



I would like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to provide evidence on the important topic of mental health in schools.

About Barnardos

Barnardos provides frontline services to children and their families who have been affected by traumatic life situations such as parental mental health challenges, neglect, separation, bereavement and parental addiction.

Our work combats social, educational and economic disadvantage, minimising the negative impact these have on children's lives. We support children and families to build their resilience and to meet children's social, emotional, behavioural, educational and physical needs.

Mental health and young people

We deliver our services in the family home, in our centres and in schools. For the purposes of this presentation I am going to concentrate on our work in schools.

1. National Wellbeing Programme

Barnardos has successfully piloted a National Wellbeing programme in schools in Dublin 15 & 24, Tipperary South, Limerick and Thurles to over 500 children.

The Programme is trauma-informed, supporting the positive mental health and well-being of children aged 4 to 18 years. It recognises the need to prevent and treat toxic stress in vulnerable populations and communities. The programme focuses on increasing children's awareness of the connection between their bodies and minds, and strengthening coping skills and stress relieving mechanisms.

An evaluation carried out this year found that participation in the programme improved children's emotional regulation; they demonstrated better emotional self-awareness and empathy; and developed stress management and coping skills.

As one 5th class boy said: "I think it was really helpful. If someone is stressed they might not know what to do, but the programme can help them. I did some of the breathing we'd learned and that helped me to stay calm"

The programme also helped teachers deal with classroom anxiety and support children to build coping mechanisms. Teachers reported that they gained new skills to support emotional regulation and wellbeing in their classrooms as well as addressing student worries and challenges. One teacher commented:

"Sessions provided an opportunity to talk to children who we knew were carrying huge burdens. That was good because sometimes children don't open up and it needed a program to help us with that"

2. Roots of Empathy

Barnardos has been providing Roots of Empathy since 2010. Over 12,000 children have received the programme to date, with 2,280 in 120 schools receiving it this academic year. The programme is suited to primary school children of all ages. It aligns with the SPHE curriculum, offering an experiential learning environment where a baby is the “teacher”.

It focuses on raising children’s levels of empathy which is vital to the development of social and emotional skills, and includes the ability to recognise, manage, and express feelings - which is integral to regulating our emotions. Children who can regulate their emotions are less likely to suffer from childhood psychological disorders, including anxiety and depression.

It is an evidence-based programme, which has undergone numerous rigorous international evaluations. Results demonstrate that the programme increases empathy, prosocial behaviour, social/emotional competence and significantly reduces aggression.

3. Barnardos Social and Emotional Skills Training Targeted Programme

Our third school based programme is our Social & Emotional Skills Training Programme. It is a targeted programme for 9-12 year old primary school children whose emotional wellbeing is impaired as a result of having poor relationships with their peers.

A child with gaps in their social skills may experience social isolation which may undermine their social confidence and self-esteem. Research shows that children who are rejected by peers often feel lonely and depressed, and are more likely to leave school early, and to require mental health services in later life.

The programme uses a coaching model to teach children social skills and develop their capacity to recognise and discuss their feelings, and develop positive peer relationships. Sessions include Cooperation and Conversation Skills, Coping and Social Stress and Responsible Decision Making.

An evaluation of the programme in Ireland found that children’s social skills improved over the course of the programme, with an increased capacity to name and talk about their feelings and emotions, greater confidence, sharing with others and cooperative play.

Recommendations

Barnardos recommends that the committee considers the following:

- Further funding and provision of universal and targeted early intervention programmes in schools focused on developing children’s social and emotional skills and overall wellbeing.
- Funding for school based programmes should be supported/complemented with local community services, such as Family Support and parenting support services which can provide holistic supports for both children and parents – enhancing parenting capacity to support positive mental health for their children.
- Improving awareness around trauma informed care in schools and building referral pathways to local trauma informed services.

Finally, it is vital that any developments regarding mental health support services within schools should include the active participation of children and parents in terms of what is helpful for them.