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ROBUST YOUTH – A program in mental health and life skills

What is Robust Youth?

Robust Youth is a 3-year program in mental health and life skills for youth age 13 – 15 years old in secondary schools in Norway. The teaching has a playful approach to promote the students' well-being and sense of belonging. Through structured exercises the students build relations while at the same time training their social-emotional skills. This can happen through developing inner awareness, learning to understand one's own and others' feelings and needs, developing responsibility for others, seeing oneself as part of a larger context and understanding society's complexity. The approach is built on positive psychology and cognitive-behavioural psychology. The exercises and tools are freely available at www.robustungdom.no.

Why?

We need to work on young people's sense of connection in our prevention work. Lack of belonging is a major risk factor for the development of later problems. Bullying and the feeling of being left out of society are risk factors as well. Many students go through schooltime without feeling included, safe and relaxed among their peers in the classroom. In health promotion and prevention work we need to focus on social support, sense of belonging, opportunities and skills training.

Prevention rooted in the classroom

We want to minimize risk factors and strengthen protective factors in the teenagers workplace: The classroom. Schools and classroom environments are important because young people spend so much time there. For many students schools are the gateway to feeling they belong to society. The most efficient way to create bonds and practice social skills between humans is through playful non-competitive activities. The pupils get to know each other better and at the same time build an inclusive and safer class environment.

What is the scope?

The school sets aside 2 hours a month, seven times a year, in three years. The students get at total of 46 hours of short lectures, practical exercises, cooperative learning and cooperative games. During three years, the students learn up to 60 different cooperative games. The teenagers highlight play as the biggest success factor for greater security and a sense of community in the class.

Teaching in collaboration with the municipality

The first part of the teaching is a short lecture given by a trained teacher or specialist. It can be a health nurse, psychologist, social worker or others who want to communicate to young people, in addition to school staff. The lecture lasts 15 minutes and contains short film examples. Several classes are taught simultaneously to save time.

Collaborative learning in the classrooms

The second part of the teaching lasts 90 minutes. The teacher is the process leader. The work in the classroom consists of storytelling, resting exercises, cooperative exercises, cooperative learning, and non-competitive cooperative play. Each collection follows a fixed timetable that provides predictability and recognition. The teaching is based on structured collaborative learning and little ordinary joint teaching. The rationale is simple: We learn most when we are active and interacting. The pupils need to gain knowledge, but they must primarily practice social and emotional skills and action competence. The students get training in talking to others and practice in presenting themselves.

The content

Students gain concrete knowledge and simple tools to strengthen their own and others' mental health. They learn about thoughts, feelings, breathing, stress, attention, sleep, cooperation, communication, resolving conflicts, taking the other person's perspective, comforting a friend, about self-esteem, and about external influencing factors that are important for mastering one's own life, such as class environment, social pressure, economy and home environment. They practice knowledge, attitudes and actions through exercises and through play. The program aim to foster social skills, communications skills and emotional skills.

Student participation

Student participation is important in Robust Youth. One student from each class participates in a psychosocial group. The resource students are tasked with following the teaching, helping with games and exercises in class, evaluating along the way and contributing to the development of the psychosocial work. The students are experience consultants and the school's most important agents of change.

Message

Sense of belonging is extremely important in prevention work. We want the teachers to be aware that creating safe and positive classroom environments is possible everywhere, and that it is an important contribution to promoting pupils' mental health and preventing problems. We want teenagers to be aware that mental health is not a fixed condition, but is created every day by the way we treat others and ourselves.

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