



Welcome to our Autumn edition of MIND MATTERS, the **bccc** professional newsletter where we share information, thoughts, ideas and reflections.

In this edition we will be:

- looking at how to set the tone for mental health provision in your school.
- considering the beginning, middle and end of the therapy process.
- thinking about play and the unconscious.
- hearing from a young person and their experience of therapy.
- offering some ideas and resources to promote mental and emotional well-being for primary and secondary pupils.
- providing some tips on how to have a conversation about transitioning to a new class or school.

Setting the tone for Mental Health provision in your school

You will all be aware of the Department for Education's objective to have a Mental Health Lead within every school by 2025. We are, of course, wholly supportive of the Government's intention to identify and upskill senior Mental Health Leads. We support the focus of initiating a whole school approach to mental health to ensure the best outcomes for all students, including the most vulnerable. We must also, of course, not forget the wellbeing of staff because without emotionally healthy, emotionally literate staff, the institution will not work as effectively.

We are proud to be working within two statutory bodies who are providing the MHL workshops to Senior Leaders and school staff. We were involved in ensuring the content for Essex was relevant and apposite. We have since been working alongside other statutory organisations in delivering the mental health elements of the training.

We know that an embedded ethos helps staff and students feel safe, valued, and contained within clear expectations around behaviours, attitudes and hopes.



The most crucial element in supporting children and young people is fast and easy access to help and support. The key for staff who are supporting children and young people is in understanding what form of support a student will benefit from: pastoral support, group work, group therapy, 1:1 therapy, or family therapy for example. The biggest challenge in access to mental health provision is two-fold: identification of need and identifying the right response. So, whilst we champion the Government's initiative, we are also on the front line, so to speak, and aware of the challenges this presents to whoever takes on the role of MHL.

We have been so impressed within our deliveries of the commitment, care and determination of every attendee to get this role 'right'. So, what does 'right' look like?

WE HAVE BEEN FACILITATING DISCUSSIONS WITH ATTENDEES ABOUT:

- The ethos of your school in relation to ensuring the wellbeing of students and staff.
- The culture of your school in relation to engagement with staff, students and families alike.
- Barriers, prejudice and stigma: Where do they come from and how do we best respond?
- What do mentally friendly spaces look like for those all-important conversations?
- What services are available for you to access and utilise.



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How does this role work best? In our opinion, a whole school approach is vital in ensuring the success of the MHL role. Why? Increasingly, our work in schools is holistic: we don't just provide 1:1 therapy anymore – it doesn't always work in isolation. What does work is joined up thinking about a child or young person. As well as providing therapy to students, we also provide consultation, support, guidance and staff supervision alongside our therapeutic work. This is our 'whole organisation' approach. What then, does a whole school approach to mental health look like?

It is founded within the culture and ethos of your school. How is mental health thought about? How is access to provision considered? What is your triage system for access to therapeutic support for your students? We know that an embedded ethos helps staff and students feel safe, valued, and contained within clear expectations around behaviours, attitudes and hopes. In terms of food for thought, what does your leadership do to support cultural change? Are your limits supported and recognised? Are flags raised when it feels too much, or is the impact recognised of the consistently difficult conversations you may be having with young people?



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In short, we think about mental health as something far better supported, even when there is no apparent need, rather than something we must respond to when it suffers. That said, vigilance, nurture, a clear and consistent ethos and culture, and open dialogue are key factors in assessing whether your school or college is a mentally healthy, mental health-aware place in which you can work, and students can engage, interact and learn.

We are available to you and your SLT to come in and review your mental health provision. We have worked closely with several of our secondary schools recently to do just this, with exciting results. Please don't hesitate to contact Catherine Munns should you wish to discuss the mental health ethos and culture within your school.



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BEGINNING, MIDDLE AND END OF THERAPY

Our counsellors all have very different trainings and professional backgrounds, and we welcome this as it contributes to **bccs** being able to build and nurture a diverse range of expertise. What most counsellors will have in common however is a sense of the structure to any therapeutic intervention.

BEGINNING

What happens before therapy even starts is important. At **bccs** we ask for a referral form to be completed, with appropriate consent, so that when a child or young person arrives for the first time, we have a broad idea of what issues they may bring. Every practitioner will also spend some time verbally contracting with the young person in order to make sure that they understand what the intervention will entail: confidentiality, caveats, timings and so on. It is then time for an in-depth psychosocial assessment either with parents/carers or with the young person themselves – this is dependent on the age of the child and the requirements of the school. Once the assessment is completed, the practitioner has the chance to ensure that they feel able to work successfully with the individual, to think about any additional plans that may need to be secured, for example: a safety plan for suicidal clients or an awareness of how a health issue may affect sessions and to consider how long they feel the young person may need to work with them.



MIDDLE

At **bccs** our counsellors work mainly in an open-ended way, “as long as it takes”. Here the main body of work will commence, with appropriate reviews to determine how the therapy is proceeding, plot any shifts in presentation and to discuss any necessity for an alternative approach.



When you refer one of your students to a bccs therapist you can be confident that there is a structure, planning and a vision for the best possible outcome.

The young person may work via play, art or a talking therapy. They may have some of their sessions outside, use drama techniques or mindfulness activities. Everything is client centred and is considered and recorded safely on our CRM software. As we only work term-time this main part of the work must carefully navigate its way through school holidays and absences but as all our counsellors are experienced and skilled in working within the school setting this is rarely an issue.





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ENDING

The ending is thought about long before the end! In fact, it is considered part of the therapy and therefore held in mind right from the beginning. Many children or young people may find change and endings a challenge and we therefore try to avoid abrupt or unplanned curtailments where we can. A practitioner may decide to work towards an ending by using verbal or visual countdowns, week by week. They may negotiate with the young person a particular time to end and sometimes a particular way an ending could be approached. We want the individual to feel that the ending of therapy is sensitively managed and that they have some control over what happens.

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PLAY AND THE UNCONSCIOUS

In therapy sessions we often work through play. Play can be a powerful way of allowing the unconscious to emerge as the child processes what is going on in their life, through their play.

The use of play as a therapeutic tool was first discovered by Sigmund Freud, who demonstrated from his work with a child, that their unconscious wishes and fears emerged throughout their play. Then Melanie Klein, a leader in the field of child psychology at the time, developed and refined existing play therapy theories and she found that through the use of play, children were able to project their unconscious feelings and anxieties onto the toys. She felt that in observing the child at play was like looking through a window into the child's unconscious. Since these discoveries, play therapy has also been influenced by others, such as Virginia Axline, who adapted Carl Rogers' theories of person-centred work, and brought it forward into the idea of 'non-directive play therapy'. This is where play is led by the child where their own internal processes are expressed through their play without anyone else's agenda taking over.



As therapists working with a child, we work hard to create an environment where the child feels safe enough to fully engage with the play, being a containing, regular presence for them, offering empathy and acceptance. As their story emerges through the play, we might wonder with them about their own life, for example we may say something like: "it's interesting how the little doll feels angry with the teddy. I wonder whether you feel angry like this "sometimes". Or if this seems too direct for the child to engage with, the work can also stay within the play, where we might focus on the feelings but keep it within the metaphor to create safety. For example, "I can see the penguin feels sad right now, that must be really hard for him". This is as equally as effective a therapeutic intervention, as at some level the child will be internalising this, hearing the words and feeling the empathy through the play, which may feel like a safer way to work.

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Sammy was an eight-year-old boy, who in his past, had experienced domestic violence at home and the school had noticed that he could be aggressive and rough with other children in the playground. He was referred for therapy sessions, where he was very drawn to the sand tray, the miniature animals and dinosaurs. Throughout his play, he often would recreate aggressive, violent scenes. This continued each week, and soon it seemed that a pattern was emerging where there was a large angry, aggressive dinosaur who was violent and intimidating towards the smaller, frightened animals. After a while, it became clear, how Sammy's past home life was perhaps being re-created in the sand with an aggressive character bullying and intimidating the smaller characters, which could have unconsciously represented his father, himself, his siblings and maybe also his mother. We explored together what this might have felt like for the smaller animals, and he spoke about how frightened they were feeling.

Over time, he began to create things in the sand to protect the smaller animals, which included building a protective wall, hiding the smaller animals in the sand and creating a safe place for the animals where the dinosaur couldn't get to them. Keeping safe may have been something he hadn't been able to do at home, so perhaps through his play, there was a sense of taking his power back, being able to protect the smaller, more vulnerable characters. Eventually, over many weeks, this play slowly began to shift and change and started to become



less violent in nature and the anger and fear emerging from the play seemed to be less intense. Over time the school began to report improvements in Sammy's behaviour towards the other children and that he seemed to be in a happier place now. In the same way that older adolescents or adults verbally process their experiences and feelings in a therapy session, Sammy was also processing and working through his past trauma- but through the medium of play.

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YOUNG PERSON'S VOICE

A fourteen-year-old girl writes about her experience of therapy.

TAMMY

The idea of having counselling at school was really daunting for me at first. It was offered after mum told the school how I'd been feeling very low for a while, sometimes using self-harming as a way of coping. I'd experienced some bullying when I was younger and during lockdown had felt quite isolated, but it was when my Nan died that I started to really struggle. I didn't always get on with my parents, but Nan was someone I could really talk to, and I just couldn't get used to losing her.

Before starting sessions, I worried about what it would be like, and what it meant about me; was I normal, or was there something wrong with me? I had this idea that it would be dark and silent with this strange adult sitting in judgement of me. From the start my counsellor did everything she could to create a comfortable atmosphere; I remember relaxing immediately when I saw the art resources, games and other things on the table that I could use if I wanted to. I haven't used those things often, but it has helped me at times when I've not been sure how to express things in words.

After the first session I remember feeling quite raw and emotional; I think I was just so used to trying not to think about those difficult things. Having tried to plan what I wanted to talk about, I often found myself saying things I hadn't expected to, and sometimes worried afterwards that perhaps I'd said the wrong thing and that I might get into trouble for it. Gradually I was able to get past this as I realised that my counsellor really did keep our sessions private, and when she needed to report an issue to the school, she involved me and, in the end, it helped to help keep me safe.



Over time I've learned about the relief that comes from saying things out loud, and someone just listening, without judging me. After a session now, I take a deep breath and say to myself "it's out, it's over, I'm ok".

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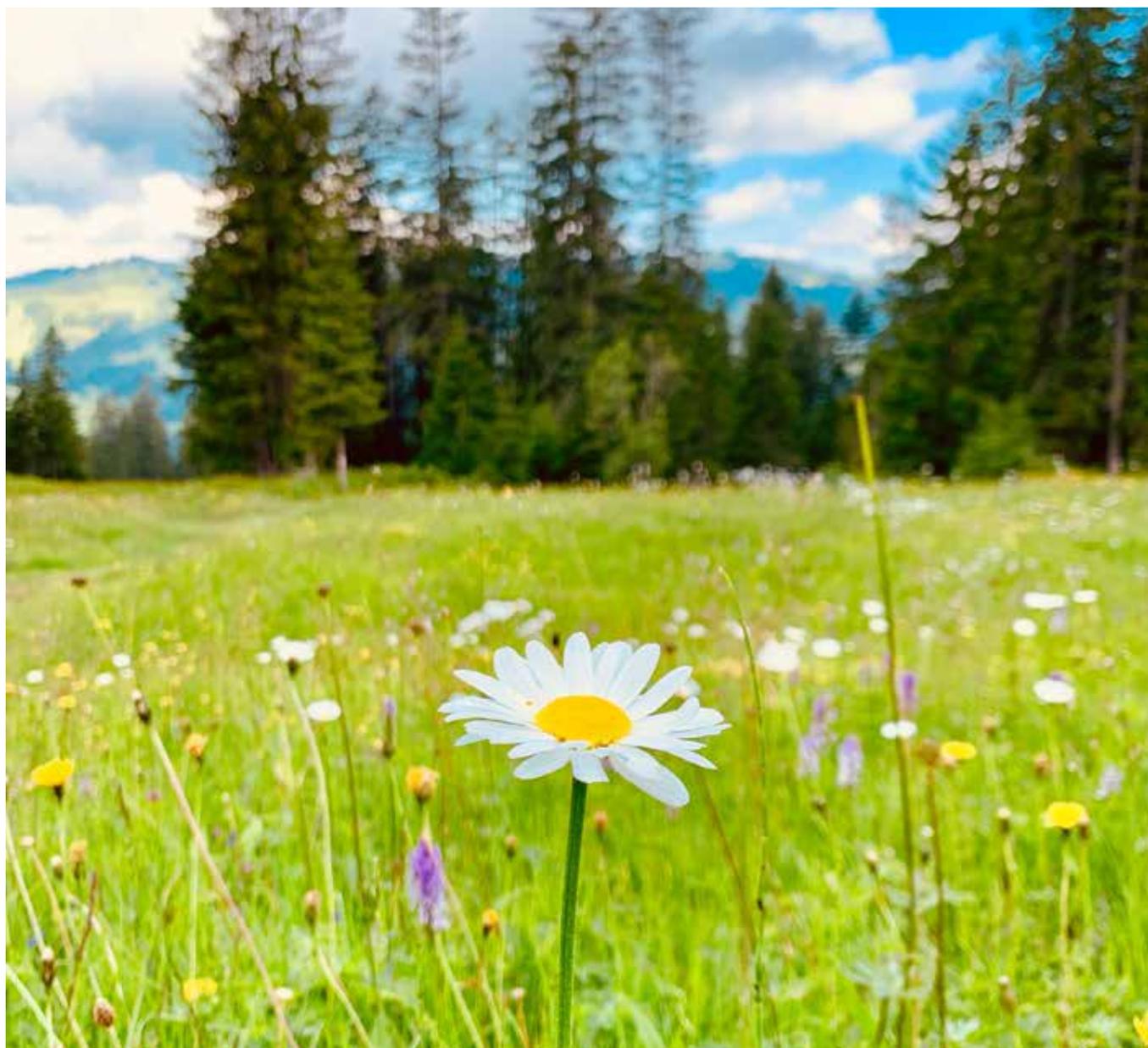


One thing I realise has been really helpful may sound a bit surprising. My counsellor doesn't always agree with me! She always listens to my point of view first, but sometimes she'll encourage me to see things from a slightly different perspective. It makes me think about how I've managed certain situations, like if I've argued with someone, and I can see how I could have handled things differently.

I'm taking away some practical ideas from my sessions too – things I do now to help myself feel more grounded when I start to feel panicky about something. My counsellor has also suggested some free apps and websites I can use, safe places where I can find more ideas and support. I wouldn't say I'm out of the woods yet and do still feel a bit overwhelmed sometimes. But it's been several months since I self-harmed, and it's starting to get easier to talk to people about how I'm feeling, instead of bottling it all up.

For any young people thinking about trying counselling, I would say, just go for it; take a deep breath, and give it a try. It may not always be easy or comfortable, but it can show you that there are things that can help, and although it feels dark now, there is light at the end of the tunnel.

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RESOURCES FOR PRIMARY SCHOOLS

BUBBLE BLOWING EXERCISE

Here is an idea to help young children calm and soothe their nervous system when feeling overwhelmed. You could do it with one child who may be feeling anxious, or you could use with the whole class when things are getting hectic, and you feel they could do with a calming break. Follow the instructions below.

- Imagine you are holding a bubble wand. When you blow the bubbles out, make sure not to pop the bubbles!
- Breathe in through your nose and hold for 5 seconds.
- As you breathe out, imagine you are breathing out large bubbles, blowing out for 5 seconds.
- Repeat a few times.



MINDFUL MUSIC

Music can have a calming, soothing effect, and can help children to tune into their senses and feel more grounded within their body. Using a variety of instruments (for example a singing bowl or Indian bells – both shown below) you could make the sound of the instrument for your class. Then listen together and see how long the sound goes on for? How long does it last? As you listen, encourage the children to take slow deep breaths as they listen to the sound. How does it make them feel? Maybe some of the children could have a turn at making the sound. Can they feel the vibration? What thoughts and feelings come to them as they listen?



HOW TO... TALK ABOUT TRANSITION

1 Primary aged Children. Transitioning from class to class each September can cause anxiety and worry for some children. Here are some ideas of how to talk and help the primary-aged child with their worries about transitioning to the next class and when they start with their new teacher in September.

- Offer opportunities in the weeks leading up to a transition for the children to ask questions about their new teacher. In addition to this, being open to the children's questions at the beginning of term will also help. Let them know that all thoughts and feelings are valid.
- If there is a child that seems to be particularly struggling, perhaps make sure that you or a teaching assistant make some time to talk with them, listening to their concerns and offering reassurance.
- In this conversation, you could help normalise the situation with the child, reminding them about how it is natural to worry when things are different and that their feelings make complete sense.
- Find out what particular things they are finding difficult and consider whether you can put things in place to help them.
- Remind the child how they have perhaps felt worried before about moving class and think of how they handled it and eventually settled. This will help them see and believe in their own autonomy and resilience.
- Remind them of the other routines in their day that won't change, for example, lunch and break times and other routines that will still be in place. You could also remind them of their friends that will stay the same and will be moving to the next class with them.

2 Moving to secondary school. Change can be particularly difficult when moving from primary school to secondary school, as the child is moving from a familiar environment (where they may have felt like big fish in a small pond) to one where they are the youngest child in a much larger school. Here are some ideas of how to talk with and help any young person who is struggling with this transition.

- Make time to listen and acknowledge their concerns. Let them know that change can be difficult so what they are saying makes complete sense.
- Remind them that it can take time to settle and find their 'tribe' and this too is normal.
- Listen to the reasons as to why they are struggling and if possible try to make any adjustments to support them through this time.
- Perhaps suggest to them that you are there for them if they need to talk or alternatively recommend someone else at school, for example a pastoral member of staff, who may be able to do this. Perhaps there could be a specific time in the week that the child touches base with this person or it could be set up that the child goes to this person when they feel they need to talk.
- Consider whether there are any groups or a service that you could refer the young person to, for example, a friendship skills group or a buddy or mentor system.
- You could find out what they are interested in and perhaps suggest that they join a club at lunch time which might help them develop friendships in an area they are interested in.
- If you are particularly concerned about a child or young person, make sure you speak to your designated safeguarding lead and they should advise on next steps.

We hope you have enjoyed this edition of Mind Matters. If you need any further support or help, please use the contact details below or follow our social media channels for updates and news.

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