

# Policy Brief

## Fostering Positive Childhood Experiences in Schools is Vital for Improving Youth Mental Health in Ireland

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“

It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men

— Frederick Douglass

”

### Executive Summary



Youth mental health in Ireland is under increasing strain, with rising rates of anxiety, depression, and self-harm among children, adolescents and young adults. While significant attention has been given to reducing Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), less emphasis has been placed on actively promoting Positive Childhood Experiences (PCEs) — factors that support optimal development and long-term wellbeing. *This brief outlines the evidence base for PCEs, reviews existing Irish policy initiatives, and recommends actionable steps to integrate PCE promotion into school-based mental health and youth wellbeing strategies.*

### What is the Problem?



Mental illness is the single biggest cause of disability among young people worldwide and a major public health concern [1]. The risk of developing a mental illness is highest during adolescence and early adulthood, with most conditions starting around age 15 and the majority appearing by 25 [2]. A 2023 survey found that 3 in 5 young Irish adults reported some experience of depression, 4 in 5 reported having anxiety, and 1 in 10 under 25 were currently experiencing depression [3]. Initiatives such as the *Young Ireland: National Policy Framework for Children and Young People (2023-2028)* [4], and *Sharing the Vision: A Mental Health Policy for Everyone (2020)* [5] recognise protective environments and experiences but lack explicit action items for embedding PCEs, particularly within the school setting.



## What Do We Know?



Early life environments, including positive and adverse childhood experiences, are particularly formative and provide the bedrock for social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development over the life course [6,7].

### ACEs

Adverse childhood experiences or ACEs are traumatic events experienced before the age of 18, and include **neglect, abuse, family or household dysfunction** and other sources of adversity [8]. Experiencing abuse, neglect, or other serious challenges at home or in the community can cause extreme stress in children. When this stress is intense and lasts a long time, it can harm their health and development, leading to problems later in life [9]. ACEs have been shown to increase risk for several health problems, including mental illness, chronic disease, and problematic substance use, leading to decreased productivity and ultimately shorter life expectancy in adulthood [10]. Unfortunately, avoiding ACEs is not always possible.

### PCEs

Positive childhood experiences or PCEs can buffer against the harmful effects of ACEs and help all children reach their full potential. Sometimes called counter-ACEs, advantageous or benevolent childhood experiences [11], PCEs are **protective or promotive factors** experienced between birth and age 18 that support healthy development and wellbeing [12]. Examples of PCEs include favourable experiences, resources or assets such as:

- feeling a sense of belonging in school
- social connection with peers and trusted adults
- having opportunities to learn and develop
- feeling safe, loved, and supported by family
- participation in community traditions and activities [13,14].



## What Are Some of the Challenges & Gaps?



- Exposure to childhood adversity often happens in the home and is difficult to prevent.
- Fragmented approaches to wellbeing promotion across education, health, and youth sectors.
- Gaps in mental health training for educators and childcare providers.
- Limited measurement of PCEs in national surveys and service evaluations.

# What can Be Done?



We can capitalise on existing supports and the school environment to strengthen the promotion of positive childhood experiences through the following recommended actions:

<b>Embed PCEs in National Frameworks</b>	Update the <i>Young Ireland: National Policy Framework</i> [4] to explicitly integrate PCEs as a core protective factor for youth wellbeing.
<b>Expand School-Based Programmes</b>	Scale up Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) curricula, restorative practice, and peer-mentoring models across the junior cycle.
<b>Enhance Training for Educators</b>	Implement mandatory mental health and trauma-informed training for all educators across primary and post-primary schools.
<b>Measure and Monitor PCEs</b>	Incorporate validated PCE indicators into the <i>Growing Up in Ireland</i> longitudinal study and HSE youth mental health monitoring tools.

## Conclusion



Fostering PCEs is key to ensuring the wellbeing of future generations in Ireland. By embedding PCEs into existing and future national strategies, policymakers can create a more supportive environment for children to thrive. Strengthening these efforts is an actionable step towards addressing the youth mental health crisis and will proactively contribute to better long-term mental health, physical health and social outcomes for all.

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# Thank You

