

Earlscliffe (Sussex Summer Schools Ltd)

MENTAL HEALTH

General Introduction

A mental health problem is defined as 'a disturbance of function in one area of relationships, mood, behaviour or development of sufficient severity to require professional intervention' (Dept of Health 1995).

A leading authority on mental health in children in the UK has estimated that, in the average secondary school of around a thousand pupils, at any one time there will be fifty students who are clinically depressed, a further hundred with significant emotional difficulties, ten affected by eating disorders and up to ten who will attempt suicide in the next year (Mind, 1997).

The importance of mental health in children is highlighted by recent concern about increases in:

Children with disruptive behaviour

Violence in schools and juvenile crime

Psychosocial disorders in young people

Suicides and incidences of self-harm among children and adolescents

The numbers of children affected by marital breakdown

The numbers of children involved in substance abuse

The incidence of children subjected to abuse or neglect

Teachers are uniquely placed to influence the mental health of children and young people. As well as being in a position to recognise the symptoms of mental health difficulties at an early stage, they can enhance the social and emotional development of children and foster their mental well being through their daily responses to pupils.

Factors influencing the mental health of children

There is no easy way of telling whether children will develop mental health problems or not. Some children maintain good mental health despite traumatic experiences, whilst others develop mental health problems even though they live in a safe, secure and caring environment. There are, however, some common risk factors that increase the probability that children will develop mental health problems. These include individual factors, such as a difficult temperament, physical illness or learning disability, family factors, such as parental conflict and inconsistent discipline, and environmental factors, such as socio-economic disadvantages or homelessness (Mental Health Foundation, 1999).

Childhood and adolescent mental health disorders

These may include:

Conduct disorder (e.g. aggression, destroying or losing of property, deceitfulness or theft, truancy or running away etc)

ADHD (inattention, hyperactivity and impulsivity)

Suicidal behaviour and deliberate self-harm

Eating disorders (e.g. anorexia, bulimia and obesity)

Obsessive-compulsive disorder (obsessions, compulsions and personality characteristics)

verging on the panic threshold all the time)
Anxiety disorders (e.g. anxiety, phobias, panic, school-phobia)
Soiling and wetting
Autism (social deficits, communication difficulties, restrictive and repetitive interests and behaviours)
Substance abuse (abuse and dependence)
Depression
Schizophrenia (abnormal perceptions, delusional thinking, thought disorders)

Psychological reactions to adverse situations

Parental separation and divorce
Bullying (bullies, victims and bully-victims)
Child abuse and neglect (physical abuse, neglect, sexual abuse, emotional abuse)
Bereavement (grief, aggression, regression and adjustment difficulties)
Post traumatic stress (caused by an event involving intense fear, helplessness or horror).

Promotion of positive mental health

This involves having in place programmes for prevention of mental health problems, procedures for identification of disorders and strategies for intervention to remedy the various problems likely to be encountered in school. These include:

The school ethos: which encompasses values shared by all staff

Whole-school organisation: which comprises a range of school policies

Pastoral provision: which is concerned with procedures in place throughout the school

Classroom practice: which involves the practical strategies used by teachers.

Prevention

School Ethos

Caring for all, valuing diversity, building self-esteem, fostering independence, safety, continuity, participation and relationships.

Whole-school organisation

Curriculum, pastoral care, behaviour management, home-school liaison, bullying and SEN.

Pastoral provision

Organisation of PSHE, pastoral care, early intervention, support and training for teachers, support for vulnerable pupils and liaison with external agencies.

Classroom practice

Facilitative teaching, guidance, counselling and PSHE.

Procedures for Identification of Disorders

Recognising when a child is suffering from mental health problems is not always easy but teachers are often the 'front line' of identification, support and referral to other services. As an integral part of their pastoral role, teachers should be alert to the signs of possible mental health difficulties and bring to the attention of the Safeguarding Team any cases that they feel may be a cause for concern.

Many children exhibit occasional episodes of disruptive or withdrawn behaviour or occasional bouts of 'naughtiness'. These are not necessarily however cause for mental

health concern. Teachers may therefore find the following definition useful for distinguishing between the two ends of the spectrum: (Dept of Health 1995)

Severity

Complexity

Persistence

Risk of secondary handicap

The child's stage of development

The presence or absence of protective and risk factors

The presence or absence of stressful social and cultural factors

Intervention

Each case will have to be evaluated and an appropriate course of action chosen. Action and intervention, where appropriate may include some or all of the following:

Early intervention and assessment

Work with families as well as children

Interagency collaboration

Training for staff on mental health issues

A flexible approach, involving Group Tutors, House staff, the school GP, mental health professionals and education psychology service.