Health and wellbeing is more than just the absence of an illness. It includes our physical health and safety, social and emotional health, spiritual wellness and subjective sense of wellbeing. Social and emotional wellbeing is an important aspect and has an impact on physical health, quality of life and personal achievements.

Social and emotional wellbeing is a broad term that includes feelings, behaviour, relationships, goals and personal strengths. When our feelings are managed constructively and not causing too much distress, and we are able to maintain positive and effective relationships with others, we could be said to be in a state of social and emotional wellbeing. Wellbeing might be displayed differently depending on culture, temperament and individual differences.

Another term for social and emotional wellbeing is mental health, which is different from mental illness. Mental health is a positive capacity, as described above for social and emotional wellbeing. Mental illness is a collective term for a number of medical conditions that can adversely affect our feelings, behaviour and relationships. Some people prefer the term social and emotional wellbeing to mental health, because of the stigma associated with mental illness.

The term resilience is related to social and emotional wellbeing, but is not exactly the same. Resilience is the capacity to deal constructively with change or challenges, allowing a person to maintain or re-establish their social and emotional wellbeing in the face of difficult events.

Health, wellbeing and resilience are not static but will change over time. Wellbeing is a continuum, ranging from optimal wellness through to serious illness. This can apply to both our physical and social or emotional wellbeing.

It may also be helpful to clarify the difference between social and emotional wellbeing and social and emotional learning (SEL). SEL is the process of acquiring particular skills or competencies that help to build our resilience and maintain our wellbeing. We learn these skills through our relationships, social interactions, observation of others and sometimes through formal learning in the curriculum. Relevant skills would include communication skills, social skills, problem-solving, negotiation and the capacity to understand the views and feelings of others.

What can teachers do to support Social and Emotional Wellbeing?

Teachers can play an important role in supporting the social and emotional wellbeing of children in their care. Promoting social and emotional wellbeing from an early age and throughout childhood is thought to be associated with more positive behaviour, better academic achievement and improved health and wellbeing, even into adulthood.

Strategies for teachers include:

• promote caring and respectful relationships among all children and staff

• model the language and behaviour that you want children to demonstrate

• negotiate high but achievable goals and provide support to help students reach these

• help children to identify and pursue their own interests and goals where possible
• have clear expectations for behaviour and use positive behaviour management strategies
• use a variety of instructional techniques to cater for different learning styles
• provide opportunities for collaborative play and learning to develop social skills
• promote a developmentally appropriate understanding of emotions eg through interactions, stories etc
• involve children in decision making, problem solving and setting group rules
• acknowledge achievements and success, while offering support and constructive feedback in other areas.

Sources and Further Reading
