

Spring 2025 Newsletter



Supporting children's rights
to play, care and learning

Scottish Out of School Care Network

As the clocks have finally moved forward we can officially say “spring is here” and along with that comes lighter and warmer days, which provide more opportunities to get outside. Whilst we’re all familiar with the benefits of outdoor play, did you know that by simply being in nature can reap rewards? This is a concept which the Japanese have known about for several decades and promote through “shinrin-yoku”, or ‘forest bathing’. This idea has been proved to help people’s mental health and wellbeing, and in this issue of the newsletter we shall be focussing on various ways that you can support the mental and emotional health and wellbeing of your children, young people and staff.

It is now well-documented that mental health and physical health are interconnected and we shall consider how things like physical movement, connectivity, yoga, mindfulness, switching off electronics and being in natural spaces can benefit everyone.

We believe that this is a timely issue- reports indicate that people in the UK are increasingly less happy and mental health issues are becoming more common across all age groups. We hope that some of the learning here can help make positive changes in your professional, and even, personal lives.

So why not grab a cup of tea, and make some time to relax with us.

Andrew Shoolbread

Editor

Employment Law Updates

The Government has increased the statutory rates for the following types of leave:

- maternity pay - www.gov.uk/employers-maternity-pay-leave
- paternity pay - www.gov.uk/employers-paternity-pay-leave
- adoption pay - www.gov.uk/adoption-pay-leave
- shared parental pay - www.gov.uk/shared-parental-leave-and-pay
- parental bereavement pay - www.gov.uk/parental-bereavement-pay-leave

The weekly statutory rate for these payments has risen from **£184.03** to **£187.18** per week. This change ensures that employees taking time off for family-related reasons receive additional financial support.

In addition, the Lower Earnings Limit (LEL) has increased from **£123** to **£125** per week. This is the minimum weekly earnings required for employees to qualify for these statutory payments.

Increase to National Minimum Wage

The new rates for the National Minimum Wage (NMW), including the National Living Wage (NLW), which apply from 1 April 2025 are as follows:

	NMW Rate	Increase (£)	Percentage increase
National Living Wage (21 and over)	£12.21	£0.77	6.7
18-20 Year Old Rate	£10.00	£1.40	16.3
16-17 Year Old Rate	£7.55	£1.15	18.0
Apprentice Rate	£7.55	£1.15	18.0

National Insurance Employer Contribution Increase From April 2025

From 6th April 2025 there will be an increase in the amount employers must contribute towards National Insurance, this raise may cost businesses more but it does not affect employees, i.e. individuals will not have to pay more.

About National Insurance Contributions – Employee and Employer

There are two types of National Insurance Contributions- one which is paid by an employee and one which is paid by the employer. The first is Primary (Employee) Class 1 National Insurance which is taken directly from an employee's salary (through PAYE), and the 2nd is Secondary (Employer) Class 1 National Insurance which is an additional contribution paid by the employer.

For both categories, there is a minimum amount that someone must earn before these contributions are paid.

For Primary Class 1 NI Contributions, an employee only starts paying once they are earning £12,570 per year (£417 per month/£272 per week) at a rate of 8%, and this is deducted from gross salary. This stays the same from 6th April 2025.

The minimum amount at which an employer begins to pay National Insurance contributions is considerably lower than that of the employee; the contribution percentage is higher, and it is an extra cost to the employer, over-and-above the employee's salary.

From the 6th April 2025 both the minimum salary limit and % changed for Secondary (EMPLOYER) National Insurance contributions.

The Secondary (Employer) Class 1 National Insurance contributions rose to 15% from 13.5% (an increase of 1.5%), and the minimum starting salary for paying the NI contributions dropped to £5,000 from £9,000. This means that employers will potentially have to pay for employees who were previously exempt, and at the same time, pay a higher NI contribution rate, so wage bills could increase.

But, don't panic- despite initial suggestions, a business' wage bill might actually go down. How is this possible?

Alongside the aforementioned changes there are also changes to the Employment Allowance, which rose from £5,000 to £10,100 per year (an increase of £5,100) and is used to offset NI payments for the employer. The Employment Allowance is basically a sum which is deducted from the employer's NI contribution bill. So, if an employer's total annual NI contribution bill is less than £10,100, they won't have to pay any NI contributions.

The Employment Allowance will now be open to all businesses which pay NI employer contributions; before it was only available to businesses which paid up to £100,000 in annual NI contributions. Please note that the £10,100 is an allowance- businesses do not get this sum of money from HMRC- it is an amount deducted from the first £10,100 of the annual NI bill. For some large businesses this will be used up in the first month, for others it will cover the cost of the whole year, or part of it.

Your accountant/payroll provider will work out the changes in NI.

Quick Survey- Impact on OSC Services of Increase of Employer NI Contributions and National Living Wage

The SAC Team in the Scottish Government is wanting to understand how OSC services will be affected by the changes to NI Employer contributions and Employment Allowance as well as increases to the minimum wage. We would be grateful if you could participate in a short online survey: <https://freeonlinesurveys.com/s/tsMStDLw>

We would be grateful if you could answer the main question (no.1) and if possible, provide more in-depth information for the additional questions (nos. 2-8). For information, the questions in the survey are as follows:

Main Question

With both the increase in NI Employers contributions and the minimum wage, what do you think will be the impact on the financial sustainability of the service?

- A. No impact- we are financially secure and plan for such increases.
- B. A little impact- we are financially OK but may have to make some budget changes.
- C. A significant impact- we will have to look at ways of cutting costs/generating more income but we should survive.
- D. A huge impact – we are already financially struggling and fear that we will have to cut places and lose staff, or potentially close.
- E. Don't know yet.

Additional Questions – if you can, please provide further details in the questions below:

NI EMPLOYER CONTRIBUTION: How many staff members earning £5,000+ per year does your OSC employ?

NI EMPLOYER CONTRIBUTION: Without taking into account the Employment Allowance, what will be the total NI Employers Contribution cost in the year 2025-2026?

NI EMPLOYER CONTRIBUTION: Is this amount more or less than 2024-2025?

NI EMPLOYER CONTRIBUTION: With the increase in Employment Allowance (as well as increase in NI contributions), will the OSC financially be better or worse off in 2025-2026 than 2024-2025?

NI EMPLOYER CONTRIBUTION: How much is this amount?

LIVING WAGE INCREASE: On a monthly basis, by how much your staff bill increase with the rise of the minimum wage?

LIVING WAGE INCREASE: Are you able to increase all workers' pay and not just those on minimum wage? Yes/No

With both the increase in NI Employers contributions and the minimum wage, what do you think will be the impact on the financial sustainability of the service?

- A. No impact- we are financially secure and plan for such increases.
- B. A little impact- we are financially OK but may have to make some budget changes.
- C. A significant impact- we will have to look at ways of cutting costs/generating more income but we should survive.
- D. A huge impact – we are already financially struggling and fear that we will have to cut places and lose staff, or potentially close.

Deadline for responses: Friday 16th May 2025.

Complete the survey here: <https://freeonlinesurveys.com/s/tsMStDLw>

The PVG scheme is now a legal requirement in Scotland

From 1 April 2025, membership of the Protecting Vulnerable Groups (PVG) scheme became a legal requirement in Scotland. Any individual who is to carry out a regulated role (paid or voluntary) with children, protected adults or both, must be a member of the PVG scheme, prior to carrying out that role.

Through continuous monitoring by Disclosure Scotland, membership of the PVG scheme provides confidence to organisations and the public that a person continues to be suitable to carry out a regulated role.

Gerard Hart, Chief Executive of Disclosure Scotland said:

“Disclosure Scotland’s number one priority is the protection of vulnerable groups in Scotland and today marks an important milestone in that role, with more to come as we implement the remaining elements of the new law in the months ahead.”

The Disclosure (Scotland) Act 2020 aims to protect the public, while balancing the need for people to move on from offending and simplify the process for disclosing criminal history information.

In addition to this change to the PVG scheme, the Disclosure (Scotland) Act 2020 introduces:

- more control over disclosure information for applicants
- simplified disclosure products, making it easier to understand and use our services
- regulated roles to define whether PVG scheme membership is required

More information

For more information on the PVG scheme and to find out if the new legal requirement applies to you or those in your organisation, visit Disclosure Scotland’s website:

www.disclosure.gov.scot/

An online checker to see if a role needs PVG scheme membership can also be found here:

www.mygov.scot/check-role-needs-pvg

Children and Young People (CYP) Continuous Professional Learning (CPL) portal

Did you know that the SSSC have a dedicated portal for people working with children and young people to access free continuous professional learning (CPL) modules and earn MyLearning badges #openbadges?

The module on supporting parents to further engage in their children’s development counts towards four of the seven core learning elements: communications and relationships; protection; knowledge for your role; and reflective practice. Access this course here:

<https://cpldirectory.elc.sssc.uk.com/modules/module-2-supporting-parents-to-further-engage-in-their-childs-development/>



OSC Workforce Health and Wellbeing- 2024 Survey Results Now Published

SOSCN has been conducting an annual survey of the out of school care workforce since 2008 (with the exception of 2023) and all the reports are available to view and download at: soscn.org/policy/workforce-survey

The results of the 2024 survey have now been published; as the focus of this newsletter is mental health and wellbeing, how were the workforce faring in 2024?

In response to the question: Currently how stressed do you feel?

24% of respondents said they felt 'not at all stressed'; 47% said they felt 'slightly stressed'; 20% said they felt 'stressed'; 6% said they felt 'very stressed' and 3% said they were 'at breaking point'.

In response to the question: Currently how physically tired do you feel?

10% of respondents said they felt 'not at all tired'; 45% said they felt 'slightly tired'; 33% said they felt 'tired'; 10% said they felt 'exhausted', and 2% said they were 'at breaking point'.

In response to the question: Currently how would you rate your mental wellbeing?

11% of respondents said they felt 'great'; 42% said they felt 'good'; 36% said they felt 'OK'; 11% said they felt 'not very good', and 1% said they were 'at breaking point'.

Whilst the majority of respondents reported to be reasonably positive about their physical and mental health, there are clearly a small number of workers who are struggling. We hope that the information in this newsletter may be of some help.

We would like to thank all of you who took the time to complete the survey- your participation is greatly appreciated. To read the 2024 results and download a copy, please visit: soscn.org/downloads/workforce-survey/osc-workforce-survey-results-2024.pdf

National Stats on OSC Workforce

In the most recent statistics held by the SSSC on the OSC workforce we can see there are 4,240 registered workers in 640 registered services;

89% are female and 11% are male; 10% have full-time employment and 90% have part-time employment. The workforce is relatively young- 49% are aged 34 or younger (29% are aged under 25).

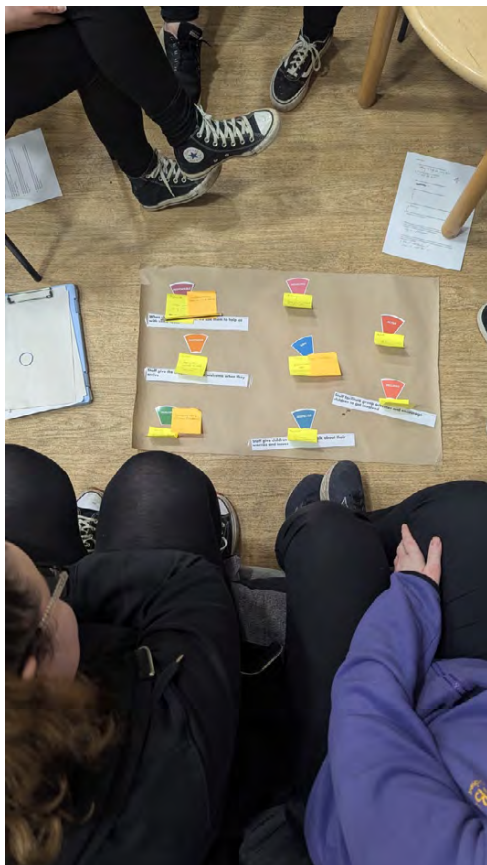
The first few months of the year has seen us out and about, delivering training to services all around Scotland

Managing Distressed Behaviour with Trauma Informed Practice

Our Managing Distressed Behaviour with Trauma Informed Practice session is developed to help give staff a deeper understanding of how adverse childhood experiences can impact children's ability to cope with stress and the effect that can have on behaviour.



The session also looks at methods for reducing dysregulation and ways of soothing feelings of distress amongst our children.



Feedback from session participants:

"Very informative, activities were fun and the trainer was easy to listen to."

"Really straight to the point and informative information, with enough content to consider our own practice without overwhelming with 'to do.'"

"I learned lots through this training and i feel like it will help my practice."

Getting it Right for Every Child

At the request of a service, we delivered our GIRFEC session, with a focus on Personal Planning.

This session is designed to give staff an introduction (or a refresh for those experienced staff members) into the Getting it Right for Every Child approach – looking its purpose, the key components such as SHANARRI and the practitioner questions, and how we can embed this into children's Personal Plans and the service has a whole.

Feedback from session participants:

"Well thought out session which was interactive and kept staff interested."

"Very knowledgeable trainer, who was easy to listen to and understand."

"I found the trainer's delivery to be very engaging. The interactive parts were great. They gave us lots more ideas on how to use SHANARRI at our service"

Book a session with us

If you would like to book a session for your service or require further information, please get in touch at patrick@soscn.org.

We deliver training in-person and online in the subjects of:

- Play
- Trauma Informed Practice
- Behaviour Management
- Medication Management
- Activity & Wellbeing
- Building Resilience Through Active Play and Sport
- GIRFEC and SHANARRI
- Personal Planning
- Induction to School Age Childcare for New Staff
- Coming soon: Child Protection



Upcoming Session: Activity & Wellbeing in Out of School Care

**2nd June
Kinning Park Complex
Glasgow**

On June 2nd, SOSCN will be hosting an Activity & Wellbeing training session for out of school care staff members.

The session will include a theory session and a light activity session towards the end of the training. The theory session will cover topics such as the benefits for children taking part in physical activity, how children can build resilience during play and resources that staff can implement during activity sessions within their services. The trainer will also cover how we as staff members can use our own physical wellbeing to motivate children to take part in physical activity on a regular basis.

Staff will have the chance to speak to other service staff members, share experiences and good practice.

The light practical section of the training will offer staff the chance to use the resources suggested by the trainer during the first hour of the training, this section should last around 1 hour. Staff will be able to use the equipment provided by SOSCN during the first hour to practice developing their own games. The trainer will take staff through techniques on how to adapt activities to either challenge or simplify activities. Staff will leave the training with new resources and techniques for keeping children active within their service. The session will run for from 10am – 12pm with limited spaces available.

Book your place here: www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/activity-wellbeing-in-out-of-school-care-tickets-1325061838629?aff=oddtcreator



Strategies for building resilience in OSC

Promoting resilience in children during activity and play can help them adapt to challenges at home and in school. Building resilience can help them bounce back quickly from difficulties and adversity. There are some key strategies that out of school care staff can use within their service to develop resilience in children over a period of time.

Emotional Awareness & Regulation

Staff can use coping strategies such as deep breathing exercises and mindfulness.

Self Esteem & Confidence

Provide opportunities for children to succeed by adapting games and activities to suit the abilities of the children involved.

Positive Thinking

Encourage positive thinking during times of challenge and stress, focus on what is going well i.e., showing effort to try a complete a new skill or activity.

Model Resilience

Share personal stories of overcoming challenges with children, let children see that everyone overcome challenges, including adults.

Normalise Setback & Failure

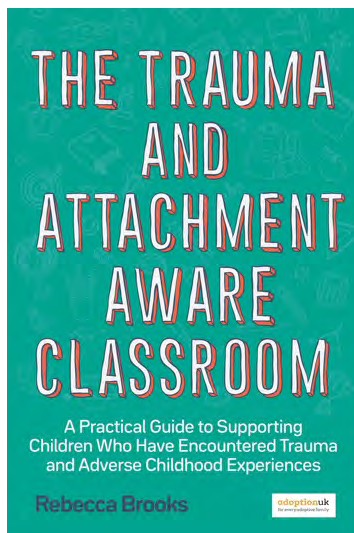
Make failure relevant to children by talking to them about their favourite football team or players. Talk to them about a time when they have lost a match for example and how they then had to remain positive and carry on working hard.

SOSCN Book Club

In January, SOSCN held its first online Professional Development Book Club. We know staff in the school age childcare sector are always being encouraged to read and keep up to date with guidance and best practice documents, legislation, frameworks, policies and procedures. The list goes on. And, if we are all being honest, it's not the most fun.



Reading a book is a bit different. We know that lots of our members enjoy reading books. The idea behind the book club is to encourage workers at all levels in and around the school age childcare sector to read books that are relevant to their practice. Along with having the opportunity to discuss these books with their peers from all over the country, the hope is that this will invoke ideas, inspire people to try new or different methods of practice, promote innovation, and to learn from interesting books and from colleagues they might otherwise never have the chance to speak to. Ultimately, support professional development.



At our first online book club meeting, members joined us from all across Scotland to discuss the book; The Trauma and Attachment Aware Classroom by Rebecca Brooks.

Prior to the meeting, members read the book and had the option to answer a some reflection questions to help prompt areas of discussion.

For some, the book acted as a useful reminder of the importance of taking a trauma informed approach to working with children. It was also reassuring for many, given they were already implementing many of the measures and strategies the book suggested. As a result of reading the book, one member commented that this reassurance had strengthened their confidence, as the felt "on most occasions my instincts are in the right ball park".

For others, the book shared some eye opening research, highlighting just how much of an impact adverse childhood experiences can have on childhood, all the way into adulthood. Others found the suggested strategies for supporting children that may be suffering as a result of trauma in the early years as really useful tips that they plan to implement into practice at their services.

A number of members had been inspired to do further research to deepen their knowledge and understanding in areas such as attachment styles, sand play therapy and visual timetables.

There wasn't much within the book that members disagreed with or felt conflicted about. However, it was mentioned that, given the book is geared towards school classrooms, some of the measures could be tricky to implement or require adaptation in order to be effective in a school age childcare setting.

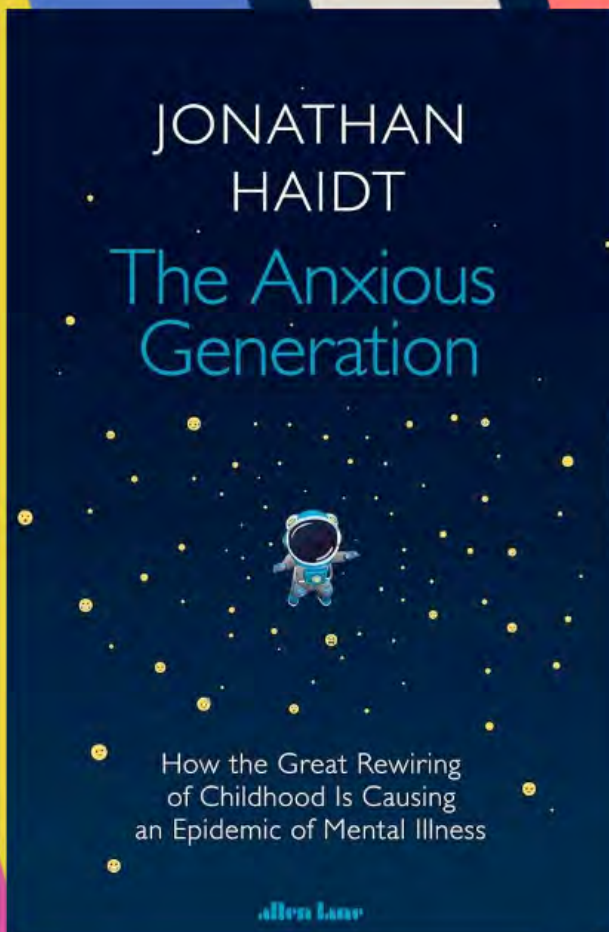
When asked about areas of practice members might want to change or develop as a result of reading this book, members mentioned;

- their desire to facilitate training to their staff, so the whole team can be on the same page when implementing a trauma informed approach to practice,
- focusing on preventative measures to reduce the incidences of distressed behaviour
- improving communication with schools and families to help develop consistent methods of support for children

Ultimately, the book was well received and members would recommend it to others working in the school age childcare sector.

To register, for free, for the next SOSCN Professional Development Book Club, scan the QR code or visit www.eventbrite.com/e/1259282631249?aff=oddtcreator

This meeting's chosen
book is



Next meeting

Wednesday 30th April

10am (Online Zoom)



Scan for more info



Mental Health And Wellbeing- A Mind and Body Approach

Andrew Shoolbread

It's not uncommon these days to hear talk of a "mental health crisis" or a "mental health epidemic" in the UK, but is it a new phenomenon or is there now less social stigma around seeking support for mental health? Perhaps it's a bit of both- thankfully people are now more inclined to seek support but maybe there really are increased numbers of people who are experiencing poor mental and emotional health and wellbeing.

We don't need to look at statistics or reports to understand that poor mental health is an issue which needs to be addressed in children, young people, and adults- many of us have direct individual personal experience, or have seen it affect family members, friends, colleagues or the children we support. We may have had to seek out support for ourselves or helped loved ones through difficult times.

When we discuss poor mental health, what are we meaning? Anxiety, depression, stress, feelings of helplessness and powerlessness, despair, hopelessness, frustration, anger, a lack of connection, feelings of isolation, shame, guilt: all of these and more. These can then manifest in physical behaviours which may be socially unacceptable, inappropriate or dangerous to the individual or others; it may cause physical illness; interrupted sleep; over or under-eating; substance abuse or addiction; or an inability to think critically or focus. The causes may also be a physical symptom: think anxiety and depression.

These lists are far from exhaustive, and the cause and affect can be varied, intertwined and complex which means the support an individual requires has to be tailored to meet their needs: it is most definitely not a "one size fits all approach". Often poor mental health and wellbeing can feel cyclical with no way out- like an infinite loop- being able to stop this spiralling is key in providing support. Now there is a clearer understanding that mental health affects physical health (and vice versa), and that environmental and social factors can also

have a huge influence, both negative and positive.

Whilst seeking professional support is always advised, being mindful of the mind/body and environmental interplays, are things which we can do to additionally support ourselves, and others? In this special feature section, we shall look at some general approaches, including mindfulness, yoga and being in nature, which may be helpful in supporting positive mental and emotional health. You may find that these work for you, your staff or could be adapted to support children and young people.

5 Actions We Can Take to Support Positive Mental Health



1. Food & Mood

Whilst the connection between a healthy diet and physical health has been clear for many years, did you know there is also a clear link with mental health? When the body detects an injury or infection it has an inflammatory response and releases cytokines, which can affect brain responses, moods and symptoms of anxiety and depression. Foods can be classed as “inflammatory” or “anti-inflammatory”, and when the former is digested they can trigger the immune system into reacting as if it were ‘enflamed’- chronic long-term inflammation is detrimental to our health. It is therefore beneficial to reduce the amount of inflammatory foods and increase the amount of anti-inflammatory foods in our diet.

Inflammatory foods include: processed foods, white carbohydrates, refined sugars, saturated fats and trans-fats.

Anti-inflammatory foods include: fruits, vegetables, whole grains, seeds, nuts, fatty fish and spices like turmeric and ginger.

2. Stay Hydrated

Hydration is an important factor in mental health and wellbeing. If you are not well-hydrated you can have impaired cognitive function (difficulties concentrating, and issues with memory and problem-solving, which in turn can lead to anxiety and depressive symptoms); a reduced capacity to deal with stress, and sleep disturbance. Recommended daily water intake varies and will depend on the individual but consider 2-3 litres for adults and 1-2 litres for children, depending on age and size.

3. Movement

It has been found that individuals who engage in regular physical activity can experience a significant reduction in anxiety symptoms compared to those who don't. This can be jogging, walking, swimming, cycling, dancing etc as well as mind/body exercises like yoga and Tai Chi. The more someone engages in physical activity, the more likely they are to experience a reduction in depressive symptoms. Even modest levels of physical activity can have an impact.

Why is this? Exercise releases endorphins, the body's natural 'feel good' chemicals, and regular physical activity can promote neuroplasticity – the brain's ability to rewire itself and promote brain cell growth.

4. Conscious Or Activated Breathing

Conscious or activated breathing means intentionally focussing on your breathing and modifying depth and speed. Consider if you are anxious, you may well have quick and shallow breathing; by focussing on your breathing and reducing the speed and taking deeper breaths you can begin to calm your body, and mind. Breathing through the nose rather than mouth can also have a beneficial effect.

Why is this? Activated breathing impacts the Vagus/Vagal Nerve. This nerve runs from the gut to the brain and plays an important role in regulating bodily functions including heart rate, digestion and mood. The Vagal Nerve is strongly linked to the "parasympathetic nervous system" (which creates the "rest and digest response") which is opposite to the "sympathetic nervous system" (which creates the "flight, fight or freeze" response). Therefore, by activating the Vagal Nerve we tap into the "rest and digest" response which effectively resets your body's stress response.

5. Quality Sleep

Quality sleep helps maintain the balance of neurotransmitters which play a crucial role in regulating mood and anxiety. Sufficient sleep is essential for regulating stress hormones and without it, people can experience increased stress and a potential worsening of any depression. However, stress and worry can cause a lack of sleep so they can be both cause and effect.

What actions can you take to promote better sleep?

Reduce sleep disruption factors: stop using screens at least an hour before bed as the blue light from screens produces serotonin*; create a comfortable room temperature for yourself; avoid stimulants; as much as possible create a dark and quiet environment, and maintain a consistent sleep schedule.

*Serotonin is a 'wake-up' hormone- we want this in the morning, not at night. At night we want to produce melatonin which helps us sleep.



A Natural Healing Process – How Nature Can Reduce Stress and Support Positive Mental Health

Andrew Shoolbread

Outdoor play has been long-promoted as a benefit to children and young people, indeed, during COVID-19 restrictions, being outdoors as much as possible was identified as one of the benefits during that difficult time. So, aside from the play experience, are there other benefits from being outdoors? Yes, especially when being outdoors means being in nature.

Humans evolved several million years ago, but it is only within the last few centuries that people have not existed in very natural settings. For example, in 1800 only 3% of the world's population lived in urban settings but by 2050 the UN predicts this figure will be 66%. We are urbanising at an incredible rate yet our genes cannot change and adapt at the same pace- although we are living in a modern world our bodies are effectively still programmed to live in a natural environment.

The Japanese have a long-existing connection with nature- they see themselves as “a part of nature, not apart from nature”. Traditionally, much of Japanese culture and art makes clear connections between human existence and nature, so it is perhaps not surprising Japanese doctors started promoting the idea of “shinrin yoku” or “forest bathing” in the 1980s. This movement developed from the intuitive notion that people (adults and children) automatically feel more at ease and relaxed within forests and natural environments. Since the 1980s research has been undertaken to better understand what is happening on our minds and bodies when we are in these natural spaces.

By being able to measure brain activity, autonomic nervous activity, stress markers in saliva and immune activity when people were in both natural and urban settings, researchers have found that less stress hormones are produced, there is less activity in the pre-frontal area of the brain, and there is less activity in the sympathetic nervous system when in natural environments: this evidence confirms what we have intuitively known.

Although the wider focus is often of “forest bathing”, researchers have acknowledged that not everyone may have easy access to forests or the countryside, so they have also looked at the effect of parks, urban green spaces, natural aromas, house plants, cut flowers etc on reducing people’s stress levels. And whilst being in a forest may have the greatest benefit, there are many smaller and more restricted interactions with nature which have a positive effect on calming our minds and bodies. Below is a list of proven ways of creating a more natural and ultimately calming experience, other than being in a forest or the countryside:

- Visit parks or urban greenspaces.
- Visit community gardens, allotments and city farms.
- “Introduce wood into your life”- use more wood-based products. The smell and touch of wood has proved to reduce stress levels.
- Have house plants or cut flowers indoors.
- Essential oils- aroma, especially that of trees has been found to lower blood pressure and increase parasympathetic nerve activity (“rest and digest”).

Although some of these suggestions are about being in nature, some of them are about bringing a bit of nature into any setting. Therefore, although being outdoors and in nature may be the ultimate goal, why not think of small ways you can bring nature into your day-to-day experience, you, your staff and children might feel the difference.

And relax...

Further reading:

“Walking in the Woods. Go back to nature with the Japanese way of shinrin-yoku”

Professor Yoshimi Miyazaki

“Forest Bathing. The Rejuvenating Practice of Shinrin Yoku”

Héctor Garcia and Francesc Miralles





Are We Going About Development the Wrong Way? A Yoga Approach

Veronica Greene, Yoga Instructor

More children than ever before are being diagnosed with 'Additional Support Needs'. From challenges with focus, emotional regulation, sensory issues and delayed motor skills. Educators and parents are seeing a rise in difficulties that are impacting learning and behaviour.

What if, instead of just managing the symptoms and the behaviours, we looked deeper at what's happening in the brain? Research suggests that many of these issues stem from something far simpler, and far more overlooked - fundamental movement! Functional movement isn't just about exercise: it's the foundation of brain development, helping children integrate their primitive reflexes, maturing their nervous systems, and developing their brains, from the brain stem or the 'bottom up' approach.

Humans are the only mammals that can't walk immediately after birth. This is because, unlike other species, we are born with smaller brains to accommodate the narrow human birth canal. As a result, most of our brain development occurs after birth.



The Missing Link in Child Development

From the moment a baby is born, movement is the brain's primary tool for development. According to Dr. Robert Melillo, a leading researcher in neurodevelopmental disorders, primitive reflexes serve as the building blocks for higher brain functions and development. When we miss vital steps in 'integrating' them, we miss out on the process required to develop a balanced brain.

This is not a new understanding and was researched greatly by Swedish psychiatrist Harald Blomberg after he worked with Kerstin Linde in the 1980s. In the 90s, he applied rhythmic movement therapy in his Psychiatry Clinic, observing significant improvements in children with ADHD, dyslexia & emotional regulation challenges.

Primitive reflexes are automatic, instinctual movements that are present at birth. Many of you will be familiar with the more obvious reflexes such as the Rooting Reflex, where a baby, when stroked at the

corner of their mouth, will turn their head to find the source of food - breast or bottle. The Moro Reflex is also obvious - when a baby startles, throwing its arms out to the side at a loud noise or sensing they are falling. Everyone's favourite, though we probably don't think of it as a primitive reflex, is the Palmar Grasp - when you place your finger inside a baby's palm and they immediately grab your finger tightly.

While these reflexes are a great source of amusement, they are automatic, instinctual reactions for survival. These reflexes and others are usually checked immediately after birth. The absence of or abnormal reflexes can indicate potential neurological problems and may require further investigation.

Primitive reflexes should naturally 'integrate' as a child grows, allowing them to develop balance, coordination, emotional regulation, and cognitive skills. However, when a child doesn't get enough of the right kinds of movement such as tummy time, rolling, crawling, climbing, spinning and balancing, these reflexes can remain 'retained', leaving the nervous system in a constant state of stress. This can manifest as poor concentration, difficulty sitting still, emotional outbursts, and even challenges with reading, writing and motor skills, often leading to a diagnosis of Autism, ADHD & Dyslexia to name a few.

As mentioned, primitive reflexes are checked at birth and then again at 6 weeks. After that they are usually not considered an issue unless development is heavily stunted and paediatricians are checking for neurological issues.

Today's modern lifestyle makes this problem even worse. With less outdoor play, increased screen time, and a focus on early academics over physical exploration, many children are missing key developmental milestones. Studies have shown a direct link between reduced movement opportunities and an increase in attention disorders, anxiety, and learning difficulties. Instead of simply labelling these struggles as behavioural or neurological issues, we need to ask: "Are these children struggling with their environment—one that no longer supports how their brains are designed to develop?"

Before looking at outdoor play, let's first look at the very early stages. Many mums report that their babies "hate tummy time and cry". Of course, babies don't like tummy time in the beginning! The heaviest part of the body is the skull, and babies have to build strength in their back muscles to hold their heads up. While 'tummy time' may seem unpleasant, in the beginning, if performed in short, regular daily bursts, babies will develop their spinal muscles, helping develop rolling, which then leads to crawling and then walking. These are the physical development milestones, and if they don't follow the 'normal' trajectory, then the brain development does not follow the 'normal trajectory'.

A Solution!

For over 23 years, I've been fortunate to work closely with children and teens across all stages of development, both in private classes and within educational settings. Throughout this time, I observed a strong connection between physical strength and focus—children with poor muscle tone often struggled with concentration. However, as we worked on developing their muscular strength, I noticed a significant improvement in their ability to focus for longer periods. Initially, I attributed this to the idea that building stability in the body creates stability in the brain.

Now, through my studies in Functional Neuroimmunology, I have a deeper understanding of why this happens. The yoga postures we practice with children naturally support the integration of primitive reflexes—key neurological functions that lay the foundation for cognitive and emotional development. As these reflexes integrate, both muscle tone and brain function improve, enhancing not just physical strength but also attention, learning, and self-regulation.

What is obvious is that we need a fresh approach because waiting for mental health support or a CAHMS appointment takes far too long. Resources are stretched, and one-to-one support simply isn't a viable option for most children. We need solutions that can be delivered on a wider scale, reaching more children when they need help.

Over the years, I've designed Programs for Schools to support resilience, exam preparation and behavioural challenges. What I truly believe is that if we equip all educators with the techniques I've used, we won't just be managing the growing crisis of behavioural and additional support needs—we'll be providing solutions. We will also be down regulating our educators' nervous systems to address the stress and burnout that is driving so many teachers and childcare professionals to exhaustion, so what are we waiting for?

3 yoga exercises that work for 3 years to 18 years.



1- Spinal Development

Backbends - "How we all used to watch Telly!"

Most children are spending too much time hunched over phones or tablets, which is affecting the development of their spine. This issue is magnified for those who missed out on the crawling stage. This helps with physical spinal development, as well as integrating primitive reflexes.

* Lie on tummy

* Head resting on hands

Can be used in any classroom situation, even at story time.

2 - Calming Your Nervous System

Abdominal Breathing (Belly Breath) - here we're using the floor for feedback on tummy expansion. Hands under the forehead helps us calm and withdraw

* Lie on Tummy

* Hands under forehead with elbows out to the side

* Breathe in through nose and feel your tummy pushing into the floor

* Breathe out through nose and feel your tummy draw back from the floor

Can be used anytime there is space, even as sleep time or relaxation at the end of gym class.

3 - Lines of Crawling

As the name suggest we set up mats for the children to crawl on - they actually love this even though it is hard work.

* self-explanatory, but get them to focus on right arm and leg moving forward together then left arm and leg.

You can add music to keep to the rhythm or turn into a game where they pick up bean bags and balance them on their back. The bean bags that haven't fallen off are counted in the score!

About Veronica Greene

She is an enthusiastic and innovative educator specialising in the brain-body connection. She develops tailored courses for schools and institutes to address the growing challenges faced by both teachers and students.

With over 32 years of experience teaching yoga, 23 years working with children, and 13 years training future yoga teachers, she blends science with movement to create experiential programs for all ages. As a degree-qualified Electrical and Electronic Engineer, she brings precision and structure to her work, integrating functional anatomy, neuroscience, and holistic well-being.

Her courses go beyond movement, helping individuals unlock the brain's transformative potential by understanding how functional movement shapes development. Using age-appropriate techniques tailored to different learning styles, she ensures that every student benefits fully. Currently studying Functional Developmental Behavioural Neuroimmunology, she stays at the forefront of research to deliver cutting-edge training that supports lifelong health and learning.

For more info on her specialised courses, see

www.TheYogaPractice.org/resilienceclassroom

For teachers who would like to learn how to Balance their classrooms see

www.TheYogaPractice.org/yoga-teacher-training-for-school-teachers

Things to do

Please find some links below with various resources and activities for discussing and promoting mental health and wellbeing within your service. If you would like to share anything on the subject with our members then please get in touch.

www.partnershipforchildren.org.uk/what-we-do/wellbeing-activities/

www.westparkprimary.org.uk/wellbeing-activities-from-mrs-jones/

www.redcross.org.uk/get-involved/teaching-resources/wellbeing-activities-being-kind-to-yourself

www.eyalliance.org.uk/simple-ideas-promote-wellbeing-young-kids

Updated Summer Activity Booklet 2025

Although you may have just delivered your spring break holiday and want a rest, you should already be thinking about summer holidays: planning activities, creating programmes and selling places well in advance of the start of summer. We hope that the updated summer activity booklet can help you plan your summer adventures. Download it here:

soscn.org/downloads/news/summer-activities-2025.pdf



Thank you for reading.
Please get in touch
if you have any
comments or would
like to find out more
about anything in this
newsletter.



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