

## Addressing the 'E' in 'SEBD'

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Brian was usually happy to go to school, but suddenly became unable to leave his mother in the mornings. He would kick and scream, and became so violent that he had to be restrained. At 12 years of age, Rhys was so depressed that at times his parents were worried that he seemed to have lost the will to live. Charlotte, aged nine, was so disruptive in lessons that she was spending more time out of class than in. While many children experience crises that can be dealt with in school by sympathetic and supportive staff, Brian, Rhys and Charlotte had entered a spiral of emotional turmoil that was difficult for them to find a way out of. Their confidence and self-esteem were ebbing away, and their extreme behavioural responses to emotional difficulties would require radical approaches.

These children live in Denbighshire, which is a small rural county in North Wales. Denbighshire doesn't seem to have a particularly high incidence of children and young people with emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD), but what it does have is a team of teachers and support staff who are committed to finding radical solutions to pupils' serious difficulties. Sheila Breeze, Acting Manager of Denbighshire's Behaviour Support Service, sets the scene: "We try to ensure that every child experiencing emotional and behavioural difficulties accesses the best possible educational provision for them." Sheila describes how the Support Service's responses to children and schools' needs have evolved over the years. "Denbighshire has what we call a 'portfolio Pupil Referral Unit'. What this means is that we are registered as one unit, but there are a number of centres under that one name."

And the word 'centre', as opposed to 'unit' is important. Parents and children are aware of the stigma attached to going to a 'unit'. In some schools "You go to a unit!" is a playground taunt. Parents need to feel that their children's attendance at a 'support centre' reflects what they will get - support. The centres offer different approaches for differing needs and different age groups. Central to all of the centres is a commitment to multi-agency working, and an understanding that children will return to school as quickly as possible.

The Stepping Stones Centre in St. Asaph embodies the service's philosophy. Children between six and 11 years of age attend for each morning or afternoon over a 10-week period. The main purpose of the centre is to develop the children's 'emotional literacy' through 'emotional education'. These are commonly used terms, but their meaning can be rather nebulous. However Nicola Wynne-Roberts, Teacher in Charge of the centre, is very clear why emotional literacy is important, and what emotional education should look like.

"Many children we work with have an overwhelming fear of making mistakes. They avoid working so they can avoid failure. Often their challenging behaviour is a means to being removed from what they perceive will be challenging activities. Additionally, children will often have significant learning

needs, such as dyslexia, or find it very hard to keep up with the fast pace of learning. This leads to a drop in confidence and self-esteem.” This can manifest itself in behavioural difficulties, notably aggression towards other children, refusal to join in, or children develop strategies where the outcome is that they are removed from lessons. Many children struggle to cope with the depth and sheer volume of work required in schools, but most have the emotional resources and support of family to be able to deal with their difficulties. As Nicola puts it, “There is a mismatch in school between what children need to do and what they actually need.”

Stepping Stones offers a complete ‘emotional curriculum’. This involves activities that help the children learn about friendship skills, social skills and life skills. Above all, children are helped to develop confidence in themselves as learners. An afternoon’s Circle Time activities, led by teacher Claire Barrett, illustrate these ideas in practice. Children passed a smile around the circle (which quickly became a laugh), and played a game called ‘How many feelings?’ using ‘feelings gloves’. ‘Feelings thermometer’ helped the children work as a team, identifying different emotions and situations where sometimes these emotions can become extreme. This led to a discussion of how the children can deal with their feelings, particularly if they begin to make them feel uncomfortable. The session, which lasted an hour, was expertly led by the centre team, and finished with ‘give a compliment’. After a short outdoor play session the children carried on with individual and small group practical work looking at feelings, under a large banner with the centre’s mantra: “It’s OK to make mistakes. It’s how we deal with them that matters.”

The centre staff are extremely positive about the work they do, but make it very clear to the children that they come to Stepping Stones for only a short time, and that they belong in their primary schools. As Nicola points out, “There needs to be a fine balance between providing fun activities and giving the message that children belong back in their local primary school. We don’t want children to mess around so they get to stay here longer!

“We tell the children, “We want you to be happy here, but we don’t want you to stay. When you leave we will be very sorry to see you go, but we want you to stay in your own school. This will show that you are doing better.” And in general the success rate is very high. Children return to school full time and are supported by the Behaviour Support Service’s peripatetic team members, who reinforce this message by saying, “You have done brilliantly at Stepping Stones, but this is your school and this is where you belong.” Success can also be judged by the fact that no children who have attended Stepping Stones have gone on to attend the County’s afternoon sessions for pupils at Key Stage 3.

Sheila Breeze acknowledges that it can be more of a challenge to meet the emotional and behavioural needs of pupils as they get older. “By the time youngsters enter our Key Stage 3 Support Centre, they may have learning difficulties that affect their behaviour, but in general they have developed tremendous emotional problems.” The local Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) work closely with the KS3 centre staff, and almost

every youngster is assessed by a member of their team when they come to the centre for a stay of one term. The county's educational psychology team are also closely involved.

Many Local Education Authorities will provide services similar to those already described, but Denbighshire's service for teenagers who are unable to attend school because of extreme anxiety and school phobia reflects the county's imaginative response to children's emotional needs. 'Dewi Sant' is a suite of rooms on the first floor of a large old house in Denbigh. One's first impression is that the house has 'character' and bears no resemblance to the noisy and thriving secondary schools that the youngsters have retreated from. This is clearly important for the teenagers who attend daily, and the staff have purposefully developed the centre to have a 'comfortable' atmosphere.

As Les Townson, Teacher in Charge explains, "We have a strong timetable and everything is planned, but you wouldn't notice this because we want the students to relax." Negotiation with the students, about what work they will do and in what order, is an important feature of what is planned. "When the students are working on science, I explain to them about the units they need to do. It's up to them what order they want to do the work in. All I ask is that what they decide to do is balanced. So if they do a physics module this term, they will have to do a biology or materials module next term. You then have six students each doing something different, and we differentiate by how much support we provide and what the task will be."

Most of the teenagers who attend Dewi Sant will have had extremely negative feelings about school, and will have been off school for varying lengths of time, some as long as 12 months. They are withdrawn, fearful and have experienced extreme loss of confidence. They often find it very difficult to make friends or even interact with their peers. Once referred to the centre, they may begin to attend part time and gradually build up their attendance. The aim is to encourage young people to return to a mainstream school, but if they find this impossible then they remain at Dewi Sant and complete their education there.

The students have the potential to achieve nationally recognised qualifications, as all the work they do is accredited. Les sees a large part of his role as managing the students' learning, as opposed to direct teaching. "Sometimes students will stop what they are doing and want to get involved in someone else's work. This is important because these teenagers need particularly to develop their skills of interacting with each other, and adults." Pupils in year 11 are encouraged to try taster courses in local colleges and work experience placements, to prepare them for leaving Dewi Sant and moving on with their lives.

One parent described graphically exactly how important Dewi Sant has been for his son. "My son has epilepsy, and in the past his medication had very negative side effects. This led to him having a lot of time off school and losing contact with other youngsters, as well as getting seriously behind with his work. He lost a lot of confidence, and gradually refused to go to school. His

self-esteem was rock bottom at times. Now he attends Dewi Sant for four days a week, which is a huge improvement from no days a week at his secondary school.

“He has developed confidence since attending here, and for the rest of the family it has been a Godsend, as we are able to get back to some kind of daily routine. What is particularly important is that the teachers set the work at the right level, so my son no longer comes home saying, “I’m thick. I’m so thick.” The staff understand him so well. So for example they know if he isn’t doing an activity whether he won’t do it because he doesn’t want to, or because he is genuinely unable. And they can do something about it without causing stress.”

Les agrees that avoiding stress and anxiety is important, though it is equally important that they learn to cope with these feelings. “Continuity is the key theme here. You have got to be really structured because if anything is different it can completely throw the students. That doesn’t mean we do the same thing every day. We have a weekly timetable that is carefully explained, including any unfamiliar activities, like a visit by a journalist!” Unforeseen events, like the cancellation of PE, can cause difficulties, but the staff see it as an important part of their role to help the youngsters deal with anxiety-provoking problems as they arise.

And what happened to Brian, Charlotte and Rhys? Brian attended Stepping Stones and, after a very difficult initial few days, he settled into the routine and activities. His parents received support and Brian is now back in school, and enjoying himself. Sheila Breeze is very clear that Stepping Stones helped to break the cycle of extreme emotional responses that led to him refusing to go to school. Charlotte has benefited enormously from being at Stepping Stones. She is involved in fewer incidents of negative behaviour in her school and is more adept at making friends. Her self-confidence as a learner has increased, as has her self-esteem. Rhys will be leaving Dewi Sant soon, and the staff there are closely involved with his parents in a transition scheme that will hopefully lead to him attending a local agricultural college.

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