

Joy to the world: Priscilla Alderson on how to protect children from mental distress
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Years ago, a residential Quaker meeting seemed to be contradictory. Some sessions were on nurturing peaceful inner spirituality. Others sessions, on vital problems to tackle from international injustice to the climate emergency, stirred up anxiety and distress. I asked a group of older Quakers, what should we do first? Work on our own inner being, or help to sort out the world? 'They both have to go together,' the Friends wisely replied. This double process recognises how our thoughts and feelings are integral to three other aspects of daily life: bodies and nature, relationships, and social systems.

Our bodies and personal wellbeing constantly interact with the natural world, in the food we eat, the air we breathe, in physical exercise and, if possible, enjoyment of gardens, parks and countryside. Many young people are depressed by hunger or feel hyper on a poor diet. They may be ill from cold damp housing or isolated in high rise flats afraid to venture into violent streets. These personal embodied worries are magnified by eco-anxieties especially felt by young people: fear and sorrow about destroyed rain forests, polluted rivers, and massive fires, floods and droughts that harm millions of people besides many other species. Talking to young people about these physical worries is important. Yet since we experience and express everything through our bodies, practical support for healthy habits and activities are also vital.

Long waits for mental healthcare can increase the lonely helplessness it is intended to reduce. This links to the second level, interpersonal relationships. These continually shape our mental health for better or worse, often moving in positive upward spirals or negative downward ones. Some schools have high rates of 'offending', punishment and exclusion. Other schools work with love and joy, where everyone feels valued and safe, and with no punishments or rewards, such as Barrowford primary school in Lancashire. The children and adults work to change things for the better, and all are ready to admit when they might be wrong and can learn new ways through respectful critical listening. They nurture courage and confidence to believe that they can work together to reduce the huge problems of climate change, and antiracism, and phobias about gender and sexuality (all related to our bodies). This school and many other positive examples are on the Quaker Values in Education website: <https://qvine.org.uk>.

The interpersonal examples link to the third level, social systems that include: families, workplaces and communities; health, transport and many other services; sports, arts and religious groups; social and mass media, business and trade; local, national and international economic and political systems. All can benefit or harm our health. Many may seem inexorably fixed and remote. Yet if changes are attempted only in small local ways, they may have only few and brief effects. Healthy happy schools need large-scale supports: adequate

government policies and funding, staff and buildings, resources and freedoms. Years of international struggle by young school students, which gradually led to schools having to teach about climate change, challenged local, national and international traditions and systems.

So promoting interrelated physical, mental and social wellbeing involves all four levels: healthy active bodies and environments, interpersonal relationships, social systems and each child's inner being, their thinking, feeling and spirituality. For example, Restorative Justice (RJ)Working (<https://rjworking.co.uk>) involves Cornish children and young people. They work in the Trebah Garden, using nature to increase their confidence, communication, problem-solving skills and adaptability whilst helping nature to thrive. The children also strive to reduce inequalities and tackle injustice restoratively in the belief everyone should access Restorative principles as part of their education. This involves learning through practical training how to better look after themselves and each other, in person and online. Young people who have failed and been harmed may learn most from their own experiences and become the best leaders of restorative practices.

When in groups they tackle, for example, racism, children can increase their solidarity and commitment to justice, without needing to be rescued or led by adults. They learn about different points of view, and how to make peace between those who are harmed and those who caused harm. They share practical ways to solve problems in solidarity, to strengthen fairer communities, and may then build connections across the world. In Northern Ireland, these methods have transformed conflict and crime and empowered young people's part in politics. Practical (embodied) RJ Working children's shared activities include drama, artwork, gardening, and becoming Nature Champions in their schools.

Quaker values are central here: to live adventurously and make fullest use of opportunities to promote peace and justice; through faith to be committed to peace and nonviolence; to witness to the unique worth of each person, every culture, and the fullness of life on earth; to contribute to the health and integrity of all our relationships, from local to global. The report *Peace at the Heart** values the promise of each child to flourish, supporting the common hopes of young people to shape a more just, inclusive world through peace education. 'To cultivate healthier ways of relating to one another and to society aims to enhance wellbeing, promote inclusion, and encourage conscientious engagement in the social challenges of our times.'

Individual counselling avoids addressing actual external causes of anxiety and depression when it cannot directly improve young people's physical wellbeing, or change either the individuals or social systems that hurt them. There may be counterproductive emphasis on the expert adult rescuing the weak needy child. Unduly concentrating on the young individual's feelings risks centring the problems into his or her mind, and thereby potentially

blaming the victim: 'it's your fault if you fail to learn to cope'. Teachers may blame the 'sick child' instead of seeing how their school distresses many young people and needs to change.

Besides the formal curriculum of maths and so on, the informal curriculum of how school students and teachers live and work together provides powerful life-long influences. Young people who do not learn at school how to share and prevent and resolve problems together may become nervous vulnerable adults, fearing their neighbours who overly rely on pills or paid experts such as social workers or police. Alternatively, schools encourage resilient self-help and problem-solving within supportive families, communities and larger networks. Children and young people are then seen as invaluable resources who generate and co-create wellbeing.

* *Peace at the Heart: a relational approach to education in British schools* (<https://www.quaker.org.uk/documents/peace-at-the-heart>, 2022).

This article grew out of a Woodbrooke online discussion (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vKza2shYK4Y>, 15/2/23) about articles on fear and love in *Friends Quarterly*, January 2023. My article, 'Is love infinite?', was partly a response to Rob Faure Walker's forthcoming book on love, and that was inspired by Roy Bhaskar's *The Philosophy of MetaReality: Creativity, Love and Freedom* (Routledge, 2012).

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