

## Parents' Perceptions Of A Lust For Life Schools Programme. A School-Based Positive Psychology Intervention For Primary School Children

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### Abstract

The A Lust for Life (ALFL) Schools Programme, which was developed in Ireland, is a 10-session universal positive psychology intervention which aims to increase children's wellbeing. The objectives of this qualitative study were to investigate parents' views on school-based wellbeing programmes generally, parents' role in the ALFL Schools Programme, and the impact of this programme on their children and themselves. Twenty-one parents of 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> class children (aged 10-12 years) who had recently completed the ALFL Schools Programme participated in the study. Data were collected with semi-structured interviews conducted on the Zoom video conferencing platform. Interview transcripts were analysed with reflective thematic analysis. The analysis yielded three primary themes and 23 subthemes. The three primary themes were: (1) Programme feedback, (2) Illustrations of positive changes in children, and (3) Parents' perception of the importance of school-based programmes in the prevention of mental health problems. Parents had predominantly positive views of the ALFL schools programme, its positive effects on their children's wellbeing skills, and its positive effects on their parenting skills. Benefits for children identified by parents included better awareness of factors contributing to wellbeing, and better wellbeing skills in a range of areas including communication within relationships, reflective capacity, problem-solving, conflict management, online safety, and emotion regulation using techniques such as mindfulness and breathing exercises. Parents also had suggestions for development of the ALFL Schools Programme, notably, increased parental involvement.

**Keywords:** wellbeing; positive psychology; universal school-based programme; qualitative research.

### Introduction

Childhood and adolescence are unique, formative and crucial life stages for mental health and wellbeing, a time when significant changes occur in physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development. These life stages are also a period of increased vulnerability for developing mental health problems (Comeau et al., 2019; Kessler et al., 2005; Merikangas et al., 2010; Sawyer et al., 2012; World Health Organization, 2022). According to the World Health Organisation (2021), 10% of children and adolescents worldwide experience mental health difficulties, and suicide is the fourth leading cause of death in 15 – 19-year-olds. Half of these mental health conditions appear before the age of 14 and three-quarters before the age of 24 (Kessler et al., 2005; World Health Organization, 2021). In recent times, young people's mental health has been challenged by population migrations, economic uncertainties, the sustainability of ecosystems, climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic (Christensen et al., 2017; Fusar-Poli et al., 2021; Gromada et al., 2020).

A recent UNICEF Report (Gromada et al., 2020) presents a worrying picture of children's wellbeing worldwide. In many countries children do not have access to the resources and opportunities needed to achieve their full potential. The report also notes the overwhelming adverse impact of COVID-19 on the lives of children and families for their mental and physical health and development. Mental health difficulties in children and adolescents often persist into adulthood and contribute to lower academic achievement, higher likelihood of health risk behaviours, self-harm and suicide (Fergusson & Woodward, 2002; Kim-Cohen et al., 20003; Patel et al.,

2007). Promoting the wellbeing and resilience of children and adolescents has therefore become an important objective in many countries and WHO and UNICEF support and encourage these initiatives (Gromada et al., 2020; WHO, 2021, 2022).

School is an optimal location for such projects, (Barry et al., 2017; DeSocio & Hootman, 2004; Durlak et al., 2011; Weare & Nind, 2011). Schools are particularly well suited to the delivery of universal interventions aimed at the general population, rather than targeted at specific vulnerable or at-risk groups (Arango et al., 2018; Fusar-Poli et al., 2021; de Pablo et al., 2020). A recent synthesis of systematic reviews of 113 universal interventions to improve children and young people's mental health and wellbeing found most focused on preventing emotional difficulties and very few focused on improving subjective wellbeing (Robson et al., 2019).

Social emotional learning (SEL) programs and positive psychology interventions (PPIs) are two overlapping and complementary approaches to positive education which aim to promote wellbeing in schools (Waters & Loton, 2019). There is a greater emphasis within SEL programmes on prevention of psychological problems, whereas the main emphasis within PPI programmes is on the development of skills to promote wellbeing. SEL programmes reduce pupils' conduct and emotional problems and enhance positive adjustment (Cipriano et al., 2023; Durlak et al., 2022). In contrast, PPI programmes enhance wellbeing and other positive outcomes such as gratitude, character strengths, optimism, kindness, hope, mindfulness, engagement, achievement, positive relationships, self-concept and positive thinking (Mendes de Oliveria et al., 2022; Tejada-Gallardo et al.,

2020). School-based PPI programmes in which mindfulness is a central component have growing popularity. In a review of six meta-analyses covering 110 primary studies involving over 28,000 young people, Grennan et al. (2025) found that mindfulness-based interventions had small but statistically significant effects on wellbeing, mindfulness, and anxiety, but no effect on depression.

### **Background to the A Lust for Life Schools Program**

The A Lust for Life (ALFL) schools program was developed by an expert team (<https://alflschools.com/our-team/>) of clinical psychologists and educational specialists, in consultation with teachers, parents, and children (<https://www.alustforlife.com>) to address the need for a universal school-based wellbeing program in Ireland. The program was integrated with the social, physical, and health education Irish primary school curriculum (SPHE, Government of Ireland, 1999). The ALFL curriculum draws on contemporary positive psychology, particularly mindfulness-based interventions; cognitive behaviour therapy; and health, developmental, and educational psychology. The ALFL Schools Programme includes ten 40-minute classes. These cover the following specific self-regulation skills: mindfulness; breathing exercises; visualization exercises; progressive muscle relaxation; naming emotions and rating their intensity; linking actions, thoughts, and feelings; positive self-talk; eliciting social support from others; addressing bullying; assertiveness; and internet safety. Experiential exercises, instruction, video modelling, and homework practice with parents are used for skills training. There are currently four developmentally staged versions of the ALFL Schools Programme for children in the following class bands (and approximate age bands): junior and senior infants (5-6 years); 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> class (6-7 years); 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> class (8-10 years); and 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> class (11-13 years). The current study focused on the ALFL Schools' Program for children in 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> classes of primary schools. A summary of the curriculum for this age group is contained in Table 1. Teachers who delivered the ALFL Schools Programme used a training system and ALFL resources which are available online (<https://alflschools.com>). Resources include lesson plans, support sheets, lesson slides, videos for learning self-regulation exercises, and homework sheets.

Four cluster randomised controlled trials of the ALFL Schools Programme have been conducted (Clancy et al., 2024; Grennan et al., 2025; O'Connor et al., 2022; O'Dowd et al., 2025). The main analyses of the first two trials showed that the ALFL Schools Programme did not have a significant effect on trait measures of wellbeing (O'Connor et al., 2022), or trait measures of mental health variables (Clancy et al., 2024). In contrast, the main analyses of the second two trials showed that the ALFL

Schools Programme had a significant effect on state wellbeing (Grennan et al., 2025; O'Dowd et al., 2025). In these trials state wellbeing was evaluated with the Feeling Better Scale (McKenna et al., 2025) which assesses wellbeing experienced when skills learned on the ALFL program were used in specific situations. Items in scales that assess trait wellbeing or mental health, ask respondents to indicate how they have usually felt recently. For example, this item, which assesses trait wellbeing, is from the Stirling Children's Wellbeing Scale (Liddle & Carter, 2015): 'In the past week I've been feeling in a good mood', and the response options are: never; not much of the time; quite a lot of the time; and all of the time. In contrast, items that assess state wellbeing ask respondents to indicate how they felt in a specific situation. For example, the following item, which assesses state wellbeing, is from the Feeling Better Scale (McKenna et al., 2025): 'In the past week I did square breathing to calm down if I was upset or just to feel good. This is when I breathed in for 5 seconds, held for 5, breathed out for 5, and held for 5', and the response options are: Yes, and it made me feel a lot better; Yes, and it made me feel somewhat better; Yes, and it made me feel a little better; Yes, but I did not feel better; No, I did not do it. The results of the four ALFL Schools Programme trials show that the ALFL Schools Programme had a significant effect on state wellbeing children experienced when they used ALFL wellbeing skills in specific situations, but it did not have an effect on trait wellbeing, i.e. how they usually felt recently.

There have been two additional noteworthy findings on the positive effect of the ALFL Schools Programme on children with low levels of wellbeing. O'Connor et al. (2022) found that a subgroup of ALFL Schools Programme participants in a randomized controlled trial who had low levels of wellbeing at baseline showed significant improvements in trait mindfulness, compared with a control group. In an uncontrolled qualitative study, Hctor et al. (2022) found that ALFL Schools Programme participants with low levels of wellbeing at baseline, who were interviewed before and after the program and at follow-up, reported improvements in emotional literacy and the use of coping skills in specific situations.

### **Aims and objectives**

There is currently no information on parents' views on the ALFL Schools Programme. This study aimed to address this gap in knowledge. The objectives were to investigate parents' perspectives on:

- (1) school-based wellbeing programmes
- (2) the ALFL Schools Programme and parents' role within it
- (3) the impact of the ALFL Schools Programme on children and parents.

**Table 1. A Lust for Life Schools Programme Lesson Plans**

Session	Core Topics	Experiential exercise	Video	Activities	Homework
1. My Wellbeing.	Wellbeing and its importance during times of COVID-19 and factors which impact our wellbeing. Resilience.	Square Breathing	COVID-19 Experiences.	Discussion and psychoeducation: My Wellbeing and Resilience. Class activity: Our Wellbeing Rights. My Resilience App and Learning Log.	Practice Square Breathing. Sleep Diary.
2. My Digital Wellbeing.	Digital Wellbeing. Online factors which impact our wellbeing. Resilience. Internet Safety.	Mindful moment	My Phone and Me. The Legends Pledge.	Discussion: My phone and me. Class Activity: My Wellbeing and Resilience. My Resilience App and Learning Log.	Practice Mindful Moment. Create internet safety poster.
3. My Thoughts and Feelings.	Identifying Feelings. Powerful feelings. Thoughts and feelings.	My Selfie Scan	Four Big Feelings.	Psychoeducation on CBT using thoughts, feelings, behaviour cycle. Feelings thermometer. My Resilience App and Learning Log.	Practice Selfie Scan. Three Good Things exercise.
4. Linking My Thoughts and Feelings.	Linking thoughts and feelings. Fight, flight and freeze response.	My Thoughtful Words	Fight, Flight, Freeze.	Thoughts, Feelings, Actions activity. My Resilience App and Learning Log.	Practice Thoughtful Words. Thoughts, Feelings, Actions activity.
5. Managing My Thoughts and Feelings.	Managing thoughts and feelings. Building positive thoughts.	My TLC- Progressive muscle relaxation.	Adults and Their Feelings: Managing Feelings.	Discussion: managing thoughts and feelings. Identifying and challenging disturbing thoughts activity. My Resilience App and Learning Log.	Practice TLC Step Ladder of Fears.
6. Healthy Relationships.	Positive Self-Talk. Interpersonal skills.	My Wise Words- Positive Self Statements	The Fallout: Conflict between friends.	Discussion and individual activity: Words of Encouragement and Self-Compassion. Letter writing. Discussion: Exploring our relationships. My Resilience App and Learning Log.	Practice Wise Words. Make a Mindful Moment.
7. Managing Relationships.	Managing relationships. Conflict resolution, assertiveness and inclusion.	Inner Warrior- Visualisation Exercise	360 Degrees of a problem: Perspective taking in conflict.	Psychoeducation on interpersonal effectiveness. Pair Activity: Friendships. Individual Activity: Inclusion.	Practice visualisation. Record mindful moments.

				Class Activity: Conflict Role Play. My Resilience App and Learning Log.	
8. Tricky World – Influences.	Influences – positive and negative. Understanding thinking traps.	Belly breathing	Tricky world on social media.	Discussion: The Influence of Others. Psychoeducation relating to cognitive distortions. Problem-solving exercise: peer pressure. My Resilience App and Learning Log.	Practice Belly Breathing. Talk about it.
9. Tricky World - Internet Safety 1.	Exploring social media.	Switching Off Exercise	Real/Fake: Exploring social media. Be internet Legends Alert Video.	Discussion: Real/Fake and Safe/Unsafe. My Resilience App and Learning Log.	Practicing Switching Off exercise. Internet Quiz.
10. Tricky World - Internet Safety 2.	Internet safety. Interpersonal skills.	Switching Off and Trusted Adult Visualisation	Fair to Share: Online information sharing. Be Internet Legend.	Internet safety Psychoeducation on social support: Identifying a trusted adult. My Resilience App and Learning Log.	Practice Switching Off and Trusted Adult Visualisation. Be Internet Legends Video Game. Review skills learned throughout programme.

## Method

### Ethical Approval

This study was conducted with ethical approval of University College Dublin Human Research Ethics Committee, and written consent of participants.

### Design

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with a sample of parents of 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> class pupils (aged 10-12 years) who had completed the ALFL Schools Programme. To increase variability within the sample, parents of children from a diverse range of schools were included in the sample. In each school, parents of randomly selected children were invited to participate in the study. Interview transcripts were analysed with reflective thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2022).

### School selection

One-hundred and seventy-one schools that expressed interest in implementing the ALFL Schools Programme for 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> class between November 2021 to April 2022 were invited to be involved in the study. (This was during the COVID-19 pandemic which, in Ireland, lasted from March 2020 to May 2023.) Ten schools agreed to participate. One hundred and forty-nine randomly selected parents of pupils in these 10 schools were invited to take part in the study, of whom 21 agreed to participate. In this group of 21, there was a maximum of three parents of pupils from any selected class.

### Participants

Twenty-one parents (19 mothers and 2 fathers) of pupils from 10 schools participated in the study. Of 10 schools in the study, six were urban and four were rural. There were eight mixed gender schools, one all-boys school, and one all-girls school. There were six regular schools and four specially resourced schools for socially disadvantaged children. These schools are referred to as DEIS schools. DEIS is an acronym for Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (Government of Ireland Department of Education, 2017).

### Interview procedure

Participants were given information sheets and an invitation to participate in the study by their child's class teacher. Participants attended 60-minute individual interviews on Zoom (<https://www.zoom.com>) video conferencing platform. A semi-structured interview schedule in the Appendix of this paper guided these interviews which were conducted by ML. Participants were asked about their understanding of school-based wellbeing programmes, views about the ALFL Schools Programme, and the effects of the program on their child and themselves. At the start of the interview the study's purpose, interview format, and participants' right to discontinue at any point without prejudice were outlined. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Parents were informed that recordings would be deleted once transcribed, and interview transcripts would be anonymised.

### Analytic strategy

Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA, Braun and Clarke, 2022) was used to analyse interview transcripts. There were six phases (1) becoming familiar with the data; (2) generating initial codes; (3) generating initial themes; (4) developing and reviewing themes; (5) refining, defining and naming themes; and (6) producing a report.

The research team held a social constructivist epistemological position (Creswell & Poth, 2016). When analysing the data an inductive, data driven approach to coding was taken. A number of strategies were used to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the analysis (Nowell et al. 2017). First, ML manually coded interview transcripts line by line. This facilitated an in-depth familiarization with data collected, and careful construction and refining of codes and themes. Second, ML engaged in reflexive journaling to clarify decision making and the potential influence of personal assumptions and biases on the analysis. Third, 10% of the dataset was coded by another member of the research team. There was a high level of intercoder agreement which ranged from 86% to 96%. Fourth, the results of the RTA were reviewed by two senior members of the research team (GOR and AC) who were experienced qualitative researchers and had expert knowledge about the ALFL Schools Programme and other universal schools-based wellbeing programmes. Fifth, the Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research (SRQR; O'Brien et al., 2014) were followed to ensure transparent reporting.

## Results

Our analysis yielded three main themes and 23 sub-themes, shown in Table 2. These are described below with supporting quotations.

### Theme 1. Programme feedback

This theme encompasses parents' limited understanding of the ALFL Schools Programme; their overall impression of the programme; the content, structure, duration, and method of programme delivery; parental benefits

associated with their child completing the programme; and suggestions for programme development.

#### Sub-theme 1.1. Limited parental involvement and limited overall understanding of the ALFL Schools Programme

Although parents knew that the ALFL Schools Programme was delivered in their child's school, most acknowledged they were not actively involved. Their understanding of the aims of the programme and knowledge of specific content was limited. One parent commented: "I have limited understanding, to be honest, and limited knowledge of it. I haven't gotten into detailed discussion with my child about what it involves, and I haven't played a role in whatever they've been doing specifically to that point."

Only two interviewed parents reported that they regularly accessed the - Try it at Home - section of the ALFL Schools Programme and practised homework exercises with their children. These parents found it "interesting and enjoyable."

However, a number of parents reflected on their limited engagement. They expressed their desire to be more involved in the ALFL Schools Programme or a similar programme in future and to learn about the aims and specific programme content, for example, "what new skills or strategies children are taught."

One mother, who acknowledged not engaging with - Try it at Home - ALFL parent-child homework exercises, nevertheless highlighted the value of "shared kind of language", "shared understanding and willingness to practice it together" and parents being "more active" and "continuing the conversation" started in school within the child's home.

More involved parents described their role as "support the learning"; "reminding children about the skills"; "backing up programme messages"; "acting as a sounding board"; "trying to link it with the experiences she is having"; and "checking out the links that were sent home and trying to do them with my daughter."

**Table 2. Identified themes and sub-themes**

Themes	Sub-themes
1. Programme feedback	1.1. Limited parental involvement and limited overall understanding of the ALFL Schools Programme 1.2. Parents' overall impression of the ALFL Schools Programme 1.3. Feedback on content, layout, duration and programme delivery 1.4. Programme benefits for parents 1.5. Ideas for ALFL Schools Programme development
2. Illustrations of positive changes in children	2.1. Improved emotional awareness and emotional expression 2.2. Increased awareness of self and others; more accepting, understanding and inclusive 2.3. Sharing and relating more 2.4. Engaging and connecting with others more 2.5. Better reflective capacity, ability to look at things from a different perspective and compassion for self 2.6. Better at problem-solving skills and asking for help more 2.7. Better conflict management skills 2.8. Better emotion regulation skills 2.9. Increased confidence 2.10. Skills learned and continued use of skills 2.11. Increased awareness of factors contributing to emotional wellbeing

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| <p>3. Parents' perception of the importance of school-based programmes in the prevention of mental health issues</p> | <p>2.12. Increased awareness of the impact social media may have on mental health and wellbeing</p> <p>3.1. Wellbeing programmes as part of school curriculums</p> <p>3.2. Challenges of growing up in the present world</p> <p>3.3. Mental health crisis and importance of prevention</p> <p>3.4. School as a 'core place' for wellbeing projects</p> <p>3.5. Assistance with social, emotional, cognitive, interpersonal, intrapersonal and developmental functioning</p> <p>3.6. Parental involvement</p> |
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### **Sub-theme 1.2. Parents' overall impression of the ALFL Schools Programme**

Most interviewed parents had a positive overall impression of the ALFL Schools Programme. They described it as "useful, effective, positive, fun, modern", "brilliant", "helpful", "fantastic for my daughter", "good", "beneficial", and "enjoyable". The following are other positive overall impressions of the programme: "a very good programme in the sense it gets children to kind of open up about what they are feeling"; "my daughter really enjoyed it, she got a lot out of it"; "it had a big impact on my son"; "I have seen an improvement in my son in many ways"; and "I feel like it has prepared my daughter for secondary school."

### **Sub-theme 1.3. Feedback on content, layout, duration and programme delivery**

There were both positive and negative comments about the content, layout, duration and delivery of the ALFL Schools Programme. On the positive side, some parents reported that they liked the fact that the programme content discussed themes that were relevant to children, especially bullying and internet safety. One parent described how opening up about being bullied had been "a really positive experience" for her son when classmates rallied round, giving him tips and suggestions for dealing with the situation. "It was something that had been really upsetting him, at times stopping him from going out during the summer, whereas that session actually flipped that completely on its head and gave him more confidence." The parent commented on the benefit of it "coming from his peers", rather than advice from a parent, "It opened up that conversation."

Several parents said the programme content and homework tasks sparked some interesting discussions at home, for example, about negative aspects of social media, cyberbullying, or the benefits of meditation and keeping yourself grounded. One mother said "It was nice sometimes to just have that situation where it brings around an opportunity for more in-depth conversation about things that we might not always talk about."

One parent made the following comment on the programme layout: "It was very well thought out that it was spaced into different sections of things, so it kept the interest going."

Several parents reported that their children enjoyed doing the programme with classmates and reflected on the benefits of doing it with their peers. One mother commented "I think it's important you do it as a class, as they can see the others' reactions and they can hear all their friends' experiences." Another said, "It was very helpful because sometimes if they're going through things, they think it's themselves so it kind of opens the conversation for them to discuss with each other."

Some parents were pleased the programme was delivered by a class teacher, with one saying, "the teacher knows them well and knows where their individual difficulties might be with their friendships, so she could target that, and tweak it to their needs."

There were also negative comments on the content, layout, duration and delivery of the ALFL Schools Programme. A few parents noted that some of the programme content, for example, internet safety, overlapped with other wellbeing input previously delivered in their child's school. Despite this, a number of participants said it was important to include these topics in the ALFL Schools Programme for other children who might not have heard about these issues before.

One parent said their child found some of the scenarios in the ALFL Schools Programme too simplistic and did not reflect complicated real-life situations. "He told me that there was some video and suddenly there was an argument and suddenly it was all solved" and he said: "Mum in real life, you know, people can hold grudges, and it isn't necessarily solved so easily."

One parent thought the meditation practice videos were "too long", while another said her daughter thought "some videos were geared towards younger children." Another said the programme was too short and did not allow time to 'instil' the new skills.

### **Sub-theme 1.4. Programme benefits for parents**

Several parents said the ALFL Schools Programme had been beneficial for themselves. They described how it assisted and supported them in their parenting role. For example, when information their child was learning on the ALFL Schools Programme about issues such as mobile phone use and social media echoed what parents were saying, it made it easier to avoid conflict about these issues at home. Some parents felt the programme had equipped them with strategies and language for talking to their child, as well as helping them to understand their child's feelings and preferences. One mother said: "the new learning for me really was certainly around the social media education because I wouldn't know how to try and talk to my daughter about the power of the influencers." Another was surprised to find breathing exercises helped her child.

### **Sub-theme 1.5. Ideas for ALFL Schools Programme development**

Although most interviewed parents were positive about the ALFL Schools Programme, some said that a few aspects could be improved. A number highlighted the need for greater involvement of parents. One parent proposed that it would be helpful to have sessions for parents before and after their children completed the programme. A couple of participants suggested that parents would benefit from receiving information packs,

handouts, and summary sheets to familiarise themselves with the programme content. One parent suggested involving parents in practising the wellbeing programme activities together with their children, both at home and in school. One interviewee discussed the idea of video animations for mindfulness practice to enhance children's engagement. Another proposed offering the programme to younger children, suggesting it was too late to start in 5th and 6th class because "they've already been taught bits and pieces, or they've already started bottling everything up."

## **Theme 2. Illustrations of positive changes in children**

This theme encompasses the many ways in which parents said the ALFL Schools Programme benefited their children. These included improved emotional awareness and expression; acceptance and understanding of self and others; and relationship skills such as sharing and relating to others and engaging and connecting with others. Benefits for children identified by parents also included a range of skills including better reflective capacity; better problem-solving, conflict management, and emotion regulation using techniques such as mindfulness and breathing exercises. Other benefits for children reported by parents were increased confidence; continued use of skills learned on the programme; increased awareness of factors contributing to emotional wellbeing; and increased awareness of the impact of social media on mental health and wellbeing.

### **Sub-theme 2.1. Improved emotional awareness and emotional expression**

The majority of interviewees noted that since their child attended the ALFL Schools Programme there was an increase in their child's ability to recognise, understand, name and express their feelings and to communicate their needs more effectively. One mother noted that her daughter "has a better understanding of her emotions" while another reported that she had seen a difference in her son in explaining how he feels. "He was much more willing to come and say, 'I'm upset about something' or 'I'm worried about something' or 'Such and such makes me nervous'. He's using words he never used before. Before the programme it could take days to get the information out of him in terms of what caused the bad mood. Now he seems to be a lot more willing to say this happened in school and that happened, and I got really annoyed or I got really upset and that's why I'm in a bad mood, which makes it so much easier, because then you can address it." Another parent described how her son was better at communicating his needs since he attended ALFL Schools Programme. She said "Sometimes he says he wants some quiet time, time on his own. Something that has changed in him."

### **Sub-theme 2.2. Increased awareness of self and others; more accepting, understanding and inclusive**

Many parents noted that since their child attended the ALFL Schools Programme there was an increase in their child's ability to tune in to their own and others' feelings, thoughts, needs and actions, and to understand the consequences of those actions on self and others. One parent said: "The programme seems to have brought in the ability to think of others and I think in doing that my daughter is reflecting more on herself as well." Another parent said her daughter "is a little bit more tuned in to people's feelings and more able to kind of put herself into somebody else's position." One father said his daughter:

"is more educated towards people's feelings; very accepting of everybody and everything; and if one of her friends in her class says something mean she calls them out on it." Several other parents similarly noticed their children being more understanding, accepting, helpful and inclusive.

### **Sub-theme 2.3. Sharing and relating more**

Some parents noticed their children were more open to sharing their feelings with others and relating more since attending the ALFL Schools Programme. One mother described her daughter as "a bit more inclined to speak about herself. She opens up the conversation to chat". Another remarked "I definitely think there's more chats and my daughter is eager to have those conversations. I feel she's letting me know what's happening in her life which is great. She just seems happier."

### **Sub-theme 2.4. Engaging and connecting with others more**

Several parents noted the since their child attended the ALFL Schools Programme there were improvements in their children's relationships, and their ability to engage and connect with peers and family members. One mother said, "I've noticed my son seems to be much more engaged with other children in the class so he's playing with a lot more children than he did before." Another noticed her son "put a little bit more effort into each of his brothers and sister, connecting with each of them on a different level and trying to talk to them and trying to engage with them."

### **Sub-theme 2.5. Better reflective capacity, ability to look at things from a different perspective and compassion for self**

A few parents reported that since their child attended the ALFL Schools Programme there was an increase in their child's ability to reflect on day-to-day living, to look at things from a different perspective, and a gentleness towards themselves. One parent explained: "Just before the programme, if my son scored badly in a test or something he would have got quite upset. Whereas now he says: 'Okay well, I'll just make sure I do better the next time'. He thinks about the reasons why he didn't do well." Another parent said "My son wasn't chosen for the school team and three of his friends were. He was not jealous. He was just, I suppose, very upset that despite all the practice he still wasn't good enough to get on the team. He said to me: 'I am upset, you know, I practised as much as they did.' And I said: 'Well, what do you think?' He said: 'Well, I suppose I did my best and maybe on the day they were better.' That seemed like he worked it around in his head, thought it through, and he verbalised it. And that was it, he moved on."

### **Sub-theme 2.6. Better at problem-solving skills and asking for help**

A number of parents reported that since their child attended the ALFL Schools Programme their child developed better problem-solving skills, and were asking for help more, when encountering day-to-day life difficulties. For example, one mother said: "If my son was doing homework and there was something he couldn't figure out he would get frustrated and he's like 'I can't do it. Now he says, 'I'll leave it to the end, mum, and when I'm finished I'll come and ask you, and you can help me'." Another mother remarked that her daughter "is handling problems and schoolwork much better. Rather than getting

frustrated and getting down on herself she'll just ask for help."

#### **Sub-theme 2.7. Better conflict management skills**

Several parents noticed that since their child attended the ALFL Schools Programme their child had acquired better conflict management skills. A mother said: "If me and my son had a row, normally he would get upset and walk away, but now I've noticed he wants to sit and talk to you about it. So, he would say 'Mum when you said this, this and this, it hurt my feelings'. A father said, "There was an incident recently with her and her brother. She did step back, and she didn't fly off the handle".

#### **Sub-theme 2.8. Better emotion regulation skills**

Many participants said that since their child attended the ALFL Schools Programme their child had developed better skills for emotional self-regulation. A mother described her daughter as "more in charge of her feelings". Before when upset "she would have probably been up in her room and crying or she'd be really angry and start shouting. Now she would sit and talk with you and tell you that she needs a little bit of space. Then she'll come to you when she's ready." Another parent said "You'll notice she will go quiet for a minute and do her breathing. She would just take a moment and settle down. Then she'll talk. Or she might even go outside, have a little walk around the house and then she'll come back and talk about it."

#### **Sub-theme 2.9. Increased confidence**

Some parents noticed that since their child attended the ALFL Schools Programme there was an increase in their children's confidence in various aspects of their life such as schoolwork, social interactions, and stating their needs. One mother said "There would definitely be a big change in my daughter this year. She was less confident, maybe less willing to put herself up for a leadership task, but that seems to have changed quite a bit." Another mother said she feels her daughter is "more confident in going about things in her school community." She was surprised her daughter was taking part in the debating programme and said: "I wouldn't have thought she would have had the confidence." Another parent said her daughter "seems to be more independent and she's able to voice what she wants."

#### **Sub-theme 2.10. Skills learned and continued use of skills**

Parents said that since their child attended the ALFL Schools Programme they had learned an array of skills including breathing techniques, mindfulness, self-regulation, problem-solving, conflict management, and looking at things from a different perspective. Parents gave examples of continued use of these skills. One mother said her daughter practised breathing exercises, particularly 'square breathing,' when she feels stressed or anxious and gave an example of her daughter "applying it during her homework." Another parent said "I would normally know that something has happened in school that upset him because he would be bad tempered. Now when he comes home from school, he's not doing the temper, instead he's actually saying to me 'I'm upset.'"

#### **Sub-theme 2.11. Increased awareness of factors contributing to emotional wellbeing**

Many parents noticed that since their child attended the ALFL Schools Programme there was an increase in their

children's awareness of factors contributing to their emotional wellbeing including exercise, sleep, nutrition, play, and healthy relationships. For example, one parent said "One day we had a hospital appointment, and she had to go to see a dietitian. I could hear her telling the dietitian 'what you eat can affect you' so that obviously was from the programme." Another parent said "Today, she was in the car on the way home and she was saying 'do you know that positive relationships add to your longevity of life?'" Parents also indicated considerable changes in children's lifestyle, such as going to bed earlier, exercising more, and using their mobile phones less. For example, one parent said "She is definitely doing her exercise and getting her sleep, for sure. She is determined to get nine hours or ten hours of sleep. She definitely took that away from the programme." Another parent commented "The screen time is a big thing for kids nowadays. My daughter definitely does make more of an effort when she comes home from school. She goes outside a bit more, and things like that. The programme definitely has made her more aware to be a bit more active and enjoy time outside."

#### **Sub-theme 2.12. Increased awareness of the impact social media may have on mental health and wellbeing**

Several parents reported considerable increases in their children's knowledge of social media, its dangers and the negative effect it might have on their health and wellbeing. One parent reported that his daughter was "more aware of the dangers" of social media while another described how her son was "more aware of the followers issue and cyber bullying". Another commented that her daughter "had decided it wasn't good for her to be too much on social media, and she has been reducing it".

### **Theme 3. Parents' perception of the importance of school-based programmes in the prevention of mental health problems**

This theme encompasses parents' views on the importance of embedding school-based wellbeing programmes in school curriculums to prevent mental health problems; current challenges for children growing up; the current mental health crisis among young people; and school as an important venue for wellbeing programmes. This theme also encompasses parents' views on social, emotional, cognitive, interpersonal, intrapersonal and developmental benefits of school-based wellbeing programmes; and the value of parental involvement in these programmes.

#### **Sub-theme 3.1. Wellbeing programmes as part of school curriculums**

All participants indicated that children need school-based wellbeing programmes. A few also thought that it was necessary to integrate wellbeing programmes into the wider school curriculum. This was viewed as especially important during and following the COVID-19 pandemic. One parent commented "I think particularly post COVID-19 it's very important to have a wellbeing programme. I would hope that it might be something that would become part of the curriculum in the future. It's something that's really lacking in schools."

#### **Sub-theme 3.2. Challenges of growing up in the present world**

Some participants commented on need for school-based wellbeing programs to help young people cope with the challenges of growing up in the world today. These



challenges include making the transition from childhood to adolescence, hormonal changes, changes in young people's appearance, transitioning into secondary school, peer pressure, pressure to excel at schoolwork and extracurricular activities, family difficulties, and living in digital world. However, at the time this study was conducted, the challenges for young people also included stresses associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, illness, isolation, and bereavement. One mother commented: "At that age, they need something, and it has been very difficult for them in the last couple of years because of the COVID-19 lockdowns and everything that has happened."

### **Sub-theme 3.3. Mental health crisis and importance of prevention**

Participants also highlighted the need for school-based wellbeing programmes to address the increased prevalence of mental health problems in young people and the importance of prevention. They regarded childhood and adolescence as the critical developmental phases for prevention and early intervention initiatives. One mother explained: "These kinds of wellbeing programmes are hugely beneficial. If we can try and get in early and try and avoid some of the issues that come along, if you just talk about things, and you don't ignore problems I think that can only benefit everybody."

### **Sub-theme 3.4. School as a 'core place' for wellbeing projects**

Many parents identified school as an important venue for child and adolescent wellbeing projects. One parent commented: "I think school is such a core place where they can learn the stuff around resilience and acknowledging and being okay with these everyday difficult feelings and anxieties and concerns, to name all that stuff and then, to give them kind of coping skills."

### **Sub-theme 3.5. Assistance with social, emotional, cognitive, interpersonal, intrapersonal and developmental functioning**

The majority of parents said their children would benefit from attending a school-based wellbeing programme that covered a range of topics associated with social, emotional, cognitive, interpersonal, intrapersonal and developmental functioning.

Examples of topics in the social and interpersonal functioning domain include: "learning about feelings, being able to open up to others and express themselves"; "empathy"; "understanding what someone else might be feeling or thinking"; "respect for yourself and others"; "conflict management"; "confidence building"; "diversity, different religions, socio-economic groups and sexual orientation"; "everybody is different, but that's okay" and "social media and all the dangers of the internet"

Examples of topics in the emotional, cognitive, and intrapersonal functioning domain include: "dealing with stress or worries"; "coping with anxiety and who they can go to if they're struggling"; "tuning into your body and realising when you're starting to panic about something, how you stop that, and what techniques to use"; "reflecting and thinking things through, asking why do I get upset about that?"; "being able to catch the negative thoughts"; "seeing the glass as half full as opposed to half

empty; "taking a break, taking a breather, and have a stretch"; "meditation"; "mindfulness"; and "yoga".

Examples of topics in the developmental functioning domain include "puberty, understanding the teenage body and brain, and sexuality"; and "school transition and what to expect".

### **Sub-theme 3.6. Parental involvement**

Some parents commented on the importance of being actively involved in future school-based wellbeing programmes to support to their children. They said that this might involve having discussions about the programme content, reviewing children's homework sheets, practising homework exercises with their children, and reminding them to use their new skills, knowledge, or techniques to enhance their wellbeing. One mother explained: "If you are aware of what children are learning, and there is a particular strategy that they have been taught explicitly and that could be used, then it empowers you and you may say: 'Well, hang on, let's try this or try that.'"

## **Discussion**

This was the first qualitative study of parents' views of the ALFL Schools Programme. Our results represent a novel contribution to the evidence-base for this universal school-based positive psychology wellbeing intervention. The RTA of transcripts of semi-structured interviews with 21 parents yielded the following three primary themes: (1) Programme feedback, (2) Illustrations of positive changes in children, and (3) Parents' perception of the importance of school-based programmes in the prevention of mental health problems. The results of the RTA showed that parents had predominantly positive views of universal school wellbeing programmes in general, and the ALFL Schools Programme, in particular. The RTA also showed that parents thought the ALFL Schools Programme enhanced their children's wellbeing skills and their own parenting skills. Benefits for children identified by parents included better awareness of factors contributing to wellbeing, and better wellbeing skills in a range of areas including communication within relationships, reflective capacity, problem-solving, conflict management, and emotion regulation using techniques such as mindfulness and breathing exercises, and online safety. Parents also had suggestions for development of the ALFL Schools Programme, notably, increased parental involvement. These findings addressed the three objectives of the study which were to investigate parents' perspectives on: (1) school-based wellbeing programmes; (2) the ALFL Schools Programme and parents' role within it; and (3) the impact of the ALFL Schools Programme on children and parents.

The finding that parents reported a range of benefits for their children involving the use of the use of skills learned on the ALFL Schools Programme in specific situations is consistent with the results two cluster randomised controlled trials (Grennan et al., 2025; O'Dowd et al., 2025) and one qualitative study (Hector et al., 2022). In an evaluation of the ALFL Schools programme for children in 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> class, Grennan et al. (2025) found that, compared with a waiting-list control group, children in the intervention group reported greater increases in state wellbeing on the Feeling Better Scale (FBS, McKenna et al., 2025). The FBS assessed state wellbeing arising from using skills learned on the ALFL Schools Programme in specific situations. O'Dowd et al. (2025) obtained similar results in an evaluation of the

ALFL Schools programme for children in 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> class. In an uncontrolled qualitative study of the ALFL Schools programme for children in 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> class, Hootor et al. (2022) found that children with low levels of wellbeing at baseline reported improvements in coping skills used in specific situations.

Patents predominantly positive view of school-based wellbeing programmes is consistent with reviews of outcome research on school-based positive psychology interventions (Mendes de Oliveria et al., 2022; Tejada-Gallardo et al., 2020) and social emotional learning (Cipriano et al., 2023; Durlak et al., 2022), and recommendations of Irish (Department of Education and Skills, 2015) and international expert reports (World Health Organisation, 2021, 2022).

Parents limited knowledge about details of the ALFL Schools Programme curriculum is not unique to this specific intervention. Similar results have been found in evaluations of other universal school-based interventions, for example the FRIENDS anxiety prevention programme (Skryabina et al., 2016) and the Zippy's Friends emotional wellbeing programme (Clarke & Barry, 2010).

Parents views of the need for greater parental involvement in the ALFL Schools Programme is consistent with evidence for the impact of effective parent school partnerships on child wellbeing (Low & Kok, 2020).

Parents recommendation that the ALFL Schools Programme be offered to younger is consistent with evidence for the impact on child wellbeing of early intervention (Faulconbridge et al., 2019). It also aligns with the recent development of developmentally staged versions of the ALFL Schools Programme for younger children.

The study had some limitations. It was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. This had an impact on the programme curriculum and the delivery. An input on COVID-19 was added to the curriculum, and the delivery of ten sessions was not weekly in all schools, due to pandemic-related restrictions. Programme fidelity was assessed by teacher report, and the reliability of this was not assessed.

The study also had significant strengths. The sample was quite diverse and represented parents of children in urban and rural schools; all boys, all girls, and mixed gender schools; and from advantaged and disadvantaged communities. The ALFL Schools Programme was delivered by teachers in-person (not online) in all participating schools despite the COVID-19 pandemic. The sample of 21 parents provided adequate data for thematic analysis. The credibility and trustworthiness of the analysis was supported by extensive familiarization, reflexive journaling, high inter-coder reliability, expert review of thematic results, and transparent reporting.

The main implications of the results are for the continued development of versions of the ALFL Schools Programme for younger children with greater parental involvement, and their evaluation with randomized controlled trials and qualitative child, parent, and teacher report studies.

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Conceptualization and design of the study (ML, GOR); participant recruitment (ML, LC, EM); data collection (ML); data analysis (ML, GOR); drafting the manuscript (ML, GOR); reviewing and editing the final manuscript (all authors); supervision (GOR).

#### Declaration of competing interests

Leda Connaughton and Eddie Murphy are members of the 'A Lust for Life' charity.

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#### Compliance with ethical standards and informed consent

This research was conducted with ethical approval of the Human Research Ethics Committee, University College Dublin, and informed consent of participants.

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## 45. Appendix. Interview schedule

First, it's lovely to meet you. Today I want to talk to you about what you thought of A Lust for Life Schools Programme and the impact it had, if any, on your child and yourself. It will be helpful to know if you found the programme beneficial or not, so please be as honest as you can.

- (1) Do you think children need a school-based well-being programme?
  - Yes
  - What areas would you like to see it cover?
  - What role do you think it should ask of you as a parent?
  - No
  - Why not?
- (2) Do you think your child needs a programme like this?
  - Yes
  - What do you think your child would most benefit from?
  - No
  - Why not?
- (3) What do you understand the aims and content of the A Lust for Life Schools Programme to be?
- (4) What do you understand to be your role as part of the A Lust for Life Schools Programme?

Thank you. I would like to ask you now a few questions about your overall impression of the A Lust for Life Schools Programme.

- (1) What did you think of the A Lust for Life Schools Programme? How interesting/boring/engaging/fun was it for your child?
- (2) How beneficial was it for your child? Was it helpful/unhelpful?
- (3) What was your experience of assisting your child with their homework task? Was it interesting, boring, enjoyable, fun or maybe time consuming, complicated?
- (4) Did the ALFL homework tasks spark interesting discussions? If so, can you give me some examples?
- (5) Is there anything you would change about the programme?
  - If so, what would you change?
  - Was there anything too tricky for your child to grasp?
  - Anything missing from the programme that you feel would be important to include?

Thanks very much for that feedback. I would like to find out whether you have noticed any changes within your child since she/he attended the programme?

- (1) Before attending A Lust for Life Schools Programme did your daughter/son have an understanding of his/her emotions?
- (2) Did she/he understand that many factors contribute to emotional well-being like exercise, sleep, nutrition, play? Do you feel she/he are more aware of this now? How do you know?
- (3) Have you noticed any changes in your daughter/son's mood?
- (4) Does she/he talk about her/his feelings more or less?
- (5) Do you think she/he pays more attention to how she/he is feeling?
- (6) Do you think your daughter/son is more aware of when she/he feels happy, sad, angry, scared, worried?
- (7) Do you think she/he knows how to handle these feelings any better? Tell me more.
- (8) Do you think your daughter/son is more aware of other peoples' feelings?
  - If so, have you noticed her/him doing anything differently when she/he notices her/his friends or family members are feeling sad/worried/angry?
- (9) Do you think she/he has learned how to take another person's perspective?
- (10) Do you think your daughter/son has changed how she/he manages strong feelings? Explain.
- (11) Have you noticed any changes in your daughter/son's behaviour? At home/When interacting with other children/Anywhere else?
  - What do these changes look like? Mindful behaviour – being in the present moment/Helping behaviour/Social behaviour/ Inclusive behaviour?
- (12) Have you noticed any differences in how your daughter/son engages with social media?
  - Do you think she/he knows more about the impact of social media on her/his health as a result of A Lust for Life Schools Programme? Tell me more.
- (13) Do you think she/he knows more about different cultures? Give examples.
- (14) Do you think your daughter/son feels like she/he belong to a community? Explain. Has this understanding improved since A Lust for Life Schools Programme?
- (15) Do you think she/he understands our society any better?
- (16) Has A Lust for life Schools Programme encouraged your daughter/son to volunteer or help out in the community at all?
  - If so, how?
- (17) Have you noticed any change in how she/he handles problems/schoolwork or otherwise?
- (18) Have you noticed any difference in your daughter/son's schoolwork?
- (19) Have you noticed any difference in your daughter/son's attitude towards schoolwork?

- (20) If she/he hasn't done well in a task, have you noticed any changes in the way she/he handles disappointment?
- (21) Do you think she/he responds any differently to praise or criticism?
- (22) Do you notice your daughter/son using any of the techniques to help them concentrate better?
- (23) Do you think she/he responds any differently to pressure?

Thank you. Just a few more questions.

- (1) Did you learn anything from the A Lust for Life Schools Programme that benefited you personally?
  - If so, what did you learn?

Thank you for taking part in the interview. Do you have any questions for me?