

2023.07.01

Mental Health Procedure

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1. Definition of Mental Health

Mental health is intricately linked with well-being. A person's condition with regard to their psychological and emotional well-being contributes to the state of mental health. Our state of mental health determines how we handle stress, relate to others and make choices. Mental health is important from childhood through to adulthood. Just as much as we are encouraged to look after our mental health, we should also be focusing on developing a healthy state of mental well-being. Pupils experiencing harmful and negative situations such as child abuse, bullying, substance abuse etc have a great chance of suffering from mental health problems.

The most common mental health problems in childhood and adolescence are:

- Anxiety Disorders
- Eating Disorders
- Stress-Related Disorders
- Clinical depression
- Suicidal thoughts and actions, and self-harm

2. Prevention and Promotion

Prevention is better than cure. Mental health issues have been somewhat of a taboo for many years. This is even more so when it comes to children and adolescents. Schools have a role to play in the prevention of the development of mental health issues and also the promotion of improving pupil well-being. While parents/legal representatives remain the main people responsible for the upbringing of a child, and are the ones who are responsible at seeing what is best for that child, schools have an educational role in creating awareness about mental health issues.

2.1 Awareness Raising Sessions with Pupils

European Schools, in accordance with their needs and realities should have an awareness-raising, age appropriate mental health programme, whereby qualified and/or experienced professionals are invited to meet with pupils and give an overview of mental health issues in children and adolescents. Such awareness raising sessions should also include information on how to strengthen one's capacity to regulate emotions, enhance alternatives to risk-taking behaviour, build resilience when managing difficult situations and promote social support networks.

2.2 Awareness Raising Sessions with Parents or Legal Representatives

Parents/legal representatives have the main role in ensuring their child develops a healthy mental state. Just as much as parents are responsible of feeding, clothing, housing and caring for their child. It is also their responsibility to ensure that their child's life, both within the family and out, is serene and peaceful which are two conducive elements to developing a sense of well-being. Having said this, parents may at times not be aware of developing issues related to mental health. Therefore, schools should develop and implement an awareness raising programme concerning mental health issues specifically for parents/legal representatives. Professionals delivering sessions about different mental health issues may be invited. School professionals who have experience in the field may also be considered for their contribution. The aim of these sessions should be information sharing, recognition of symptoms, initial first aid and where to seek help.

3. Intervention

Pupils may or may not realise that they have or are developing a mental health problem. They also may or may not seek help in school. However, schools need to have clear procedures of how to help if they become the holders of such knowledge.

A pupil may trust any member of staff with a psychological, emotional difficulty. It is important for all staff to know how to deal with such situations in terms of what to say, what not to say and where to refer. Basic training in helping skills is always helpful, so that a member of staff knows how to listen, empathise and make non-judgemental statements. Pupils may also not open up with a trusted member of staff. However, they may open up with

parents who may seek help from the school or may open up to friends who will also seek help from a member of staff. Another possibility is that a pupil does not speak about a difficulty they are experiencing, but shows signs that may be a cause of concern to members of staff (non-verbal disclosures). Therefore, whatever way the information is relayed, it is important for schools to have clear intervention procedures of how to manage a worrying situation related to mental health and as much as possible, recognise any concerning signs. Schools may also have teams of professionals who work together to manage such situations (eg Care Teams, Crisis Teams, etc). School psychologists also have a very crucial role in dealing with such realities both in terms of supporting individuals, but also work with entire classes and/or groups of pupils who are affected by such realities.

3.1 Nursery/Primary Cycle

If a member of staff is in possession of information or has a strong suspicion of a serious mental health issue of a child in the nursery/primary cycle, the member of staff should refer the case to the school psychologist. Once the details of the situation have been shared and understood, the school psychologist will draft a plan of action. This may include class observation, gathering of information and/or immediate referral to parents. If there is an urgency to the situation, the parents/legal representatives must be informed immediately. In the case of a possible health urgency, the medical services may need to be brought in urgently. In very serious and urgent situations, the Assistant Deputy Director and the Deputy Director of the cycle will be informed. The Deputy Director of the Secondary cycle will keep the Director informed.

3.2 Secondary Cycle

If a member of staff is in possession of information or has a strong suspicion of a serious mental health issue of a child in the secondary cycle, the member of staff should refer the case to the Educational Advisor firstly. The Educational Advisor will evaluate the situation. Certain actions may be necessary at this level such as observation, speaking with the pupil concerned etc. There may be cases where the Educational Advisor may need to refer to the school psychologist. Once the details of the situation have been shared and understood, the school psychologist will draft a plan of action. This may include class observation, gathering of information and/or immediate referral to parents. If there is an urgency to the situation, the parents/legal representatives must be informed immediately. In the case of a possible health urgency, the medical services may need to be brought in urgently. In very serious and urgent situations, the Assistant Deputy Director and the Deputy Director of the cycle will be informed. The Deputy Director of the Secondary cycle will keep the Director informed.

3.3 Suicide

In the unfortunate circumstance that a suicide has occurred in the school, each school should have a Tragic Events procedural document so that a certain protocol is followed to ensure appropriate sharing of information with the school community and also psychological support for pupils and staff. This procedural document should list out clearly what actions are taken in such tragic circumstances.

4. Training

As one can conclude from the preceding paragraphs, training of staff is important. The word staff is used purposely as opposed solely to teachers. Any member of staff in the school may become the holder of serious information and thus some form of basic training and awareness raising needs to take place. It is recommended that schools offer training in basic helping skills to their staff so that they are able to listen empathically and respond appropriately if they are trusted with confidential information. Schools also need to consider having a training session on their procedural document so that staff will know what services the school offers in terms of prevention and intervention and what steps needs to be taken when a case related to a mental health issue arises.

5. Confidentiality

It is very important for the school to have a general confidentiality clause. When pupils share personal information with a member of staff, if the pupil is a minor, the information will be kept confidential, except in the following 3 circumstances:

1. Harm to self
2. Harm to others
3. Harm being done to you

In the beginning of a school year, it is important for schools to communicate the terms of confidentiality with the school community.