Six ways to reduce pupil stress

*Consistent procedures are key, says Steve Baker, as he outlines measures that will take pressure off pupils – and make life easier for staff, too*

Stress gets a bad rap. Try winning a Formula One race, operating on a patient or even crossing a busy road without stress and you’ll soon come a cropper. It’s a useful aspect of our make-up. Teaching pupils to manage stress, to appreciate its worth but also to read the warning signs is vital in our exam-obsessed, target-driven culture; and if we think about how badly characters in popular TV shows such as Hollyoaks and Coronation Street handle stress we can see there is a shortfall that desperately needs making up. Learning to control one’s breathing in moments of crisis is an important life skill that few parents are in a position to pass on, and even fewer could do the job of a school counsellor. School staff are in a unique and privileged position to help young people become more self-aware and develop coping strategies that are more effective than ‘getting bladdered’.

Here are some actions schools can take to lighten the stress load on pupils. There are many others such as peer mentoring that would justify a full article in by themselves, but here I have included some of the less obvious measures.

**Invest in the role of the form tutor**

Who is the first adult a pupil is going to encounter in the course of a day? For many it will not be a parent. I believe that the abandonment of the form tutor role is a failure of leadership. In the face of staff inconsistency and poor pupil punctuality some schools have reduced ‘form time’ to 10 minutes in mid-morning. The all-important ‘getting-off-to-a-good start’ that could have been performed by form tutors in form time is delegated to pastoral staff at the perimeter moaning ‘Planner? Equipment?’ like airport security. If we want pupil to suffer less stress, investing in the proper training, monitoring and evaluation of form tutor time at the start of the day offers the prospect of a long-term relationship with an adult who knows the pupil and cares about their progress and wellbeing. I am also a fan of the coaching model, so long as coaches are able to meet their coaching groups several times a week.

**Take anti-bullying seriously**

Former headteacher John Stead of the NSPCC, when he was regional adviser for the Anti-Bullying Alliance in Yorkshire and the Humber, said that the most effective preventative measure a school could initiate was to become ‘a listening school’. If adults are trained in what to look for, how to listen and who to refer to, and if pupils are told repeatedly that adults are willing to listen and this promise is kept by the vast majority of staff, then there will be less bullying.

The quality of supervision is a key factor in this. Staff duties must be sacrosanct and being at the door between lessons to observe pupil movement should be required of all. This means staff arriving at lessons in a punctual manner and remaining vigilant throughout lessons. Where is the value in a staff briefing in which colleagues are asked to look out for Brendan, who is being bullied, if it
overruns and Brendan’s teacher is late to period one, thereby leaving him at the mercy of Jake and Dylan for five minutes?

**Address the ‘hidden curriculum’**

Coined by Philip W Jackson in his 1968 book *Life in Classrooms*, this phrase still has currency. Norms, values and beliefs are transmitted in schools quite unintentionally. I remember a head of house I once observed stomping up and down the school stage glaring at pupils as they entered and barking at those who spoke or committed other tiny misdemeanours. Arms folded, shoulders hunched and brow furrowed, her body language spoke volumes to those unlucky pupils. The message on the big screen behind her? ‘Reach for the Skies!’ It might as well have said ‘Fear for Your Life’.

As anyone who works in schools can tell you, life is less stressful if the ideals espoused by the leadership team are matched by one’s day-to-day experience of working in the school. It is just the same for pupils. If the PSHE curriculum teaches them about human rights then staff have an obligation to act as if these existed. It is an age-old problem for PSHE that the rest of the week fails to live up to the standards of inclusiveness and dignity that have been preached and experienced in the subject. One way to bridge the gap is to introduce SEAL (Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning). Encourage staff to think through the relevance of the SEAL domains:

- self-awareness
- managing feelings
- empathy
- motivation
- social skills.

These skills enable staff and pupils to perform better because they explicitly address aspects of behaviour that might otherwise be getting in the way.

**Invest in high-quality toilets**

When I was training to be a behaviour and attendance consultant in 2003 I was told over a coffee between sessions: ‘Go and look at the pupil toilets; that will tell you what you need to know about a school.’ Smart move. What can be more demoralising for pupils than having to visit a smelly lavatory with hard paper and no soap? And that is before we get to the issue of supervision. It is pleasing to see the new builds designed with their toilets so easily accessible that the bullying that some of us endured is far harder to get away with.

**Establish standard operating procedures**

If I fail to bring a pen to Mr Hardcastle’s lesson, he opens his pencil case and hands me one without comment. Miss Crank on the other hand, in the same situation ‘goes off on one’, berates me in front of my peers and keeps me back at the end of the day. How stressed am I? Wouldn’t it be good if situations like this were governed by SOPs – standard operating procedures? We all know that pupils
find it difficult to deal with perceived unfairness. If different teachers don’t deal with failure to bring a pen in the same way, different pupils are not receiving the same treatment for the same crime. There is less stress when we know where we stand from the start.

**Making learning fun**

A study some years ago showed that factory floor staff with dull repetitive jobs were more stressed than their managers who appeared to be under greater pressures. It was the repetition and lack of control that contributed to an overload of stress. Involving pupils in lessons, making use of humour, breaking up the monotony of worksheets and PowerPoints is a key action to take. Senior leaders would do well to follow a low-ability Year 8 class for a day, without warning, and see what their scholastic diet consists of. Helping staff to plan collaboratively is one step we can take to promote more innovative learning and teaching.

Of course, much of a child’s personal make-up is set by the age of three and we cannot hope to undo all that life has done to our pupils. It strikes me, though, that the actions we can take to reduce pupil stress are often those that will help staff too. Consistent procedures and an experience of life that lives up to the rhetoric will help all in school to keep afloat.

Use this checklist to ensure that pupil wellbeing is addressed in your school

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