

MENTAL HEALTH AND EMOTIONAL WELLBEING AT SCHOOLS IN POLAND

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24th May 2021

In Poland in 2018 a study *Health and Lifestyle of Polish Pupils* was conducted. Among other indicators, the life satisfaction was examined. According to this study, the mean level of life satisfaction among the 7th grade pupils (13 years old) is 7.1 points on a scale of 1–10, with boys having a significantly higher mean level of life satisfaction than girls. More than 1/5 of the surveyed teenagers were dissatisfied with life, twice as many girls (28.2%) as boys (14.2).

In the HBSC study in 2018, 16% of adolescents were dissatisfied with their lives in the overall group of 11-15 years of age. Dissatisfaction with life is significantly greater in girls (almost twice). The percentage of dissatisfied with life increases with the age of respondents.

Only 1/3 of the surveyed 7th grade pupils show a high level of the sense of meaning in life. Compared to girls, boys have a significantly higher average level. Girls are twice as often dissatisfied with their life. On the other hand, they feel lonely significantly less often than boys.

Studies conducted in Poland from spring 2020 to spring 2021 confirmed that the year-long period of the COVID-19 epidemic has significantly weakened the mental condition of pupils. Also, fulfilling the educational role by parents and teachers is significantly difficult during the epidemic. This is due to the additional burden and stresses associated with epidemic threats, but also with isolation, remote learning, and remote work. Weakened mental condition of children and adolescents during an epidemic and isolation is a factor contributing to the growth of risky and problem behaviors both during and after the epidemic duration. The lack of preventive measures in the period of a prolonged crisis state could lead to a significant deterioration of the mental health of children and adolescents, and in the long term it could also cause a growth in risky behaviors and problems (including substance abuse, violence, behavioral addictions, etc.).

Due to the prolonged epidemic period and the resulting physical, psychological, and social consequences, an appropriate response of the education system to the serious challenges in the area of education, mental health and prevention of problems of children and adolescents is necessary. There is a need to provide children and adolescents with educational and preventive support in various forms and on the broadest possible scale.

Now in June 2021 in Poland, all classes from primary and secondary schools return to full time at schools. Ministry of Education and Science prepared guidelines for activities of pupils, parents and teaching staff upon return to schools. It contains recommendations for the teaching staff of schools, a description of activities addressed to pupils, recommendations for cooperation with parents, requirements for the activities of psychological and pedagogical counseling centers and arrangements for education superintendents. The aim is to support students in returning to full-time education after a long period of remote learning.

Headmasters should have the possibility to decide about the priorities and variants of the implementation related to the education, prevention, and mental support of pupils. Reducing the requirements in schools is a prerequisite for equalizing educational opportunities between pupils who go through the pandemic well due to greater mental resilience or effective support from their loved ones, and pupils who do not have such support, are more psychologically sensitive or have special educational needs.

Some of the factors that may significantly affect the solutions chosen are the following: different size and conditions of schools, socio-demographic characteristics of local communities, levels of epidemic risk in the regions, different levels of digital exclusion of students during remote learning. In a completely new situation of an epidemic, distance learning, hybrid learning and the return to classroom teaching, it is very necessary to collect good practices regarding specific activities and methods of educational and preventive support and to organize their exchange at the national, regional and local level. When developing solutions, one cannot forget about those students who during the epidemic were confronted by special problems resulting from their life, family, or health situation. If the relationship between teachers, parents and students is based on kindness and trust, any form of action to strengthen the mental condition of pupils will be implemented more fully, efficiently and with better results.

At the end of the school year 2020/2021 (May-June) and in the 1st semester of the next 2021/2022 school year, intensification of school activities should be aimed at:

- Improving the mental condition of pupils. Building good relationships and reintegrating classes. After returning to full time, it is important to carry for the mental condition of students (ordinary conversations, interest in pupils' experiences, simple integration games, preliminary diagnosis of the number of students in very bad mental condition who may require more help).
- Help in adapting to the rhythm of full-time or hybrid learning (and possibly also helping to adapt to the next school closure period).