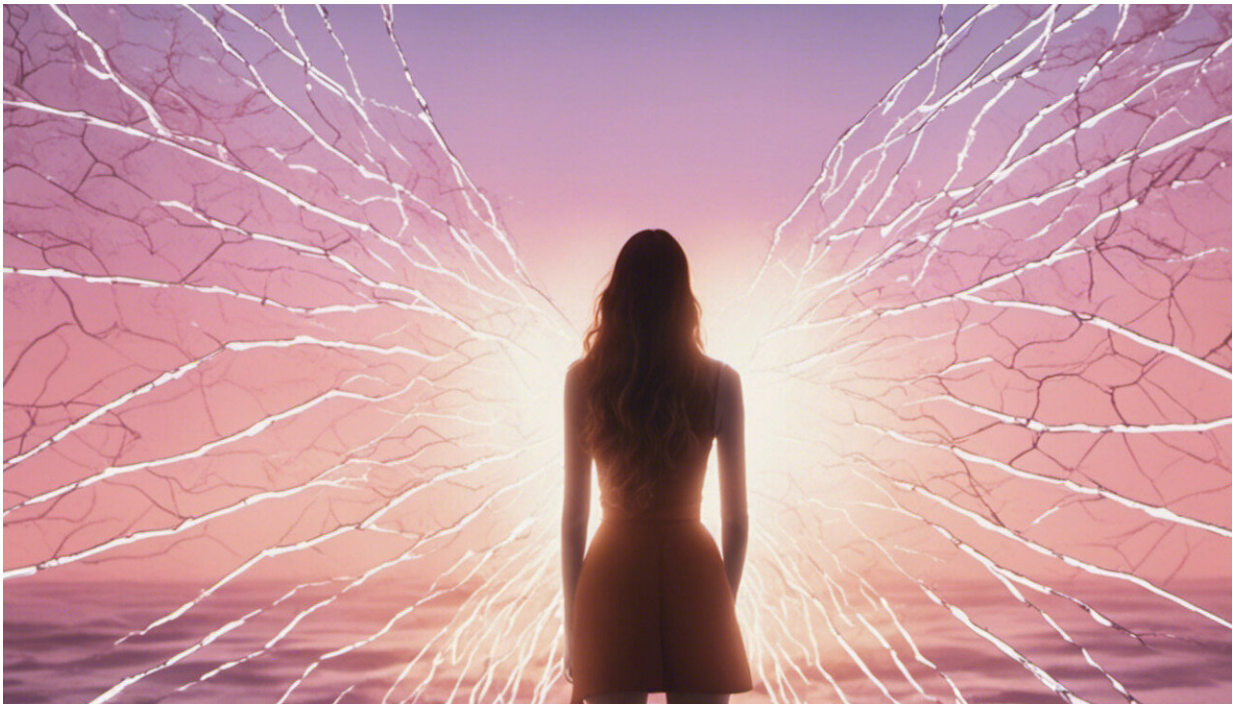


Positive social-emotional environments in schools boost students' mental health

November 28 2022



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

A Murdoch Children's Research Institute (MCRI) led project has shown that fostering a positive social-emotional environment in schools can boost students' mental health.

The Wellcome Trust's Active Ingredients for Youth Anxiety and

Depression Commission last year announced the 21 research teams from around the world who had been awarded funds to review the evidence for an "[active ingredient](#)," a promising intervention for preventing, treating or managing anxiety and depression in those aged 14–24. The aim was to identify the next generation of approaches that tackle [mental health issues](#) affecting [young people](#).

Dr. Monika Raniti, Dr. Divyangana Rakesh, Professor Susan Sawyer and Professor George Patton were commissioned to explore the role of school connectedness, defined as how much a student feels accepted, valued and supported in their educational environment, in preventing future depression and anxiety. The review was undertaken in partnership with a group of youth advisors from Australia, Indonesia, and the Philippines.

The [systematic review](#) of 36 international studies, published in *BMC Public Health*, overwhelmingly found that higher levels of school connectedness predicted lower levels of depressive and anxiety symptoms in young people in [high school](#).

Dr. Raniti said improving school connectedness was a beneficial way to promote well-being and a promising intervention to prevent [mental health problems](#) in adolescents.

"Schools are an important resource for influencing the mental [health](#) of young people," she said. Current approaches to mental health in young people have primarily focussed on developing mental health literacy and delivering mental health services. Our findings focused on prevention and reorientating the role of schools by expanding the repertoire of levers to include developing social-emotional skills, creating safe and inclusive environments and providing a sense of community and support for students, parents and families.

"School connectedness recognizes the profound effects of young people's social-emotional environments on mental health, which in turn can benefit learning."

Depression and anxiety affects about one in four young people, with evidence of increasing prevalence in recent years due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic such as multiple lockdowns.

Professor Sawyer said while improving access to effective treatments was important, prevention was essential to reduce the incidence and burden of mental health symptoms.

"Prevention approaches for youth depression and anxiety have commonly focussed on schools, viewing the school curriculum as an intervention platform," she said. Yet overall these interventions have small effects that are not sustained over time. School connectedness can be seen as two sides of the one coin, an active ingredient that is potentially as relevant for both health and learning outcomes. What we now need are mental health interventions associated with whole school environments."

As part of the project, the youth advisors shared that school connectedness encompassed feelings of acknowledgement, relationships characterized by empathy and the creation of a genuine and welcoming school environment.

A youth adviser, 16, from Australia said, "You've got that [social aspect](#), but you've also got extra-curricular activities, how you're going through your studies, your classes, if you're enjoying them, it's engagement... being supported in all aspects of your well-being, it's the positive emotions, it's the relationships, it's the meaning, it's engagement, the accomplishment, it's all of that. Once you feel supported in all these areas is when you feel connected."

Another youth adviser, 18, from Indonesia, said, "If I had all the money in the world... it would be that everyone in the [school](#) really cares about their students, they know their interests, and their names, and every time they talk about something they just connect in a really genuine way."

More information: Monika Raniti et al, The role of school connectedness in the prevention of youth depression and anxiety: a systematic review with youth consultation, *BMC Public Health* (2022). [DOI: 10.1186/s12889-022-14364-6](https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-022-14364-6)

Provided by Murdoch Children's Research Institute

Citation: Positive social-emotional environments in schools boost students' mental health (2022, November 28) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2022-11-positive-social-emotional-environments-schools-boost.html>

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