

SPREADING A NEW VIRUS...

"...happiness, optimism and sense of fun are dispositions that are significant to their emotional wellbeing and resilience".

Page 7, 'My Time, Our Place'.

"My Time, Our Place" spells it out – happiness, optimism and sense of fun are key contributors to emotional wellbeing and resilience. So are you a 'killjoy' in the lives of children or the team you work with?

The first test that you are indeed a 'killjoy' is that as soon as you read my statement you felt resentment. Your mind went to ALL the reasons why children cannot have 'fun' and the impossible restrictions that you are required to enforce. You will be dwelling on the possibilities for harm, fines and, worse still, legal action.

But would it help if I told you that the restrictions on our happiness, our optimism and our sense of fun are ones we set for ourselves? Or sometimes, ones that others set for us?

Believe it or not you may be a 'psychic vampire' or been spending way too much time with one!

The Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Jung wrote, "Emotions are contagious." His theory is borne out by years of scientific studies on how moods and emotions are transmitted between

people like a virus. Known as 'emotional contagion' or 'mood contagion' it is a process whereby people mimic others' expressions of emotions such as facial expressions, gestures, and vocalisations, which results in the actual experience of similar emotions (Hatfield et al., 1994). "Emotional contagion happens within milliseconds, so quick you can't control it, and so subtly that you're not really aware it's going on," said Dr. Elaine Hatfield, from the University of Hawaii. "It's critical that people understand emotional contagion is not just a self-contained phenomenon that

ends with the 'catching' of the emotion," she said. "This contagion then influences our cognition and behaviour — and we often don't even realise the process is happening."

Whilst what we say and how we speak is important, so too are facial expressions and body language. Research has shown that people's emotions are more influenced by the other non-verbal cues that the person is sending.

Understanding this research and being aware of 'emotional contagion' in our interactions is critically important in whatever role we play in a child's life. For OSHC service environments it can mean the difference between a happy and relaxed environment and one where children are stressed and behaviour issues are rife.

On a biological level, humans are designed to mimic

"For OSHC service environments it can mean the difference between a happy and relaxed environment and one where children are stressed and behaviour issues are rife."

others. It is how we learn and socialise. Research shows that primates, including humans, have distinct types of neurons in the brain that fire when watching someone else carry out an action, even when we ourselves are not doing the same thing. Such neurons help prime us to understand and identify with other people. This mimicry is more pronounced in young humans and has the potential to impact on a child's long term emotional and social development.

The research depicts moods as akin to social viruses, with some people having a natural ability to transmit them while others are more susceptible to contagion. These same moods, no matter how unpleasant, can then

perpetuate themselves, reinforcing themselves and spreading amongst individuals depending on how susceptible they are to contagion. The more dominant personality frequently has the greater impact. This understanding means that the adults we are exposing our children to should be positive role models or the consequences for our children's mental health and wellbeing could be serious.

This of course does not mean we have to be permanent 'bundles of fun' but a general optimistic and positive approach with a proactive attitude to setbacks is going to have the best effect on children and our workmates. It teaches children that even when there is a set back or disappointment there remains an opportunity to smile and look for a positive – a good foundation for acquiring resilience! Research supports the assertion that people who elicit positive emotions are more popular, whilst those individuals eliciting more negative emotions

have an increased chance of being identified as practicing counterproductive workplace behaviors. Many of us know of at least one person who, whenever faced with a change or a different way of doing things, immediately responds negatively. Some of us have worked with individuals who make it their mission in life to remain pessimistic. These individuals are not only a negative influence in the workplace (Felps, Mitchell, & Byington, 2006) but a negative influence on our children and if we are really serious about children's health and wellbeing we should get serious about working with the individual to take a more positive approach or find another job.

In our life today we see many examples of emotional contagion through the power of advertising, reality TV and social media, all of which are large-scale emotional



and cognitive contagion examples. Understanding emotional contagion can help us to understand human history, be it Hitler fanning the hatred of Jews or Martin Luther King spreading his message of unity and equality.

Awareness of the existence of emotional contagion is essential in understanding and supporting our own interpersonal communication with children. There are multiple paths through which contagion can occur, and several processes interact to produce the effect.

Perhaps the most readily identified example of mood contagion is laughter. We appear to have an almost automatic laugh reaction in response to others' laughter. In many cases once laughter commences it is very difficult to stop, particularly in children. We all have experiences of small children laughing hysterically at others laughing and in between gulps of air they ask, "What are we laughing at?". Research undertaken by Dr Robert Provine, at the University of Maryland-Baltimore County shows that we are thirty times more likely to laugh in the presence of other people than by ourselves. "Laughter is a social relationship between people," said Provine. "The essential ingredient is another person."

Physiological research on humour also indicates that the appreciation of humor corresponds to regions of the brain being activated that have previously been associated with reward (dopamine) and the processing of positive emotions (Mobbs et al., 2003).

In our work with children it would be useful to reflect on how often humour or laughter is heard in your environment. Knowing that these two ingredients are essential for receiving a healthy dose of dopamine should be enough for all of us to see them as essential daily offerings in the service environment.

So how contagious are you? What you are doing in your daily life to be more happy, optimistic, and to rediscover your sense of fun? How are you encouraging happiness, optimism and a sense of fun to become the new 'virus' in your work with children?

It's a virus worth spreading for the emotional wellbeing of children!

