

Drinking enough water improves children's behaviour, and their work.

Yvonne Roberts investigates

Thirst for learning

MEET Phil the cactus and Sip the Sunflower, two cartoon characters used in South Staffordshire schools to persuade children (and staff) that water is much more than the playground's most lethal weapon – it's vital for oiling children's brains.

Working with South Staffordshire Water, schools held poster and writing competitions to encourage children to think about water. This was backed by a study of water use and a day of activities.

Only recently have schools begun to appreciate that children are what they drink. Or, more precisely, what they don't drink. Each primary school child should consume at least six to eight glasses of water a day, half at school.

Water makes up around 80% of the brain and is an essential element in neurological transmissions. Cognitive performance decreases by 10% in healthy young adults when they are thirsty. Among children, mild dehydration may be signalled by irritability, tiredness and an inability to concentrate.

Children should be encouraged to see the signs in their own urine (a game that's bound to amuse!). Pee the colour of pale straw, odourless and lots of it is good. Deep yellow, cloudy and smelly pee tells them to reach for several drinks.

Traditionally, water in school sig-



nalled disruption; soaking clothes and very little down the throat. If, that is, water was available to children at all.

In 2003, the Department of Health asked ERIC (Education and Resources for Improving Childhood Continence) to assess water provision in a sample of 40 schools. Eric discovered that existing facilities are "insufficiently durable" and there are still not enough suitable sites. In short, quite the reverse of 'Water, water everywhere...'

Last year the government published its Healthy Living Blueprint for Schools, which declares "All pupils should have access to drinking water at all times at a number of points around the school, preferably not from the taps in the toilets. Pupils should be permitted to carry water with them and consumption encouraged both in class and during break and lunch time."

This has had an impact. One primary school learning support assistant explains, "We had a water day giving the children information

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and we put lots of posters around the school. We substantially increased the number of fountains and encouraged the children to bring bottled water into school. The water fights have stopped. Except when it gets very, very hot."

The Welsh Assembly has provided free water coolers and personal water bottles to 384 schools. The Scottish Executive by next year will have provided water coolers, water fountains and personal water bottles for all its schools. But while water provision to children in English schools has greatly improved, some schools still regard water as a drop too far.

If you want to change policy, there's plenty of help available – and you may be able to encourage your local water board to sponsor posters and materials. Drink up!

www.wateriscoolinschool.org.uk

www.water.org.uk

www.wateraid.org/drinkwater

www.water.org.uk/waterforhealth