Managing mental health in schools

A degree of pressure and stress is inevitable in most pupils and is common during exam periods. However, when their stress becomes excessive, it can move pupils to a state where it begins to have an effect on their health and wellbeing. Stress can also undermine educational attainment, causing pupils who suffer to fall behind in their overall educational achievement.

For children, growing up presents significant challenges; however, in recent years it could be argued that these have, in many ways, become increasingly complex. The growth and development of a culture of social networking, and growing expectations on the young to achieve high grades has, amongst other things, contributed to circumstances where children find themselves under increasing levels of pressure and stress.

Developing the ability to manage the situations that may generate feelings of stress is an essential prerequisite of a healthy emotional development.

Key points

- In order to help their pupils succeed, schools have an important role to play in supporting them to be resilient and mentally healthy.
- Where severe problems occur, schools should expect the pupil to get support elsewhere as well.
- Schools should ensure that pupils and their families participate as fully as possible in decisions, and are provided with information and support.
- Schools should consider if their pupils would benefit from the offer of school counselling services.
- There are things that schools can do for those showing early signs of problems and for families exposed to several risk factors, such as early intervention and strengthening resilience, before serious mental health problems occur.
- Schools can influence the health services that are commissioned locally through their local Health and Wellbeing Board.

Factors that put children at risk

Certain individuals and groups are more at risk of developing stress and mental health problems than others. These risks can relate to the child themselves, to their family, or to their community or life events. The risk factors are listed in the table below:

	Risk Factors
In the child	- Genetic influences - Low IQ and learning disabilities - Specific development delay - Communication difficulties - Difficult temperament - Physical illness - Academic failure - Low self-esteem
In the family	- Parental conflict, including domestic violence - Family breakdown, including adoption - Inconsistent or unclear discipline - Hostile or rejecting relationships - Failure to adapt to a child's needs - Physical, sexual or emotional abuse or neglect - Parental psychiatric illness - Parental criminality, alcoholism or personality disorder - Death and loss, including friendship
In the school	- Bullying - Discrimination - Breakdown in or lack of positive friendships - Deviant peer influence - Peer pressure - Poor pupil to teacher relationships
In the community	- Socio-economic disadvantage - Homelessness - Disaster, accidents, war or other overwhelming events - Discrimination - Other significant life events

Risk factors are cumulative. Children exposed to multiple risks, such as a social disadvantage, family adversity and cognitive or attention problems, are more likely to develop behavioural problems.

Identification

A record should be kept of changes in pupils' patterns of attainment, attendance or behaviour, and relevant procedures should take place in order to address the problems found.

At least one member of staff should know every pupil well and be able to spot where bad or unusual behaviour may have a root cause that needs addressing. Where this is the case, the pastoral system or school policies should provide the structure through which staff can escalate the issues and take decisions about what to do next.

Intervention

Schools have the flexibility to create their own PSHE curriculum and many use this to focus on developing pupils' resilience, confidence and ability to learn. Discussions or activities can also be used to identify pupils who require additional support.

Evidence has shown that an effective approach promoting positive behaviour, social development and self-esteem can help pupils identify coping strategies to help them deal with stress.

School-based counselling is one of the most prevalent forms of psychological therapy for young people in the UK. School services are often one-to-one sessions with pupils, given by a qualified counsellor. In primary schools, in addition to talking therapies, support is often provided through non-directive play therapy. For pupils with more complex and severe cases, advice should be sought from a medical health professional.

Working with parents/carers to help support them to better manage their children's behaviour can reduce the likelihood of a child developing severe stress or anxiety.

Some schools also find peer mentoring to be an effective approach to supporting pupils, especially during exam periods.

Communication should be promoted amongst all the staff and pupils to ensure those suffering with stress and other mental health issues feel encouraged to come forward and discuss their concerns.

How schools can promote mental health

- A culture that values all pupils, allowed them to express their problems in a non-stigmatised way shall be devised by a committed senior management team.
- Consistent support shall be applied to create an ethos where high expectations of attainment is expected for all pupils.
- An effective strategic role for the qualified teacher who acts as the special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCO), to ensure all those working within the school understand special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).
- Continuous professional development for staff to ensure all members of the school are made aware of their responsibility to promote good mental health, whilst also informing them about spotting the early signs of mental health and what to do if they spot any of these.
- A clear system and process needs to be put in place in order to assist staff who identify children and young people with possible mental health problems. Schools should work with other professionals in order to offer a range of support, both within and beyond school.
- Working alongside parents/carers as well as with the pupils themselves.
- Working with professionals to ensure a wide range of support is available to all pupils.
- The health and wellbeing of all pupils should be promoted throughout the school.

Bibliography

Department of Education (2016) 'Mental health and behaviour in schools', <https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/508847/Mental_Health_and_Behaviour_-_advice_for_Schools_160316.pdf> [Accessed: 8 April 2016]