

## Child and adolescent psychotherapy in schools



**Those working in education increasingly feel the need to be more emotionally and psychologically aware if they are to help children to learn, achieve academically and participate socially in school life.**

Children today are immersed in a world of quickly evolving multi-media, where mobile phones, the internet and social networking sites have changed the way they learn, play and relate to each other. In addition, many children now grow up in home situations which can be destabilising. Circumstances such as family breakdown, bereavement, parents who are overworked or absent and situations in which children become looked after all contribute to the many levels of emotional distress and deprivation that teachers have to cope with in the classroom. Schools also meet the challenges of population changes as a result of migration. Many languages, religions and cultures are reflected in our schools and teachers cater for diverse needs, including the needs of refugee children.

### The child and adolescent psychotherapist in school

The child and adolescent psychotherapist can make a valuable contribution to understanding and managing the overwhelming demands placed on teachers and others who work in schools. As well as offering direct work with children, parents and families, the child and adolescent psychotherapist can support staff members in educating children and young people. Drawing on their expertise in mental health and emotional well-being, this can take the form of helping teaching and support staff to understand individual children who are presenting in puzzling, disturbing and challenging ways.

In addition, training in observational skills equips the child and adolescent psychotherapist to contribute to understanding of classroom dynamics and underlying organisational issues that may be having a negative impact on the way the school functions. Their participation in a range of meetings within the school, for example

inclusion meetings and education reviews, provide insight into some of the social and emotional issues that are proving to be obstacles in learning and relationships. They can also help schools to identify and make referrals to other agencies such as CAMHS and social services departments and they can actively lead and participate in multi-agency meetings on behalf of the school.

“Having a psychotherapy service on-site has really changed the way we think and talk about behaviour in school. It creates a space to think rather than react.”

*Maureen Smyth, Head of New Rush Hall School, Redbridge*

“I believe that my work at school with our most complex and challenging students and their families has been enhanced by my long and successful relationship with the child and adolescent psychotherapist.”

*Judith Black, Learning Support Unit Manager, Acland Burghley School, Camden*

## Support for children in school

### *Individual Psychotherapy*

Many children or young people are in need of therapeutic help but are not in family situations that can facilitate their attendance at regular formal appointments in the local CAMHS clinic. Access to therapeutic help at school can be the only means of receiving help for children and young people in great emotional distress or suffering with serious mental health problems. The kind of complex difficulties that the child psychotherapist can treat in school include:

- depression, suicidal thoughts and deliberate self-harm
- anxiety
- bereavement issues
- trauma and post-traumatic stress
- impact of severe deprivation and abuse
- entrenched separation and attachment difficulties
- eating disorders e.g. anorexia and bulimia
- neuro-developmental disorders e.g. ADHD, autism
- conduct and emotional disorders
- emotional aspects of learning and physical disabilities

**Case example:** Diana is a 15 year old girl who was exposed to domestic violence between her heroin addicted parents for most of her life. In school, Diana pushed against all boundaries and refused to comply with any authority figure. She gave the impression she did not care about anything, including her exam results. Her learning mentor encouraged her to see the school child psychotherapist and after much persistence, she succeeded in getting her to attend regular sessions once a week. After a tentative start, Diana began to explore some of her past traumatic experiences and her family relationships within her therapy. Slowly, she became more able to participate in school life in a more ordinary way and surpassed her teachers' expectations by passing four GCSE's at the end of the year.

Often the close liaison between educational staff and the child and adolescent psychotherapist can provide a supportive structure around the student, particularly important for children or young people who have dysfunctional or fractured families. This connection also allows careful planning in relation to the timing of psychotherapy sessions, so that students do not miss out on crucial lessons. A school-based psychotherapy service allows both the emotional and educational needs of children and young people to be considered in a complementary way.

### ***Brief Focused Work***

When students are experiencing transient difficulties, for instance with peer relationships, bullying (including cyber-bullying) or problems at home, it can be helpful for students to meet with the child psychotherapist at school for a series of four or five sessions. Sometimes one-off consultations are sufficient to explore particular issues that are troubling the student.

**Case example:** His teacher noticed Darren in Year 3 had become moody and downcast and he was not participating in class as usual. There had been a particular incident when he had got into a fight with a younger child at play time. He readily took up the offer to see the child and adolescent psychotherapist at school. Over the course of four sessions, Darren explored some of his conflict about the birth of his new baby brother and his worry about his mother who had complications after the birth and needed to remain in hospital for some time. He was more settled in class by the end of the term.

### ***Group Work***

Many problems that become manifest at school can be worked with in therapeutic groups led by the child and adolescent psychotherapist, or co-led with education staff. The group context allows the potential for students to understand more about their ways of relating and interacting with each other and authority figures. Sometimes groups can be helpfully organised around themes that may be preoccupying the school or one class or group of students at any one time. Examples are: preparing for secondary transfer; coping with exams; challenging bullying; peer support for pupil with autism; transition to the UK from abroad.

## **Support for parents and families in school**

Parents often turn to the school for support when they are concerned about their children or adolescents. Issues of concern can include their children's difficulties making and sustaining friendships, clashes with teachers, poor academic attainment, and anxiety-provoking problems such as depression, self harm, suicidal risk, or other serious mental health problems. Some difficulties emerge within the context of complicated family dynamics or situations of illness, parental mental health problems or disability. For some parents and families, access to CAMHS is hampered by perceived stigma and they prefer to be seen in the more familiar environment of the school.

The kind of interventions that the child and adolescent psychotherapist can offer parents and families in school include:

- drop-in advice service for parents
- parent support groups
- workshops around particular themes, e.g. ‘Supporting your child through GCSEs’; ‘Helping your child to survive divorce’; ‘Preparing your child for secondary transfer’
- therapeutic sessions for parents to support their child’s or adolescent’s regular psychotherapy
- brief family work

**Case example:** The head of year referred Rashid, a 13-year-old adopted boy, as there were behavioural difficulties and poor communication between mother and school staff. Rashid did not want to be seen alone for individual sessions so the child and adolescent psychotherapist saw him in the context of half-termly family meetings. In these sessions it was possible to explore issues to do with his perceived place in the family and his awakening curiosity about his birth family of origin. Alongside this, Rashid’s mother was seen for fortnightly appointments during which she began to understand more about how rejected and challenged she felt by her son. When she developed insight into how she was transmitting similar qualities into her relationships with school staff, she made significant moves to change her pattern of interaction with the school. Rashid became less oppositional in school as his relationship with his mother improved and as connections between his home and school became more cooperative.

## Support for education staff in school

The pressures of curriculum delivery, meeting targets and administrative demands, together with being on the receiving end of children’s provocative behaviour, all act together to compromise staff well-being. In order to withstand the increasing demands being made upon them, staff in schools need support too.

The child and adolescent psychotherapist in the school context can add a new perspective to some of the difficulties that can get mobilised in any teaching/learning relationship. This helps staff to develop greater emotional competence which has a positive impact on staff stress levels. This in turn can help teaching staff to become more effective and the academic achievement of students to improve.

**“My supervision sessions with a child and adolescent psychotherapist have enriched my therapeutic work with this age group and contributed significantly to my confidence in managing my work.”**

*Paul Christelis, Counselling and Wellbeing Coordinator, BSIX Sixth Form College, Hackney*

**“It is difficult to quantify the value we place on having an experienced child and adolescent psychotherapist in school: individual children are supported through difficult times; staff learn from work discussion groups; and we are all supported in developing a more reflective approach to our work with students.”**

*Alix Diemont, Head of Inclusion, Pimlico Academy*

### **Consultations**

School staff can be given opportunities to think about the powerful feelings that certain students evoke in them in individual consultations with the child and adolescent psychotherapist. Having some neutral space to explore their responses to troubled or troubling students can help to maintain a reflective stance in the face of considerable challenges in the classroom. School staff can also benefit from a deeper understanding of the special attachment that students can have to their teachers and their school, so they can manage this in a helpful way. Consultations to the senior management group can also be provided to support their unique and often isolated role and to look at organisational issues and the wider functioning of the school.

### **Work Discussion Groups**

Child and adolescent psychotherapists commonly facilitate work discussion groups with staff in schools. Depending on need and interest, these work discussion groups are organised around different staff sub-groups that include teachers, heads of year, pastoral and learning support staff. The groups range in size but typically have between five and 10 members. Meetings often take place fortnightly but more or less frequent meetings are offered as well.

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**Report on the Implementation of Standard 9 of the NSF for Children, Young People and Maternity Services (2006):** *Work discussion groups were highlighted by the Department for Education and Skills and the Department of Health as a 'model of good practice'.*

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Topics can range from a focus on a specific student, a student group, a class or parents, and occasionally organisational issues. Staff members share their observations and concerns. The child and adolescent psychotherapist can offer insight into some of the underlying conflicts that education staff regularly have to absorb in their roles. An in-depth discussion of an issue or a particular interaction with a student often leads to deeper understanding and renewed energy to try a new approach or to hold steady in the face of uncertainty or turbulence.

#### **Outcomes:**

- 93% of staff found the work discussion groups supportive
- 97% of staff reported that they had developed a *deeper understanding* about the meaning of behaviour
- 91% of staff reported that they had been helped to develop new ways of engaging with challenging or disruptive pupils
- 88% of staff reported that they had been helped to persevere with challenging pupils when they had previously felt like giving up
- 85% of staff reported that they felt *less stressed* after talking about pupils with whom they were struggling

*(Jackson, 2008)*

### *Staff Training*

The child and adolescent psychotherapist can also share their expertise in the field of child and adolescent mental health with staff in schools. They can offer workshops on particular issues that may be pertinent in a particular school at any one time. Schools choose their own topics but some examples of themed workshops that can be offered include:

- supporting refugees and asylum seeking families
- understanding adolescence
- helping pupils following family breakdown
- managing self-harm in the school
- the impact of transition on school life
- working in partnership with parents
- surviving challenging students.

Inset days can also be provided by the child and adolescent psychotherapist if a school wants to devote a lengthier time to a chosen current topic.

“Ben in my class used to really irritate me until I understood him.”

“Work discussion meetings have helped me to understand the students from a different perspective. This has been really helpful.”

“Despite being part of the work discussion group for so many years, I still find I learn new things each year and new ways of thinking about situations.”

### **Commissioning child and adolescent psychotherapy**

Some schools catering for special educational needs, particularly special schools with provision for behavioural, emotional and social difficulties, and learning difficulties and disabilities, benefit most when the child psychotherapist is based full-time on-site and can be an integrated member of the wider staff team. The child psychotherapist who works in a mainstream school one or two days a week can see the students of most concern, and can be easily accessible for consultation, advice, supervision and training on any number of issues that relate to child and adolescent mental health and the emotional well-being of the school.

**If you are interested in commissioning a child psychotherapy service in your locality, either via your local NHS CAMHS or via a private provider, please contact the ACP office on 020 8458 1609 or email [contactus@childpsychotherapy.org.uk](mailto:contactus@childpsychotherapy.org.uk). You can access further information on our website, including further briefing papers on the work of child and adolescent psychotherapists with children with disabilities, with parents and with fostered and adopted children and in hospitals, the court system and through long-term and intensive work.**

**[www.childpsychotherapy.org.uk](http://www.childpsychotherapy.org.uk)**