

Recognising mental health difficulties: Suggestions for school staff

In partnership with parents and carers, school staff in primary schools play an important role in children's development. As they have a great deal of contact with their students, school staff are in a position to notice when children are experiencing mental health difficulties. They can make a positive difference to children and their families by assisting them to access help for children's mental health difficulties.

Children showing early signs of difficulty may have trouble managing their emotions (anger and/or anxiety), coping with change, working cooperatively and/or making and keeping friends. Some of the signs of difficulty that school staff might notice include the following:

Behaviours

- Frequently avoiding situations that are challenging
- Fussiness
- Withdrawal
- Perfectionism
- Poor concentration
- Constant tiredness in school
- Overactivity
- Being easily distracted
- Impulsivity
- Destructive behaviour
- Defiant behaviour
- Non-compliance
- Repetitive behaviours
- Unusual and restricted interests

Learning issues

- Lack of problem-solving skills
- Academic difficulties
- Difficulties maintaining focus/attention
- Not hearing all of the instruction
- Not completing work

Thinking

- Self-blaming
- Low self-worth
- Persistent negativity/pessimism, excessive worrying
- Thinking others are 'out to get them'
- Thinking in strange or unusual ways



Emotions

- Nervous temperament
- Fearfulness
- Sadness and feelings of hopelessness that don't go away
- Persistent moodiness
- Poor self-control
- Irritability
- Challenging temperament
- Excessive anger (more than what would typically be expected in the situation)



Social issues

- Severe shyness
- Being isolated
- Lack of perspective-taking skills
- Over-talkativeness
- Poor social skills
- Being argumentative
- Aggression towards others
- Communication difficulties
- Problems in relating to others



These kinds of behaviours occur in all children some of the time. It is not the role of school staff to provide assessment or treatment of individual children, but there are some things that can be done to help:

- Support parents and carers by listening to their concerns and by helping them to access information and further advice regarding children's mental health.
- Seek advice from the school welfare team, including the school psychologist or school counsellor, when there are concerns about a particular child.
- Talk with parents and carers to work out the best way to assist the child together.
- Adapt teaching and behaviour management strategies to cater for children's mental health and learning needs.
- Continue to provide assistance for students and for parents and carers while children are receiving professional support for mental health difficulties.
- Ensure that there are policies and practices within the school to support students and families to seek help for mental health difficulties.

This resource is part of a range of KidsMatter Primary information sheets for families and school staff. View them all online at www.kidsmatter.edu.au



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