



MATTERS

We don't need to tell you that the mental health needs of children and young people are seemingly the most complex they've ever been. We're keen to support you to understand how to best tune into, respond to and support the pupils in your care. That being said, we thought it would be helpful to break this down into 'common' issues and offer some tips as to how to best respond in what are, often, fleeting interactions with children and young people:

Typical Presentation

Self-harming behaviours

- Scratching
- Cutting
- Biting
- Burning
- Punching or hitting

Remember, self-harm is often:

- An act which turns unconscious thoughts and feelings into something tangible and accessible.
- A way for a young person to feel in control.
- A way to turn psychological pain into something identifiable: i.e. physical.
- A coping mechanism in response to overwhelming feelings.

Useful Responses

Self-harm is most concerning when it becomes a secretive act. Try to keep lines of communication open, and don't be afraid to gently notice the presence of a scratch, burn, cut etc. Pretending it does not exist often reinforces shame and whilst we may 'ignore' so as to avoid saying something wrong, or cause any embarrassment, shame is something we wouldn't want a young person to feel.

It's helpful to maintain an awareness that self-harm is always about the bigger picture, i.e. what is happening in their world, or how isolated they may feel. When discussing things directly, try to make sure you're curious about the child/YP you're talking to: their life and their beliefs about themselves, for example. "I wonder how things feel outside of school right now?". "Is there anything outside of here you'd like to talk to me about?". "I know it may feel like I can't help, but I'd like to try to listen". Or, "I think there are things preoccupying you, and I just want you to know that I see that."

Once you start inviting a dialogue with a young person who is self-harming, try to be as consistent as possible. Make time every day to check in if you can. Ensure the focus isn't on the act of self-harm, rather the feelings associated before engaging in it, or perhaps afterwards.

Typical Presentation

Pressures: Exams, parental expectation, school pressures:

Remember, pressure can be internalised or externalised by children and young people:

An internalised response can look like:

- An apparent retreat – from the world, the topic, the classroom, peers, teaching staff.
- A sudden disinterest in anything.

An externalised response can look like:

- Challenging, defiant, acting out behaviours.
- Supposed anger (frustration) and rejection of help/support/authority.

Useful Responses

- Validate the pressure. “I can imagine that feels overwhelming/exhausting/preoccupying/stressful”, etc.
- Be concrete in your language and, gently, challenge the reality. It’s wise to only do this once you’ve established a rapport. So the challenge can be heard as curiosity, and not dismissiveness.
- Encourage honest dialogue with parents, and be curious if a child/young person tells you they don’t feel able to be honest.
- Help them identify **why** there is pressure. Children often internalise pressure as them not being good enough. That is often the projection of a worried parent. Inviting that language would be useful, “I wonder what fuels your parents’ worry about ...”
- Offer containment by breaking things down into manageable pieces, psychologically speaking. You can do this by summarising what they’ve said and reflecting on the distress of it, and then focusing on one element of it.



Identity worries

- Acknowledge that thoughts/feelings shared might have felt challenging/exposing/scary.
- Let them know you’re privileged to have been confided in.
- Validate their beliefs, about themselves and others, within the conversation.
- Don’t offer an opinion.
- Be curious about their mindset, thoughts and feelings
- Offer a space for them to consistently share any worries they may have.
- Celebrate their exploration of their identity.
- Ask about the pronouns they’d like you to use.

Typical Presentation

Anxiety

- Anxiety takes so many forms, but it is often a psychological response to feeling overwhelmed, ill-equipped, out of control, inadequate, and much more.
- It can take the form of panic attacks, foggy thinking, an inability to focus or retain information.

Useful Responses

- Try to get to the heart of the issue.
- If a young person is telling you they feel anxious about their best friend rejecting them, e.g. it is helpful to validate and sit with the fear: “I can see that feels really unsettling for you”. And then, think about why it feels frightening, i.e. fear of alienation, loneliness, being judged, not being invited out etc.
- As is always the case, when we break a feeling down into “I hear that”...and then examine it more deeply, we can really support a child or young person to get to the heart of the worry or concern.
- We often have clarity of thought when we’re able to locate the depth of the feeling. It also enables us to pinpoint at which point a child or young person is likely to begin catastrophising, and catch it.

Parental separation

This can feel scary for children and young people. They can often feel like they’ve lost control of their life, and can be forced to consider the identity of their parent (outside of being just their parent) earlier than they’re psychologically equipped to deal with.

Anger, resentment, fear, sadness (loss) are a few of the big feelings children and young people have to navigate. In addition to this, they face the task of separation (from both parents, at different times) earlier than they may be ready to do, and so pseudo ‘stuff’ can creep in.

- Be curious about how they feel about the separation.
- Be curious about whether they feel differently towards a parent(s), i.e. protective, angry, disappointed etc.
- If emotions are expressed, validate, validate, validate!
- Be mindful that some children and young people begin to ‘fill’ the space of an absent parent and adopt traits and behaviours of them. This can feel confusing for everyone.
- Be mindful that some children and young people will adopt an unconscious role of care-giver for either parent, and this is too much for them to take on. Actively and consistently remind a child/young person that, of course, they love their parent(s), but it is too much to try to care for them.
- Invite expression of big, “ugly” feelings such as anger, resentment, frustration, omnipotence. Celebrate them if they become evident and validate that these are “normal” psychological responses.



SUPPORTING FAMILIES THROUGH CHILD AND FAMILY COUNSELLING SERVICE (CFCS)

In addition to the services we offer within schools, we are dedicated to supporting children, young people, and their families through our CFCS. Over the past year, demand for this service has grown significantly, and thanks to our dedicated team of therapists, we've been able to make a meaningful difference to the lives of many families.

A Service in Demand

CFCS has expanded to meet the increasing need. We support children as young as 4 years old to 18 years old (and SEN young people up to the age of 25). While most sessions take place in person, we also offer online therapy where necessary. We currently provide approximately 50 sessions a week.

We can provide a more bespoke form of therapy within CFCS. The majority of clients have one to one support, but some families benefit from more parental support or have child and parent therapy and family therapy. We work alongside other agencies, such as schools and social services when required.

Supporting SEN Children

A key area of growth within CFCS has been our work with SEN children. Many of our referrals come from parents and carers who have been signposted to us by the charity SNAP. We are continually reviewing our rooms and practice to ensure we are providing the best therapy and environment for these clients.

Meeting Challenges and Expanding Services

While most services are funded by parents and carers, external financial support and fundraising continue to be crucial in enabling us to offer counselling to families who might otherwise be unable to access our services. To meet the rising demand, we need to continue recruiting and expanding our availability to support even more families.

Looking ahead, we are planning further developments. This includes enhancing our therapy rooms to make them more versatile for older children, as well as exploring the potential for launching satellite centres and a parent support service. We are also growing our volunteer base to ensure that all visitors are greeted with warmth and care.

For potential clients in need of our services, please contact me via email dbooth@bccs.org.uk



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MY 'DOOR IS ALWAYS OPEN' – WHY DO MY STAFF NEED SUPERVISION?

Supervision is an effective tool for assisting school staff members in developing personal and professional skills and creating a culture of support and teamwork. And those supervised by BCCS often comment on how helpful it is to talk to someone independent from their line manager and colleagues. The power of a nurturing and confidential space cannot be underestimated and our supervisors create a safe environment where teachers, pastoral workers, LSAs, SLT and DSLs can offload and raise any concerns that they might have about children in their care. They can also receive support to help them deal with difficult or challenging situations at work. Schools may operate an open door policy and this is invaluable, but it is not the same as receiving regular scheduled supervision aimed at anyone working directly with children and learners whose safety and welfare are at risk.

Over the years our supervision team has grown and we hold sessions with staff from many of our Essex and East London schools. What we are noticing is the increasingly complex presentation of the children and young people staff are working with and that this can often feel de-skilling and overwhelming. Alongside appropriate training, supervision facilitates a discussion with a trained child and adolescent therapist (all our supervisors are practitioners in schools) which can offer up a different perspective and a chance to consider psychological theory and where this fits into the relationship.

A recent supervisee found herself struggling with her interactions with a 6th form student who she had been supporting since Year 7. She could feel a change in her responses to the student and a realisation that she was worrying about the student outside of school hours, wondering about her well-being and whether she would get her place at university. We began to look at this shift in terms of the supervisee unconsciously taking on a maternal role and that this had 'disrupted' the usual rhythm of their meetings.



We explored the fact that this staff member had worked with this student for the entirety of her secondary school education but, and importantly also, the staff member had started her own journey at that school at the same time. We spoke in terms of mutual growth and change alongside the maternal identification and inevitable sense of loss at the student leaving the school. With this clearly in mind, the staff member could resume her educational role with the student and discontinue a more unhealthy enmeshment.

Although supervision is a work based conversation, and is distinct from counselling, supervisees may also wish to bring elements of their personal life to session. Stress, family issues and physical health can all impact work-life balance and a person's ability to cope in the school setting. An acknowledgement that the professional and personal parts of anyone are intrinsically linked can give permission for exploration and a validation of feelings.

If you feel that supervision may be a process that you would like to invest in, please contact Louise: lpicton@bccs.org.uk

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PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT

Parents and caregivers are the most direct support network and influence for a child or young person. Positive interactions between school and home can help reduce some of the defensive or assertive behaviour's parents often bring. We understand that when children or young people act out, they are often communicating how they really feel, so to do adults. The response parents are met with is key to breaking down barriers and supporting the child at the centre of the engagement. Recognising unconscious processes behind some of the reactions received from parents, can break the cycle of insecurity and dysregulation that often sits with families for generations.

What we know about parental engagement?

Attachment theory helps to explain patterns of behaviour and human interactions. The connection between parent and child is integral to providing holistic support but can be interrupted which makes it difficult to engage parents or can cause parents to be overly anxious about what is going on for their child. Parents who can think about their own reactions and feelings towards their child or their behaviour without judgement from others, are better equipped to support them.

Children and young people learn from the world around them and that includes the attitudes and actions of their parents/carers. In therapy we think about modelling and mirroring as a way of helping children understand their emotions and what is expected of them. When things go wrong shouting at a child is less productive than being calm and modelling how you need them to be. This is not an easy task for parents/carers who feel overwhelmed themselves and so situations quickly escalate and spill over into school. Recognising a parents need for support and perhaps some behaviour modelling, can help restore an equilibrium.

Is there a difficulty engaging parents?

The level of involvement with parents may depend on the attachment that already exists within the parent-child relationship. Some families may require more conversations to increase understanding of what is happening for their child/young person or within the family than others. However, it is often these parents/carers that the most positive relationships can develop. Richer discussions can be had and suggestions of things to try at home can prove beneficial.

Sometimes parents just can't relate to their child/young person's difficulty even when the relationship is strong. If you have never experienced overwhelming anxiety, for example, it can be hard to understand why your child/young person just can't leave the house without a meltdown. Especially when you are doing everything you feel will help them. Patience can deteriorate quickly when all you need is a no fuss morning causing psychological disconnect between the two and a struggle for both to have their needs met.

Often until you understand where a reaction originates internally can you understand the behaviour that happens externally and as a result, promote change. But parents still need to parent and set boundaries. Understanding and empathy does not wipe away poor behaviour or decision making. Sometimes this can be all too much to manage.



Unconscious psychological processes influence likelihood and success of parental engagement. Parents/carers might sabotage schools' intervention because they feel threatened and so become hard to reach. Some parents can resent the attention their child is receiving. Professionals may also defend themselves from parent's projection and rejection by not reaching out as often as they should sabotaging their own efforts. The transference and countertransference experienced during any human interaction but especially a trusted adult and a child may initiate protective factors or unconscious bias in both professionals and parents/carers.

Most parents/carers are happy to meet to discuss their child but often what happens in school can become thought of as school's responsibility. If parents/carers don't understand or agree with an intervention that is in place or have their own agenda for attending a meeting this could cause conflict. Parents/carers and school staff often see two different versions of a child/young person and so can be difficult to relate to opposing views. A holistic approach with open communication links between everyone involved means that interventions are more effective.

Strategies for improving parental engagement

It can be intimidating to talk to parents/carers about sensitive matters, they may feel judged or ashamed by the discussion topic and we can't account for their reactions. It may be useful to think about how talking to a professional may be perceived. What has the parent/carer experienced that could affect the productivity of the conversation? Is there anything we can do as a result of recognising this.

Try to think about our own thoughts on having the conversation and what this might mean for us.

Experience suggests, parents are more likely to engage if they feel empowered to make their own decisions. Giving time to parents/carers and building relationships rather than approaching only when something has gone wrong is key.

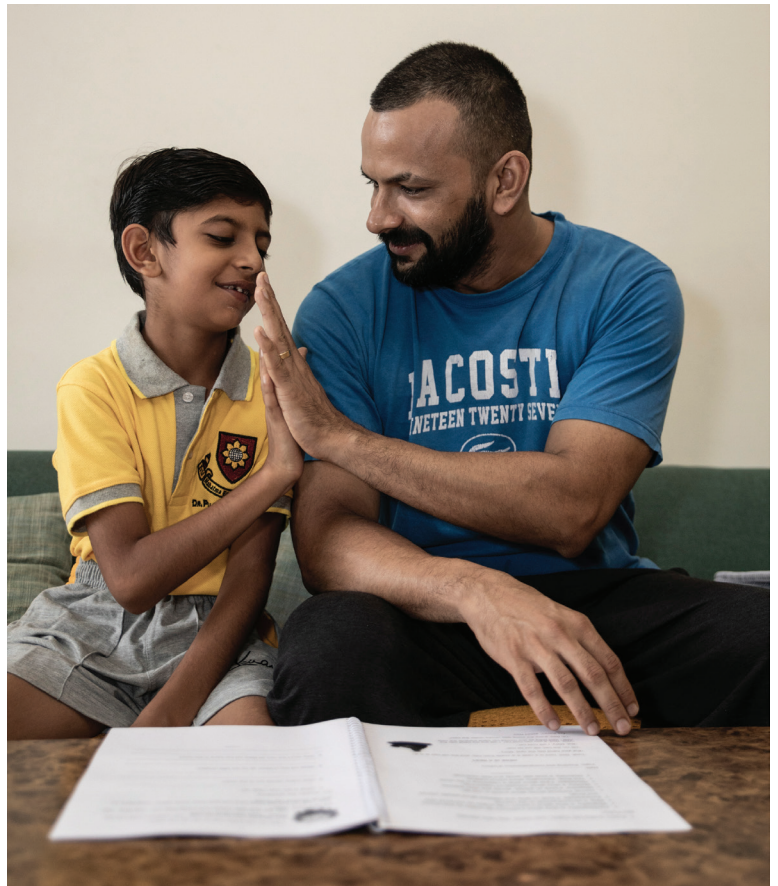
Providing opportunities for parents/carers to let school know what is happening with their child in their own words. Sometimes this is the first time they have been able to offload which can lower stress levels at home.

What's important is parents feel heard and gain a sense of the school and the people in it so they can relate to the people supporting their child/young person.

For some parents/carers not being in control or not knowing what is happening in their child/young person's life can be difficult. Empowerment to feel included builds trust in the school. Checking in with parents after significant events in their child's school day (good or bad) can also help build a picture of the family and anything that may be influencing school life.

Encourage parents to talk to their child when there has been contact with the school. It shows respect and allows them to feel safer when everyone is working together to support them.

Reflective practice can help navigate the unconscious process that play a part in every human interaction and knowledge of these can promote a more strategic and confident approach to parental engagement.



OUR COUNSELLING SKILLS FOR SCHOOL STAFF COURSE RECEIVES OUTSTANDING FEEDBACK

“It felt really personal and I have loved it all. I can’t really put into words how amazing and beneficial this has been professionally and for myself.”

In January this year we delivered our first 6-week counselling skills course for school staff in the dedicated training and therapy rooms in our Billericay offices. The course enables school staff at all levels to develop listening and supportive skills in their interactions with children, young people, parents and colleagues. Feedback from the course has been outstanding, with one participant telling us they feel it is **“an essential part of school training”**.

The course content, based on our many years of working in schools with pupils and staff, recognises the need for practical, solution-focused support. In devising the activities, we also drew on the most useful experiences from our own therapeutic training. Many course members told us that the content fitted directly with the skills they need most; **“very valuable..... I am now much more equipped to carry out my role and have already used strategies from the sessions.”**

Written for both a primary and secondary school audience, our first cohort included head teachers, class teachers, SENDCos and a variety of support staff. The course is offered over 2.5 hours each week, supported by 2 experienced child and adolescent counsellors and trainers. Each session covers a different aspect of counselling skills, including active listening, psychological theory, the use of play and creativity, and managing difficult conversations.

Each week our time is divided equally between theory and practice, with participants working in small groups to use their skills in action, utilising our dedicated therapy rooms and resources. This practical aspect proved very rewarding for participants; **“I really got a lot out of the small group work and felt really comfortable”**; **“I could see my skills developing every week”**; **“It has given me a deeper understanding of how a child may feel”**.

“Having the time to talk to others was a big plus”; many course members told us that they felt the importance of having time away from the school setting in order to learn from others, share and reflect in a **“relaxed, supportive atmosphere where I felt confident to share and ask questions.”**

We have been delighted to hear from so many participants of the positive impact of this course on themselves and their work; **“I found the course incredibly helpful, it surpassed my expectations”**; **“I have had feedback from students saying they feel listened to and safe”**; **“I have grown as a person”**.

Of course, with feedback like this, we felt compelled to offer the course again! Running for 6 weeks on Thursdays 2:30-5pm from 30 January 2025 – with a break for half term – spaces are limited and already filling up. To secure your place please contact Louise at lpicton@bccs.org.uk



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