

HYDESVILLE TOWER SCHOOL

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“Brexit negotiations hitting a standstill? Send in the kids” says Mr Warren Honey, Headmaster at Hydesville Tower School in Walsall.

How long has it been going on now? It feels as if there has never been a time when radio or television was not carrying a Brexit story. As the anchor introduces the European editor, I find myself twitching nervously: never helpful when driving a car! Trembling, I await the inevitable doom-laden message of hard borders, backstops, belligerent negotiators and mutinous cabinets (new range, soon to be released by Ikea).

Indefatigable. It is the word that comes to mind when considering a child’s persistence. At the school gates on Friday, as I wearily looked forward to a fortnight’s holiday, a Year 2 pupil approached me. “How old are you?” came the innocent question, which with the artistry of the chronologically-challenged, I evaded. Again it came. Parried. Using the sort of techniques usually only seen in television shows portraying extreme interrogation, he switched to good cop: “My dad is bigger than you.”. I’m used to this one, partly because it is a favourite of children, and partly because most dads seem to be bigger than me. But it was simply a ruse, a masterstroke, a coup-de-grace. Three more requests of my age and I was revealing my date of birth, address and probably PIN numbers and National Insurance details. Satisfied, although intrigued about how such a large age was possible, he went on to peeling leaves off the bushes and seeing how high he could jump.

Anyone dealing with young children regularly will recognise that persistence, recalling similar cross-examinations they have experienced as the child looks to discover everything about the world around them. Resilient, determined and optimistic: typical features of the young, and crucial to how they start growing up. Sadly, this emotional strength is not guaranteed throughout childhood, with mental health disorders such as anxiety and depression arising in some children towards the end of primary education and gathering pace towards the age of 14. Some studies have suggested that this age can be a turning point for many children in terms of their emotional resilience: the nadir of their challenges and self-doubt; but even that is not a guarantee, and high quality professional support can be slow to arrive or limited in its impact in certain cases, especially with the funding squeezes that have occurred.

This is too important an issue to risk getting wrong. In reality, there is unlikely to be a single factor responsible for the increase in mental health issues in the young. The pressures being experienced by our children are multi-factorial, and can impact regardless of economic status, education, family situation or availability of technology. As a part of Cognita, Hydesville Tower School is increasingly well-placed to help support children and families when difficulties are encountered. Mrs Kingston is the Mental Health Champion for the whole school, and is readying a variety of initiatives that are being rolled out across the UK schools to maximise our understanding and resources. Indeed, at the recent

Cognita Global Conference, mental wellbeing of pupils (and staff) was the main focus point, with sharing of best practice from around the world and Heads working hard at determining what would fit in their own school contexts.

Our first step in all of this has to be prevention. There are no certainties in life, but with school and home working together, we can create an environment that lowers the risk of emotional issues arising in the first place. Anyone watching the recent Fashion Show in the Prep School will understand what I mean when I describe the boost in confidence and the character development arising from such events. Seeing children from 4 to 11 years old strutting their stuff was to see grit and resilience at its best. This is how we want our children to feel throughout life: ready to go and certain of their brilliance! When Rory spoke to a full house at the Senior School Information Evening, he was described to me by listeners as an orator, as a deeply impressive character; as a...*politician!*

If things do go awry, however, the best chance we have is for children to admit to their struggles early. This can be hard, despite celebrities like Stephen Fry and Ruby Wax coming forward to describe their own difficulties. As a society, I believe we are moving into a time when physical health and mental health are regarded as being equally important and as likely as each other to suffer challenges. Once the stigma of mental health has diminished, we might have children quicker to talk to staff or parents to share their fears. Any red flags raised should always be treated as a call to arms: working together, we will always have a greater chance of success in helping the child back to emotional stability. Neither family nor school should regard a mental health issue as a negative aspersion on themselves – the causality is often too complex for this – but the solution is more likely to come from our teamwork. Although we may never recapture that innocence of childhood, when everything seemed possible and no hurdles were insurmountable, maybe this is the zone we need to recreate: not mollycoddling them or preventing any form of failure, but keeping them grounded that the love and appreciation of them remains unconditional.

Back to Brexit. Will there be a deal? Will anyone give ground through the negotiations? If Theresa May needs some help in wearing down Donald Tusk and Michel Barnier, I know the right child with the resilience and gusto to do so. I just hope his dad is taller than them both.