

## WELLINGTON COLLEGE'S WELL-BEING LESSONS

Wellington College is an independent, co-educational boarding school located in Crowthorne, Berkshire. It currently has just over 1000 pupils on roll.

In 2006, Wellington College began the teaching of Well-being lessons. I am always asked why we started to teach well-being: perhaps it was because of particular problems with the happiness of the student body which needed addressing such as anxiety, depression or bullying. This was not the reason.

I took over the running of PSHE in 2005 and was immediately struck by the response of the pupils to the 'traditional' PSHE course that I had devised. They simply were not interested in the juicy topics of smoking, drugs and sex. This puzzled me: surely teenagers would love to talk about these fascinating issues and given that they are such prominent parts of teenage life, they would want to know how to deal with these thorny issues. They didn't. And then two things dawned on me. The main reason that they are not interested in discussing smoking, drugs and sex, is because they have been hearing the same message for years and they are bored by it. The second thing is that statistically, most of them are not troubled by smoking, drug taking or risky or problematic sexual behaviour. The data on this is very clear: teenagers in the UK are healthier and happier than ever before so it struck me as foolish that we would design a curriculum that was utterly inappropriate for most young people.

The real reason goes deeper than pupil enjoyment of lessons. Traditional PSHE, or 'health terrorism' as I have heard it described does not have a coherent or overarching philosophy of subject. It tends to be a curriculum based around 'junevoia': the fear that teenagers are up to no good and need to be stopped from doing things that will do them harm. This was dissatisfying to me as a teacher and I realised that our PSHE needed to be different: it needed to be entirely focused on building the habits of good living that would lead to flourishing, rather than being a finger-wagging exercise in disaster avoidance. At this point, I was introduced to the burgeoning research into human flourishing or well-being and I realised that this was the approach that we needed to take.

Over the last 8 years, we have designed a 4 year, 60 hour programme which is entirely focused upon the habits of good living that will bring about flourishing. Our students embark upon this course in Year 9 when they arrive at the school and complete it at the end of their Lower Sixth Form year. Each lesson is focused on learning something that contributes to flourishing and the course as a whole is based upon 6 strands, which are as follows.

### 1. Physical Health.

The bedrock that our well-being rests on as humans is our physical health. This element of the course looks at topics such as sleep, exercise, diet, neurology and learning, understanding stress and resisting temptation. We try where possible to emphasise self-knowledge and self-care and give the students as much insight as possible into how the body functions, what its needs are and how we can maximise the physical potential we possess. We also cover the topics of body image and pornography and try to ensure that the students engage with the debate surrounding these issues, rather than have to sit through moralising lessons on what to avoid.

## 2. Positive Relationships.

This is arguably the most important part of the course. So much of our human joy and human misery is intimately connected to our experiences of human relationships. This part of the course begins in Year 9 with understanding the emotion system and learning ways of managing it and then goes on to look at topics such as empathy, trust, kindness, being a friend, resolving conflict restoratively, being in a romantic relationship and being a parent. The emphasis is always on realising that relationships take skill and work and that they are central in giving meaning to life.

## 3. Perspective: learning good habits of mind.

This element of the course has its origins in the brilliant Penn Resilience Programme - [https://cypmhc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/PENN\\_RESILIENCE\\_PROGRAMME.pdf](https://cypmhc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/PENN_RESILIENCE_PROGRAMME.pdf), which is a course in teaching young people how to cope with adversity and change and how to bounce back from the difficulties they might encounter. It has its roots in Stoic philosophy and Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and helps students recognise how they think in difficult situations and learn to challenge inflexible and inaccurate thinking by examining the evidence around them. We also spend time learning about Carol Dweck's theory of the Mindsets - <https://www.mindsetworks.com/science/Default> which helps young people unpick unhelpful thoughts they might have about how intelligence is acquired and above all, we try to help them to develop self-efficacy: a set of beliefs that we can be effective in the world and that we are not just victims of fate.

## 4. Engagement.

The focus of this strand of the course is how to get stuck in to worthwhile activities and how to stay stuck in. We look at curiosity and how to build it, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's work on Flow states (where one is so absorbed in an activity, one loses consciousness of time and self), the role of positive emotions in staying engaged, dealing with 'choking' and unhelpful thoughts that can interfere with performance and we also look at mindfulness and creating stillness of mind and attention to help us remain focused - <https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/articles/199707/finding-flow>.

## 5. The world: living sustainably.

This element of the course is concerned with learning to live sustainably in a consumer culture. It builds on work done on body image and looks at learning to be critical of advertising, finding alternatives to consumption as a way of being happy, thinking about our impact on the planet and learning to make a positive difference to the world.

## 6. Meaning and Purpose.

This final element of the course gives students the opportunity to envisage what their life might hold in store for them and looks at the stages of adult development that they may go through. It is based upon Viktor Frankl's work on developing an individual sense of meaning and purpose and Erik Erikson's model of adult development. Students also spend time considering how their learning in well-being will help them over a life course and how they can continue to learn to live well.

Sitting around the content, are some guiding principles. The course as a whole is designed to be eudaimonistic. Eudaimonism is based upon Aristotle's virtue ethics which suggests that the aim of human life is flourishing. In order to flourish, humans must learn and practice the virtues, which are simply dispositions to choose and act well in any given situation. Aristotle held that the virtues are acquired and developed over time and that our virtues are what go to make up our character. An excellent discussion of the eudaimonistic approach can be found in *Intelligent Virtue* by Julia Annas and some interesting work is being done at the University of Birmingham's Jubilee Centre on developing a scheme of character education for schools - <https://www.jubileecentre.ac.uk/432/character-education>.

Supporting this idea of learning the virtues through practice is our use of homework throughout the well-being programme. Each lesson contains a core idea, the practice of which it is hoped will improve the students' lives. In between lessons, students are asked to experiment with the idea that they learn and write about how successful it has been for them. This work is not formally assessed, but formative comments may be added to it to help students' learning to keep going.

The eudaimonistic approach is applied to the traditional areas of PSHE education that we cover. When learning about drugs, smoking and SRE, we look at those issues through the lens of character and try to help students consider which virtues they need to develop in order to choose well in situations where they are confronted with potentially risky behaviour. We also make it very clear to them that contrary to popular opinion about teenagers, the actual numbers of those participating in illegal or risky behaviour are much lower than they might think.

Finally, I am always asked whether or not I know that the course is working. We ask our students to write their own progress reports in well-being. Here are two examples of what they write:

'So far this term in well-being we have been learning how to change what we do such as bed times and food consumption to aid our day. We have been set preps that, rather than just answering questions, actually require us to act. For example one of our preps was to change something in our routine and write about how it helped us. Also more recently we have been looking at meditation and how to calm ourselves down when we are stressed or unsure of what to do. I have really enjoyed well-being so far as it is a step away from being an academic subject and more of a lesson where I can improve my day to day life and school work with immediate visible results.'

Year 9 pupil.

'I have learnt many key skills so far this term. Many I think I will take further through my life. Resilience- I have learnt to become strong, and know when to say no, like playing football on a Monday night, when I know I have loads of work to do, or I need some rest. I have learnt to speak my thoughts a bit more, be more honest and take responsibility for my own actions. I also have learnt about risk taking. Recently, having joined the jazz band, having been asked to do a solo and other stuff, has been tough, but enjoyable to say the least. I'm glad I took the initiative to say yes when the chance came my way, I'm loving it now. What is also important is my understanding of myself, and what I can do. I am learning to prioritise my work, be more structured in my day, and keeping calm, when originally I would panic about work.'

Year 12 pupil.

All of the course materials are available at: <https://www.wellingtoncollege.org.uk/pastoral-care/well-being/> and a more comprehensive guide to teaching happiness and well-being can be found in *Learning to Ride Elephants* by Ian Morris - <https://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/teaching-happiness-and-well-being-in-schools-9780826443038/>.

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