

# Skills building and clinical psychology; is there a role for clinical psychologists to support special schools in building 'key skills'?

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**R**EDUCING the Need for Restraint and Restrictive Intervention (DfE & DHSC, 2019) starts by highlighting the need for a positive and proactive approach to behaviour and states that settings and services should create an environment which seeks to help young people to meet their needs without having to use behaviour that challenges. This guidance therefore highlights the need for schools to proactively help young people to develop skills to meet their needs, but says nothing about what those skills are, or how they can be taught. This article outlines the work that occurred between the CAMHS LD team and the special schools in Hillingdon, London to explore these questions.

## **Service background**

The CAMHS LD team was a small team of clinical psychologists and behaviour analysts that received referrals for children and young people when there were significant concerns about the young person's behaviour. The team and the special schools worked closely together and, as part of this, every new initial

assessment for a child or young person referred to the team took place in their school and included the family, school staff, and social worker. The shared experience of these assessments led to a discussion about the skills that the young people who were referred to the team usually seemed to lack, and an exploration of how best to assess and track those skills. Having tried to develop a questionnaire in Hillingdon the team came across a skills building package called Essential for Living (EfL) (McGreevy et al., 2014) and an assessment tool within it called the Essential Eight (E8). The Essential Eight assesses a person's ability in relation to eight key skills including communication (making requests and following instructions), tolerance (waiting, accepting transitions or removal, managing when someone says 'no', tolerating situations related to health and safety) and daily living skills. The authors of EfL argue that without this set of key skills 'children and adults with disabilities will almost certainly exhibit forms of problem behaviour, will have limited access to preferred items, activities, places and people, and will

have limited contact and interaction with the community in which they live' (McGreevy et al., 2014, p.2). Their assertion matched our experiences within Hillingdon.

Our discovery of the EFL package led to two separate but interrelated developments. Firstly a piece of research carried out by the clinical psychologist in the team, in conjunction with Warwick University, to look at the role of the eight key skills included in the E8 as risk factors for the development of behaviour that challenges (Armstrong et al., 2021). Secondly one of the special schools decided to implement the broader EFL package within the school and explore how those key skills could be taught.

### **Research into risk factors for the development of behaviour that challenges – what skills should we be teaching?**

The research focused on exploring the relationship between the key skills measured by the E8 and a young person's behaviour and found that pupil's chances of having behaviour that challenges varied dependent on their E8 scores (Armstrong et al., 2021). In the study pupils had a 93 per cent chance of having behaviour that challenges if at least one of their skills was rated at the lowest level on the E8, and a 13 per cent chance if all of their skills were rated at the highest level.

Thus, in answer to the initial question of what skills should schools teach, this research suggests that they should teach the skills included in the E8 questionnaire.

### **Implementation of EFL in a Special school – how do we teach those skills?**

One of the special schools within Hillingdon was interested in exploring evidence-based approaches and decided that EFL was an appropriate curriculum for some of their pupils. Four years ago they decided to trial it with two pupils and this has now expanded to a group of 25 pupils who are taught EFL in specially adapted classrooms.

This move has required significant changes within the classrooms. Teaching does not start with pupils sitting at desks with academic and developmental tasks but is led by the objects and activities that motivate the pupils, the first question that school staff ask is what does this pupil enjoy the most? The sharing of this enjoyment leads to the gradual building of a relationship and trust, and then to communication; finding a way to teach the pupil to be able to request the items they enjoy. Emphasis is put on finding a form of communication that works for the pupil and meets the café criteria (continually available, frequently used and effortless) (McGreevy & Fry, 2022). Once a pupil has developed a relationship with the adults in the classroom and is able to make some spontaneous requests then the remaining 'essential 8' skills are introduced. The children are taught to wait and accept 'no' after they make a request and taught daily living and leisure skills. The pupils learn to share, take turns and even begin to make and honour requests to each other. This results in a 'classroom' that has a settee and TV screen, large group size tables, changing rooms, toilets, a shower room, bedroom and kitchen.

The data on the progress that pupils

have made has not yet been published however the school share data about the pupil's progress with parents. One parent noted that:

*'Since my child has been following the Essential for Living Curriculum, I have noticed at home considerable changes and improvements in his behavior, independence, happiness and wellbeing. He is certainly a more contented and less frustrated little boy than he has been in the past before he started EFL'*

In answer to the question therefore about how the key skills can be taught the suggestion from the school's work is that they can be taught in modified classrooms following the EFL curriculum.

## Summary

The evidence to date from the collabora-

## References

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tion that occurred between the CAMHS LD team and the special schools in Hillingdon is that teaching the key skills included in the E8 may reduce the likelihood of a child or young person developing behaviour that challenges, and hence the chance that they may experience restraint or restrictive interventions, and that these skills can be taught by implementing EFL within a school. Further research is currently underway.

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