

Book Review



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*Reviewed by Anna Szabina Szele<sup>1</sup>*

### **The Aspects of Mental Health and Violence in Childhood**

The “*Child and Adolescent Wellbeing and Violence Prevention in Schools*” is an extremely valuable book for educators serving as a guide to the better understanding and promoting well-being and violence prevention both in schools and communities.

In five sections, the reader can obtain significant information about the well-being of children and adolescents, the major challenges of these ages, and the violence prevention possibilities and initiatives in schools [(a) Culture and well-being; (b) Young females and well-being; (c) Bullying, cyberbullying, and student violence; (d) Interventions to promote well-being; and (e) Interventions to promote violence prevention]. By an introductory and commentary chapter, the authors provide a well-structured, clear framework. Following the structure of the book, I will briefly review these sections and chapters:

### **Introduction**

Approximately 20% of children and youth experience mental health problems. Beyond the family, unarguably, the school is one of the strongest socialization forces in the life of the child. In schools, children learn about their history, culture, and acquire the needed knowledge and social competence to become successful adults. Schools play a vital role in the preservation and development of children’s mental health. Sometimes, the educators

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<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Medicine, Department of Pediatrics, University of Debrecen, Debrecen, Hungary, Email address: [szeleanna93@gmail.com](mailto:szeleanna93@gmail.com), ORCID: 0000-0001-8372-4263

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are the first to recognize the first signs of mental difficulties in students – so the primary task is to increase teacher's knowledge about mental disorders and their treatment, to promote mental well-being, and to inform students where they can seek support and use interventions in which both the school and community are involved. The following strategies and initiatives provide an overview of opportunities that schools can contribute to promoting mental well-being and dealing with school violence.

### *Culture and well-being*

This section points out the cultural differences of well-being, the diversity of the concept, and its subjective nature. We can peer into the unique worldview of the Ngarrindjeri nation in South Australia and the disadvantage of indigenous Australian youth. Because of the cultural differences, the interpretation of these chapters is more difficult, but those who are interested in these cultures can obtain useful information. The authors draw attention to the importance of subjectivity. The effectiveness of human development policy decisions is demonstrated by a number of objective factors (e.g., reducing income poverty, morbidity, mortality, illiteracy, and increasing longevity). However, subjective factors (such as human well-being) do not have a place in the legislation. We can get to know a relatively new method (Assam well-being survey; [Saikai, Chalmers, & Dasvarma, 2017](#)) to measure overall subjective well-being and some qualitative methods (documentary filmmaking and living lab) of exploring how bullying is understood by people who deal with children in an Indian context.

### *Young females and well-being*

Nowadays, the first visual signs of puberty appear at an earlier age – physical maturation in many cases precedes mental development. Adolescent girls are often subjected to sexual objectification and become the primary target of bullying. The stress of objectification can lead to depression, eating disorders, and self-harming behavior. For girls, bullying often appears as relational aggression to reduce the social status of the targeted person. In the case of maltreatment, we can also emphasize the disadvantage of girls – they are more frequently victims of cyberbullying and school bullying than boy peers. We can also get to know the concept of eve-teasing, which means the sexual harassment of women in Indian culture.

It has become common among adolescent children to commit minor or experimental crimes, but these behaviors are mostly disappeared. If offending begins before the age of 14 years, it is more likely to be persistent. In all forms of crime, the number of women, except for prostitution and illicit drug use, is underrepresented. However, there is a rise in female offending. According to Skrzypiec's ([2017](#)) research, Australian adolescents aged 15–18 years most likely to participate in deviant behaviors, such as drug consuming, stealing, and fighting. In most activities, the proportion of females was lower.

The authors discuss well-being as a multidimensional construction. Research shows that younger students and girls report higher levels of well-being than their peers. However, with age, a slight decrease can be discovered in the sense of subjective well-being, and boys show better well-being points. The reader also can get to know some significant tools that can be used in practice to measure well-being (Flourishing Scale, Mental Health Continuum, Stirling Child Wellbeing Scale; [Skrzypiec & Askell-Williams, 2017](#)).

### *Bullying, cyberbullying, and student violence*

The harmful effects of bullying on the well-being of children are well-known, early preventions and interventions have a significant role to prevent these damaging effects. There is no agreement about the beginning of bullying in childhood. It is difficult to determine it appropriately (mostly based on adults and peer reports, observations). Research results suggest that bullying starts at about 4 years old. In the case of preschool-age children, boys engage in more physical, whereas girls engage in more verbal aggression. The presented research results suggest that the understanding of bullying becomes more sophisticated with the age and developing in childhood. The elder children (aged 8 years) can distinguish between bullying and conflict more properly than younger counterparts (aged 4–7 years).

The authors draw the attention to the presence of cyberbullying. Cyberbullying often occurs in the presence of others who are not directly involved, but play an important role in these episodes (bystanders): they can amplify the aggressive potential of the attack (provide audience/join to the harassment), or protect/socially support the victim. We can also get to know some useful technical tools, which can be appropriate to measure the role of bystanders and the coping strategies with cyberbullying. Bullying cannot be completely excluded from the child's life in later school years. However, it is extremely important that the family and the community take an active part in the interventions together.

### *Interventions to promote well-being*

The fourth section introduces us in a very readable way with some interventions to promote well-being in the school environment. It is more difficult to achieve behavioral change in adolescence, so it is important to focus these interventions at the early ages. For example, the RESCUR “Surfing the Waves” ([Cefai, 2017](#)) intervention program aims to create children's resilience and positive growth and to improve their mental health.

Many children around the world live separately from a biological parent. Parental separation has many negative effects on the child's mental health and well-being. Schools play an extremely important role in preventing harm and promoting well-being – the

authors present the reader 10 low or no-cost ways, which can be effective in these issues. A study emphasizes the primary role of youth in the mental health services – by cooperating in the development of youth-friendly environment and taking part in certain decisions they experience greater competence, confidence, and pride.

Cognitive biases also have a huge impact on interventions. They can affect our observations and lead to developing inaccurate explanations for the child's behavior and abilities. To overcome these biases, we can acquire an easy-to-learn, three-step (stop, connect, and collaborate) method.

### *Interventions to promote violence prevention*

The last section presents four intervention programmes to prevent violence. We can learn about the Learning & Behaviour Unit ([Maratos, 2017](#)), which aims to build student capacity to learn; a programme called Step Up for SA ([Stott et al., 2017](#)) to deal with the adolescent violence in the home. It gives the opportunity to the parents and siblings to share their experiences and provides a safe environment for adolescents to learn prosocial behavior. The "Value Me" intervention program ([Mubarak, Zeitz, & Slee, 2017](#)) aims to build the internal strengths and resilience of teenage girls in order to prevent or minimize the appearance of self-harming behaviors.

With regard to the effective use of interventions, we have to consider some significant aspects. The interventions should have clear goals, strategies, skill-focused, and targeted with a focus on program integrity. An excellent example is the Life Buoyancy Model ([Raymond, 2017](#)), which provides a clear framework to create an intervention.

### **Summary**

The book put the emphasis on the forms of child and adolescent violence, to their prevention, and to the increase of well-being and mental health. It draws attention to the fact that increasing the well-being of children can prevent mental difficulties, school violence, bullying, and school dropouts. It presents research results and interventions through 20 chapters. Sometimes, its language is difficult, but it is a well-read, well-illustrated publication. I recommend the book to all professionals who deal with children and adolescents – the presented research results and intervention programs can be useful in the practice.

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