Introducing Professor Tamsin Ford

As Professor of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at the University of Exeter Medical School, Tamsin Ford leads a group of researchers conducting studies into the effectiveness of services and interventions supporting the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people. This includes studying the patterns of service use and access; service organisation; how psychological distress is identified and the effectiveness of interventions. More recently this work has expanded into exploring how schools and teachers can support the mental wellbeing of pupils. At the medical school Professor Ford is also the lead for integrated clinical academic training for junior doctors and medical students.

Professor Ford is also an honorary consultant child and adolescent psychiatrist at Devon Partnership Trust, a Fellow of the Royal College of Psychiatrists, the chair of the Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Surveillance Service, a founder member of the Child Outcome Research Consortium and on the Board of the Association of Child and Adolescent Mental Health. Recently she was awarded a CBE for her services to psychiatry.

Top Takeaways from the ‘Get a Grip’ Blog with Professor Tamsin Ford: Improving Young People’s Mental Health

1. The best approaches to support a young person with behavioural problems will involve working with the young person, their parents and their teachers. Professor Ford is currently working on the STARS trial (Supporting Teachers And childRen in Schools), studying the effectiveness of a 6 day training course for teachers to help them support children with behavioural problems more effectively in schools. A programme for parents (The Incredible Years) has already been researched and is used worldwide, but Professor Ford explains teachers need more support in using effective strategies for managing poor behaviour.

2. The programmes for teachers and parents are both based on the well-established findings that noticing and paying attention to positive behaviour and rewarding this behaviour will lead to improvements in behaviour and this is much more effective than the use of sanctions following poor behaviour.

3. Research has indicated that the teacher-pupil relationship can have an impact on the mental health of the child. Also, for children growing up in difficult circumstances, with multiple adverse life events during their childhood, having at least one positive adult-child relationship can reduce the likelihood of later mental illness. This may often be a particular teacher who helped the child develop some sense of self-worth, positive regard and resilience.

4. Professor Ford notes poor pupil behaviour is difficult for teachers, especially if they have not been shown effective strategies to deal with it. Highlighting data on the high prevalence of depression and psychological distress in teachers and the numbers of teachers leaving the profession, Professor Ford stresses the importance of good teacher training.

5. For leaders of primary schools, Professor Ford’s main advice is to ensure students with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) are supported as much as possible. She explains that providing as much support as possible to these students benefits all. Professor Ford recognises the budget constraints and urges head teachers to make sure they do the best with the resources they have and understand that some support or
strategies may be low cost. Working with the family is always important. Lobbying for more resources may also be necessary.

6. For leaders of secondary schools, Professor Ford suggests tackling bullying is key as lots of evidence shows that bullying is a big risk factor for poor mental health. Head teachers should promote a school culture where it is less and less acceptable to be a bystander to bullying, recognising that without bystanders bullying does not persist. Professor Ford also encourages schools to have clear referral processes and sign posting for staff, parents and pupils indicating where to get more help with mental health if needed.

7. While our genes, environment and life events can make us more vulnerable to poor mental health we can all help reduce the likelihood of experiencing mental illness by eating well, sleeping well and handling stress proactively. Other factors which are associated with greater resilience include having a good support network and having positive adult/child experiences.

8. Parents need to help children understand, name and express feelings in words rather than in temper tantrums or other unhelpful behaviour. To learn how to manage their feelings, children will need to experience feelings of worry, disappointment, frustration, boredom, sadness, anger and so on. It is important to help children learn from their mistakes and become reflective so they can start to think for themselves ‘What went wrong? What did I have control over? What could I do differently next time?’ It can be very powerful for a parent to model this kind of reflective self-talk when they get something wrong.

9. Recent findings of surveys looking at mental health in children and adolescents give incident rates of poor mental health but as they are cross sectional and not longitudinal these studies are not able to tell us why rates of poor mental health are higher in teenage girls than boys or whether social media is increasing levels of distress in young people.

10. While we might not fully understand why young people are experiencing such levels of anxiety, we do know effective ways to combat it. We should help children gradually face their fears, showing them breathing exercises, helpful self-talk and instilling in our children a sense of competence - a belief that they can cope. It would be really helpful for children to see that grown-ups or older siblings can feel anxious but that they use strategies to overcome any anxious feelings. It is also really helpful to recognise and acknowledge when a child does something they find challenging and anxiety provoking as this will help them reflect on what they did to overcome their worries and to see themselves as capable. ‘Wow, you tried this new thing, I know you found it difficult and were nervous beforehand but you had a go so well done. What did you do to help you be brave and have a go? Did you take a deep breath and tell yourself you’d be ok? That’s what I do when I have to do something new and I feel nervous? Is there anything else you do that helps?’

11. Although it is natural to want to shield our children from upset, Professor Ford explains that when there are difficulties in the family (bereavement, separation, illness etc.) children usually pick-up that something is going on and if the adults are not talking to them in an age appropriate way about what’s going on, then children may think that they should not talk about their worries.

12. Professor Ford urges parents to not be afraid to explore their child’s fears or worries and advises that side by side conversations (rather than face to face) when driving, or walking can feel more comfortable, especially for teenagers. The message to get across to our children is “It’s ok, I can listen and I am strong enough to hear what you want to talk about”.

13. As yet, data from studies is not able to say whether screen time or access to social media is harmful for children at a certain age. It probably depends on the reasons for using screens or social media. Using screens for homework could be helpful whereas posting selfies and trying to attract likes could be harmful. Parents should find out what the school recommends and it is very important for parents to have conversations with their children about social media before handing them a phone. Professor Ford explained that with her own children she used parental controls, when younger her children would use the computer in the family room so she could see what they were looking at and the family had plenty of conversations about on-line safety. She also advised her children that if they received an unkind text they should: 1) delete the text/post 2) don’t engage and 3) tell
someone. She also was prepared to turn off the internet during night if her children were not sleeping due to being online.

14. For parents of teenagers, Professor Ford gave the advice; give children your time and space to talk to you about whatever they want to talk to you about and don’t worry about being ‘perfect’ as the fear of not getting it right can inhibit parents from broaching subjects which need to be discussed.

More from Professor Tamsin Ford

Podcast – in this podcast, found on the Association of Child and Adolescent Mental Health website, Professor Ford is interviewed about her career and research findings. https://www.acamh.org/blog/professor-tamsin-ford

Resources highlighted by Professor Tamsin Ford

Healthy Schools aim to raise attainment and achievement in schools by improving the health and wellbeing of pupils: https://www.healthyschools.org.uk/

MindEd is a free educational resource on children and young people's mental health for all adults: https://www.minded.org.uk/

The Association for Child and Adolescent Mental Health aims to raise standards in the understanding and management of child mental health issues and are committed to sharing information and best practice: https://www.acamh.org