

Children's Mental Health

Parent Carer Guide to Mental Health Support

A Parent Carer's Guide to Supporting Childrens Mental Health



As parent carers, we often become experts in many things we never expected to learn.

We learn about diagnoses, therapies, education plans, appointments, sensory needs, medications and systems. We spend hours advocating, researching and supporting our children to access the world around them.

Yet one area many families tell us they feel less confident navigating is mental health.

How do you know if your child is struggling emotionally?
When is behaviour simply behaviour, and when might it be a sign of something more?

How do you support a child who cannot always explain how they are feeling?

And what happens when your child's mental health starts affecting the whole family?

The truth is that mental health can be complicated for any child, but for children with additional needs and disabilities it can be even harder to recognise and understand.

Many children communicate their distress through behaviour rather than words. Others may mask their difficulties at school and unravel at home. Some may appear angry when they are actually anxious. Others may seem withdrawn when they are overwhelmed.

This guide is designed to help parent carers understand children's mental health, recognise signs that a child may be struggling, and develop practical ways to support emotional wellbeing.

Most importantly, we want you to know that if you are worried about your child, you are not alone.



Understanding Mental Health

Mental health affects how we think, feel, behave and interact with the world around us.

Everyone has mental health, just as everyone has physical health. Mental health can be positive and healthy, or it can become more challenging during difficult periods of life.

Children experience a wide range of emotions, including:

- Happiness
- Excitement
- Frustration
- Sadness
- Fear
- Anger
- Worry
- Disappointment



Experiencing these emotions is completely normal.

Mental health difficulties occur when emotions become overwhelming, persistent, or begin to impact a child's daily life, relationships, learning or ability to enjoy things they once enjoyed.

Mental health exists on a spectrum and can change over time. Children can move between periods of coping well and periods where they need additional support.

Mental Health and SEND

Children with SEND are more likely to experience mental health difficulties than their peers.

This is not because there is something wrong with them.

It is often because they are navigating a world that was not designed with their needs in mind.

Many children experience:

- Feeling different from their peers
- Sensory overload
- Difficulties communicating their needs
- Social isolation
- Bullying
- Exclusion from activities
- Constant demands to fit into environments that feel overwhelming
- Repeated experiences of being misunderstood

Over time, these experiences can have a significant impact on emotional wellbeing.

Many children spend their days trying to cope, fit in, mask their difficulties and meet expectations.

That takes an enormous amount of energy.

Sometimes what we see as behaviour is actually exhaustion.

Sometimes what looks like defiance is fear.

Sometimes what looks like laziness is overwhelm.

Understanding the reason behind the behaviour is often the first step towards helping.

SEMH

SEMH stands for Social, Emotional and Mental Health. It refers to a type of Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) experienced by children and young people who have significant difficulties managing their emotions, behaviour, and mental well-being. These difficulties can manifest in various ways, including:

- Disruptive, antisocial and uncooperative behaviour
- Temper tantrums
- Frustration, anger and verbal and physical threats / aggression
- Withdrawn and depressed attitudes
- Anxiety and self-harm
- Stealing
- Truancy
- Vandalism
- Drug abuse
- Setting fires

Social:

Social interaction is fundamental for children. Challenges in communication or attachment can make relationships difficult, impacting wellbeing and development. Equipping children with social skills and opportunities is essential for them to reach their potential. How can we achieve this?

Emotional:

This covers a wide range, including emotional regulation, understanding feelings, stress management, and resilience. The Mental Health Continuum (below) is a helpful tool. Often, supporting a child's emotional wellbeing involves empathetic listening and emotional coaching – simply being a good human can make a big difference.

Mental Health:

When discussing mental health within SEMH, we're often referring to diagnosable conditions or symptoms requiring professional intervention. These can manifest as irrational fears, obsessions, intrusive thoughts, and safety behaviours linked to how someone processes the world.

For example, anxiety might cause a child to misinterpret everyday situations as dangerous, and low self-esteem can hinder social interactions and learning. While normal reactions to adversity reflect emotional wellbeing, such periods can alter beliefs and potentially lead to mental health conditions later. Our thoughts, feelings, and interactions are interconnected, constantly influencing each other and impacting both our mental and social health.

Key Facts:

Social, Emotional, and Mental Health Difficulties (SEMH) are a type of SEND:

- SEMH is one of the four areas of SEND, alongside communication and interaction, cognition and learning, and physical and sensory needs.

It's not a single diagnosis:

- SEMH can be caused by a range of factors, including mental health conditions like anxiety or depression, behavioural issues, or difficulties in forming relationships.

It can affect a child's ability to learn:

- SEMH needs can make it difficult for children to engage in learning, cope with classroom demands, and form positive relationships with peers and teachers.

It's a spectrum:

- The severity of SEMH can vary greatly, with some children experiencing mild difficulties while others have more significant challenges.

[For more key information on SEMH here:](#)



Signs Your Child May Be Struggling

Every child expresses distress differently.
Some children become louder, others become quieter.
Some seek connection, others push people away.

Some common signs include:

Physical Signs

- Headaches
- Stomach aches
- Poor sleep
- Changes in appetite
- Fatigue
- Frequent illnesses

Emotional Signs

- Increased worry
- Tearfulness
- Low mood
- Irritability
- Frequent emotional outbursts
- Low self-esteem
- Increased sensitivity

Behavioural Signs

- School avoidance
- Increased meltdowns
- Aggression
- Withdrawal
- Loss of interest in favourite activities
- Avoiding friends
- Refusing previously manageable situations

Signs Often Seen in SEND Children

- Increased sensory sensitivities
- Regression in skills
- Increased masking
- More shutdowns
- Increased need for reassurance
- Greater difficulty coping with changes

The most important thing to notice is change.

Ask yourself:

"What has changed for my child recently?"

Anxiety in Children

Anxiety is one of the most common mental health difficulties experienced by children.

Anxiety is not simply worrying.

It is the body's alarm system activating to protect us from danger.

The problem is that sometimes the alarm system becomes overprotective.

Children may experience:

- Constant worry
- Fear of making mistakes
- Physical symptoms
- Avoidance
- Panic
- Difficulty sleeping
- Perfectionism



For many SEND children anxiety can look like:

- Refusing school
- Emotional outbursts
- Needing constant reassurance
- Sensory overwhelm
- Extreme distress around change

Remember:

Anxiety is not attention-seeking.

It is a sign that a child feels unsafe, uncertain or overwhelmed.

Behaviour as Communication

Children often communicate distress through behaviour long before they have the words to explain it.

Behaviour is communication.

Rather than asking:

"How do I stop this behaviour?"

Try asking:

"What is this behaviour telling me?"

Behaviour	Possible Message
Refusing school	"I don't feel safe there."
Aggression	"I'm overwhelmed."
Withdrawal	"I don't have the energy to cope."
Clinginess	"I need reassurance."
Meltdowns	"My nervous system is overloaded."
Avoidance	"This feels too difficult."

Looking beneath behaviour often provides valuable clues about what support is needed.

Demand Avoidance and Mental Health

Some children experience significant distress when faced with everyday demands.

This may include:

- Getting dressed
- Attending school
- Completing homework
- Following instructions
- Transitioning between activities

For some children, demands trigger anxiety and a perceived loss of control.

Their response may include:

- Refusal
- Negotiation
- Distraction
- Avoidance
- Emotional outbursts

It can be easy to assume these behaviours are deliberate. However, for many children the behaviour is rooted in anxiety rather than opposition.

Understanding the difference can change the way support is offered.

Meltdowns, Shutdowns and Burnout

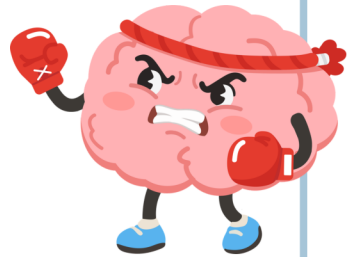
When a child's nervous system becomes overwhelmed, distress can present in different ways.

Meltdowns

Meltdowns often involve an outward expression of overwhelm.

This may include:

- Crying
- Shouting
- Aggression
- Throwing objects
- Running away
- Loss of emotional control



Meltdowns are not tantrums.

A tantrum is generally goal-directed and stops when the goal is achieved. A meltdown is the result of a nervous system becoming overloaded.

The child is not choosing it.

They are struggling to cope.

Shutdowns

Some children respond differently.

Instead of becoming louder, they become quieter.

They may:

- Withdraw
- Stop speaking
- Hide
- Appear disconnected
- Struggle to respond

Shutdowns can be just as distressing as meltdowns but are often overlooked because they appear less disruptive.

Meltdowns, Shutdowns and Burnout

Burnout

When stress, demands and overwhelm continue for long periods, some children experience burnout.

Burnout can look like:

- Extreme exhaustion
- Increased anxiety
- Reduced tolerance for demands
- Loss of previously developed skills
- Increased emotional distress
- School avoidance



Burnout is not laziness.

It is often the result of a child operating beyond their capacity for too long.

Supporting Emotional Regulation

Children cannot regulate emotions alone.

Emotional regulation develops through relationships.

Before children can self-regulate, they need co-regulation.

Co-regulation means borrowing the calm of a trusted adult.

Helpful strategies include:

- Remaining calm where possible
- Reducing demands during distress
- Using simple language
- Offering reassurance
- Creating predictable routines
- Using visual supports
- Providing sensory regulation opportunities

Children learn emotional regulation through repeated experiences of feeling safe.

Building Emotional Literacy

Children cannot communicate feelings they do not understand.
Helping children recognise emotions can improve emotional wellbeing.

Try:

- Talking openly about feelings
- Using emotion cards
- Modelling your own emotions
- Naming emotions without judgement

For example:

"You seem frustrated."

"It's okay to feel angry."

The goal is not to remove emotions.

The goal is to understand them

Protective Factors for Good Mental Health

Protective factors are things that help children cope with challenges and build resilience.

These include:

- Safe relationships
- Feeling accepted
- Opportunities for success
- Consistent routines
- Being listened to
- Having a sense of belonging
- Access to interests and hobbies
- Feeling understood
- Positive self-esteem



Small positive experiences repeated over time can have a powerful impact.

When Should I Seek Help?

Consider seeking support if:

- Difficulties persist for several weeks
- Symptoms worsen over time
- School attendance is affected
- Friendships are impacted
- Family life becomes significantly difficult
- Your child talks about self-harm or suicide
- You are increasingly concerned

You know your child better than anyone else.

Trust your instincts.

Seeking support early is never a failure.

It is a strength.

Looking After Yourself

Children do not need perfect parents. They need supported parents.

Many parent carers carry enormous amounts of responsibility while trying to manage their own emotions, worries and exhaustion. Supporting a child with emotional difficulties can be incredibly demanding.

You may feel:

- Guilty
- Helpless
- Frustrated
- Isolated
- Burnt out



These feelings are normal.

You cannot support someone else from an empty tank.

Looking after yourself is not taking away from your child.

It is investing in the relationship you have with them.

There are many organisations that offer support for children and young people with mental health needs, including:

Childline

- Free confidential support for children and young people by calling 0800 1111



YoungMinds

- Free confidential support for children and young people up to age 25 by calling 0808 802 5544 or emailing parents@youngminds.org.uk



Papyrus

- Confidential advice and support for young people who feel like they want to take their own life



Kooth

- Support and advice for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and mental health issues



Orli

- We're building a groundbreaking digital platform that empowers families to navigate anxiety, school avoidance and emotional challenges with tools that regulate emotions, bring you closer your child and offer clarity on next steps.



Your Child, Your Choice

Because one size doesn't fit all

Find our
website here:

