Author calls for kindness to be part of school curriculum

By Natalie Savvides, author of 'Full Circle' and happiness coach

Teaching kindness in schools is more important than ever.

There is a huge increase in bullying, child depression and anxiety affecting school children from an ever-decreasing age. In order to end this we need to take determined action to educate children on the powerful impact of kindness in all areas of life, and most importantly how to apply it. In the high-achieving society we live in, the focus on academics is often drowning the importance of teaching kindness, which is equally important. It's no good being a Grade A student if you are simply not happy. From what I see there is still a strong emphasis on kindness at nursery in the obvious form of teaching to share, no pushing, play together, and inclusion. Once we get to pre-school however, where more structured leaning sets in, it seems these principals take a back seat.

THE BENEFITS OF TEACHING KINDNESS IN SCHOOLS

Training children from the youngest age to nurture the right, positive attitude to encourage care towards one another ultimately makes for happier, more confident and tolerant individuals. Children need to learn to compare, envy and judge less, and to accept more, in order to generate a happy and healthy environment. Only by doing this, will we wipe out pain, bullying, and anxiety in schools. However, the training needs to start young, in order to instil the right habits before the wrong ones set in - and it needs to continue as a constant reminder of its importance.

SPOTTING UNHAPPINESS IN STUDENTS

Children can be clever at hiding their true emotions, especially when they are feeling vulnerable or proud among their peers. We need to encourage a greater openness in sharing our fears and worries, and educate that communication of all emotion - good and bad - is vital to our happiness. It can be hard to spot a child that is unhappy, but any slight change in behaviour could denote a change in mental attitude and should be duly noted. If a child is behaving differently - quieter, louder, more shy, more boisterous - this could be something that needs to be addressed. By encouraging dialogue we demonstrate that people do care, and that it is as important to the teacher that individuals are happy as it is for them to succeed academically. Playground behaviour is a good indication of a child's comfort and happiness and should be assessed carefully.

Staff can also watch out for more subtle changes in body language. For example, when a class moves as a group – does one child always drag their feet at the end of the line? Do they hang their head down? There can be a wide range of telltale signs that a child is unhappy, but observance is key to nipping a problem in the bud early.

WHAT TO DO IF YOU THINK A CHILD MIGHT BE UNHAPPY?

If you have any concerns about a child in your school, it is important to speak to them.

Make sure you approach the child in a soft, comforting way, get down to their level and look them warmly in the eye and ask if all is ok.

The impact of talking to a child at their eye level should not be underestimated - it takes away any sense of intimidation and inspires a sense of trust. Encourage them to speak and if they don't want to, reassure them that you are there whenever they may need to say something. Perhaps explain the changes you've noticed or express your concerns, stating that it's fine to be sad or to worry or to feel uncomfortable, that it happens to everybody, but by talking about it perhaps they could find a way to help.

WAYS TEACHERS CAN HELP

It is important for teachers to regularly set aside time to discuss what makes children happy and sad, at home and in the classroom. Students need the opportunity to discuss how they should behave, try to express how they feel when they are upset, and how they can manage that. Teachers could use games and role-play to get children thinking about what to do if they notice that someone in their class is unhappy, and the little things they can do to help.

Class discussions about what might make people sad and what might make them happy would be hugely beneficial, as could starting a challenge where everyone has to do one nice thing for someone every day.

There is an endless list of ways schools can incorporate kindness into everyday life, and the result could make a huge difference to students. A dedicated educational slot should be embedded into the curriculum to keep the importance of kindness alive, and keep it ingrained in students as they grow older - but it needs to start young.