



Promoting Children's Mental Health within Early Years and School Settings

Summary and key messages for schools

LEAs, Schools,
Pre-School Settings
Child and Adolescent
Mental Health Services
(CAMHS)

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Recommended

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Overview

- The Government has recently issued good practice guidance on *Promoting Children's Mental Health within Early Years and School Settings* as part of a wider government strategy to raise educational standards for all children, to tackle the causes of social exclusion and to transform children's services.
- This summary offers pointers and examples of good practice to help school staff, working alongside mental health professionals, in early identification and intervention for pupils experiencing mental health problems.
- Schools, ***often working in partnership with other agencies***, can help promote the mental health of all children, and particularly those children most at risk of developing mental health problems.

Further information

Promoting Children's Mental Health within Early Years and School Settings (DFES 0112/2001), June 2001 is on the DfES website <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/mentalhealth> or can be ordered from DfES publications.

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Background

- There is increasing evidence that early years settings and schools can promote all children's mental health, and intervene effectively with those children experiencing problems.
- Strategies to promote mental health impact on individual children's learning and behaviour, staff performance and morale, and the overall ethos and success of the school.
- Increasing numbers of children are experiencing mental health problems. A recent ONS survey showed that 10% of children aged between 5-15 experience clinically defined mental health problems.
- *Through working in partnership with more specialist agencies*, schools may be better placed to support and maintain progress achieved by children with mental health problems, than may contact with a health professional seen solely for specific problems and for the duration of that problem.
- *In many areas, schools can draw on support from such agencies as LEA Behaviour Support Teams, Educational Psychologists and Child and adolescent mental health services, to support them in this work.*

What Causes Mental Health Problems in Children and Young People?

There are a range of factors in children and young people's lives which can result in them being at increased risk of developing mental health difficulties.

- **Risk Factors in the Child.** For example, children with specific learning difficulties, communication difficulties and specific developmental delays are more at risk than their peers.
- **Risk Factors in the Family.** For example, overt parental conflict, family breakdown and where children experience inconsistent or unclear discipline.
- **Risk Factors in the Community.** For example, children who experience socio-economic disadvantage, homelessness or discrimination are at increased risk.

An important key to promoting children's mental health is also an understanding of the protective factors that enable children to be resilient.

- **Resilience Factors in the Child.** These include having secure early relationships, a positive attitude, a problem solving approach and good communication skills.
- **Resilience Factors in the Family** includes at least one good parent-child relationship, affection and clear, firm and consistent discipline.
- **Resilience Factors in the Community** includes having a wider supportive network, a high morale school with positive policies for behaviour, attitudes and anti-bullying and strong academic and non-academic opportunities.

Whole School Approaches to Promoting Children's Mental Health

Promoting children's mental health within schools has important educational payoffs, resulting in improved academic attainments for all children.

Early Years Settings

Characteristics of Early Years Settings that actively promote the emotional well-being of children. These include:

- stable child care arrangements so that children interact with just a few primary care givers in any one day;
- low staff turnover so that children are cared for by the same individuals over several years;
- good staff training in child development;
- adequate staff to child ratios; and
- positive behaviour management.

Schools

Key characteristics of schools that promote their children and young people's mental health share:

- a committed senior management team, creating a culture within the school in which the importance of trust, integrity, democracy, equality of opportunity and each child being valued regardless of their ability is seen as being vital;
- a culture within the school which values teachers, lunchtime supervisors, and all those engaged in the care and supervision of children;
- clear policies on vital issues such as behaviour and bullying - 'whole school behaviour' policies which set out the range of acceptable behaviour for children, what is and what is not acceptable;
- the range of sanctions that will result and the acceptance and implementation of the policies throughout the school;
- high professional standards (efficient planning, setting, marking, punctuality);
- skilful teaching which arouses pupil interest and motivates; and
- proactive work with parents.

What are Mental Health Problems in Children and Young People?

Mental health professionals have defined these as:

- emotional disorders, e.g. phobias, anxiety states and depression;
- conduct disorders, e.g. stealing, defiance, fire-setting, aggression and anti-social behaviour;
- hyperkinetic disorders e.g. disturbance of activity and attention;
- developmental disorders e.g. delay in acquiring certain skills such as speech, social ability or bladder control, primarily affecting children with autism and those with pervasive developmental disorders;
- attachment disorders, e.g. children who are markedly distressed or socially impaired as a result of an extremely abnormal pattern of attachment to parents or major care givers;
- Other mental health problems include eating disorders, habit disorders, post-traumatic stress syndromes; somatic disorders; and psychotic disorders e.g. schizophrenia and manic depressive disorder.

Many of these problems will be experienced as being mild and transitory nuisances to the child and their families, whereas others will have serious and longer lasting effects. When a problem is particularly severe or persistent over time, or when a number of these difficulties are experienced at the same time, children are often described as having mental health disorders.

Interventions to Support Individual Children who are Experiencing Difficulties

School staff need to understand a child's needs to decide what help and support might be most useful. Questions to consider when thinking about the help that children and young people might need include:

- What sort of problem is the child presenting with?
- What is the impact of the child's problem?
- Risks. What factors have initiated and maintained the problem?
- Strengths. What assets are there to work with?
- Are there wider perspectives?

School staff will already have experience of these issues. The Code of Practice for Special Educational Needs (a new edition of which will come into force on 1 January 2002) has clear guidance for meeting children's needs, including those children who have emotional and behavioural difficulties and mental health problems. In contributing to the assessment of children's needs under the Children Act, schools should also be working with the Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families. *Copies of the Framework are available on website www.doh.gov.uk.*

Early Interventions in Pre-school Settings

In early years settings some practices are particularly important for children who are at risk of developing emotional and behaviour problems. These include:

- home visiting, parent 'drop ins', courses run for parents in such areas as literacy and computing skills;
- parenting classes which enable parents to build on their strengths and learn new ways of engaging with their children;
- work with small groups of vulnerable children or vulnerable children individually around strategies to promote positive behaviour, social development and self-esteem;
- teaching interpersonal problem solving skills to young children; and
- compensatory nurturing experiences for vulnerable children.

Early Intervention in Primary and Secondary Schools

Some simple but important strategies that all teachers can use to support children with mental health problems are:

- **In the classroom.** Evidence has shown the effectiveness of positive classroom management techniques at a whole class level, alongside work with small groups of children or individual children around strategies to promote positive behaviour, social development and self-esteem.
- **In the playground.** A range of interventions – Circle of Friends, Play assistants, Pyramid Trust type schemes can help children at these potentially difficult times.
- **Out of school through effective links with parents.** Evidence shows that if parents can also be supported to better manage their children's behaviour, alongside work being carried out with the child at school – there is a much greater likelihood of success in reducing the child's problems, and in supporting their academic and emotional development.

For children with more complex problems, interventions in schools may include:

- support to the child's teacher, to help them manage the child's behaviour within the classroom, taking into account the needs of the whole class;
- additional educational one to one support for the child – to help them cope better within the classroom;
- one to one therapeutic work with the child, delivered by mental health specialists outside or sometimes inside school. This may take the form of cognitive behavioural therapy, behaviour modification or counselling approaches;
- medication may be recommended by mental health professionals. School staff should be aware of the medication that children are taking; and
- family support and/or therapy could also be considered by mental health professionals – to help the child and his family better understand and manage his behaviour.

Schools can draw upon a range of external supports to assist them in this work. In many areas, LEA Behaviour Support Teams and Educational Psychologists can provide useful advice and support, alongside Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). CAMHS is a term used to describe the range of services and professionals working in the field of child and adolescent mental health. In some areas there are fully staffed specialist CAMHS teams who are able to offer a range of support and help for schools with individual children and their parents, and with groups of children experiencing difficulties. The professionals who work within CAMHS services can include child and adolescent psychiatrists, child psychotherapists, social workers, clinical psychologists, community psychiatric nurses and art, music and drama therapists.