

**Speech by the Taoiseach, Mr. Enda Kenny, T.D.,
at the Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN) Symposium
"Emotional Wellbeing - at the heart of school communities"**

Wednesday 4th November 2015, Citywest Convention Centre

Good morning all. Thank you for inviting me. I'm delighted to be here.

As you know, mental health and emotional wellbeing are areas that interest me greatly. Since becoming Taoiseach, I have spoken on several occasions and at various professional symposia. About the need we have as individuals need to examine our lives, and indeed 'mind' our lives.

The author Karen Blixen wrote "all sorrows can be borne if you can put them in a story or tell a story about them". But as the psychoanalyst author Stephen Grosz poses in response - what if we can't tell a story about our sorrows? What if our sorrows start to tell us? I'm sure many, if not all of you, see and hear such stories being told. Stories of fear, anxiety, loss, in the smallest of infants, to the Leaving Cert sports captain.

Perhaps at times, you feel these stories in your own lives. The psychotherapist and clinical professor of psychiatry at UCLA, Daniel Siegel is compelling on the connection between brain and mind. On how or whether we 'integrate' the various parts of ourselves in terms of how we live our lives, transform ourselves and our relationships, and experience emotional wellbeing.

It's all about addressing that big question - who are we when we're at home. At home - in here - our most precise yet often remote co-ordinates. For our part, in government, and since coming to office, we have been attentive to the emotional wellbeing of our children and introducing legislation and policies based on something that was new to us as a society - the best-interest of the child.

Following a referendum, our children are now citizens in their own right. We set up the Child and Family Agency Tusla to promote the development, welfare and protection of our children. It's had a strong start on its journey, we – as a government, and a country – must focus on its future and its move from crisis intervention to early intervention.

'Wellbeing' is now a subject in the new Junior Cycle and I look forward to seeing the impact of this in the future. The Little Things campaign too is an online awareness resource for adults. It's a discreet yet powerful campaign that I support strongly.

As I have said many times before, our children's peers are no longer the kids next door, the boys or girls they meet at the GAA or music or soccer in the suburbs on Sunday mornings. With social media, their peers and reach are right across the globe. Their life online is of thumbs up or thumbs down – Followers and Favourites.

Our friend the psychiatrist Daniel Siegel writes powerfully about the importance of "feeling felt" by those we meet and with whom we relate. That sense of how or whether we 'get' each other, the cues we give and take.

Social media can take that opportunity from us, that human and humane connection. We all can underestimate a child's capacity to suffer cruelty or indeed to inflict it.

The Department of Education and Skills has introduced important Anti-Bullying Initiatives and its strategy to ensure that internet safety is mainstreamed throughout schools are all designed to keep our children safe and well. It's a strong initiative, but I believe we will have to do more.

But in so many cases you can, and do, make all the difference. I commend you for holding this symposium today. We must do our best to create the best and safest space for our children in our schools - a space that allows them to be who they are - and to be valued for it.

Indeed, I believe we should be teaching our children to recognise that it is 'normal' not to be happy all the time. That it is in fact 'normal' - very 'normal' - to feel sad, or lonely, or a bit down, often for no appreciable reason.

As parents or teachers we cannot make our children happy. Rather what we can and must do is give them the skills that will make them reflective, thoughtful, questioning, observant and resilient. Because resilience is what will sustain them through their lives. This is particularly the case where children are feeling fragile. It is vital they know they are not the sum of their thoughts, their feelings.

It is crucial we – as parents, educators, government - give them the skills to 'observe' their thoughts, their feelings, their sensations and not be overwhelmed - so that they can tell their story - not have their story tell them. This is a big responsibility for us all.

I understand that the Department of Education and National Office for Suicide Prevention are actively discussing how best to provide supports to teachers and schools in the promotion of wellbeing for the whole school community. SafeTalk and ASSIST training would help equip teachers and other members of the school community.

The connections we make inside our brains, our minds, are vital - and so too are the connections we make in life - and for life. Earlier this year, I was proud to launch Connecting for Life – Ireland's Strategy for Reducing Suicide. Crucially, this strategy sets out to strengthen the ties that bind in society. A connectedness that will keep us - it will 'mind' us.

At some point in all our lives we will depend on the kindness of strangers or we will be the kind strangers ourselves. As we stand before each other, will we shadow each other? Or will we shelter each other?

As a nation we must not alone become mindful, but minding of ourselves and those around us. This can happen in the most simple, ordinary ways. In the staff room, it might be asking a colleague out for a coffee. On your street, dropping around with a few scones and saying, 'stick on the kettle'. Or simply asking the question: is everything ok? It is the little things.

Be in no doubt this is the ground, the difficult yet miraculous ground, you are sowing.

I commend you.

Thank you.