Developing empathy in school staff through emotional first aid

Paul Jetten explains why the Emotional First Aid training programme was developed and what it consists of.

In a hectic school environment, a young person experiencing emotional distress may find a number of ways to self-manage it, which may not always be accepted and understood by the school employees around them (NHS Confederation, 2007). The coping mechanism they adopt can be seen as challenging or problematic behaviour and interventions are put in place to manage the behaviour often with no attention given to the emotional distress from which it arose.

In schools, school nurses do not just apply plasters and bandages to physical injuries, they deal with emotional cuts and bruises too. They are often the person young people choose to disclose to on a wide variety of issues ranging from abuse at home to problems with relationships.

Emotional First Aid

Emotional First Aid (EFA) is a training programme developed by Southampton CAMHS workers Stuart Gemmell, Jacquie Kelly and Dave Smith, in response to feedback from young people to help support and encourage staff working with children and young people to see many of the presenting behaviours as a ‘solution’. The solution is often the best way they can find to cope with their feelings and manage their distress. This may range from withdrawing from school and truanting as a way of dealing with bullying, or becoming aggressive and abusive to staff as a way of getting sent out of a lesson to hide their poor reading ability.

EFA was developed following a project supported by Solent Youth Action, a youth volunteering project, where a group of young people who had experienced mental health problems produced a book and DVD entitled: Me & U (My Emotions Understood)—a real insight into the emotional experience of a young person today (Moreton et al, 2008), in which they identify what they and those around them did that helped make positive steps towards recovery.

In the government’s new white paper No Health without Mental Health it is recognized that risk behaviours may become ways of dealing with emotional and other problems (Department of Health, 2011). This is a core part of the EFA training, highlighting how all of us adopt solutions to manage our distress. While they may relieve the distress these solutions often become problems in their own right later on becoming what we call Emotional Stuckness. In schools and other agencies it is then the problematic solution which interventions are geared towards and not the initial distress that the young person is experiencing. It is widely recognized that early intervention and prevention have a substantial impact on reducing the severity of a mental health problem. The Department for Education (2011) has produced a new model Productive Children’s Services which demonstrates how effective early intervention and prevention can improve outcomes for Children and their families. By increasing the confidence and capacity in the universal services we reduce the time a young person is left alone with their distress while they wait for a referral into CAMHS but also reduce the cost to local authorities that higher tiered mental health services carry (Wistow and Barnes, 2007).

Developing EFA

Emotional First Aid was developed in response to the Me & U booklet (Moreton et al, 2008). Four Pilot cohorts were delivered to a number of staff from the wider children and young people workforce in November 2008–February 2009. 19 staff from the pilot cohorts went on to a Train the Trainers course in April 2009. The EFA material was revised and a longitudinal study by Solent University was started on the efficacy of the EFA training, measuring staff confidence before and after the training. Southampton University are working with us to create a longitudinal wellbeing tool to measure the impact EFA is having on children and young people who work with EFA trained staff. As part of our ongoing development, we have also had a group of inter-professional learning students from Southampton and Portsmouth Universities come to audit the EFA experience.

What is different about EFA?

‘Emotional First Aid is the initial response given to a young person experiencing emotional distress before specific professional help is sought and obtained.’ (Gemmell et al, 2008)

A key part of EFA is highlighting that often the child or young person chooses someone to disclose to, not because of his/her qualifications, but because of the trust they have built up with that person. EFA helps staff to develop a sense of empathy with the young people they work with. By getting in touch with our own experience of being a young person we can form a better understanding of what a huge time of transition adolescence
is. Emotional First Aid also seeks to challenge the way we look at mental health and seeks to move away from the medical model of mental illness towards a social/ training model of mental health. We see mental health as a continuum, which we are all on and move up and down on depending on contributing situations and emotional processes. For example, anxiety is a normal state for a human being to experience; however, there are various degrees of anxiety moving from a normal transient state at one end, to a more ‘stuck’ state potentially leading towards a clinical anxiety disorder. The emotional first aider will assist in the early detection and identification of the ‘stuck’ behaviours/solutions the young person is employing to manage their emotional distress and by getting alongside them, help them develop more positive enabling strategies. If specialist referral is appropriate, the emotional first aider would help support the young person to reach that service and continue to check in with them while the referral was going through, reducing the number of ‘pillar to post’ referrals that many young people experience.

Training delivery
The EFA course built on humanistic and systemic principles, drawing on a sense of empathy, congruence and unconditional positive regard, but also that as an emotional first aider you are part of a wider system, such as the school. The course is delivered over six weekly, half-day sessions. The structure encourages reflection on practice and personal development between sessions. All delegates on EFA courses are encouraged to form a network with their training cohort, which they can use to exchange ideas and obtain support. During the course each delegate is given a unique login code that gives them access to a secure community forum on the webpage, which allows users to both upload and download numerous tools and strategies they know work with children and young people. We also aim to have bi-annual call-backs with all Emotional First Aid trained staff to improve networking and learn from one another about how they are using the EFA material in practice.

In practice

‘When I first heard about Emotional First Aid I thought it sounded like a good idea and I was interested to undertake the course. The course discussed many key issues that young people go through which helped me to understand things better. It also helped me to gain knowledge of how to deal with such situations and what not to do. As a school nurse I come across young people who are struggling with emotional issues and sometimes as a professional you feel a bit stuck as to know what to do.

Before I was Emotionally First Aid trained I tended to signpost young people to other agencies who might be able to help. I have now learned that this is not always the best course of action and just spending some time with them, helping them to discuss worries can work wonders.

Taking the course with other professionals including foster carers was great as we could all share our knowledge of how we help young people and the skills we already use. I learnt a huge amount from this sharing of information and have used it to create my own Emotional First Aid Kit.

I now use this kit to do exercises to help young people talk about the problems they are having and to help them recover. I would recommend the course to anyone who works with young people as it has helped me to develop professionally and I feel more confident to support young people.’ Nick Higgins, school health nurse, Woolston Clinic

EFA and school nursing/ family support work

‘As a school nurse, I work closely with two family support workers. Our role is to support families in their homes in order for them to function without a crisis.

Most referral’s we receive are about parents not coping with their child’s behaviour, when we speak to the parents they paint a very dark picture of their child who, they say, is out of control.

The EFA course has encouraged us and helped us with these families. We help them understand that their child isn’t bad and naughty but needing help. We use the strategies learnt on the course to help the child with their anxieties and find the underlining cause to their behaviour. We work very closely with the family to help the child find new coping strategies, and help the parent understand their child and their needs. Once the parent understands that there is a problem and it’s not just the child kicking off, they calm down and work with other professionals to help support their child.

We also work in secondary schools and EFA has been invaluable helping us to understand why young people self-harm and overdose.

Again we can apply EFA to these situations to help the young person deal with their anxieties and reasons why they have become overloaded (stressed).

EFA is not just a sticking plaster, it is a way to engage and understand why the young people/children act/ do what they do. To understand the behaviour the child is displaying is the way they are coping with a situation and for us to help them find out why they are feeling like they are, and to help them find better ways to cope.’ Allison Strudwick, school nurse

Further information

Emotional First Aid
For more information about Emotional First Aid visit: www.emotionalfirstaid.co.uk
Annual reports are also accessible on the website.
Courses
Initially EFA was a course written in 2008 for staff working with young people aged 11–25 years. This EFA for Young People course proved successful and a number of staff from Primary schools requested that the material be contextualized into their school setting. Primary EFA was written in 2009 and have been well received nationally (Gemmel et al, 2009). Since August 2011 there are 785 EFA trained staff across the country and we currently have 136 EFA trainers delivering courses nationally.

The development of a parents’ EFA course supported by a national parenting charity and with the help of a group of parents and parenting professionals, began in May 2011. This will not be a parenting course in the classical sense, but a personal development programme to help parents understand their own emotional wellbeing. This course will be launched nationally in September 2011.

Work has also started on the development of an EFA for staff working with people with learning disabilities. We aim to have a finished product ready to launch in January 2012.

Upon completion of an EFA course, some delegates go on to become trainers, so they can roll out the EFA courses in their localities. The Targeted Mental Health in Schools grants in 2010–11 have helped a number of local authorities roll out the EFA training across the country.


