Managing cases of students' emotional abuse

Cases of student emotional abuse can all too frequently go unnoticed believes Jenni Whitehead. Here she suggests an exercise for staff-room discussion.

For the purpose of the child protection system, the Department of Health employs the following definition of emotional abuse:

'Emotional abuse is the persistent emotional ill-treatment of a child such as to cause severe and persistent adverse effects on the child's emotional development. It may involve conveying to children that they are worthless or unloved, inadequate, or valued only insofar as they meet the needs of another person. It may feature age or developmentally inappropriate expectations being imposed on children. It may involve causing children frequently to feel frightened or in danger, or the exploitation or corruption of children. Some level of emotional abuse is involved in all types of ill treatment of a child, though it may occur alone.' (Department of Health et al, 1999, p5-6)

NSPCC research evidence

NSPCC research has shown that:

- 6% of all children experience frequent and severe emotional maltreatment (Cawson et al, 2000, p.70)
- 18% of children experienced humiliation and/or attacks on self-esteem during childhood (Cawson et al, 2000, p.64)
- 11% of young adults said that they had not been made to feel special by anyone during their childhood (Cawson et al, 2000, p68)

Research carried out online by the NSPCC found that more than seven out of 10 experienced professionals had dealt with cases of emotionally abused children in the last five years. However, less than half of respondents said that they felt they had enough knowledge and training to deal with emotionally abused children. (Cawson et al, 2000, Child Maltreatment in the UK: A Study of the Prevalence of Child Abuse and Neglect, NSPCC)

Anyone who has had to deal with emotionally abused children will understand the difficulties involved. Some such children employ the coping mechanism of trying to disappear into the background, so as not be noticed. Unfortunately, some of them can be successful in doing this, and as a consequence their plight goes unnoticed.

Emotional abuse can prove particularly difficult to evidence. We can assess how the child is functioning, but making direct links between how the child is and the behaviour of their parents towards them is much harder.
Impaired development

The Children (NI) Order 1995 talks about an impairment in the child’s development as an important factor in evidencing significant harm. Development is defined as including physical, psychological and educational development.

One of the difficulties in responding to emotional abuse is that it has often developed within the parent’s relationship with their child over a period of time, as opposed to being an identifiable act such as a physical attack. Emotional abuse may include:

- threats to abandon the child (as opposed to actual abandonment)
- threats of harm to the child or to others that the child cares about, including pets (as opposed to actual physical harm).

Alongside such threats there may be a continuous blaming of the child for how the parent feels and or behaves.

Schools can support children’s social care enquiries about emotional abuse by reporting their knowledge of the relationship between the child and their parents and how the child presents in school. The child’s academic progress also needs to be reported with comments on how the child copes with their peers and the demands of school in general.

Risk of dismissal

Staff may find listening to children’s disclosures of emotional abuse particularly difficult to hear and there is a risk that a child’s disclosure may be dismissed on the grounds that parents sometimes say things to children that they do not mean.

Unfortunately, I have heard adults respond in a very unhelpful way to children who try to talk to them about the messages their parent is giving them. For example, the child who tells the adult, ‘My mummy is always cross with me,’ is told,

‘Oh, I’m sure she loves you really,’ or the child who says, ‘My dad told me that I cause all the problems in my family,’ is told, ‘I don’t think your dad means that.’

The adult in these examples is making a presumption or perhaps is hoping that the child has got it wrong. However, by making such statements the adult may suggest to the child that either they are not believed or that they were wrong to tell.

Compare the child making disclosures such as those described above and a child making a disclosure that they have been beaten or sexually abused. It would be much more difficult to dismiss physical or sexual abuse disclosures.
A classroom resource for combating emotional abuse

‘The Princess and the Secret’, is a story by children’s author Narinder Dhami which forms part of an NSPCC classroom resource dealing with emotional abuse. Originally published in the Guardian on 7 October, the resource includes the story, a lesson plan and a comprehensive list of resources.

The ‘Princess and the Secret’ tells the tale of a child who is struggling with keeping the secret of her mother’s drinking problem and the emotional abuse to which her mother subjects her. The story and lesson plan are designed to get the message across to children that it is OK to talk to helpful adults about their worries and difficult experiences.

The NSPCC resource is aimed at teachers of nine to 11-year-olds and includes curriculum-linked ideas for exploring the issue of emotional abuse further, plus links to other sources of help and advice for teachers. Teachers can download a free copy of the resources.

How should the adult respond to such disclosures? An exercise

Here is an exercise for your staff meetings. Read the disclosures in the box below one at a time and discuss the following questions in pairs. It is useful in this exercise to place more experienced members of staff with less experienced ones.

Disclosures of emotional abuse

1. ‘My daddy said he would send me and my brother away if we didn’t stop getting on his nerves.’ – Seven-year-old girl who has very low self esteem.

2. ‘Mummy says I’m stupid and I don’t deserve any friends.’ – Ten-year-old boy who has just fallen out with his best friend.

3. ‘My cat’s going to be chopped up into little bits if I don’t stop making a mess’ – Said by a four-year-old girl in a very ‘matter of fact’ way.

4. ‘I get scared in the night but my mum says if I get up I will have to go to the police station and sleep in a cell on a stone bed.’ – Six-year-old boy who is known to wet himself.

5. ‘All my family hate me and blame me for everything.’ – Thirteen-year-old girl who has a history of getting into trouble.

For each disclosure, discuss the following questions.

• What are your immediate feelings hearing this disclosure?

• Feeling anger towards a parent who has said such things is a normal reaction but showing your anger to the child is not helpful as the child may misinterpret this as you being angry with them. How will you manage your own feelings?

• How will you respond to the child? For each disclosure think about what actual words you would use taking into account the child’s age and understanding.
• If you were expected to talk to the parent, how would you approach it? Again, think of actual words. How would you start the conversation?

• If you were expected to talk to the parent what safety measures would you take for yourself and what support would you expect from other staff?

The aim of the exercise is to help staff to recognise the importance of sharing their feelings about difficult issues and to develop their practice in talking with children and to parents. These are difficult exercises and it should be stressed that there is no one absolutely correct way of responding – it’s not a test!

*Developing your own verbal responses to difficult disclosures can help staff be prepared.*

Of course each child’s disclosure is unique and one set of words, no matter how well rehearsed, will not fit all circumstances, but by practising forming actual verbal responses members of staff will be better equipped and perhaps less likely to dismiss these very difficult disclosures due to being lost for words.

*Further reading*

A useful starting place for further reading is the NSPCC’s research briefing.

*Author details*

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