



# Wellbeing Policy

## (R.E.A.L. Independent School)

**Amended on: 31/10/2017**

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**Revision history:**

31/10/17 - Updated and checked. F.Hunter

01/09/2014: - No amendments to policy. Policy duplicated for R.E.A.L. Alternative Provision School.

01/09/2013: - Policy written for R.E.A.L. Independent Schools.

**Ethos - focusing on strengths**



At REAL we choose to adopt a hopeful view of young people. We aim to understand and engage our students from where they are right now.

It is not our aim to judge, diagnose or label the young people we work with. Instead we get alongside our students and help them to work out the best ways forward in their lives.

At the centre of our approach are the principles of being strengths-based in our work with young people:

- All the people we work with, and the situations and environments we work in, possess strengths that can be marshalled to improve young people's lives
  - All environments, no matter how unfavourable, contain resources that can be harnessed to make a difference and we need to actively discover and utilise them
    - An individual's sense that they cannot make a difference to their worries can be counteracted by a focus on individual strengths, even in the most adverse of environments
      - Motivation towards positive change can occur through a consistent emphasis on people's strengths

#### Introduction

We have developed a way of working that draws on four evidence based approaches; positive psychology, emotional literacy and mindfulness, the solution focused and the 'human givens'.

The approach we use can be delivered flexibly, one to one, through small group work, or adapted for use with a class group.

It can have an impact on a wide range of issues, as well as being an enrichment opportunity from which all young people can benefit.

It has been designed by an experienced educational psychologist and draws on evidence-based practice. To support our staff we have developed focused activities that they can use to plan their work, as well as describing ways in which they can interact with young people on a day-to-day basis so that this approach becomes embedded. An example of this way of working is included in the appendix to this policy.



We have developed our practice by providing staff with access to training to aid the wellbeing of the young people that they are working with.

## Outcomes

The approach is designed to help youngsters reflect on how choices and behaviours create both opportunities and limitations in our lives. Securing real and lasting change is what this work is all about. The approach has clear goals for time spent working with the participants:

- To develop their ability to engage in thinking and reflecting on their behaviour
- To develop their understanding of how this affects what they get out of education, as well as their wider life and relationships
- To begin to think about the effect of their behaviour on their future
- To work on their goals about what needs to change to improve things
- To initiate small, positive and observable changes that move them towards their goals

We strive to help young people see the potential for positive change and to achieve small steps towards this which can help them make the most of their potential.

The approach aims to achieve a positive shift in participants' engagement with opportunities in education and beyond and a positive effect on their emotional health and wellbeing. It aims to encourage feelings of energy, confidence, openness, enjoyment, happiness, calm and caring.

## A non-stigmatising approach

This work does not stigmatise or label young people. The tools and resources are positive, grounded and realistic and designed to be translated into day-to-day practice.

It is crucial that we do not label or limit students through a deficit-laden approach. This framework involves using indirect and non-stigmatizing ways of working on strengths and weakness, issues of change, and on the identification and enhancement of positive aspects of behaviour, however small. It is our role to search out and reinforce strengths. We build upon these to bring about wider positive change.



## Being evidence-based

The approach draws on evidence, research, theories and ideas derived from some key areas within psychology and therapeutic work: positive psychology, brief therapy, psychological coaching, the human givens, emotional literacy and mindfulness. Each of these areas has evidence that we can draw on to provide a basis for using the approaches with young people.

Additionally there is evidence about what works with vulnerable youngsters. It is important to be aware that what is good for the many is also good for the few who are vulnerable and at risk.

What works well generally is also exactly what needs to be put in place for those who are experiencing difficulties.

Therefore, what our students need is not different, rarefied, or a complex set of interventions and our aim is not to promote some kind of rarified, clinical approach, where young people are labelled or diagnosed.

Weare (2001) reviewed interventions that were most effective in helping at-risk young people. The results did not point to a very complex or clinical approach. What worked was:

- beginning early
- building self-esteem
- providing personal support
- teaching life skills
- involving peers and parents in the process
- creating a positive ethos

Our approach therefore is focused on identifying and developing strengths, on development of goals, on trying out new, fun and enjoyable things, sharing stories, understanding our mind and bodies and our relationships. Our role is that of being a coach, rather than a therapist or counsellor.

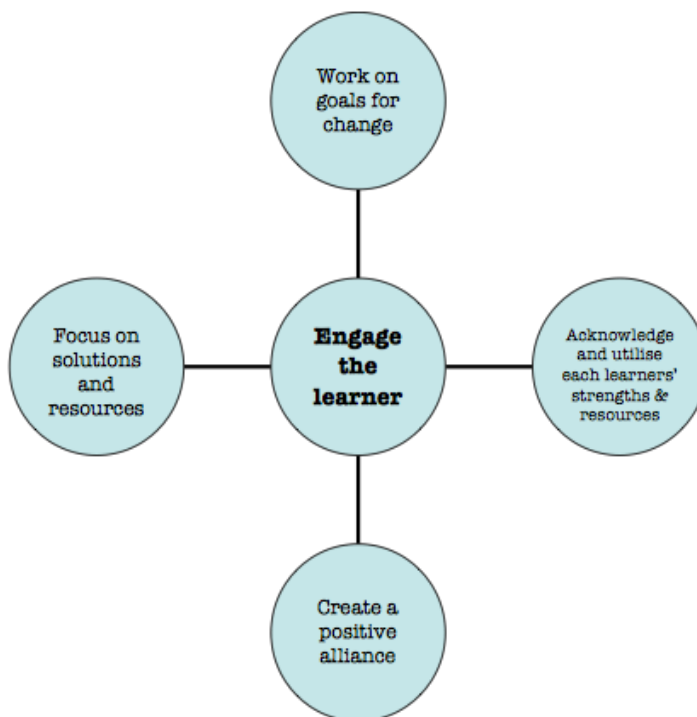
### **How do we do this work? Being a coach to bring about change**

Coaching is the art of facilitating the learning and development of another. It is an approach to unlocking a person's ability to maximize his or her own potential. It is about helping them to learn rather than just teaching them. Some of this challenges traditional thinking about the relationship between a "teacher" and a child. Coaching offers us a challenge as it invites us to



go beyond our habits and assumptions.

There are 5 important aspects of working as a coach: engage the learner; create a positive alliance; work on goals for change; acknowledge and utilize each learner's strengths and resources; focus on solutions and resources. Each one is supported by research evidence.



## Engage each learner

Meeting each child where they are is essential in our work. Hooking youngsters into the work is the first key step. This is often about helping youngsters to have a greater sense of ownership and agency. Brown (1996) and McKinnon (1992) both found that when people felt they had been given a say in matters and presented with options, they responded favourably. When the opposite happened individuals became alienated and disengaged. Thoburn, Lewis and Shemmings (1995) found that when individuals were actively involved in processes 65% of cases had a good outcome.

## Create a positive alliance





Once we have engaged a child we need to extend this to construct a positive alliance for working together. It has been found that having a positive relationship is actually more important than the person's level of expertise or the model or technique being used (Hubble and Miller, 2004). It would seem that, first and foremost, people want to work with a person they feel comfortable with and supported by.

### **Acknowledge and utilize each learner's strengths and resources**

Knowing the child on the basis of their strengths and interests and the resources they can draw on in their life, such as supportive relationships, is another key way in which we work. This is supported by a large-scale research project by Hubble, Duncan and Miller (1999), whose review of outcome studies found that, in therapeutic work when people used their own personal resources it encouraged a positive outcome. O'Neil and McCashen (1991), in work which focused on work with families as a whole, also found that when they acknowledged family strengths, the family members reported that they felt they were viewed more fairly.

Acknowledging young people's strengths is also attractive because it brings a competency-based view of the individual. We begin with the notion that our young people are resourceful and therefore capable of joining in with co-operative relationships. It is therefore our job to create situations that allow this to flourish. We need to actively look for signs, however small, of young people's strengths and aim to utilize them to bring about positive change.

Approaches that harness youngsters' inner strengths and resources are likely to be most effective and therefore this is a key element in how we work.

### **Work on goals for change**

As early as possible in the work, we aim to have clear goals. This means we have a clear sight of the ending from the very beginning. Beginning with the end in mind means that our work with young people can include a focus on how they are progressing towards their goals and how they will recognise the signs they are getting there. Goals should evolve and change as things unfold and be described in clear, descriptive language. Evidence for this way of working includes a family support programme in the US which found that families who were reluctant to engage with services became much more likely to do so when practitioners asked them about their own goals for change from the outset (Becker, Hogue and Little, 2002). We bring this learning into our work by asking youngsters, as soon as it feels appropriate, about the changes



they want to see, who they think can help them and what opportunities are around them. When clear and realistic goals are set, checks can then be made on whether progress is being made towards achieving them.

## Focus on solutions and resources

We need to try to make sure we take a balanced approach. It is really easy to slip into “problem talk” and find that negativity dominates our ways of looking at the world. Whilst it is not a good idea to simply ignore worries and concerns, there is evidence that an extensive focus on problems may well be counter productive. A recent study (Byrd-Craven, Geary, Rose and Ponzi, 2008, in Bannink 2008) shows that extensive discussions about problems and encouragement of ‘problem talk’, for example rehashing the details of problems, speculating about problems and dwelling on negative effects in particular, lead to a significant increase in the stress hormone cortisol, which predicts increased depression and anxiety over time. This shows that, in some ways, focusing on problems almost brings them back to life in the present, even if they are not present or occurring.

There is evidence that the creation of new neural links may be a learning process that remains possible into adulthood. This means our brains retain the ability to continually reshape in ways that allow us to learn and grow with new experiences (Siegel, 1999). Therefore, there is some risk that exclusively talking about problems wires our brain in such a way that we begin to see the world through that lens. Bannink (2008) suggests that by focusing on resiliency, coping and competencies (all examples of solution-talk), new positive neural networks may emerge and old negative ones will ‘die away’, leaving the individual more able to skilfully cope with the challenges and opportunities in their life. Therefore, a focus on the resources that a child can draw on in order to help bring about positive change becomes essential and log

## Appendix

In our programme the area Positive Psychology is divided into six themes:

- Character Strengths
- Confidence/Self Worth/Optimism
- Creative thinking



- Gratitude
- Resilience
- A sense of purpose

Below is an illustrative extract taken from the resources on Character Strengths.

## Character Strengths

Strengths can be described in lots of different ways. Here, we are talking about strengths of character. Your character is what makes you the person you are. It is about how you relate to other people and the world around you. When you are using your true strengths, you feel full of energy. Character strengths are different from talents or skills or knowledge.

Sometimes we talk about character as if it's just one thing – we may say someone has good character or that they don't. But character is actually made up of lots of different strengths and everyone has a different profile of strengths. Character strengths are things like curiosity, bravery, kindness, humour, hope and modesty, and lots more.

Recent evidence suggests that recognising our own strengths and using them in our daily lives can help us build happier, more meaningful lives.

### How do we achieve this with young people?

Examples of day to day interaction:

- Focus on young people's strengths instead of their weaknesses
- Notice young people's strengths and talk about them
- Help young people to think about new ways of using their strengths on a regular basis

### An example of a planned activity:

Top 5 Strengths

Young people aged 10-17 years can do the youth version of the strengths test at [www.authentic happiness.sas.upenn.edu](http://www.authentic happiness.sas.upenn.edu) - click on the "VIA Strength Survey for young people". It will take them about 45 minutes to answer all the questions. Then they will get a rating of their top 5 strengths which are called 'signature' strengths.

Discuss their top five strengths with them. Ask them to think about whether they agree that





these are their top 5. Ensure their understanding of these strengths by asking for examples of when they use each one in their lives.

Don't be surprised if appreciation, forgiveness, modesty and open-mindedness are low on their list. In general, young people and adolescents will find these difficult – they will develop as they get older.

You can do a number of different activities after a group of young people have completed the strengths questionnaire:

If you are working with a group of young people you could:

- compare everyone's top 5 strengths and see how many strengths there are in common. It helps young people to see that everyone has different strengths. It also helps highlight that absolutely everyone has strengths that should be celebrated and valued.
- make one long list of all the top 5 strengths from everyone in the group and put them up on the wall. This helps remind everyone that as a group we are stronger than as an individual. This activity can help to clarify the importance of team work and cooperation with others.
- ask everyone in a group to write up their top five strengths on a piece of paper and play a guessing game - which profile belongs to which person? This helps us to notice strengths in others.
- display signature strengths (or diary them) and then get young people to note and list when they use them – focus their attention on them. Perhaps one each day. Do it as a display and celebrate each time a child achieves
- create a '100 square' reward chart. Each time a strength is used, complete a square with a reward at end

## Positive Outcomes

Why are these things important?

- Research has shown that finding and using our strengths is really important for improving health, happiness and our sense of self-worth. Talking to young people about their strengths and helping them to use their strengths more in their daily lives will enable young people to lead happier, healthier, more fulfilling lives. It will build their confidence



and will help them to flourish.