

MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT FOR LEARNERS

Supporting the social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs of learners with learning difficulties and disabilities in further education (FE) and skills

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OVERVIEW

SEMH (Social, Emotional & Mental Health) is a term introduced in the Special Educational Need and Disabilities (SEND) Code of Practice in 2014 as one of four specific categories of special educational needs. i.e.

SEND areas of need

- communication and interaction
- cognition and learning
- social, emotional and mental health difficulties
- sensory and/or physical needs.

Learners with SEMH needs experience a breadth of difficulties that adversely affect their ability to access education and training. This could include experiencing high levels of anxiety and feelings of being unable to cope with demands of daily life such as dealing with changes and understanding what is required in different situations. Learners with SEMH needs often experience low self-esteem and find interactions with others difficult. This can result in withdrawal and social isolation. Difficulties experienced in managing emotions can result in challenging behaviour.

Learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities have an increased likelihood of having SEMH needs. According to Mencap, the rate of mental health problems in people with a learning disability is double that of the general population (Mencap 2016). A danger for this group of learners is that mental health difficulties are dismissed as an inevitable consequence of wider learning difficulties and/or disabilities. For example, the assumption is made that 'anxiety is just a symptom of autism' and so no specific interventions are sought and learners' SEMH needs are unidentified and/or unmet.

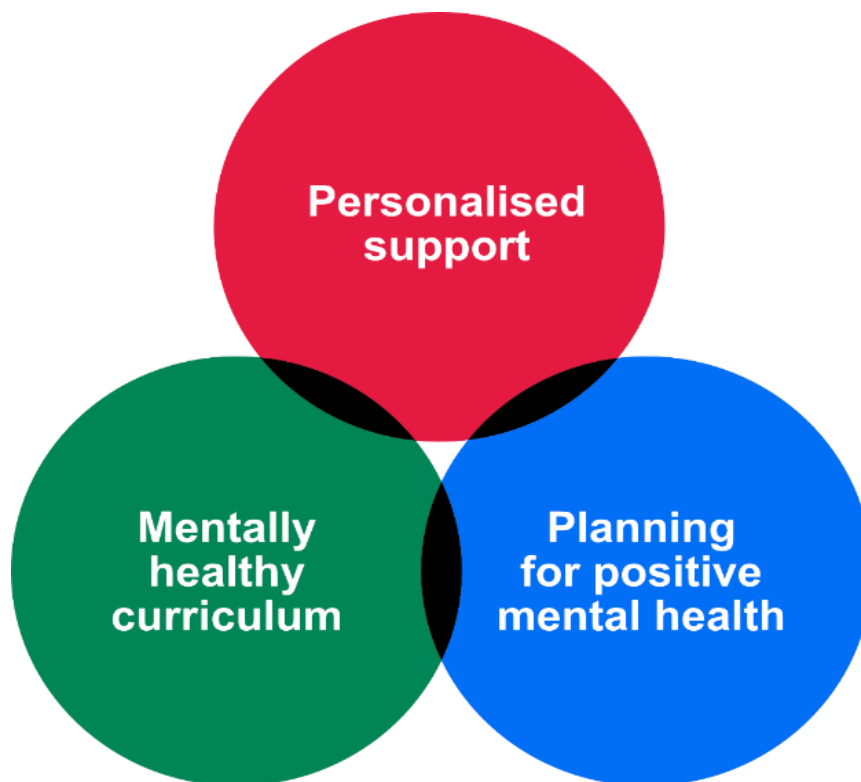
Other reasons why FE and skills learners may have unmet SEMH needs is that they can be navigating moves from children to adult services that result in delays and changes in accessing assessments and interventions. It can also be the case that SEMH difficulties are recognised but not deemed to meet thresholds for clinical referrals to Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). Evidence suggests that unmet SEMH needs result in poor attendance, engagement, challenging behaviour and low attainment (ONS 2022).

SEMH difficulties compound difficulties in learning, however there are a wide range of measures FE and skills settings can put in place to support learners and improve outcomes. This resource is not a replacement for the clinical interventions that some learners will require but is instead, a

guide for practitioners and managers on ways learners can be supported to manage SEMH challenges and succeed in FE and skills.

The guidance is applicable to all FE and skills settings working with learners who have learning difficulties and disabilities. Additionally, some of the content will also be applicable to enhancing the FE and skills experiences of non-disabled learners and staff as in general, policies and practice put in place to meet the needs of learners with the most complex SEND have wider advantages. For example, having a skilled and well-informed workforce working in environments where people feel safe benefits everyone.

This guidance draws on examples of practice from specialist FE colleges who are providers established solely to meet the needs of learners with SEND. It is divided into three broad sections, that while not mutually exclusive, offer a useful framework focusing on person-centred approaches, how the curriculum and extra-curricular activities can be used, and how settings can plan more broadly to support learners' SEMH needs.



SECTION 1: PERSONALISED SUPPORT

Person-centred practice is at the heart of legislative, policy and education inspectorate frameworks for learners with SEND and the importance of understanding individuals' specific needs and responding to them is a decisive factor for success in FE and skills.

Cornerstones of effective personalised support are having an up to date understanding of learners' needs and ensuring that personalised information is readily accessible so that approaches can be implemented effectively and consistently.

Ensuring learners' communication needs are met is key. Most learners with SEND benefit from the same information being communicated in multiple ways. Using signs (e.g. [Makaton](#)), symbols or objects of reference to reinforce spoken words increases opportunities for learners to understand situations and will be particularly beneficial for learners with sensory processing differences.

Learners who find transitions and changes between activities anxiety-inducing will benefit from personalised and accessible information about current activities and what is coming up that will help them prepare. See below examples of communication tools and how simple technology such as timers to countdown to the end of one activity and the start of another or 'Now and Next' boards can be used. Improving the ways learners are supported to understand their environments and any expectations of them increases their ability to anticipate circumstances and feel a sense of control and wellbeing.

Communication tools

Tools such as **objects of reference**, **now and next boards**, **social stories** and **talking mats** support learners' understanding of what is happening around them. They can also support learner understanding of changes to routines and so reduce anxieties associated with change and disruption. Assistive Technology can also play a key role in supporting learners to express themselves, receive, access and collect information.

Objects of reference are objects used with a person to represent people, places, objects and activities. They are designed to augment the spoken word. For example, we may use a cup to reinforce asking someone if they would like a cup of coffee. Ideally, the same object should be used to represent the same things on different occasions (e.g. using the same cup), they should be presented immediately before the object, place, person, event or activity it represents, presented in the same manner on each occasion and used on every relevant occasion (Bell 2013).

Some learners benefit from personalised technology such as simplified calendars on phones or tablets. [Handi Calendar](#) is one example of this. Another example is [Brain In Hand](#) which enables mood tracking and could help identify times or places which cause escalations in anxiety.

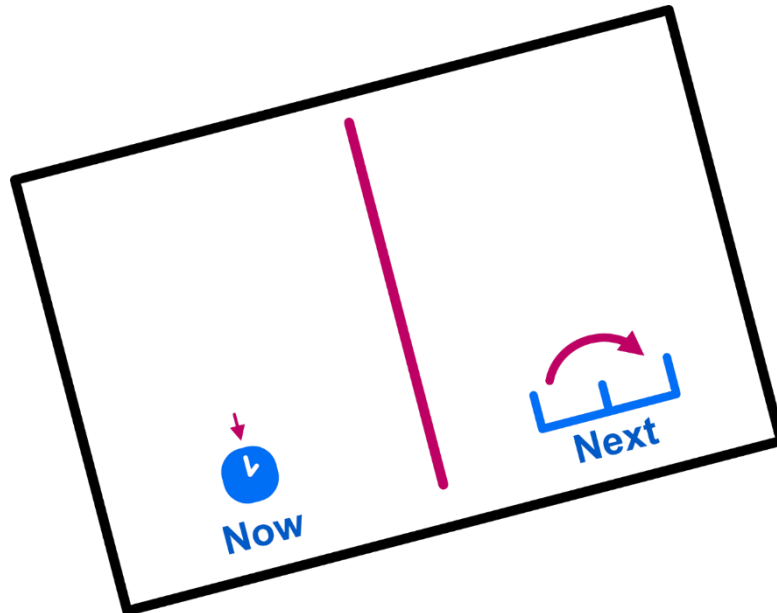
If learners use Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) such as communication books or digital devices, ensuring that key words like "help", "good", "bad", "stop" are quickly and easily accessible as part of a [Core Words](#) approach will support learners ability to communicate effectively at times of anxiety.

Alternatively, printed core words or charts can be carried by staff, for example on lanyards or placed on walls in key areas.

A [MEMO Dayboard](#) on display for learners can be used to show a visual display in a simplified,

linear fashion of the day's structure and ties between activities.

Now and Next Boards are very simple visual aids, typically divided into a left-hand side entitled 'Now' and a right hand side entitled 'Next' to which pictures, symbols or text can be added to explain what is currently happening and what is coming up next.



Social Stories share information in accessible and personalised ways. They are written according to [social story criteria](#) and aim to diminish anxiety through providing clarity and establishing predictability. The National Autistic Society provide [training on writing social stories](#).

Talking Mats are used to support conversations with people with communication difficulties. They use visual representations, which can be placed on a physical mat or selected on a digital device. As Talking Mats do not necessarily require the individual to communicate verbally, they can be useful in supporting sensitive conversations.

Talking Mats can be a helpful thinking tool to support learners with understanding options, and as an expressive tool for exploring more complex topics e.g. how someone feels they are managing different elements of their daily lives, what is going well, what they are worried about or what they need.

What happens in one talking mat conversation can be used to inform further discussions on further talking mats. For example, a talking mat could lead to learners identify strategies others can use to support their mental health and engagement.

Talking mats can be used proactively for regular check-ins and can also be used reactively to understand issues of concern. Staff using talking mats should be trained to use them to ensure the options presented are appropriate and that adequate processing time is given. For more information and guidance using talking mats in education visit www.talkingmats.com.

Managing transitions within settings

Anxieties that can be experienced in daily transitions such as when moving between from the comparative safety of a familiar room to navigating lunch and breaktimes can be reduced for learners who experience them by:

- Transition cues. This can be as simple as a verbal reminder but other learners with more complex needs may benefit from the use of 'Now and Next Boards' or using large sand timers or countdown functions on mobile phones.
- Personalised and accessible timetables.
- Communication notice boards.
- Objects of reference and job lists.
- Using social stories or talking mats to prepare learners for unanticipated last minute changes.
- Using role play to deal with anticipated changes to routines such as fire alarms.
- Involving learners in conversations and decision making about what is happening around them.

Other personalised information such as understanding and providing the right processing time a learner needs can be critical to providing effective learning environments. Different learners need different amounts of processing time that in turn may be context specific. For example, more processing time may be needed when in an unfamiliar or noisy environment. For some learners with SEMH needs, not being given adequate processing time will result in them feeling overwhelmed leading to disengagement, escalations in anxiety and potentially challenging behaviour. The National Autistic Society have made a [short film highlighting sensory overloads associated with not having adequate processing time](#).

All behaviour has meaning and often for learners with SEND, understanding reasons for behaviour will require time spent speaking with learners themselves, familiar staff and others who know them well to build an informed picture of triggers and the kind of support strategies learners need.

When experiencing overloads, learners with SEMH needs will often have their own personal self-regulating strategies developed to manage emotions. For example, stimming, a term short for self-stimulating behaviour helps individuals manage emotions like anxiety, anger, fear and excitement. This could include using fidget toys or personal items that provide reassurance and comfort. Some learners' stimming behaviour may be physical such as flapping their hands or rocking back and forth. For some learners, being unable to stim may cause significant distress.

Personalised support information should be collated and shared in appropriate documents such as personalised [one page profiles](#) or [communication passports](#).

For learners with more complex needs, a **behaviour support plan** informed by a breadth of relevant people can be highly effective in supporting learners SEMH needs and improving engagement in learning.

Behaviour support planning

A behaviour support plan should provide information on the environments and strategies learners need to feel calm (called proactive strategies) as well as detail on the circumstances when it may be appropriate to intervene to prevent escalations that may result in learner distress (called reactive strategies). To be effective, behaviour support plans should be working documents that can be adjusted in response to changes in circumstances and new information.

Example of a Behaviour Support Plan

Key information	e.g. name communication needs and preferences likes and dislikes that may affect behaviour [e.g. likes learning through doing; Dislikes busy places and being presented with multiple choices] known triggers [e.g. sensory overload in busy and noisy environments] personal regulation strategies
Proactive strategies	e.g. be familiar with triggers and personal regulation strategies allow processing time of at least xx seconds keep language simple reinforce spoken language with objects of reference ensure changes to routines are explained and understood (e.g. use social stories to explain staff changes)
Reactive strategies	e.g. withdraw the learner from the triggering situation or take away the trigger provide access to regulating tools and environments talk in a calm voice be aware of your own body language

It is important that staff responsible for behaviour support planning are appropriately trained and that plans are used to support learners SEMH needs and not simply as a tool for rewarding behaviour deemed to be positive. The [British Institute for Learning Disability \(BILD\) offer training](#) on Positive Behaviour Support and a guide on [what does good PBS looks like](#).

Understanding how your own behaviour impacts others is an important aspect of effective support for learners with SEND. For example, learners with sensory processing difficulties may be overwhelmed by loud voices, strong perfumes or highly patterned and colourful clothing.

All learners, regardless of the challenges they face will benefit most from the support of mentally healthy staff. For guidance on taking care of your own wellbeing see [Starting with you](#), a resource in this series, along with [Psychological Safety in Further Education Settings](#) and [looking after yourself and supporting colleagues while supporting learners – secondary trauma](#).

SECTION 2: A MENTALLY HEALTHY CURRICULUM

Both the curriculum and extra-curricular activities are effective vehicles to support learners SEMH needs. Many learners with SEND will have personal targets or goals within their programmes of study, e.g. the development of social and communication skills which will contribute to improved mental health. Additionally, using dedicated timetabled sessions to build self-awareness and resilience alongside facilitating access to extracurricular clubs and groups can all support overall wellbeing and mental health.

Examples include:

- Dedicated personal wellbeing sessions within timetables used to build understanding of how to recognise feelings and connections between different triggers and emotions ([see the example from St John's college below](#)).
- Building into teaching sessions a focus on understanding how to use apps to manage mental health. A Children's and Adolescents Mental Health Services (CAMHS) professional has built a repository for a [collection of apps aimed at supporting young people's mental health](#). They include apps on meditation, coping with anxiety, low mood and depression.
- Using the [zones of regulation framework](#) outlined below to allow learners to identify their emotional states, provide in the moment feedback and self-regulate.
- Engaging learners in activities or specific projects aimed at garnering the learner voice and lived experiences of FE ([see the example from Derwen College below](#)).
- Using proactive regulation approaches such as short mindfulness sessions at the start and/or end of classes or doing simple puzzles and problem-solving activities.
- Finding opportunities for outdoor learning. [Forest School](#) is a way of working in an outdoor natural space for extended periods of time that is increasingly being adopted by FE and skills communities in recognition of how learning outdoors can provide calm and relaxing spaces to build confidence, communication and life skills.
- Facilitating access to physical exercise opportunities such as sports clubs and /or lower impact exercise including yoga, Tai Chi or relaxation sessions.

Zones of regulation

The goal of the [Zones of Regulation](#) is to support individuals to recognise when they are feeling less regulated and to be proactive in avoiding overloads. They encourage self-awareness of feelings, energy and alertness levels. The zones are represented by four colours. The Blue Zone is used to describe a low state of alertness, the Green Zone represents an ideal state, Yellow, a heightened state and Red represents an extremely heightened state of alertness. Learners can be supported to recognise when they feel each zone and to identify tools they can use to either stay in a zone or move to another.

Staff talking about the zone they feel they are in at any one time alongside recognising that all the zones have a place and that we may feel like we are in more than zone at any one time (e.g. Blue & Yellow) will encourage learner engagement. Some learners and particularly those with communication difficulties will benefit from accessible representations of the zones as cards, on lanyards or on communication devices.

			
<p>Sad Tired Sick Bored</p>	<p>Happy Calm Feeling OK Ready to Learn</p>	<p>Frustrated Worried Silly Excited</p>	<p>Angry Terrified Yelling Hitting</p>

St John's College's wellbeing and relaxation groups

Wellbeing therapy groups

Groups of learners from tutor groups or who have similar therapeutic needs, meet once a week for a 60-minute timetabled session that focuses on ways to promote problem solving and peer to peer interactions. Topics covered include emotional regulation and understanding information we receive from our 5 senses as well as discussing interoception (understanding what is going on in your own body), proprioception (understanding how your body is orientated), and vestibular awareness (balance and body control).

Learners are supported to understand and label emotions and identify related physical body sensations. The group discusses recognising bodily sensations, how they feel and how that understanding can help us manage situations e.g. recognising that feeling very excited has a similar bodily sensation to feeling very anxious.

Relaxation lunch club

Learners can choose to spend time during lunch breaks in a drop in relaxation club where low lighting, relaxing music and a range of different sensory items can be used. The Club offers a calm and safe space away from busy the lunch spaces and teaching rooms.

Derwen College's Safer Places project

The College Student Union led a piece of research called the safer places project which resulted in the senior management team understanding how different areas of the campus made learners feel. The project commenced as a piece of work undertaken within timetabled Students' Union sessions and explored the concept of 'feeling safe'. Participants then developed a research model that was rolled out across the college. Work commenced with members of the Council being asked to draw circles around images of people feeling safe, and around activities people may do if they are feeling safe. A 'click and drag' activity was then produced using PowerPoint for learners to drag different coloured arrows to different areas in photos to represent how those spaces made them feel.

The following week the exercise was repeated through physically walking the campus and recording feelings on an iPad. Learners said it was easier to comment about different spaces when they were in them. Interestingly, this aspect of the research flagged that the importance of the routes taken to different spaces were of as much relevance as how learners felt when physically in specific spaces.

The next step was to take photos of different spaces and make comments about areas where they felt particularly safe and why.

The Students' Union representatives then used their networks and gained the support they needed from staff to encourage the involvement more learners in the research. They were upskilled by learning relevant Makaton signs to ensure they could communicate with all learners, so no-one was excluded from contributing.

Findings were collated into a PowerPoint presentation and a visual map of safe places were presented to the college's Director of Estates.

Staff across the college were then able to use the data to inform their planning for groups and individual learners.

SECTION 3: PLANNING FOR POSITIVE MENTAL HEALTH

Underpinning all support approaches is the requirement to plan for having suitability trained staff with the workload capacity to be able to respond to learners SEMH needs. FE and skills providers can also plan for how physical spaces can be adapted to be more sympathetic to learners with SEMH needs. For example, some learners experience sensory overloads from lighting and acoustics that cause distress and even physical pain. It follows that soft lighting and window blinds to manage strong sunlight and sound dampening measures can have a significant impact on learners' wellbeing and their ability to learn. The National Autistic Society has an [accessible environments resource](#) explaining how excessive noises, smells, crowds, queues and temperatures can have an adverse effect on people with sensory differences. [Safe places](#) can provide learners with physical areas they can withdraw to when feeling overloaded. Alternatively, some providers identify specific areas often in corners of teaching rooms, where they may put a comfy chair or beanbag where learners who need to, can go to self-regulate.

FE and skills providers are increasingly exploring how trauma informed practice, an approach that originated in health and care services, can be applied to their contexts. According to its originators, (Harris & Falot 2001), being trauma informed means providing places where people can feel safe, develop trusting relationships, feel listened to, collaborate with others and be empowered. While not all learners with SEMH needs will have experienced trauma, the kind of environments trauma informed settings seek to create will offer the nurturing spaces they require. [Two FE colleges have recorded their journey to embedding trauma informed practice](#). A notable modification to their approach was a change of emphasis in their behavioural policy, moving away from punitive action, to seeking to understand **why** learners were behaving the way they are.

The transition to FE and skills settings for learners with SEMH challenges can be a precarious time requiring timely and person-centred planning for successful learner retention. See the example from Aurora Boveridge College below on how their tailored admissions process allows learners to influence the pace at which they commence their programmes.

Listening to the learner voice by spending time talking and consulting with learners with SEND to further your understanding of what they want and need to be successful in your settings will be a valuable resource allowing you to tailor your approaches in response to identified needs. It may be that your Student Union or other student representative groups can support you furthering your understanding of the learner experience in your settings ([see the example from Derwen College in section 2](#)).

Should learners want to speak with staff about their SEMH needs it should be clear who they can speak with. Some providers assign personal tutors to take on pastoral and advocacy roles while others adopt 'no wrong door' approaches and encourage learners to speak to any member of staff they feel comfortable with. Whatever your approach, the most important aspect is that learners with SEND can easily access and understand the support arrangements available to them and that they feel listened to and understood.

Aurora Boveridge College's tailored admission process

New learners and their families are supported to engage in and influence the process of transitioning into college to help them feel in control and support safe and successful transitions. This focused and structured approach allows staff to develop their understanding of the learner's history, what has worked well in the past and current and anticipated support needs. The stages outlined below are not prescriptive and are adapted in response to the needs and preferences of learners and their families.

At **stage one** the education and support teams assess applications or referrals to decide if they are able to meet the learners needs and progress to stage two or:

- The application is refused and reasons why explained.
- More information is needed to assess if the learner's needs can be met.

Stage two involves arranging taster visits that will familiarise learners with the college environment and routines. The visits also allow staff to confirm support needs, get to know learners and start to build trust. At the end of stage two, the aim is that learners should feel safe and confident. If a place has not already been offered, an offer could be made to the young person.

Taster days include:

- A meeting at the start of the day and at the end of the day with the learner's parent or carer. In the morning they are introduced to the individual support available and curriculum and resources. At the end of the day feedback is shared from all parties on their experience during the day.
- A personalised timetable that includes sessions for the day, meeting peer mentors, tours of the site including key support locations, i.e. quiet spaces, location of key staff.
- Supporting staff commence assessing the learner's baselines across subject areas, identify any potential issues of concern and start to collate information for the learner's personal support strategy document.
- The identification of any staff training needs that may be required to meet learner's needs.

Stage three involves refining and sharing initial strategies and confirming any staff development needs. It also includes a preadmission meeting with the learner and their parent or carer to confirm the curriculum offer and learning pathway. This meeting also includes the opportunity for learners and their parent or carer to ask any questions and the opportunity for a phased transition that could mean the learner slowly integrating into the college over a period of weeks, slowly building up to their full timetable

The Orpheus Centre's Keep Calm Kit

In general terms, the more providers can do to normalise meeting learners' SEMH needs and demonstrate that mental health needs are something we all have to a lesser or greater extent, then the more included and accepted SEND learners will be.

To support learners' abilities to manage and recognise their emotions, Keep Calm kits are given out to all learners on enrolment day. They include fidget toys for learners to self-regulate and cards demonstrating calming breathing exercises that can be done when feeling anxious. The kits also contain 'mind dump sheets' that learners are encouraged to complete if they feel stressed. They are asked to record what is bothering them, how they feel, what they think would help them to feel better. The sheets also encourage positive thinking by asking learners to record something that they are looking forward to. The completed sheets are then discussed with staff and any actions are agreed.

The kits also come with a kindness coupon that learners are encouraged to pass on to another learner in recognition of the acts of kindness.

NATSPEC CENTRE FOR EXCELLENCE IN SEND

This resource has been produced by [Natspec](#), the membership association for providers of specialist further education for young people with learning difficulties and disabilities.

As part of a Department for Education funded programme, Natspec is one of four national [Centres for Excellence in Special Educational Needs and Disabilities](#) (CfESEND). Each provides expert support for FE and skills leaders, managers and practitioners to help them put learners with SEND at the centre of their organisation.

The aim is to place inclusion right at the centre of further education so that difference is valued, and all learners fulfil their aspirations. The primary focus is on supporting staff in FE and skills who work with young people with complex needs in a wide variety of FE settings through sharing specialist knowledge, skills, and experience, through live sessions, communities of practice and provider reviews.

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Thank you

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