

# Mental Health Concerns of Elementary School Children

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**Abstract** *The study attempts to locate the mental health concerns of children within their lived realities and everyday experiences as they unfold in the contexts of family life, school and society. It revisits the factors at home and school which impact mental health from the perspective of children and teachers. It also explores the role of school in promoting and maintaining the mental health of students. The mental health concerns of school children were identified through focus group discussions and interviews. The findings revealed several that a significant number of mental health concerns of children can be located and understood in the specific contexts of the school in which they study and their homes. Most teachers were found to be engaging in counselling functions.*

**Keywords.** Mental health, Elementary school children, Psychological well being

## Focus of the Study

Schools play an important role through engaging with a large segment of population and preparing them for future roles in society. Thus, the acknowledgement that everyday mental health concerns need to be addressed to prevent serious mental illnesses later in life, has also led to the recognition that schools must be proactive in their engagement with students.

The present study thus attempts to locate the mental health concerns of children within their lived realities and everyday experiences which are located in family life, school and society. Each of these spheres is characterised by conflicts and dilemmas within which they live. The presence of someone with whom they can share their concerns, issues, anxieties, stressors and dilemmas is likely to help them maintain positive mental health. The study has attempted to relook at and rediscover these factors from the perspective of children and teachers and also see how school can help children to maintain their mental health.

A number of articles in magazines and newspaper reports have highlighted the concerns of children, which include: examination stress, increasing parental expectations, parental conflicts, adjustment problems such as change of school

from Hindi to English medium, depression and suicidal problems, emotional neglect and physical abuse, dilemmas regarding choice of career, peer pressure, queries perplexing them such as physiological changes and issues pertaining to sexuality, lack of communication between parents and children which manifests itself through stress and the “no-one understands me” syndrome and imitation of the role models that they see in media which lead to the inculcation of negative traits such as bullying and authoritarianism. (Vaidyanathan, 2012)

The context in which children grow has a significant influence on their mental health. The home and school are important contexts in the lives of children and thus need to be studied and understood. In the present study, it is the role of the school that is focussed upon.

## Role of School in Fostering Mental Health of Children

Traditionally mental health has been looked at from an illness perspective which focuses on the cure dimension of mental health rather than its prevention, promotion and conservation. The implicit assumption in the illness perspective is that it locates the problem in the individual. Recent researches have however changed the negative



illness conception to bring in a more positive, realistic conception which includes the crucial dimension of 'health' in it. This conception makes an effort to view children in the context of their environment, which includes the socio-cultural milieu in which they live. It urges schools to also view children from the same perspective and recognise the fact the children too could have mental health concerns which can be prevented from becoming clinical concerns by use of promotional and preventive measures by the school. Ranganathan (2012) writes that mental health services in school cannot be derived from what happens in clinical practice. Rather, they have to be based on a set of needs, assumptions, and ideas which emerge from the practices in education, particularly schooling. Schools' role in mental health should be promotional, preventive, conservative and curative and unlike the clinical approach where the main emphasis is on curative aspects. So schools need to look at children as active beings who are affected by the unique contexts in which they live and accept that their mental health is also influenced by these contexts.

It is in this backdrop that the present study attempts to focus on the following objectives:

- ◆ To identify the mental health concerns of elementary school children.
- ◆ To explore the influence of teacher's behaviour and peer relations on the mental health of elementary school children.
- ◆ To find out the views and perceptions of teachers and the principal about the mental health of children.
- ◆ To examine the interface between children's schrests.

### Method

The study was undertaken in an elementary school in Delhi. The participants were children in the age group 11-14 years covering three grades - six, seven and eight, teachers associated with these children and the Principal of the school. Observation of the classes, focussed group discussions with the children of these classes and interviews with the teachers were undertaken as

the research strategies. The aim of the observations was to see the place of students in the teaching-learning process and identify the mental health concerns if any, that would emerge. Children were observed in their classes, the playground and during the lunch break. Subsequently, focus group discussions were carried out with each of the three classes, comprising of 30-40 students per class. The themes covered in the FGD were: Favourite Teacher, Preference for school or home, Reasons for fights with friends, Most boring and interesting days of the week, and Best and Worst Things about School.

Based on the data collected from the FGD, semi structured theme based interviews were conducted with three children from each class to get more detailed insights. The interviews also included a writing task that focused on tapping their inner world of dreams and fantasies and unexpressed feelings and emotions. The themes covered in the interview were: Teacher-student relationships, Family relationships including parents and siblings, Peer relations, and Personal interests.

To gain a more holistic understanding of the mental health concerns of children and how the school addresses them, the class teachers of the three classes and the principal of the school were also interviewed using a semi-formal interview schedule. The themes that were covered in the interview were: Mental health concerns of children of class 6, 7 and 8, How teachers address these concerns, Influence of peer relations on children's mental health; Challenges faced in addressing children's concerns; and What they visualise the role of the school to be.

### Discussion

#### Mental Health Concerns of Elementary School Children

A number of factors that affect the mental well-being of elementary school learners emerged in the study. These include **issues related to studies**, such as incomprehension of a subject, problems in memorising subject content, expectation of parents regarding performance in tests; **issues related to home**, such as unsupportive atmosphere and/or



economic conditions at home for studying, harsh behaviour of parents, including violence; **relationship with siblings**, such as a difficult relationship with a younger sibling who gets more attention; and **peer relations at school and in the neighbourhood**, such as name calling, bullying, difference of opinion with friends, particularly during games.

The influence of these factors was visible in students in many ways. Non comprehension of a subject and problem of retrieving what has been learnt often led to associating feelings of fear with the teacher and developing a dislike for the subject. It also led to negative associations. For instance, many students reported that if they had seen a teacher scold someone for not being able to recall content in class, the child developed an unfavourable attitude towards the teacher, even though the child himself/herself may never have been scolded by that teacher.

Many students' developed a fear of the Parent Teacher Meeting that often arose out of not meeting their parents' expectations in academics. Most parents expected their children to be good in studies and well behaved in class. When teachers shared the performance of children with their parents, parents often resorted to scolding and even beating the children at home. Most students also shared that they like the teachers' friendly and non-discriminatory attitude towards them, and that teachers are concerned about them. The most frequently reported reason for liking teachers was that they do not scold or complain about them. This shows that a majority of the teachers' complaints are also attempts at suggesting improvements to the students.

The manifestation of home related issues such as an unsupportive atmosphere and/or conditions at home for studying was evident in the difficulties that children faced in completing their home tasks. These difficulties showed up behaviourally in some of them as being irregular in studies and less participative in class. Some children tended to lose concentration and became disinterested in classes. Some used to hit other children and become verbally abusive.

The next factor which is relationship with siblings is also related to the behaviour of parents. Paying more attention to one of the children leads the other to feel ignored and the child often develops negative feelings towards his/her sibling. As a result, the child may engage in attention seeking behaviour. The influence is generally negative where the child goes astray and develops wrong habits. This was also reported by teachers in the case of students they had come across in earlier batches.

While most students reported having several friends, all of them also reported fighting with friends and feeling troubled by it. Some of the common causes of fights included name calling, teasing, passing unnecessary comments, and bullying. Students also reported dislike for particular students in class who used abusive language or were rude in their behaviour.

#### **Influence of Teacher's Behaviour and Peer Relations on Mental Health**

The children were more comfortable with teachers who were nice, friendly, and understanding. The caring attitude and behaviour of their teachers made them feel more confident about themselves. They found teachers to be easily approachable. These aspects also made them like school, studies and look forward to coming to school, interacting with their teachers and learning new things. In the class, they also shared that they feel free to voice and share their concerns as they feel that their teachers would hear them out and their concerns would be addressed. They also felt confident about their learning abilities and were optimistic about the transient problems that they face.

On the other hand, if a student had witnessed a teacher scolding any student, then it created a fear in the mind of the child. The children also tended to associate the behaviour of the teacher with the subject that she taught. Thus, children started liking a subject that their favourite teacher taught and disliking a subject where they found the teacher's attitude unfavourable and vice versa. Most children appreciated a balanced, non-discriminatory attitude of teachers.



In terms of peer relations, the interaction with the children and teachers revealed that children had both good and bad relations with their peers. Good peer relations were most evident in their preference for spending time in the school, for it allowed them space to play, talk, study and eat with their friends. Friends were seen as a source of positivity and happiness in life as, persons to joke with and have fun and ease out their tension and worries through sharing their inner most feelings. Students also reported petty fights with their peers that they resolved on their own.

The negative form of peer relations became evident in the dislike that a few children expressed for few of their classmates. In specific cases, a child remained isolated in class because of few friends. Teachers also reported incidents in which specific children were ignored by their classmates.

Other forms of negative influences that teachers reported were in the form of bunking classes, not paying attention to studies and engaging in socially unacceptable behaviour. Positive influences included making children better performers in academics and encouraging them to take interest in learning. Teachers' interventions in the form of organising group discussions and also peer learning situations, such as a 'buddy system', played a significant role in improving peer relations.

The principal made a very significant point that if peer relations in class were good, then learners tended to cooperate a lot with each other.

### **Perceptions of School Teachers and the Principal on Mental Health**

The various teachers were seen to conceptualise mental health differently. One of the teachers viewed it in the context of learning and studies and another as equilibrium between self-discipline and socially accepted behaviour. Anger and aggression among children was a common area of concern identified by all the teachers. The root cause of it was identified by them as exposure to aggression shown by parents at home and observed by children in the larger society.

All of them were of the view and sensitive to the

fact that students' socio-economic-cultural and familial background were quite diverse and unique and it was in this background that they made the attempt to understand and locate the mental health concerns of students.

The teachers also felt that there was lack of time, support and resources to address the concerns of children as the focus in school largely remained on syllabus completion. Some of them also felt that they were not trained in addressing the mental health concerns of children.

They also recognised emerging adolescent issues as a significant area of concern for elementary level learners. A special feature of the school is Adolescence Education which the principal of the school had started. Another programme which was conducted in the school was the Girls Guidance Programme which followed as a result of some instances of heterosexual relationships that developed among students. Teachers recalled that after the programme children expressed their concerns which they were otherwise hesitant in expressing.

Teachers felt that the most effective strategy in addressing students' concerns is talking to them. Scolding and hitting were not preferred. However in difficult situations teachers found themselves in a dilemma about the strategy to be used. They also felt that the strategies to be used vary according to the age of the learners.

The principal emphasised the fact that they enable learners to reason for themselves and choose what is right and what is wrong, rather than using punitive measures.

Another strategy which was emphasised by most teachers was to build up a bond between the parent and child. Constant communication with parents is maintained. Teachers intervene in parent child relationships and even visit their homes when deemed necessary.

Teachers were also of the view that teachers' attitude should be friendly and supportive. They should not view the child as only a student but as one of their own children.





One of the teachers also felt that the present system does not make any provision to train children to deal with their mental health concerns. Most of them talked about the situation in an all-boys' school being comparatively unhealthy. Also the class size was seen as a hindrance to addressing the mental health concerns in government schools where 60-70 students study in a class. They felt that the school was at an advantage since class sizes are small.

However, they also said that often concerns of most children don't come to forefront and remain unaddressed, particularly because of paucity of time.

### **Interface between School Life Experiences and Needs and Interests of Students**

According to the need structure given by Maslow, until one's physiological needs are not addressed to some extent, other needs will not emerge. One of the teachers also emphasised this and was of the view that it is one of the most important determiners of mental well-being. After this the next need which may be a hindrance for children's well being is the love and belongingness need. Its deficiency was observed in many students. Those who get beaten up at home, those who get neglected in comparison to their siblings and those from dysfunctional families were not able to fulfil these needs. They were often also not able to pay attention in school. When their concerns remain unidentified and teachers also fail to recognise this, their situation becomes worse. If teachers recognise their concerns and satisfy their need through their love and affection, students felt motivated to study and develop positive mental health.

As for children's interests, students of this age group are in a transition phase between the concrete operational and formal operational stage. They like to explore, engage in activities, develop different interest areas and are full of energy and enthusiasm. All students in their responses showed a great liking for sports, computer, music, work experience and other activity periods. Their favourite subject and days of the week that they

found interesting or boring were also related to their interest areas. They wanted more and more periods of the things that they were interested in. They eagerly looked forward to the days which would have those periods. Play is another significant area of interest for school children and hence, many students wished for a bigger play ground in school.

From the above discussion, some implications have been drawn for schools to aid them in fostering students' mental wellbeing. Teachers' attitudes were significant in influencing mental health of students. A friendly, caring, and supportive attitude is the need of the hour. Teachers can benefit from being aware of the background of learners and the school can play a facilitative role in this context. A detailed profile of the students taking admission in the school can be prepared and handed over to the teachers of the respective classes. This will help the teachers to be aware beforehand of what kind of concerns a student might be dealing with. Organisation of discussion slots in the time table can also help in developing teacher-student bonds as well as their learning. Teachers can also play a strong role in building harmonious relationships and strong bonds with parents and children. Working in collaboration with parents can go a long way in ensuring learners' mental wellbeing.

Schools need to emphasise the preventive, promotive, curative and conservative aspects of mental health. They should organize guidance programmes and workshops with students. These would enable students to see for themselves what is right and wrong and check for itself negative peer influences to a large extent. The school principal and teachers must have a positive attitude of belief in students' abilities to make judgments and take decisions. Their role has to thus be facilitative rather than instructional. The system needs to provide time and support services to teachers in the form of counsellors and expert help to maintain children's wellbeing. The school also needs to ensure it fulfils basic infrastructural requisites which cater to children's needs and interests.



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