

Spotting the signs that pupils are struggling

Whether a pupil is struggling academically, emotionally or with safeguarding issues, staff need to be alert to warning signs. Adele Bates describes what to look out for

Author details

[Adele Bates](#)

Adele Bates is a teacher, speaker, writer and educator for students with emotional and behavioural difficulties. She is a TEDx Speaker 2020 and forthcoming author of *Miss, I don't give a sh*t* with Sage publishing. With over 17 years'...

How do you know when a pupil is struggling academically or otherwise?

- They put their hand up and ask for help.
- They look for other resources in the classroom – dictionaries, computers, past work, displays etc.
- They use the support order you taught them of Brain, Book, Buddy, Teacher.
- They have a word with you after class.

Yes. It can look like that. Sometimes it can also look like this.

- They chat to their friends.
- They distract themselves and others from the work.
- They become withdrawn.
- They become angry in your lessons and backchat.
- They destroy any work they have attempted.
- They put their heads on the desk and sleep.
- They play on their phone.
- They refuse to enter your classroom.
- They refuse to go to school.

The challenge, as educators, is that the first list is what we would hope happens, but in reality, it is the second list we experience more.

The tricky thing about the second list is that these signals often look like behaviour issues and not signs of struggling.

Communication difficulties

Pupils are not always able to communicate clearly when they are struggling. The behaviour is the communication.

I once taught a pupil who climbed the walls. She was unable to sit for more than two minutes, could not engage with the work, often selected to be mute and when she did communicate with me it was fairly rude.

This was a mainstream year 8 class with around 33 other pupils. It was early on in my career and this school, so I thought it best to first consult the behaviour policy, follow the 1,2,3 out method that it suggested and see what happened.

It didn't work. I was addressing the surface symptom of the behaviour and not the issue.

[We also need to be aware of very personal, individual struggles our children may be going through](#)

I did some investigative work and spoke with the SENCO. We spent the next few weeks trying different learning strategies with the pupil that included timers, smaller tasks, a different seat in the classroom and a test for dyslexia – and slowly we got there.

She concentrated for increasingly long periods of time, produced work and even contributed to class discussions (all while refraining from wall climbing).

I learned an important lesson – that pupil was struggling with my work. She was unable to articulate that, and so the poor behaviour came out.

It was my job to adapt the learning for her to be able to access it. To do that I first needed to know what the struggle was.

Spotting the signs

So, what should you look out for?

It's a tricky one. All pupils will react in different ways, so keeping curious, not assuming anything, questioning and a bit of trial-and-error-magic-guess-work will help no end, but here are some general signs that will be useful to consider.

A child struggling academically

- Distraction, anything to avoid doing the work – even if this is engaging you in topics they know you love talking about! It's sneaky but it's often a very successful strategy to avoiding work.
- Frustration and anger.
- Spending a very long time on one task, exceeding expectations in that area (usually as they feel comfortable here and it avoids facing the tasks they find challenging).
- Chatting to friends for help or, again, as a distraction.
- Not opening their book or computer file – they feel like they will fail, so why bother starting?
- Refusal to engage in group work or class discussions.
- Pens inexplicably breaking – especially ones that require a 20 minute toilet visit to clean up the ink.

A child struggling emotionally or with mental health

- A change in their usual behaviour, e.g. a sudden withdrawal, increased aggression, increased tiredness, increased apathy
- Anxiety
- Symptoms of depression
- Erratic behaviour
- Seemingly inexplicable outbursts
- Increased difficulties in friendship groups
- Changes in eating or sleeping patterns

A child being triggered by past or current trauma

- Challenges forming positive relationships
- Difficulties around eating and their relationship with food
- Overly clingy
- Irritable, aggressive, difficult to soothe or engage
- Anxiety
- Passive
- Sexualised behaviour
- Sadness and depression

A child with safeguarding issues

Like the above, keeping in mind the four types of abuse.

Physical

Bruises, broken bones, scratches, bite marks, burns or scalds.

Emotional

Unconfident or lack self-assurance, struggle to control emotions, difficulty making or maintaining relationships, act in a way that is not appropriate for their age, self-harm.

Sexual

Anxiety and depression, eating disorders, post-traumatic stress, difficulty coping with stress, self-harm, suicidal thoughts and tendencies, pregnancy, STIs, feelings of shame or guilt, drug and alcohol problems, relationship problems.

Neglect

- Poor hygiene and appearance – hungry, smelly, poorly dressed for weather conditions, difficulty using menstrual products.
- Developmental problems - medical or health issues, skin conditions, weight or growth issues.
- Housing and family issues – no heating at home, in unsustainable living conditions, being left alone, taking the role of carer for adults or siblings.

What about in/after/during a global pandemic?

We will see different behaviours.

Routines and boundaries are important as they make us feel safe. (How many teachers found it difficult to not have bells ringing and not leave the house?) Schools should maintain these as they can.

In addition, we also need to be aware of very personal, individual struggles our children may be going through. They may not come out as we would expect.

Each of us have experienced 2020 in a unique way and some of us have had additional struggles. Unfortunately, we know domestic abuse, loneliness, isolation, and mental health issues have all been affected.

Ideally, we can build in ‘check in’ moments as part of our routines. A brilliant [tool for this is free writing](#).

We can't expect our pupils to be able to articulate challenges they're experiencing beautifully every time, especially when we struggle with that as the adults.

Keep an eye out for the signs, keep curious, adapt, and support where you can. And please remember to seek your own support when your own signs come up too

Strategies to support anxiety

Nicola Harvey shares four practical strategies to use in supporting children or young people who are experiencing anxiety



Anxiety is a normal emotion and we all experience it from time to time. It only becomes a problem when anxiety persistently gets in the way of a child or young person living their best life.

In my previous blog, [Understanding anxiety in children and young people](#), I explored what it means to experience anxiety, common forms and when it can become a problem, particularly in light of the Covid-19 pandemic

In this blog, I want to share four practical strategies I have used to support children and young people experiencing anxiety.

As we know, every child is different so feel free to adapt these tools as necessary or use them alongside methods you may already be utilising.

- Normalising anxiety
- Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT)
- Conscious breathing
- Basic neuroscience

Please note the strategies are not intended to substitute professional medical or counselling advice, so if you need any further support speak to your school's mental health lead or another trained professional.

Normalising anxiety

Firstly, it's important for adults to normalise anxiety with children. When teachers, therapists and parents talk openly about their own anxious

experiences whilst encouraging children to do the same, it builds emotional literacy, resilience, self-esteem and much more! When we reassure children that it's ok to not be ok, it can help reduce the stigma surrounding mental health and puts the onus on the young person to develop self-regulation tools.

A simple way to normalise anxiety is to schedule **Worry Time** – a regular time slot for a young person to talk, write or draw what's on their mind with a trusted non-judgemental adult. This can be an effective way of encouraging children to face their fears whilst getting any anxious thoughts and feelings off their chest. This does not have to be problem-solving activity; it can simply be a process of listening and creating a

safe space for the young person to release the anxious thoughts and feelings weighing them down.

For more guidance, take a look at this resource from Sheffield Hallam University on [how to set up worry time](#).

Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT)

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) is based on the concept that our thoughts, feelings and behaviours are interrelated and looks at therapeutic ways to change our thoughts and behaviours.

Mindfulness is the process of paying attention and being in the present moment in a non-judgemental way. This may be through meditation, movement, focusing on the breath or anything that connects us to focusing on the here and now.

Similar to CBT, research shows mindfulness to be an effective coping strategy for anxiety, reducing common behavioural, psychological and physical problems in children and young people (Hwang & Kearney, 2015) (Weisbaum, 2016).

Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy combines both practices and can be used to support the wellbeing of children, young people and adults. A simple and practical example is the **STOPP** technique, outlined in the table below

STOPP	EXAMPLES OF ACTIVITIES WHICH CAN BE SIMPLIFIED
Stop	Take a moment to pause and step back from the situation. This can be by encouraging a young person to look at a calming object like a calm down jar, to shift their focus.

STOPP	EXAMPLES OF ACTIVITIES WHICH CAN BE SIMPLIFIED
Take a breath	Encourage the young person to be aware of their breathing to help find a sense of calm from within. This can be connected to a breathing exercise like slowly counting to 5 as they breathe in and out.
Observe	<p>Develop self-inquiry skills without judgement and prompt the young person to observe one or some of their responses to the following.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What am I actually reacting to? • What thoughts are going through my mind right now? • What sensations do I notice in my body? • What else do I notice right here and now?

Pull back	<p>Put things into perspective by prompting the young person to think about the bigger picture.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there another way of looking at this? • What are the facts? • What advice would I give to a friend in this situation?
Proceed – practise what works	<p>When the young person is ready, encourage them to move forward and think about next steps.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where can I focus my attention right now? • What is the helpful for me to do now? • How can I move forward and learn from this

Conscious breathing

When a person experiences anxiety, their breathing tends to become shallow or is at a faster pace. In contrast, when they become aware of

their breathing and take slow and steady full breaths, it sends messages between the brain and the parasympathetic nervous system and enhances a more balanced state of calm in the mind and body.

The benefits of conscious breathing are endless, particularly as it can help reduce anxious thoughts, feelings and uncomfortable physiological sensations. A good way to remind children to practise conscious breathing is through easy to follow practical activities, including synchronised breathing apps like headspace and calm.

In my book *Mindful Little Yogis*, there are over 50 practical and inclusive guided breathing activities for children and young people, particularly for those with special educational needs. One of the activities I share is **Five Finger Breathing** – a great way for children to trace around their hands in sync with their breathing



Image taken from [The Calming Corner](#)

For step by step guidance on how to do five finger breathing, take a look at [Dr Pooky Knightsmith's video](#).

Basic neuroscience

When we inform children and young people that the brain controls all parts of the body, including where our thoughts and feelings come from, it can help build emotional intelligence and be incredibly empowering. With this knowledge and understanding, rather than being consumed by anxiety in the 'emotional brain' (limbic system), a child can learn the importance of regulating their emotions using their 'thinking brain' (neocortex).

Dr Dan Siegel and Dr Tina Payne Bryson's book *The Whole Brain Child* shares a simple method called the **Upstairs Downstairs Brain** to teach children that the emotional and thinking parts of the brain need to work together to help us feel balanced, calm and healthy. However, there are times when we may 'flip our lid' and big emotions are difficult to contain, so Siegel and Bryson share helpful ways to self-regulate (e.g. practising mindfulness) when big emotions like anxiety feel overwhelming

Dr Hazel Harrison's fascinating article on Hey Sigmund provides practical steps on how to adapt the 'upstairs downstairs brain' into teachable activities for the classroom environment.

Remember...

If you need additional support for yourself or for a young person experiencing anxiety, please consult your school's mental health lead, school nurse or a member of your senior leadership team. The strategies suggested in this blog are not intended to substitute professional medical or counselling advice.