to expect across the day.
- Giving a warning when an activity is about to finish.
- Teachers meeting select students in the morning to help them transition from home to school.
- Having a play plan for children who struggle socially in the playground.
- Use social stories to communicate information that is potentially stressful, such as catching the bus to and from school.



# FOCUS ON TEACHER WELLBEING TOO

Being a teacher comes with many challenges. It's important to prioritise your mental health and wellbeing.

Across Australia, teachers are reporting higher levels of stress, and, according to a research study out of Monash University, 59% of teachers say they want to leave the profession altogether.

### **Make self-care a priority.**

This means eating well, taking time out, doing things you enjoy, and making time for exercise and relaxation.

### **Identify your support system**

Connect with friends and loved ones who can support you, from providing a listening ear to sharing a meal after a long day.

### **Set firm boundaries**

Teachers have a reputation for being available at all hours of the day. Setting boundaries with students, parents and colleagues to set expectations about when you are and are not available does not mean you care any less.

### **Take time to celebrate the positive moments**

It's easy to get bogged down by difficult situations at school. It's vital to take time to celebrate the 'wins,' or positive moments.

Read more about [how to boost teacher wellbeing](#) on our website.

"Remember the oxygen mask principle – we need to take care of ourselves to be able to support our children's wellbeing. Children develop the skills to self-regulate – that is, they learn to understand and manage their own emotions – when supported through co-regulation with adults. We can only do that when we are taking care of our own wellbeing."

Dr Nicole Brunker  
University of Sydney



# USE YOUR STUDENT WELLBEING BOOST TO EMBED A CULTURE OF PEER SUPPORT

The Student Wellbeing Boost means that every school in Australia has one-off federal government funding to put towards student wellbeing initiatives, like Peer Support.

The Peer Support Program involves senior students being trained as Peer Leaders, and leading small groups of younger students in weekly structured sessions.

Our student-led program that is backed by research and endorsed by state education departments.

But Peer Support is more than just a program: it's a whole-of-school approach to mental health and wellbeing. It's embedding a school culture that puts relationships at the core of everything. It's embracing a wellbeing strategy that is universal, strengths-based, preventative, and holistic.

Participating in the program equips kids and young people with the skills and tools to build strong relationships and navigate life with a positive mindset.

## **Investment**

The cost to introduce the program at your school is **\$1,100 (incl GST)**. This includes online training for your Peer Support Coordinator, online access to the resources to run the program, and a 12-month licence to use the Peer Support resources.

The program is designed to be run with your students every year, and once your school joins, you pay an ongoing renewal fee (currently \$275 incl GST) to license the materials and access any support needed.



Implementing and running the Peer Support Program is simple. Our training model builds capacity for your school to own and deliver the program.



# Join a Peer Support workshop

The teacher who is responsible for the Peer Support Program at your school needs to attend a workshop to become an accredited Peer Support Coordinator. We recommend the face-to-face workshop for new coordinators, which includes time for planning, group activities, and one-on-one input from our facilitator. We also encourage schools to train two or more staff members.

[Register Now!](#)

## Term 1 & 2 face-to-face workshops

Our one-day training runs from 9:00am to 4:00pm local time.

Date	Where
8 February 2024	Sydney CBD
29 February 2024	Melbourne (VIC)
27 March 2024	Sydney CBD
3 April 2024	Newcastle (NSW)
10 April 2024	North Ryde (NSW)
2 May 2024	Adelaide CBD
15 May 2024	Perth CBD
22 May 2024	Gymea (NSW)
29 May 2024	Darwin CBD
30 May 2024	Melbourne (VIC)
6 June 2024	Brisbane (QLD)
12 June 2024	Ballina (NSW)
18 June 2024	Sydney CBD
20 June 2024	Canberra (ACT)

## We also offer online workshops

You can join our two-hour online workshop, which is an abridged version of the one-day training. This accredits teachers as Peer Support Coordinators, but excludes time for planning and one-on-one advice from our facilitator. Check our website for details.

# Find out more about the Peer Support Program and how it can help your students thrive.

Contact Peer Support Australia to find out more.

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