

**National Children's Mental Health Awareness Day
Testimony by Goldie Hawn
Washington, DC
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Good morning. My name is Goldie Hawn, and I want to thank the members of Congress, congressional staff, fellow panelists and all the advocates at this important briefing. I appreciate the opportunity to speak.

We're meeting at a time of extraordinary turmoil in the world, and given the economic crisis, the mortgage meltdown, two wars and the flu outbreak, it would be all too easy to miss the inner turmoil that is afflicting so many of our children today. But this turmoil is an epidemic of quiet distress, one that is taking a terrible toll.

I'm here today to speak in three capacities.

First, as a mother who knows the joys and challenges of raising children.

Second, I'm testifying as a public citizen – someone who's deeply concerned about improving our struggling schools, because they are so critical to our future.

Third, I'm speaking on behalf of the Hawn Foundation, which worked with leading educators, neuroscientists and other researchers to develop a program to enhance children's social and emotional learning skills. This program, called "MindUp," is already in use in many schools across the United States and Canada, and it equips kids with simple, practical tools to help them:

- Reduce stress and anxiety
- Improve concentration and academic performance

- Understand the brain science linking emotions, thoughts and behavior
- Manage emotions and behavior more effectively
- Develop greater empathy for others and the world

But before I talk more about the impact of social and emotional learning programs, I'd like to set the context. Many in Washington and across the country are well aware of the academic problems in our schools. In addition, many are aware of and concerned about the mental health of our children.

Here is an important connection to make: children's mental health affects their academic performance; and their academic performance affects their mental health. In other words, depression, anxiety and unhappiness impair school performance. Similarly, school failure contributes to mental health problems.

Across our country, one in 10 children suffers from a serious mental health disorder, and only a small fraction of them receive the help and services they need. A national survey by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control reported that 8% of our kids in grades 9-12 tried to take their own life, and 17% reported "seriously considering" suicide. These troubling statistics reflect symptoms of a deep unhappiness that can afflict children from all backgrounds.

We need solutions that simultaneously promote children's social-emotional skills, mental health, and academic performance. According to CASEL, the nation's leading organization focused on social and emotional learning, several hundred studies have documented that social and emotional learning programs help children improve classroom behavior, become more engaged in learning, and perform better academically. These programs have also been proven to reduce kids' anti-social and violent behavior generally, and lower the likelihood of drug use.

Recent field reports from classrooms using the Hawn Foundation's Mind Up program – one of which is in Alexandria, just across the Potomac – reinforce this research.

I spoke recently with one teacher, who told me one of her students started crying because his dad was leaving on a 3-month assignment out of town. Without prompting from the teacher, other kids – who had been working on their social and emotional learning skills – gathered around to comfort their classmate. One said his dad had been in the hospital for brain cancer, where he couldn't visit him. Another talked about his parents' divorce, and his dad moving out. And their empathy in the classroom made that first boy feel better.

In another classroom, an autistic child, nervous about a test, started to shake his hands over and over, a sign of anxiety that can often escalate. A fellow student – who had been working on his social and emotional learning skills – spotted his classmate's anxiety and approached the teacher with a solution: a deep-breathing and centering exercise for the entire class. In just a couple of minutes, this calmed everyone down, including the autistic child, who was then able to join the others in taking the test.

These are small examples, but the point is that we have valuable tools we can teach our kids – tools that can have a big impact on the way they interact, learn in the classroom, and navigate life. Our challenge as adults is to ensure that we make these tools available to every child that needs them. And I would argue that every child in America *does* need them.

Today, as we mark National Children's Mental Health Awareness Day, I hope that leaders here in Washington will commit themselves to scaling up funding for the mental health resources – including implementation of social and emotional learning programs – that our children need to overcome the challenges they face.

I also urge Congress to reauthorize funding for the Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), which must be able to continue its vital work.

Finally, I would add that, at a time when our nation is struggling to bring down health care costs, supporting social and emotional learning programs in elementary schools is extremely cost-effective. First, these programs are inexpensive. Second, they make a big impact in helping young people manage and reduce stress – and over time, stress is a major contributor to a whole range of costly health issues.

We need to focus on creating healthy, eager learners who can reach their full potential. And until we do so, our children will continue to struggle academically, and continue to lag behind students in other countries. In a competitive global economy, this is a terrible handicap – for our kids and our country.

So let's move forward and equip our kids with these powerful social and emotional tools. We know what works. The research is clear. Now is the time to apply what we know in every classroom across America.

Because remember, while our children might only be a fraction of our population, they represent 100% of our future. We owe it to them – and ourselves – to make sure their future is one of health, happiness and genuine opportunity.

Thank you.