

Schools use animals to boost pupils' well being

ANIMAL THERAPY IS A WAY OF TACKLING 'DIFFICULT FEELINGS'

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A SET of Plymouth schools that use animal therapy as a way to tackle difficult feelings are the first in the UK to win a prestigious award dedicated to mental health and well being.

Oakwood Primary Academy, Weston Mill Community Primary Academy, Beechwood Primary Academy and the Edison Centre all come under the Discovery Multi Academy Trust umbrella and it is them who have become the first educational group to win a Mentally Healthy organisation Award.

The award was presented by not-for-profit The Centre for Child Mental Health (CCMH) and Trauma Informed Schools UK (TIS), providers of trauma and mental health training for teachers and education staff across the country.

All of the Trust's academies have a higher than national percentage of children who are eligible for free school meals and children with special educational needs.

At Weston Mill Community Primary Academy, over 41% of children are eligible for free school meals - significantly above the national average of 13.6%.

Measures that the Trust have put into place to aid the wellbeing of its students has resulted in significant improvements in behaviour and academic attainment.

The Trust's approach includes animal therapy with guinea pigs and

chickens, outdoor learning and shared lunch between pupils and teachers.

Suzie Franklin, education consultant and TIS UK awards assessor, said: "You can really feel the sense of emotional well being as you walk around the school and the calm caring yet playful relationships that adults engage in at all levels promotes emotional regulation across the whole school culture.

"The ethos is focused around learning as the foundation for life, rather than league tables or exam results. Underpinning this is a comprehensive vision for students' social, moral and cultural development.

"There is relationship policy (for staff to ensure that interactions with pupils are reflective, regulating and warm) and the school really understands the evidence-based role that relationships play in shaping daily experiences."

Alison Nettleship, leader of the Trust, said on the win: "The approach has transformed our culture and is a result of the hard work of our dedicated team.

"As a result we have seen an improvement in the well-being of staff and children and this has been a key strategy for facilitating school improvement.

"As a Trust we believe in the importance of recognising the emotional health of our school communities and we look forward to this ongoing development in the future. Receiving this award continues to validate our approach and we are extremely proud to be recognised as a Mentally Healthy Organisation."