

## **Supporting children with social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) difficulties in the classroom**

Children with **Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) difficulties** may exhibit a wide range of behaviours, including becoming withdrawn or isolated, or displaying challenging, disruptive, or disturbing behaviour. These behaviours can stem from underlying mental health difficulties such as anxiety, depression, self-harming, substance misuse, eating disorders, or medically unexplained physical symptoms.

They can also be associated with disorders like **attention deficit disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), or attachment disorder**. It's crucial to understand that a child's behaviour is often a communication about their state of mind, potentially caused by anxiety, sensory overload, anger, trauma, frustration due to communication difficulties, the wrong level of challenge in lessons, grief, overwhelm, physical pain, or undisclosed abuse.

Supporting children with SEMH difficulties in the classroom involves a holistic and inclusive approach:

### **Create an Inclusive and Supportive Whole-School Environment**

- Foster an environment that **emphasises inclusion and cooperation**.
- Ensure children with SEND, including those with SEMH, **feel accepted and belong** within the school community.
- Maintain **high aspirations for all children and young people** with SEND.
- Develop children's **understanding and valuing of difference** in others, which can be done through good quality PSHE (Personal, Social, Health and Economic education) sessions promoting relationships and diversity.

- Proactively **tackle bullying and discrimination**.

### Personalised and Adaptive Teaching Approaches

- Adopt a **flexible and tailored approach to support** that recognises pupils' individual needs and diversity, moving away from a "one size fits all" approach to behaviour.
- Develop a **learning plan, or Individual Education Plan (IEP), that builds skills step-by-step** to improve success, providing opportunities for children to practice new skills, receive encouragement, and get feedback.
- Implement **highly personalised and evidence-based reasonable adjustments** to meet unique needs and aspirations. Schools have a legal duty to make reasonable adjustments and provide extra support, aids, and services to avoid disadvantaging children with disabilities. All staff should **proactively identify what a child needs to participate and learn**.
- Recognise that **behaviour is a form of communication** about a child's state of mind, rather than solely focusing on disciplinary processes. Teachers and other professional colleagues sometimes attribute atypical behaviours to a diagnosed learning difficulty instead of recognising them as symptomatic of a mental health problem, suggesting a need for clarification.

### Deliver Social and Emotional Skills Programmes

- Implement programmes designed to **improve emotional literacy and coping skills**, such as "Zippy's Friends," which focuses on recognising, understanding, managing, and expressing emotions.
- These programmes can be delivered by teachers and teaching assistants using engaging activities like stories, games, drawing, and group discussions. The "Zippy's Friends" program, for instance, uses adapted stories at four different ability levels, incorporating **WIDGIT symbols** to support children with a wide range of abilities.
- Ensure that teachers **reinforce the content of these programmes in all classroom interactions** to maximise their effectiveness.
- Be flexible in programme delivery, allowing for **shorter sessions, repetition of sessions, or the completion of various activities attached to each session** before moving on to the next, especially for complex content.

## Early Identification and Intervention

- Be alert to **early signs of escalating risk to mental health** and mobilise protective factors to prevent further escalation.
- Teachers need to be better trained to **identify needs at an early stage** and equipped to support pupils' needs.
- Understand that mental health difficulties can become a **barrier to learning**, thus necessitating special educational support.
- Recognise that SEMH needs are often not identified until a child is a teenager, leading to delayed support.

## Professional Development and Staff Training

- Ensure **all education staff are supported in their initial training and throughout their career** in identifying and addressing needs that underlie SEND, including SEMH, and in understanding statutory responsibilities.
- Provide training on **neurodiversity** to enable more appropriate support for children with SEND.
- Utilise free e-learning resources for professionals on children and young people's mental health, to help staff better understand different types of special educational needs and barriers to learning.

## Collaboration with Families and External Specialists

- Work **collaboratively with parents and pupils**. Parental involvement is crucial to support and reinforce messages learned at school in the home environment, increasing the effectiveness of mental health promotion and emotional literacy interventions.
- Provide **extra support, if needed**, through pastoral care, school counselling, school nurses, or referral to community-based support.
- Engage with **voluntary sector services and families** themselves on the best ways to support children with SEND.
- Utilise **specialist services** such as occupational therapists, speech and language therapists, or health professionals, either on or off the school site. These specialists can aid in implementing person-centred approaches like Person Centred Active Support, the National Autistic Society's SPELL Framework, Total or Alternative and Augmentative Communication (AAC), and Positive Behaviour Support.

### **Address Challenges Related to Behaviour**

- Acknowledge that unmet needs can manifest as behavioural issues, which, if treated punitively, can negatively impact mental health.
- When behaviour is challenging, explore potential underlying causes such as anxiety, anger, trauma, communication difficulties, or mental health problems, rather than simply treating it as defiance.
- These strategies aim to create an environment where children with SEMH difficulties are understood, supported, and empowered to engage effectively with their learning.