

Educational Psychology Consultation

We like to use a 'consultation' based approach when working with schools and families. We wanted to try and set out what we mean by this.

A Definition: Consultation is a process of collaborative problem solving with adults who are most concerned and who know most about a situation. The Educational Psychologist facilitates a process 'to help them think through the issue, clarify the problem and then develop solutions to the problem in order to bring about positive change. Ownership of the problem remains with the key person raising the concern. The educational psychologist empowers them with the skills and knowledge they need to be part of the solution.' (DfEE 'Future Directions Report 2000')

What does the Consultation process look like?

Consultation can be used to explore issues at three inter-related levels within education settings:

- *Individual*, e.g. limited progress in literacy; difficulties making friends etc.
- *Group*, e.g. concerns around classroom behaviour; groups experiencing anxiety around exams etc.
- *Organisation/Setting*, e.g. support to review behaviour policy; planning how to make best use of Teaching Assistants etc.

The consultation approach involves working together with staff and parents/carers to collaboratively explore concerns in a way that helps them to have a better and sometimes different understanding of the issues. In this way, it is possible for thinking to shift towards a wider range of possibilities for change. When complex situations can seem stuck, the consultation model can help facilitate positive next steps to bring about change.

The consultation process also focusses on holding review meetings to look at progress and continue to problem solve and plan next steps. This increases the impact of the approach, embeds quality assurance and ensures evidence of 'Assess Plan Do Review'.

What do EP's bring to this process?

- The EP facilitates the process, encouraging everyone to share their views and help plan next steps.
- EPs contribute from their psychological knowledge, to help all involved have a deeper understanding of the situation.
- EPs help to come up with a realistic action plan which participants will implement and later review.

What sort of psychology do we use?

EPs apply a variety of psychological approaches, according to what seems most appropriate. For example:

- *Cognitive psychology* – using their understanding of children's cognition and learning and evidence-based approaches that support progress.
- *Systemic thinking* – recognising the complexity of the systems in which the child is functioning and making sense of the concerns within the inter-relating systems of school and home.
- *Interactionist* – recognising that 'Behaviour is a function of the person and the situation'. Hence the issues and the solutions are not simply located 'within-child'.

- *Solution Focused* – using positive psychology to build on the resourcefulness of the child, family, teachers and staff and develop solutions from what is already working.
- *Narrative* – recognising that ‘stories’ or accounts that individuals tell about a situation may contribute to the problems, or be used to develop more constructive alternatives.

What sort of outcomes can you expect from a consultation based approach?

We believe that consultation gives participants:

- A richer picture and understanding of the concerns and what is contributing to the concerns.
- Chance to develop a range of practical strategies and next steps, approaches and evidence based interventions to draw on that will work for them in their setting
- A clear, realistic and collaborative action plan to help improve a challenging situation.
- Increased feelings of competence, confidence and skills development that help participants to manage similar situations in the future.
- A written record of the consultation with agreed actions and next steps. We believe that lengthy reports are not in themselves effective agents of change and are also very time consuming.

A Consultation based approach supports the SEND Code of Practice, Assess, Plan, Do, Review process. Schools also find this way of working to be a creative, effective and economical way to use their EP time.

Will we ‘see’ the child/young person?

To help adults solve their problems, or reframe the situation causing concern, EPs need to spend quality time with the adults who are dealing with the current situation. In many cases a solution-focused approach can move forward directly to conversations about solutions.

This is not to say that there is no place for direct individual work within a solution focused consultation model. In some circumstances it may be appropriate for the EP to gather further information from working with the child/young person to help to gather a better understanding of the situation. However, the decision to engage in direct work with the child should always be based on an explicit purpose that has been clearly defined. Individual work is always costly in use of time and carries the significant potential drawback of reinforcing the view that the problem lies within the child. We can also often support staff to gather initial screening data themselves and in this way we can continue to skill up staff. Our role can then be to organise and interpret information in ways that are helpful for constructing solutions.

Why do we believe this is this a good way of working?

Evidence shows that consultation leads to better outcomes for children/young people and for participants. We believe that it is the collaborative conversations with teachers and other adults that are the most powerful agents for bringing about change.

It is psychologically important that Educational Psychologists (EPs) help staff and colleagues to find their own solutions that are likely to work in their own environment. These will be more durable and carry more commitment than solutions offered as advice that they are expected to adopt. Because the process of consultation engages staff in creating their own solutions in their own schools/classrooms, this model of service delivery is supporting inclusion and intrinsically fosters school improvement.

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