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DANGERS AND RISKS: THE EDUCATIONAL ASPECTS

Danger, also risk or peril, is the possibility of something bad happening. A situation in which there is a risk of something bad happening, is called dangerous, risky or perilous [1]. In terms of health and safety management, the term "risk" may be defined as the most likely consequence of a hazard, combined with the likelihood or probability of it occurring [2].

Educational institutions are a minefield of health hazards, arguably one of the most dangerous possible places for children to be. Spending their days

there may not kill children outright, but a number of recent trends makes educational setting a contributor to the health problems of many children.

This alarming conclusion has been drawn from a growing chorus of public health warnings about lunches in educational establishments, squeezed time for recess and physical education, crumbling public infrastructure, mounting curricular demands and germ incubation in these institutions.

From the moment children drag their overloaded backpacks up the bus steps to the late-evening hour at which many finish their homework and send their last text, educational institution imposes sedentary behaviour on them, plies them with lousy nutritional choices, exposes them to myriad communicable diseases and environmental toxins, primes their stress-hormone pumps and messes with their internal clocks.

As for the backpacks, kids are flocking to orthopaedist's offices complaining of back pain and nerve compression, because they have little choice but to tote a full day's worth of textbooks on their backs. It is a wonder they can hobble up to the stage at the end of it all to collect a diploma.

Still, though experts have a lot of concerns about the effect of educational institutions on students' health, they also have lots of suggestions on things to do in order to minimize risks [3].

Inactivity. Students are admonished not to run in the halls. They might sprint through a throng to reach their next class on time, often with a heavy backpack slung on their shoulder because they do not have time to stop at their lockers. That is about as much exercise as many of them get. Second only to the couch in most students' homes, educational institutions have become a no-exercise zone. Many educational establishments do not require students to take any physical education at all.

Suggested measures to be taken: make educational settings more active places, make the most of physical education classes identifying hazards that discourage the practice.

Germ pool. As a gathering place for hundreds, sometimes thousands, of individuals who are, as epidemiologists put it, immunologically naive, educational establishments are ideally suited to the maximum transmission of those germs among students and between those students

and their families at home. There is much evidence that transmission in educational institutions catalyses community-wide transmission. Students share everything: desks, books, writing implements, lunch, etc. For the lucky virus that makes its way into educational setting attached to a student's hands, lips, nose or respiratory tract, the prospects for finding new hosts for its offspring are virtually limitless.

Suggested measures to be taken: in addition to knowing and practicing the basics of hand washing, students can withstand the onslaught of germs best by getting enough sleep, eating a healthful and varied diet and getting all their recommended vaccinations, including the yearly vaccination for influenza.

Poor nutrition. The typical nutritional offerings of educational institutions fall somewhere between fair and failing. For many students, lunch is intended to be a principal source of their daily nutrients. And they have certainly lagged far behind nutritional research findings, which tout the importance of whole grains, fresh fruits and vegetables, and low saturated fat and sugar content.

Suggested measures to be taken: there are two solutions to school lunch: the every-student-for-himself strategy and the communitarian route. If a student is open to carrying a packed lunch it is not hard to find great, healthful components, including fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grain breads and bars, cheese or yogurt. Alternatively, unified cafeterias with fresh healthy produce.

Bullying. Children can be very cruel to each other, whether surrounded by institutional walls or not. Of course, educational establishment is not a deserted island where one's very survival is at stake, but it has its stresses, including crowded halls, limited free time and the inevitable emergence of tribalism and hierarchy. With those stresses come bullying and violence. Far more likely than physical injury, however, is the prospect of being taunted, teased and generally humiliated, which may have a more enduring effect on a student's well-being than sticks and stones. For years after they were bullied, adults who were victims in their teen years have higher rates of depression and low self-esteem and are more likely to ponder suicide.

Suggested measures to be taken: pay attention to signs of distress, including physical complaints such as headaches and stomach pain, frequent bad dreams or changes in appetite or sleep. A student who comes home with missing or ripped clothing, or lost books, electronics or jewellery may be being bullied. And if someone is a victim of bullying, get help from the teacher or a more senior administrator if the student is not getting the protection he needs.

Sleep deprivation. Students are among the most sleep-deprived people anywhere, meaning that most routinely get far less than the roughly nine hours of sleep recommended for them. And though television and cell phones all play a role, educational setting is a major contributor to their chronic sleep deficit. The health consequences may be far-reaching. A growing body of evidence links too little sleep with a heightened risk of obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure, depression and anxiety, not to mention poor memory and attention.

Suggested measures to be taken: enforce limits on late-evening time spent texting and on social networking sites, and not let the students make up their sleep deficit by staying in bed until noon on weekends. It will cause their distorted time clocks to get even more out of phase, experts suggest that weekend wake-up times should be no more than two hours later than those of the weekdays.

Infrastructure hazards. Public educational establishments, as usual, expose students to close quarters, makeshift classrooms and contaminants of all sorts. Crumbling ceilings, leaky roofs, broken pipes and mouldy basements are part of that picture; overcrowded classrooms linked to a wide range of indoor air-quality problems are another. Each year many students miss their classes due to poor indoor air quality from dust, mould, allergens and poor circulation that exacerbates asthma and other respiratory diseases.

Suggested measures to be taken: there's no substitute for ensuring that kids with asthma or allergies are medically managed to minimize their sensitivity to irritants from crowded and crumbling educational institutions.

Stress. Stress is a central feature of many students' experience of educational setting. And the resultant health risks, including suppressed immunity, cardiovascular disease and depression, are undeniable. The physical symptoms of stress, including stomach pain, headaches and difficulty sleeping, are widely reported by students, especially girls, who are more likely to report such internalizing symptoms. It is definitely affecting their health, and the level of stress that students routinely feel also subverts the goal of education: to help students learn to solve problems and think creatively.

Suggested measures to be taken: eat and exercise regularly, learn relaxation techniques and self-assertiveness skills, challenge harsh assessments of self and the situation, and work at feeling good about doing a good enough job at the educational setting rather than expecting perfection. Students should get help from a parent, guidance counsellor, physician or mental health professional.

The current economic climate should prompt all sectors to focus on identifying existing and emerging security threats and re-evaluate their strategies to respond to these risks. Educational institutions are no exception, facing a range of threats. In a time of budget cuts, it can be difficult to justify spend on seemingly non-essential work; however, investing time and money in assessing security and developing an effective security strategy is not only imperative but can also save money in the longer term [4].

People should be well aware of the array of risks that educational institutions may face. Educational establishments need to build in counter measures for these offences alongside strategies to handle health and safety. Risk assessment is central to the development of an effective security strategy. Once threats have been identified, the likelihood of each threat occurring has to be weighed against the scale of the impact. The security strategy is a key step in the process by which management's expectations for security are translated into specific, measurable, and verifiable goals.

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