

# Improving wellbeing and mental health through kindness and mutuality

**Prof Sonia Blandford's third blog in the run-up to World Mental Health Day addresses two fundamental social and emotional building blocks in the foundations of workplace wellbeing: in the here and now *and* beyond Covid-19.**



We live in the midst of a global pandemic, where all our lives are disrupted and where acts of kindness are celebrated. Is it time to consider more deeply how through kindness and mutuality we can all improve our own and others wellbeing and mental health?

## ***Why kindness?***

Kindness is mutual, it helps both the giver and receiver – if you give kindness you will be kinder to yourself.

Kindness is free.

## ***What is kindness and mutuality?***

I have previously talked about kindness in three contexts, written as drivers for change – in my books *'Born to Fail? Social Mobility, A Working Class View'*<sup>1</sup>, *Social Mobility Chance or Choice?*<sup>2</sup>, and in the Achievement for All manifesto *'Every Child Included in Education'*<sup>3</sup>.

In *Born to Fail?* I commented on the increasing educational divide, with the impact of COVID-19 on educational provision, my words are perhaps more relevant in 2020 than when they were first published in 2017?<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.johncattbookshop.com/born-to-fail>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.johncattbookshop.com/social-mobility-chance-or-choice>

<sup>3</sup> <https://afaeducation.org/content/manifesto/manifesto/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.johncattbookshop.com/born-to-fail>

*We need to act fast and act now to galvanise society against what is ultimately the greatest social injustice of our time by bringing together all educational provision, private, independent, and state in supporting and delivering change.*

At the heart of this action is kindness and mutuality. A kindness that is not about pity, but about valuing every segment of society. In 2020, social justice is about changing the way people think, act and engage, by understanding there is an alternative way to live to ensure everyone can succeed and feel comfortable about themselves in the world, it is about mutuality<sup>5</sup>.

We are in a place and at a time when there has to be a new way of thinking, there has to be both a recognition of the great things that have come about, borne of necessity, of initiatives (in health, social care, and education), whilst recognising what hasn't worked and what isn't working. Kindness is about mutual gain.

Mutual gain happens when people, on all sides of the social spectrum, across all classes and cultures, own the change and have a role to play. How would it work in education, if everyone demonstrated kindness and owned the benefits of mutuality across class and community?

Kindness through mutuality is giving the other party a voice, so they can engage – in a long-term way – on what happens next by working in partnership with others. Mutuality isn't about rescuing people. It's about valuing them and allowing them to develop in their own way, where they are now, or where they want to be. Mutuality is, I believe, is also social justice and the key to social mobility.

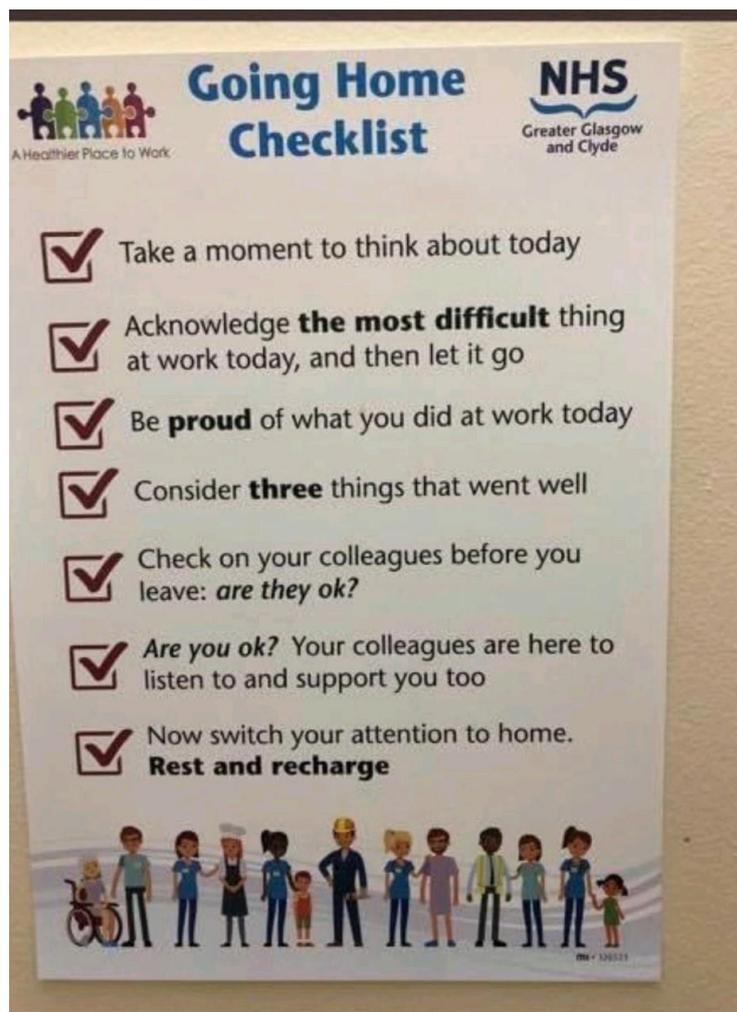


Kindness and joy writ large on the MEA Central Secondary (Manchester) website messaging

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.johncattbookshop.com/social-mobility-chance-or-choice>

Kindness through mutuality is about ensuring everyone has chances and choices – about what they learn, and what they do with that learning. That might be to learn by going to university, or it might be to learn a trade or to travel the world. Mutuality is about schools and a curriculum that is relevant to their lives and which engages with them, so they can engage with larger society.

Schools – some in the most difficult of environments – have embraced kindness and mutuality in really exciting ways. Those schools have taught me about the things that matter. I have witnessed life-changing acts of kindness demonstrating the impact that an inclusive approach in education can make: The parent who was taught by his daughter’s teacher to read so that he can better support her education – and has since become a teaching assistant; the school gardener who spent every morning with a pupil who was afraid of school, teaching him maths as they planted bulbs and fixed fences until his confidence flourished and he went back into the classroom; and the power of sport and extra-curricular activities in building much-needed self-confidence and resilience. This is kindness in action.



Mutuality as expressed within the NHS (Greater Glasgow and Clyde)

## ***A Kindness Policy***

Kindness in action is at the heart of the Achievement for All manifesto *Every Child Included in Education*<sup>6</sup>. Launched by Lord Jim Knight in March 2018 at the House of Lords, the manifesto celebrates kindness, inclusion, and mutuality. Kindness that is free, mutually beneficial, enhancing mental health and wellbeing.

In 2020, AfA's priorities remain:

1. **Kindness and wellbeing** in education, business and third sector settings, where every child and young person is included every day, addressing mental health, character and resilience through culture and mutuality, celebrating tolerance, patience, *friendship, creativity, and problem solving*
2. **Further investment across all phases of education**, beginning with the early years that results in a socially and culturally relevant curriculum, increasing attainment in reading, writing and maths, enhancing life chances and culminating in a meaningful destination for every child
3. **Greater focus on teachers as professional learners** through recruitment, retention, and professional development that includes an enhanced understanding of the way disadvantaged and vulnerable children learn
4. **Reduce exclusions in education:**
  - a) **increase responsibility for children at risk of exclusion** through cross-agency collaboration to reduce exclusions and minimise the number of children and young people at risk, **and**
  - b) **close the gap for SEND**, too often the marginalised and forgotten group
5. **Increased recognition of parents, carers, and wider communities**, valuing all parents and carers as crucial partners in the improvement of learning and life chances for every child.

You are invited to join us in promoting kindness and mutuality in schools.

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The screenshot shows the Achievement for All website homepage. At the top left is the logo. To the right are two buttons: 'Get in touch' (pink) and 'Donate' (dark blue). Below these is a navigation menu with links: 'About us', 'Coaching Programmes', 'Covid-19 Leadership Support', 'Step-Up Reviews', 'Our Impact', 'News', 'Join us', 'Blog', and 'Awards'. The main content area features a large image of two young boys smiling. Overlaid on the image is a text box with the message: 'We want to put Wellbeing at the heart of learning and help school communities across England and Wales to thrive emotionally, socially and academically, ensuring that social mobility is real.' Below the image is a pink button that says 'Read our Every Child Included in Education manifesto here'.

Visit [afaeducation.org](http://afaeducation.org) to learn more about our leadership development and professional training approaches that have reached nearly six thousand education settings over nearly a decade.

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<sup>6</sup> [www.afaeducation.org](http://www.afaeducation.org)