



Coping with disruptive pupils

This factsheet outlines how to understand the behavior of disruptive pupils and how school social workers can help.

If you've just survived yet another disrupted class or had to deal with the same group of persistently abusive pupils, you may be feeling professional frustration at the detrimental effects of this on the rest of the class as well as concern for your own health and wellbeing. In the worst-case scenario you may even be considering leaving the profession.

Understanding your pupils

It can be difficult to empathize with your pupils in this sort of situation, but when you have a breathing space, try to consider their behavior dispassionately. Some of the children in your class may live in chaotic and disadvantaged circumstances, causing them to feel vulnerable and unable to cope, and they may respond with aggression.

For instance, 11-year-old Ahmed was becoming increasingly aggressive towards other pupils. By talking him through his problems, the school found he had been bullied throughout primary school and felt aggression was his only form of defense.

As a teacher, your first thought may be that your role is to teach, not to deal with the child's psychological history or home life. Indeed, many callers to Teacher Support Line sense that they are expected to take responsibility for pupils' social education, while feeling helpless to influence the social context outside of school. You are right to look for clear boundaries to your responsibility and capability, but it may be helpful to realize that poor behavior is rarely a personal reaction to you, the teacher. You might also identify solutions your school could explore outside the classroom.

Working with support staff

In Ahmed's case, the school social worker was able to refer him to a city social worker, to talk through the issues and help Ahmed to move on. She came up with a strategy called the "Cycle of Behavior", which showed him what he would gain and lose through his behavior. He started to understand that the losses far outweighed the gains. The worker changed his self-beliefs around friendships and set him targets for improving his behavior, which he enjoyed. After two semesters of support, Ahmed's teachers commented on how much his behavior towards them and his classmates has improved.

How social workers can help

Social workers at your school can sometimes provide the counseling the student needs, and if not, they can refer the student to trained and experienced workers, who become part of the care team alongside support staff such as the special educational needs coordinators and welfare officers. These teams help build bridges between home and school, so children and young people can make the most of educational opportunities despite difficult circumstances. As one senior teacher who worked with her school social worker said,

"Schools need to deal with the baggage that children bring with them, otherwise it gets in the way of learning."

If your school does not have a social worker, you can search for a qualified clinical social worker through the National Association of Social Workers by going to the following site: <http://www.socialworkers.org/register/default.asp>.

Where can I go for further support?

If you are an educator from one of the districts that have signed up to this service and you wish to speak to a qualified counselor, you can call the toll free Educator Support Line on 1-877-876-4327.