



Salvesen Mindroom Centre
support • inform • empower

Building Effective Relationships

Helping young people, families and teachers to work together so that children with learning difficulties can thrive at school

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Definitions

There is no single interpretation or consensual definition of the term ‘learning difficulty’. Different organisations and local authorities have adopted their own definitions of the term. Salvesen Mindroom Centre uses the following definition: *A problem of understanding or an emotional difficulty that affects a person’s ability to learn, get along with others and follow convention.*

Our definition of an ‘effective relationship’ is one where: *there is a way of working together in which everyone feels listened to, respected and valued.*

We use the term ‘parents’ throughout this guide to include all parents, carers or guardians supporting children or young people with learning difficulties.

When we refer to ‘young people’ we mean school pupils of secondary school age. Reference to ‘children’ includes those who are younger.

The term ASN stands for ‘additional support needs’.

Introduction

Salvesen Mindroom Centre is a Scottish charity supporting children and young people living with learning difficulties, as well as their families and the professionals working with them. We work with many partners and organisations **across all sectors**. Our work with families and young people is supported by research being carried out at the Salvesen Mindroom Research Centre based at the University of Edinburgh.

We often find that small changes in the way we do things can make a positive difference to the children, young people and families that we work with. If everyone is properly listened to and respected we can achieve better outcomes and ensure that the child or young person remains at the centre of all our working relationships.

This guide aims to provide **young people, parents and teachers** with practical advice about how to build effective relationships that support learning and wellbeing. We worked together with a reference group of young people with learning difficulties, parents and teachers to identify the 5 most important things about communicating well together. In this guide, when we refer to the views of 'young people', 'parents' or 'teachers' we are referring to those we consulted with. Although we cannot claim to speak for all young people, parents or teachers, we hope that the views we have gathered will chime with others in a similar situation therefore please read on with this in mind.



Everyone we spoke to agreed on the top 5 things needed to build effective relationships, shown below. However, as you will see in this guide, young people, parents and teachers all put them in a different order of preference. This tells us how important it is to try to find out and understand the other person's point of view and as a result it is important to acknowledge that we may not always have all the answers.

Here are the top 5



Young People

Young people at school should expect that they are given the right support so they can get the most out of their education.

But we work better with and for young people if we involve them in all the plans for their education and always make sure their voices are heard.

Young people with learning difficulties may need help to be able to have their say.

Here is what our young people said matters most to them -

Empathy and understanding

Effective communication

Education and training

Practical information and support

Honesty and transparency



Tips for young people – how to ask for the things you need in school

Here are some things you can try to make sure you get the right support:

- Can you think of someone who can speak up for you if you don't feel confident – it could be your mum or dad, a brother, sister, auntie or uncle, grandparent, or a friend that you trust.
- If there is something about your lessons that you enjoy, let your teacher know – it could be using an iPad, or it could be working in pairs with a friend. It might be sitting on your own. Everyone is different and may enjoy different ways of learning!
- Is there something a friend enjoys /gets/does in lessons which you think will help you better too? You could ask your teacher if you could also try that.
- If you find it hard to speak to your teacher about what you need, can you write it down? You could use our 'Young person's views' form on the next page, or you could email using Glow or the school's other email system.

Young person's views

Things that are working well

Things I am worried about

Things I want to be different

Things I want to tell you about



Quotes from Young People

Young people said these things make a difference -

"Teachers should not take offence if the support they are giving isn't working well for me"

"All school staff should be aware of my needs"

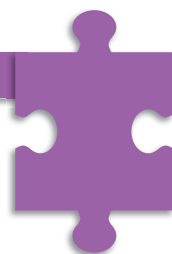
"Staff need to be sensitive so I don't feel excluded because of my needs"

"Take all the actions that were agreed in meetings"

"Give my family a better idea of how the school can help me"

Parents

You might disagree with your child about what's best, but you should always give them a right to be heard.



Teacher

Learn from experience – if you know that 'springing surprises' creates anxiety, could you give advance warning of tests, outings, classroom visitors etc?



Parents

Parents really appreciate being able to talk in an open and honest way about the support their child needs. They also want to be kept informed about their child's progress and, for many, this may mean being given daily updates.

It is important for parents to feel that the added pressure on families with a child with learning difficulties is recognised – emotions and stress are common signs of such pressure.

Some parents may lack confidence in speaking to professionals and could feel ignored if professionals do not have a good understanding of this.

It is very important to parents that they feel comfortable about sharing their suggestions about what can help their child. And they want to feel able to ask for things they think could help, too, without being seen as 'pushy'.

Here is how the parents we worked with ranked the key elements of building effective relationships –

Effective communication

Practical information and support

Empathy and understanding

Education and training

Honesty and transparency

Tips for parents – getting the right support for your child

If you are unsure who the best person to speak to might be, have a chat with other parents at school to find out who they find it most useful to approach first.

If you feel that you could give your child more support with their learning at home, check out the Parentzone pages of the Education Scotland website.

Quotes from parents

Parents spoke from their personal experience to tell us what could make a real difference -

"We need good communication channels"

"If a child is struggling to attend school, the family may be in need of extra help"

"We need to feel that everyone is working together to provide the right support"

"Families need to be aware of their own rights as well as their child's rights to education"

"Open and honest dialogue is most important"

Young People

Your teacher may not have all the information they need to support you. Could you and your family try to find a way to tell them more about how your condition affects you?



Teachers

Signs of stress that a parent or carer might show are probably because they are doing their best to support their child.



Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD)

People with ADHD are inattentive, easily distracted, impulsive and hyperactive. These characteristics are usually combined in varying degrees of severity. ADD has the same characteristics as ADHD except that individuals do not have hyperactive or impulsive symptoms.

Autism

Autism affects how individuals communicate, process information, and experience the world around them. People with autism will often have difficulties with social interaction, coping with change and sensory stimuli.

Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD)

DCD is characterised by impairments in coordination, motor control and planning, affecting any or all movements. Associated difficulties with memory, perception and organisation can impact everyday life. DCD is still sometimes referred to as 'Dyspraxia'.

Dyslexia

Specific difficulties with reading, writing and spelling.

- Dyscalculia - difficulties with maths.
- Dysgraphia - difficulties with handwriting.

Tourette syndrome

Involuntary movements or sounds which may come and go and vary in severity. These actions are known as 'tics'.

Teachers

The relationship that teachers strike up with their pupils is central to the school experience for all children and young people in their classes. Having a good relationship with pupils' families may not seem as important, but it is vital in the case of children and young people with additional support needs such as learning difficulties. These young people might not be able to act as the bridge between parents and school.

Teachers can communicate effectively with young people and their parents by listening carefully to the information being shared with them, and by taking the young person's views seriously. School staff should be welcoming towards parents and ensure that they have all the information they need to support the young person to get the most out of the opportunities offered by the school.

Teachers should aim to get to know 'the whole child' and recognise the importance of parents having at least one person in the school they can easily speak to about any concerns. The school needs good communication channels so that important information is shared with everyone who needs to know. If information is shared but then gets 'stuck', so that avoidable mistakes recur, it creates the impression that the school doesn't listen and sets relationships off on the wrong footing.

Remember that the way a child or young person responds to a situation may be linked to their learning difficulty.

Here are the elements of effective relationships ranked by teachers. Honesty and transparency is their top pick -

Honesty and transparency

Empathy and understanding

Education and training

Effective communication

Practical information and support



Parents

Don't lose sight of the fact that teachers do their job because they believe in children and young people and want what's best for them.



Young People

Don't be afraid to let your teacher (or someone else you trust) know about anything that is worrying you at school.



Reflective questions for teachers

- How can you show the other person that their views are welcome and important?
- How will you gather enough information about the child or young person so that you fully understand their behaviour and how to meet their needs?
- What information do you have that you can share to ensure that the child or young person gets the right support from everyone in the school?
- How can you offer support in a way that won't make the young person feel 'different' from their peers?
- What is the most constructive way you can find to raise concerns about a young person who is struggling to manage in school?
- How might you ensure daily updates to parents where needed?
- Who can you turn to for support in your school?

Further thoughts

The UNCRC sets out that children should have the opportunity to express their views, and for these to be considered and taken seriously. This is echoed in education law. Young people with learning difficulties may need extra help to have their say and be involved in decisions that are about them, but all young people should have the same opportunity. It is up to adults to be proactive in seeking out those views.

Parents will feel ignored if they speak to teachers who don't appear to really know them/their child. Taking time to prepare before meetings to make sure you do know the young person and have all the key information will pay dividends in improved trust and relationships.

Young people are entitled to support to overcome any barriers to learning. There is no need for a diagnosis or 'label'.



Quotes from teachers

Teachers told us what they feel can make a practical difference to building effective relationships -

“Be unafraid to admit when you are wrong”

“Acknowledge the validity of other people’s experience and their emotional response to it”

“Schools should be open to advice from families”

“We should recognise that behaviour is communication”

“Find ways to include all families, for example those whose children are transported to school”

Also bear in mind...

It is so easy to use ‘jargon’ that makes perfect sense in a school setting but is often not familiar to young people or parents. Be alert for acronyms that you use every day such as GIRFEC, ASN, ASL, CSP, CPM etc. Even use of a familiar term like ‘wellbeing’ may not be meaningful to the person you are talking to. Try to use the plainest language you can to explain what you mean.



Summary

This guide was written to aid young people, parents and teachers to build effective relationships, thereby fostering a community of support for children and young people's education and wellbeing. We also hope the information will be useful to professionals working in other settings.

The Scottish Government has an ambition to make Scotland the best place for children and young people to grow up. Reflecting the values and aspirations of the nation, our national outcomes include an objective for children to be loved, safe and respected, so that they can fulfil their full potential (*Scotland Performs, National Performance Framework*). This outcome is supported by *Curriculum for Excellence*, Scotland's framework for learning and teaching, whereby children are helped to become *successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors*.

The themes that have been identified in this guide are supported by the Professional Values and Personal Commitment set out by the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS): *Social Justice, Integrity, Trust and Respect*, and *Professional Commitment*. GTCS Professional Skills and Abilities (Teaching and Learning) encourages the profession to "work effectively in partnership in order to promote learning and wellbeing". The themes also reflect the principles of our national policy, Getting it right for every child – GIRFEC.

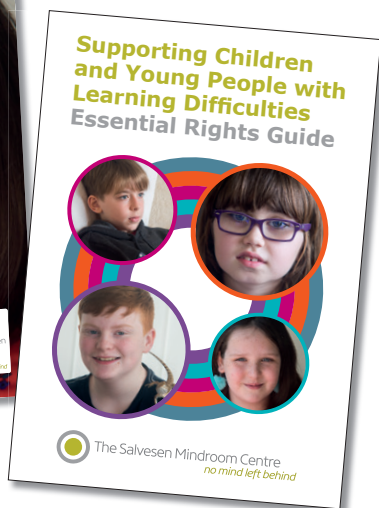
Feedback

We're listening too!

We hope this guide is the start of a conversation about how we can all work together to build effective relationships among children, young people, parents, teachers and schools. We would love to hear what you have found useful here. Have you learned anything new? Do you disagree with any of the points that have been raised, or can you find echoes here of your own experience?

If you can let us have your response to what you have read in this booklet, we will collate your views and build upon them to provide further resources that will help us build effective relationships for all.

Send us your views – berfeedback@mindroom.org



Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the young people, parents and teachers who so freely and enthusiastically gave of their time to contribute their thoughts, ideas and expertise to the content of this guide.

We also give our thanks to the School of Education and Social Work team at the University of Dundee who provided guidance and critique from planning to completion of this resource, and to the General Teaching Council for Scotland who supported us and have provided their endorsement to this publication.



Key resources

Salvesen Mindroom Centre

Salvesen Mindroom Centre is an independent Scottish charity that aims to support, inform and empower those who live with learning difficulties. We do this by working directly with families, providing advice, signposting and 1:1 support. We work with young people up to age 25, offering advocacy and support, and by offering supported work placements for secondary pupils. We work with teachers and other professionals by providing literature, training and resources. We also liaise closely with the Salvesen Mindroom Research Centre at the University of Edinburgh to increase the understanding of learning difficulties and to influence best practice.

<https://www.mindroom.org/>

Curriculum for Excellence

Curriculum for Excellence is intended to help children and young people gain the knowledge, skills and attributes needed for life in the 21st century, including skills for learning, life and work. Find out more on the Education Scotland webpages.

<https://education.gov.scot/>

National Framework for Inclusion

The Framework for Inclusion has been designed to ensure that all pre-service teachers and teachers are appropriately guided and supported from the outset and throughout their careers towards gaining the required knowledge and understanding of inclusive education.

<http://www.frameworkforinclusion.org/>

GTCS: Professional Standards and Values

General Teaching Council for Scotland professional values are at the core of the professional standards for teachers. <https://www.gtcs.org.uk/>

My Rights My Say

My Rights, My Say provides: advice and information about a child's rights - advocacy to support a child to have their voice heard when talking to their school - independent support to make sure the child's views are heard in formal process (such as assessments) - support to enhance professional practice in listening to children's views - legal representations to support a child making a reference to the Additional Support Needs Tribunal. <http://enquire.org.uk/myrightsmysay/>

Parent Councils

You can usually find information about the Parent Council at your school on the school website. Or contact the national organisation for Parent Councils, Connect. <https://connect.scot/>

Parentzone

Information and resources to help parents and carers learn about the Scottish education system, the curriculum, additional support, and ways to support their child to learn. <https://education.gov.scot/parentzone>

Scotland Performs, National Performance Framework

The National Performance Framework is for all of Scotland. It aims to get everyone in Scotland to work together. You can read more about it at <https://nationalperformance.gov.scot/>

For more information about Salvesen Mindroom Centre,
visit our website:

www.mindroom.org



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