



A GUIDE TO BUILDING MENTAL
WELLBEING OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH
FOR TEACHERS, COUNSELLORS AND YOUTH WORKERS
.....
6-17 YEAR OLDS



Introduction

A positive mind is important for children and youth to lead a healthy and fulfilling life. This guide will help you strengthen children and youth's mental wellbeing with activities aimed to equip them with important life skills such as taking initiative, staying attentive, being organised, planning and having self-awareness.

From 2011 to 2012, the Health Promotion Board carried out a study in Singapore to determine the factors contributing to the mental wellbeing of our children and youth.

We discovered that for children aged between 6 to 12 years old, building on the domains of Positive Functioning, Social Intelligence, and Emotional Intelligence could better equip them to cope with challenges and achieve positive outcomes in life. These three domains similarly emerged for youth aged between 13 to 17 years old, along with a fourth domain – Asian Self-esteem. To help teachers and counsellors better understand and build on the strengths of their students, two separate scales were developed to assess the mental wellbeing of children and youth. To access the scale for children, you may visit the **Colours of the Mind** online portal at coloursofthemind.sg. Similarly for youth, you may visit the **Find your Inner Awesome** portal at www.findyourinnerawesome.sg.

As teachers, counsellors and youth workers, you will find that the mental wellbeing scale and domains complement the Ministry of Education's Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) framework. This tool can be used to build the social emotional competencies, and increase frequency of behaviours that would contribute to the overall mental wellbeing of children and youth. For lessons on building mental wellbeing, please refer to the HPB's Mind Your Mind Curriculum.

In this guide, we have provided activities and tips that you may use to build on the different mental wellbeing domains for children and youth. We hope that this will enrich the strategies that you may have already implemented. You may choose to use the suggested tips and activities in different settings, whether it is in a group or one-on-one, and modify as you see fit. You may also wish to use the information in your interaction with parents and families, in order to work together to build the mental wellbeing of children and youth.

Foreword

It gives me great pleasure to write this Foreword to recommend to you an excellent reading and teaching/educational guidebook prepared by colleagues at the Youth Health Division of Singapore Health Promotion Board.

Colours of the Mind (COM) was prepared to help parents, teachers and counsellors to work with children and youth to build mental wellbeing. COM was designed on the basis of cutting edge research in children and youth mental wellbeing – to thrive – living a successful life. It blends the most current understanding of healthy human development and the emphasis on the social cultural context where traditional values and modern technology prevail.

Most of us want our children and youth to achieve and be happy. Research in mental wellbeing and brain sciences found that achievement and happiness actually go hand in hand. To achieve both, one needs a set of life skills. COM outlined these life skills to facilitate development of achievement and happiness.

A great challenge to Asian students is the tension between autonomy and interdependence. To develop positive mental wellbeing, children and youth need to actively experience it themselves. You can be a facilitator in the child's development. Acceptance of the child, non-judgmental feedback and positive encouragement are most effective in the development of positive mental wellbeing.

Negative remarks, rejections and personal criticism are least effective in the child's development of positive mental wellbeing. We aim to not only teach a set of life skills but also help the child develop self-acceptance, the habit of self-development and the autonomy to make independent decisions to live life with interdependence.

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BEGIN WITH YOURSELF



Build your own mental wellbeing

Mental wellbeing is not only important for children and youth, but also for you. Taking good care of yourself helps you to better care for others' wellbeing.

What is Mental Wellbeing for adults?

In the first of a kind study completed by the Health Promotion Board in 2010, it was found that Singaporeans (adults) understand mental wellbeing to be related to five dimensions or areas: self-esteem, resilience, cognitive efficacy, social intelligence and emotional intelligence. To find out how you are faring, and the various ways you can build your mental wellbeing, simply visit hpb.gov.sg/mentalwellbeing/scale.

Here are some quick ways you can care for yourself:

- Set aside at least 10 minutes for yourself every day to do something you enjoy.
- Recognise your limitations, especially when the person you are helping has complex issues that are beyond your scope of expertise.
- Have regular chats or participate in group activities with friends.
- Evaluate yourself regularly to recognise and acknowledge your thoughts, feelings and attitudes.
- Do some deep-breathing exercises when you feel stressed. Take deep breaths for a minute, focusing on your diaphragm. Feel your belly rise when you inhale and fall when you exhale. Repeat until you feel relaxed.
- Your mind and body deserves a good rest. Aim for around 6 – 8 hours of sleep each day.
- Adopt a healthy diet and eat regular meals. Munch on fruits if you need a snack. Your body needs a constant supply of energy to allow you to care for others.
- Incorporate physical activity into your daily routine. For example, take the stairs whenever you can or do some stretches every morning when you wake up.

Just a few minutes of relaxing or doing something you enjoy can make a big difference. Give it a try and find out what works for you.



UNDERSTANDING THE MENTAL WELLBEING OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH

What contributes to mental wellbeing of children and youth in Singapore

Research in Singapore has shown that mental wellbeing of children and youth consists of:

Positive Functioning – “I can solve problems!”

Children and youth with high positive functioning value themselves, are able to learn well, make good decisions, and adapt to different situations in school and at home.

Social Intelligence – “I get along with people!”

A socially intelligent child or youth is able to build and maintain good relationships with family and friends. He/she frequently shares emotions with others, while also providing a listening ear. He/she is able to cooperate when working with others and seeks advice when making major decisions.

Emotional Intelligence – “I know my feelings!”

An emotionally intelligent child or youth has mastery over his/her feelings in different situations. He/she is able to maintain a positive attitude and is able to manage emotions in difficult times. He/she is also able to express, share and discuss emotions with others.

Asian Self-esteem – “I value myself!”

This is an additional domain for youth aged 13 to 17 years old. Those with high Asian self-esteem are able to love and respect themselves. They accept their strengths and weaknesses and are comfortable as they are. They see themselves as someone useful to those around them and contributors to the community.

Building on these mental wellbeing domains increases the protective factors in children and youth as they go through life’s ups and downs.





Building protective factors in children and youth

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), mental health is a state of emotional and social wellbeing in which the individual realises his/her own abilities, copes with the normal stresses of life, works productively, and is able to make a contribution to the community¹.

Protective factors contribute to an individual's capacity to cope with challenges in life, thereby reducing the risk of mental health problems. This is especially important to children and youth as they face physical, psychological, and emotional changes which may come in the form of risk factors during their development into adulthood.

Risk factors increase the likelihood of developing a mental illness. As risk factors accumulate, more protective factors are needed to compensate for them.

1. Adolescent Health and Development. A WHO Regional Framework 2001-2004. Regional Office for the Western Pacific, WHO.

Examples of protective and risk factors commonly found in children and youth

Types of factors	Protective factors	Risk factors
Individual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good level of physical activity • Good physical health • Good intellectual capacity • Good life skills: problem-solving skills, social skills, communication skills, willingness to seek help • Good social emotional development • Easy-going temperament • Good sense of independence • Good sense of self-efficacy/ internal locus of control • Good self-esteem/self-worth/ self-confidence • Good sense of personal competence • Resilience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Genetic (e.g. family history of mental illness) • Personality and temperament (e.g. anxious disposition) • Adverse early childhood experiences or chronic trauma (e.g. physical, emotional and sexual abuse, neglect, domestic violence and bullying) • Experience of losses (e.g. parent, family member, or close friend)
Family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supportive family • Good family support for school success • Good relationship with parents • Parents with good emotional stability • Stable financial situation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Divorce • Inconsistent care-giving in the family • Poor family discipline • Death of a family member
School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supportive teachers • Positive relationships with peers/fitting in at school • Positive school experience • Involvement in school-based activities • Feeling cared for and respected by peers and teachers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pressure from exams and school placement • Poor academic performance • Problems with classmates and schoolmates (e.g. bullying, isolation) • Inadequate/inappropriate provision of education
Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good social support • Good social inclusion • Economic stability of neighbourhood • Good access to health care and recreation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Substance abuse • Poverty • Crime • Lack of a sense of belonging



Mental Wellbeing Domains and Social Emotional Learning frameworks in schools

The Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) framework outlines competencies that students require to support their social and emotional health, which is important for effective learning in schools. As the mental wellbeing scale provides the means to assess the state of mental wellbeing of children and youth in all settings, it provides an indication of the developmental level of the social-emotional competencies. Stakeholders in school and community settings can use information gleaned from the scale to build the strengths of children and youth.

The results from the mental wellbeing study support the need to extend these life skills beyond the school setting to the home and the community. Stakeholders and students need to be aware of the building blocks that would help to buffer children and youth against the developmental challenges as they grow into adulthood.

STRENGTHENING AND SUPPORTING THE MENTAL WELLBEING OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH



Here are some strategies and activities to try out. Feel free to modify them based on the needs of your students.

Positive Functioning – “I can solve problems!”

Proposed strategies	Suggested activities
Inculcate time management skills	<p>Help students to identify the common ‘time-wasters’ in their weekly schedule. ‘Time-wasters’ are activities where the actual time spent is more than their ideal time spent. Some examples include cutting down on time spent watching TV and surfing the internet.</p> <p>Help students to categorise their tasks into these four groups and plan what they need to do in this order of priority:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Important and urgent 2) Not important but urgent 3) Not urgent but important 4) Not important and not urgent
Inculcate problem solving skills	<p>Help students to practise exploring and evaluating possible solutions for different problems.</p> <p>Explain that just like cars on the road, it is good to first stop and slow down when facing a problem. Using the analogy of a traffic light, share the following simple steps:</p> <p>STOP - Take a deep breath and relax.</p> <p>SLOW DOWN - Identify the problem. Think about and write down possible ways to solve this problem.</p> <p>GO - Explore and evaluate the possible solutions and determine the best method to solve the problem.</p> <p>Such an approach can help students avoid making impulsive decisions, and help them make more rational and well thought-out decisions in future.</p>
Help students identify strategies for effective decision-making	<p>Select a known character from a popular story or movie who overcame tough times before achieving a goal. Ask students to create a list of positive characteristics displayed by that character (e.g. courage, perseverance, patience etc).</p> <p>Discuss how decisions were made by the character, and point out useful strategies along the way (e.g. making a list of options, information gathering, asking people for an alternative point of view). Guide students to discuss whether decisions made helped achieve the desired outcomes.</p>

Social Intelligence – “I get along with people!”

Proposed strategies	Suggested activities
Provide opportunities for practicing social skills	<p>Get students to role-play by providing them with ‘social scripts’ for particular scenarios e.g. how to request to join a playgroup politely, and how to compliment friends.</p> <p>Set up a social skills project. Ask students to choose one social skill they want to work on for the week (e.g. cooperation, turn-taking, sharing). Ask them to be on a look out for times when others show that skill, complimenting them when they do so. They may then evaluate themselves on a scale of 1 – 10 at different points in the week. Plan a simple celebration at the end of the week to congratulate students on their progress.</p>
Promote cooperation and teamwork	<p>Plan team games for fun and experiential learning. Here are some suggestions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Human Knot In a circle, students are to cross their hands out in front of them and grab hold of someone else’s hands. Once everyone’s hands are held, without letting go, the team starts to untangle themselves. The first team to get back to a circle shape wins. Egg Drop Each team is to design and construct a structure that protects a raw egg from a 2-storey drop. The same materials (e.g. sponge, string) are to be provided for each team. Teams win if their eggs remain unbroken after the drop. <p>After each game, debrief students on the following points:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What was helpful for the team? • If they could do it again, what would they change to achieve a better outcome? <p>Summarise the skills that were helpful for the team and give examples of how these skills may be helpful in group settings.</p>
Build empathy by helping students understand others’ perspectives	<p>Describe and discuss with your students scenarios where people have different, but equally valid points of view. You may make it more engaging by using scenarios from magazines, newspaper articles, etc. An example would be a baseball batsman who strikes out and the pitcher who struck him out. The batter feels sad, but the pitcher for the other team feels happy. For each scenario, ask students to write down how each person feels. This exercise helps students understand that each person’s individual experiences can affect how they interpret a situation.</p>

Emotional Intelligence – “I know my feelings”

Proposed strategies	Suggested activities										
Equip students with a variety of coping strategies	<p>Encourage students to bring an item from home and describe how they use it to de-stress positively and effectively.</p> <p>Explore a variety of helpful coping strategies that can calm a person down in times of frustration or stress. Examples include listening to music, writing in a journal, and watching a comedy.</p> <p>Such a sharing session allows students to realise that their peers use different ways to cope with stress, thus learning a variety of positive coping strategies that can be applied in the future.</p>										
Help students to deal with setbacks, rejections and disappointments	<p>Using stories or video clips, help your students understand that it is common to face setbacks, rejections and disappointments. Explain that it is normal to experience negative emotions such as sadness or anger in such circumstances. Remind them that each disappointing incident does not represent their whole self and life.</p> <p>Instead of dwelling on the negative emotions, encourage students to find the silver lining and learn from setbacks. Here are some guiding questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Is there anything you did that worked well? 2) What can you learn from this? 3) How can you do better next time? 										
Impart positive thinking skills	<p>Ask students to write down some common negative thoughts they have. Help students to reframe their negative thoughts into positive ones, by explaining negative events as temporary, specific and due to external factors. For example:</p> <table border="0"> <thead> <tr> <th style="border-bottom: 1px dotted black;">Negative Thoughts</th> <th style="border-bottom: 1px dotted black;">Positive Thoughts</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>I failed my first Math test.</td> <td>I failed my first Math test.</td> </tr> <tr> <td>I will fail all my Math tests (permanent).</td> <td>If I study harder next time, I can pass my test (temporary).</td> </tr> <tr> <td>I can’t do anything right (pervasive).</td> <td>I am not good in Math, but I’m good in English (specific).</td> </tr> <tr> <td>I failed because I am dumb and good-for-nothing (internal).</td> <td>I failed this time because I did not study hard enough (external).</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Negative Thoughts	Positive Thoughts	I failed my first Math test.	I failed my first Math test.	I will fail all my Math tests (permanent).	If I study harder next time, I can pass my test (temporary).	I can’t do anything right (pervasive).	I am not good in Math, but I’m good in English (specific).	I failed because I am dumb and good-for-nothing (internal).	I failed this time because I did not study hard enough (external).
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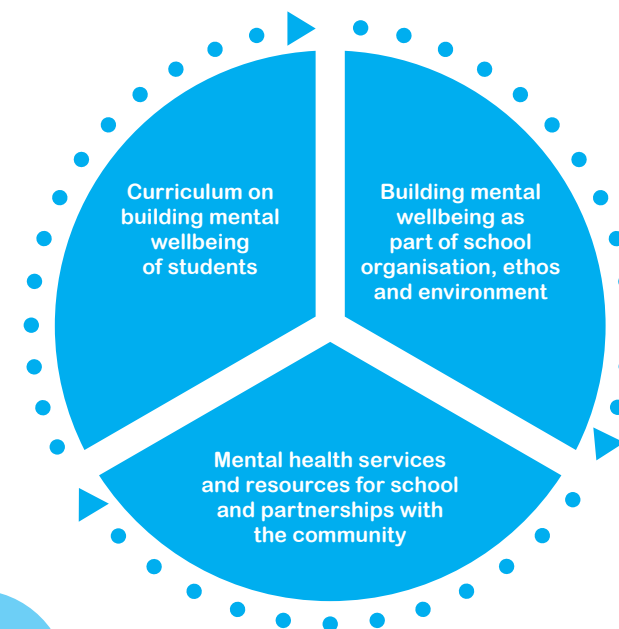
Asian Self-esteem – “I value myself!”

Proposed strategies	Suggested activities
Encourage students to explore and cultivate their personal strengths and talents	<p>At school or community events, provide opportunities for students to teach others a skill they possess (e.g. making origami, playing chapteh or showcasing knowledge of a specific area such as a superheroes series). This inculcates a sense of achievement and confidence in their personal talents.</p> <p>Encourage students to develop their interests and talents. Guide them to avoid using others as their achievement benchmark, but to improve themselves against their own previous achievements. For instance, a runner who has just broken the record should strive to break his new record, rather than becoming complacent from knowing that he is already number one.</p> <p>Encourage students to imagine what positive traits their 'ideal self' would have. Examples include generosity, the ability to swim fast, patience, etc. Discuss ways to develop these traits and encourage students to try them.</p>
Create opportunities for students to help others	Get students involved in helping their community. Encourage them to volunteer for charities or voluntary welfare organisations. Assign them mentoring roles in school (e.g. seniors being buddies to the juniors). You may even allow them to help you in your own tasks. Such opportunities allow for positive feedback and appreciation from others, and help students realise that they can make a difference to others.
Promote positive body image	<p>Challenge stereotypes of beauty presented in the media. Select appropriate videos which seek to debunk perception of beauty or popular songs that focus on personal strengths for discussion. Help students be aware that societal ideals of body shape are constantly changing, thus there is no true perfect and best body shape. People naturally come in all shapes and sizes and everyone is beautiful in their own ways.</p> <p>Provide students with opportunities to engage in activities that allow them to appreciate their talents and abilities rather than appearance. Examples include art, debating, and playing badminton.</p>

Building a positive environment for children and youth

In the quest to build the mental wellbeing of children and youth, it is imperative to create a safe and supportive school or community environment that promotes holistic development and learning. The **Championing Efforts Resulting in Improved School Health (CHERISH)** framework provides an overview of how you can establish a health-promoting environment through:

- 1) **Curriculum**
 - Explicit teaching of social and emotional competencies and mental health education
- 2) **School organisation, ethos and environment**
 - Building a culture of care in the school
- 3) **Services and community engagement**
 - Provision of support to students in school and from external professionals and agencies



For more information about CHERISH, please visit www.hpb.gov.sg/HOPPortal/programmes/article/3128

▶ IS YOUR CHILD/YOUTH IN DISTRESS?



Detect distress early

As we aspire to build the mental wellbeing of children and youth, there can be times when challenges may be too much for them. Being able to identify early warning signs of distress can prevent situations from getting worse. As a teacher, counsellor or youth worker, understanding the child's personality, common habits and behaviour will help you look out for warning signs of distress.

Signs of distress:

Abrupt Changes

- Behaviour, moods and/or personality
- Sleeping and/or eating habits
- Likes and/or dislikes

Academic Disengagement

- Unexplained and repeated absence or truancy
- Inattentiveness or unusually disruptive behaviour
- Unexpected deterioration in academic performance or underachieving

Anguished Behaviour

- Ideas and themes of death, suicide or self-harm (statements that life is not worth living)
- Feelings of hopelessness, helplessness and worthlessness, and/or perceived loss of control
- Expressions of worry, anxiety and/or fear

Avoidant Behaviour

- Becoming withdrawn
- Avoiding others
- Having a lack of social interactions

Negative Affect

- Mood swings
- Occasional emotional outbursts

Neglect of Appearance

- Unkempt appearance
- Poor hygiene

Substance Abuse

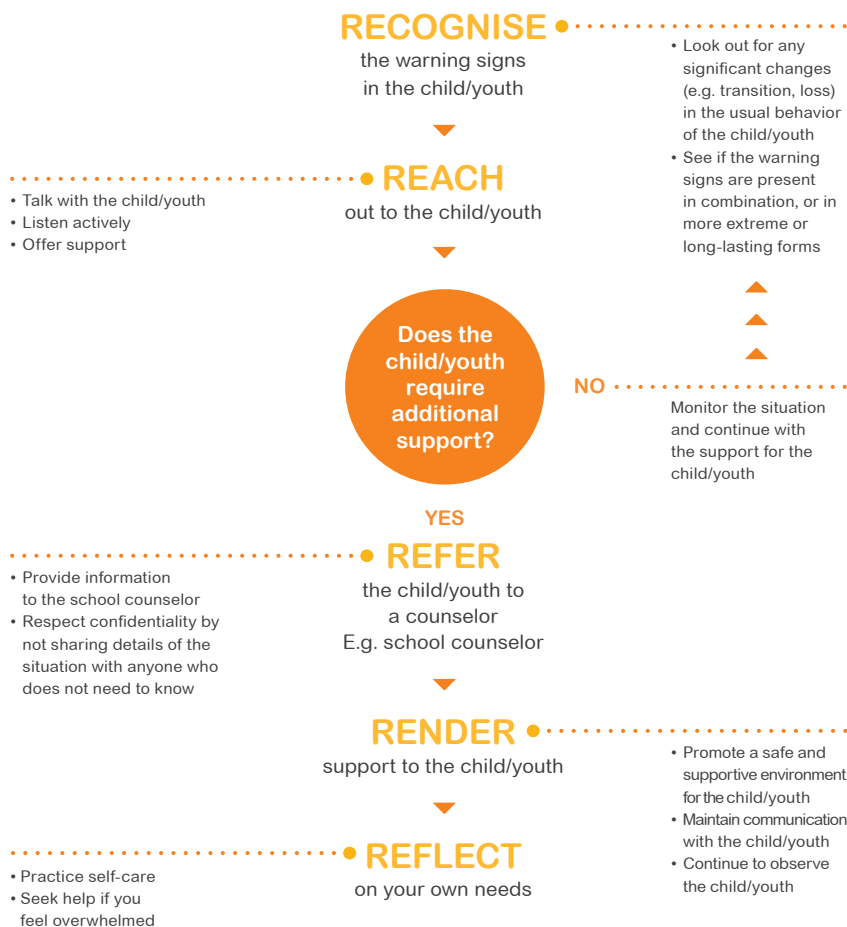
- Engage in smoking and/or drinking
- Drug abuse

If these signs are present in combination, or in more extreme or long-lasting forms, it may be an indication that the child/youth is experiencing significant social or emotional distress with potential for long-term consequences.

Early intervention at this point may be effective in reducing the risk of outcomes such as delinquent behaviour, academic failure, isolation from friends or family, and/or substance abuse.

Get the right help

The RESPONSE flowchart serves as a guide when you become concerned that the child/youth may possibly be experiencing distress. The 5Rs – Recognise, Reach, Refer, Render and Reflect – highlight the possible actions that you can take.



Resources and helplines

Agency	Brief Programme Description	Hotline/Contact
Agape Counselling & Training Centre	Counselling for individuals or families on emotional, interpersonal, sexual and parent-child relationships	6842 2922
Child Guidance Clinic, Institute of Mental Health	Any child or youth (up to the age of 19) with significant or severe emotional and behavioural problems	6389 2000 6389 2222 (24 hrs)
Counselling and Care Centre	Anyone with psychological and behavioural issues	6536 6366
Mount Elizabeth Behavioural Health	Anyone with psychological, psychiatric, and behavioural issues	1800 738 9595 (24 hrs)
Samaritans of Singapore (SOS)	Anyone in crisis or suicidal	1800 221 4444 (24 hrs)
Singapore Association for Mental Health Helpline	Anyone with psychological, behavioural, medical and psychiatric issues	1800 283 7019 Mon-Fri: 9:00am-6:00pm
WINGS Counselling Centre	Any child or youth with psychological, behavioural, medical, and psychiatric issues	6383 5745 Mon-Thurs: 8:30am-5:30pm
Tinkle Friend (Singapore Children's Society)	For children aged 7-12 who need someone to chat with	1800 274 4788 Mon-Fri: 9:30am-11:30am and 2:30pm-5:00pm
Touchline (TOUCH Youth Services)	For youth aged 12-19 who need someone to talk to	1800 337 2252 Mon-Sat: 10:00am-10:00pm
Audible Hearts (Supported by HBP)	An anonymous online peer support network by youth for youth	audiblehearts.yah.sg
REACH	A one-stop centre for mental health related matters for children and youth	reachforstudents.com

Jointly produced by:



The image features a light brown wood-grain texture as a background. It is framed by four registration marks, one in each corner, consisting of a small horizontal line and a vertical line meeting at a point.

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