

# Briefing for schools

## Supporting children with mental health issues

**December 2017**

The [How safe are our children? 2017](#) report revealed that mental/emotional health was the most common concern for young people in Childline counselling sessions.

School staff spend a lot of time with children and get to know them very well, so can play a vital role in spotting the early signs of mental health issues and can help children get the support they need.

### **Children at risk of mental health issues**

Some children can be more vulnerable than others to issues such as depression, anxiety, self-harm or eating disorders. If there are children in school who have experienced abuse, bullying, bereavement, have learning difficulties or are in care for example, school staff may need to be vigilant to potential emotional and behavioural problems.

Exam time can also be a time when children experience increased levels of stress and may need extra emotional support. The Childline website has resources and advice for children about [exam stress](#).

### **Signs of possible mental health issues**

There may be cause for concern if staff notice certain changes in a pupil's appearance or behaviour such as:

- noticeable weight loss or gain
- physical injuries
- change in personality i.e. mood swings
- frequently missing lessons
- social isolation
- lethargy and disinterest
- tearfulness or appearing anxious
- lack of focus in class
- change in educational performance.

## School policy, ethos and training

Schools can include a section about mental health issues in their existing policies that cover special educational needs, additional support needs, additional learning needs, learning difficulties and/ or disabilities, or create a separate policy to outline the different types of mental health issues and actions that need to be taken if concerns arise

It also a good idea to promote sources of help and advice such as [Childline](#) around the school, if a child is not yet ready to talk to a member of staff at school.

The school should create a culture that fosters confidence in pupils to approach any member of staff if they are struggling with mental health issues. The school should promote positive messages about mental health and resilience to let pupils know help is available and they will not be stigmatised.

Training for school staff can help them spot signs of mental health issues. [MindEd](#) provide free e-learning courses for schools on mental health.

## Responding to concerns about mental health

The school should have a clear policy and process for reporting and escalating concerns about mental health. If a member of staff has a concern about the mental health of a pupil they should speak to the person named in this policy. This could be the person responsible for pastoral care, the person in charge of coordinating support for children with special/ additional needs or the designated safeguarding lead.

The DfE non-statutory advice for schools in England [Mental health and behaviour in schools](#) (DfE, 2016) suggests that if there is a concern about a child's mental health a [Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire \(SDQ\)](#) can be completed to assess the child's behaviour.

Schools should be aware of local area protocols for early help referral and assessment and follow these where appropriate.

Schools should also be aware of local external agencies that can be accessed if additional support is needed for child or young person.

After an assessment has been made, a plan of action needs to be decided upon taking into account the wishes of the pupil and their parents/carers. Regular reviews need to be undertaken to judge the effectiveness of the support provided.

Persistent mental health issues may have an impact on learning and mean that a child will need special or additional needs support

## How children can get help

One-to-one school-based counselling can be offered to children. The DfE has produced advice on what makes an effective school counselling service [Counselling in schools: a blueprint for the future](#) for schools in England (DfE, 2016).

If a child is experiencing more severe mental health issues the school may need to access help from the child's GP, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), an education psychologist or specialist counselling organisations such as [Place2Be](#) (England, Wales and Scotland), and [Achieve NI](#) (Northern Ireland).

Young people can sometimes be reluctant to talk to an adult, so peer support systems can be a good way of encouraging children to talk to someone their own age. Peer supporters must be trained and must understand that sometimes they will need to let an adult know if they are worried that a child might be at risk of harm. [Childline](#) has online message boards where young people can talk to their peers about a range of issues including mental health.

Circle time for younger children can be a good way of discussing worries and looking at problem solving strategies.

## Promoting good mental health in schools

The PSHE curriculum can be used to explore and discuss topics around mental health and build confidence, self-esteem, resilience and help children develop problems solving skills.

The PHSE Association has produced resources and [guidance on preparing to teach about mental health and emotional wellbeing](#).

Schools could also run workshops for the parents/carers of children who are suffering from or at risk of mental health issues.

## References and useful resources

[Mental health and behaviour in schools](#)

[Safeguarding Children - Working Together Under the Children Act](#)

[Child protection: record keeping in schools](#)

[National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland](#)

[YoungMinds](#)

## Online training for schools

- [Child protection in schools](#)
- [Managing sexualised behaviour in primary schools](#)
- [Safer recruitment in education](#)
- [Keeping children safe online](#)

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