

CAMPAIGN

How the district embraced themes of inaugural Children's Mental Health Week

Stacey Turner, founder of mental health awareness campaign It's OK To Say, reflects on activities during St Albans' first Children's Mental Health Week.

Introducing Children's Mental Health Week to St Albans began with a vision of wanting to reach out to our families, and inspire discussion surrounding mental health, that it's OK to feel and It's OK To Say.

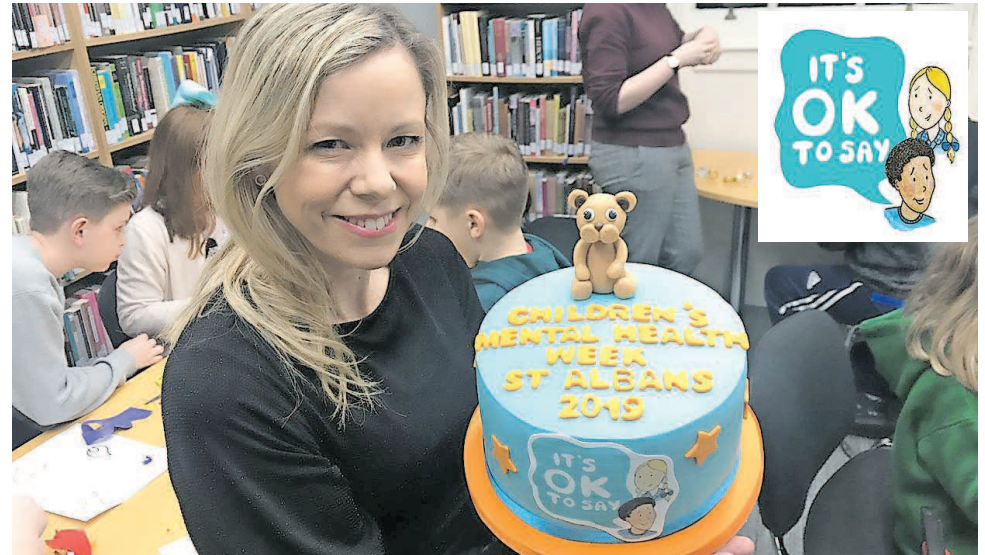
I wanted us to look beyond the daily grind, reflect on our wellbeing, learn how we can improve the mind and body in harmony, and ultimately provide a happier and healthier state of wellbeing for families across the district.

Presenting our mascot bear Okie to the community was a beautiful experience. It was heartwarming to see the high fives, cuddles, smiles and giggles of happiness from children.

No matter where we turned up there was a real buzz and a sense of community spirit with so much interest in what we were doing and why we were there.

I loved discussing It's OK To Say and Children's Mental Health Week with the residents we met of all ages.

The week began at St Albans



Museum + Gallery with a ribbon-cutting ceremony at which I was joined by Herts Ad group editor Matt Adams and Cllr Annie Brewster, who was instrumental in the successful inclusion of the museum for Children's Mental Health Week. The museum chef had even created cupcakes with the It's OK To Say logo and staff wore orange ribbons.

Back at the Museum + Gallery last Wednesday, two older gentlemen joyously embraced Okie and I and were thrilled to

hear all about It's OK To Say and how St Albans was illuminated in orange for Children's Mental Health Week.

Both men spoke openly about how their teenage and adult lives were impacted by not learning how to talk about their feelings. The men congratulated me and said, if nothing else, teach children how to talk, the importance of it and use examples of what happens if they don't!

Thursday saw us visit Westminster Lodge where we

were invited to spread the campaign's message further by surprising families with a photo opportunity with our mascot bear. It was an absolute delight to see so many children taken with Okie. Even through the glass overlooking the baby pool, children excitedly ran to the window waving furiously in excitement.

On Friday, I received a special cake from Heaven is a Cupcake's Lucy Clark, who said: "With mental health very close to my

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(Left) Stacey Turner with the It's OK To Say cake created by Lucy Clark of Heaven is a Cupcake and (above and right) some of the children from the Xcite youth group at St Albans Cathedral.



heart, I was delighted to support Stacey and offer this bespoke cake to help celebrate Children's Mental Health Week."

I chose to take the cake along to share with St Albans Cathedral's youth group Xcite on Friday evening, where I was invited to talk to the group about the campaign's message and Children's Mental Health Week.

Youth group leader Naomi Gardom said: "We really enjoyed having Stacey visit our meeting on Friday.

"It's so important for young people to hear that they are supported and that they are allowed to ask for help. We also loved the cake!"

The group listened and responded intently, they all knew who I was and about my work and it was wonderful to see a whole room of young people throw their hands up in the air when asked, "Do you feel you have someone you can speak to?"

We decorated candles together while sharing cake before going

outside for a prayer by candlelight for children with struggles.

Before leaving, the group were asked if they had any questions for me, I was impressed by the excellent and well thought-out questions allowing me to sneak in a little more information.

Simply put, mental health is how we think, feel and act. If you are worried about a child's mental health, let them know you are there and ready to listen. This may sound basic, but don't assume they know.

Try to stay calm and respond in a thoughtful and non-judgemental manner. Offer acknowledgment by repeating what has been said back and from this, together you can plan forward.

Don't be tempted to try and fix, as this can shut down communication. Gather options, such as going to the GP, talking to school, talking to a trusted family member or an independent service.

Print off information (and even positive case studies) to show the

child is not alone and together go through the options assuring the child you are there every step of the way. You may be able to access support to help you help your child. There is an abundance of help available, but it should always be child lead, as difficult conversations often take time to happen.

If a child finds it difficult to talk, follow this advice: If you can't talk, write it; If you can't write it, draw it; If you can't draw it, express it.

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