

Practical Tips for Teachers in the Classroom

Supporting children with mental health needs across seven conditions

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ADHD

- **Space:** find a space with the child that helps reduce sensory overload. Ask them what would work and create it together so they feel ownership of it.
- **Movement:** use whole-class movement breaks — such as Go Noodle ([gonoodle.com](https://www.gonoodle.com)) or Joe Wicks 5-minute moves — so as not to single out the child who needs to move. Agree monitor jobs with all children and ensure the child who may need to move has a job you can initiate when needed. Create a brain break schedule as part of their timetable, with a brain break box of carefully chosen resources.
- **Information chunking:** use visual timetables, task management boards, now-and-next boards, charts and timers to break large pieces of information into manageable chunks.
- **Strengths and targets:** build meaningful relationships to identify strengths and create targets together with the child. Ask how they enjoy learning and plan to engage them through a variety of methods.
- **Organisation:** share the timetable (including visual timetable) with the family so the child has support in remembering what to bring each day. Keep locker or peg areas calm and use small groups at a time. Use online platforms to support home learning where possible.
- **Notice and praise:** notice triggers and early warning signs and adapt your teaching accordingly. Make praise specific, repeat it to ensure it has been heard, and check it has been understood. Teach self-regulation by encouraging the child to notice their own feelings and the choices available to them. Use a pre-agreed signal (such as a card they turn over) when they need time out. Mindfulness breathing techniques — 5-finger breathing, petal breath, or a glitter bottle — can help in the moment.

Anxiety

- **Respond in the moment:** offer support at the time the child is feeling anxious. Let the child lead your response. Use mindfulness techniques such as breathwork, mindful colouring, or meditation as appropriate.
- **Create a calming corner or box together:** ask rather than assume what the child will find calming. Invite them to bring something from home — a photograph, a cushion — that triggers relaxation. Replicate this at home where possible, so the child feels supported everywhere. Familiarity with the process and the contents is key.
- **Managing anxiety through routine:** share the day's timetable verbally and visually at the start of each day. If changes occur, give as much notice as possible, update the visual timetable with the child, and explain why. This builds trust and helps the child learn to live with change.
- **Check-in board:** use a class check-in board where children can move their name tag to indicate whether they are fine, a little worried but can manage, or need to talk now. Check it regularly and respond appropriately.
- **Worry monsters:** these help a child talk through a worry with a trusted adult. The monster devours the worry as the child develops their own strategies to move forward.
- **Develop self-regulation:** rather than constantly reassuring, coach the child to notice, reflect, and act for themselves. Help them name their feelings using a feelings wheel (Gottman Institute). Once they can name an emotion and locate it in their body, they can begin to regulate it.

Autistic Spectrum Condition

- **Relationship building is key:** develop trust by finding out what the child likes and dislikes about the school day. Ask them to share their wishes and feelings and show them you are taking their ideas on board. This helps you predict difficult situations before they escalate.
- **Clarity in the what and how of learning:** make both the learning objective and success criteria explicit. This helps the child know if they are on the right track at each step. Breaking instructions into smaller achievable tasks reduces anxiety, avoids misunderstandings, and builds confidence.
- **Create a safe space:** work with the child to find a space — a corner of the classroom, a corridor outside, a tent or beanbag area — where they can go when things become too much. Add resources that will trigger a calming response: pictures of a favourite character or animal, a familiar toy or cushion. Encourage ownership by creating it together.
- **Pupil passport:** develop an individual plan together with the child and their parents. Include agreed strategies for times of crisis (such as a signal when they feel overwhelmed), as well as the child's interests, likes and dislikes, and resources that help them learn effectively.
- **Communication:** share all of this information with every adult working with the child — including supply teachers and midday supervisors. Ensure plans are in place for the child to access their safe space during unstructured parts of the day.

OCD

- **Emotion coaching:** emotion coaching helps children become more aware of their emotions and manage their own feelings, particularly when they are unable to self-regulate. Dysregulation can lead to increased anxiety and increased compulsive behaviours. The steps are: trigger a calm response (a favourite toy, picture, adult or place); help the child recognise and name their feelings (the feelings wheel is useful here); validate the emotion; set clear limits where needed; and problem-solve together. (emotioncoachinguk.com)
- **Positive relationships:** take time to build a trusting relationship with the child so you can understand the meaning behind the behaviour. Ask what is triggering it and seek to look beyond the behaviour itself. Use break or lunchtimes for relaxed, informal conversation — mindful colouring or a walk outside can create safe conditions for talking.
- **Communication with others:** involve the family to find out what strategies work at home. Consistent, joined-up support helps the child feel safer and more cared for.

Depressive Symptoms

- **Talking feelings:** some children — especially younger ones — find it hard to link feelings to a specific situation. They may know they feel unhappy but not know why. Create the right conditions for talking: through drawing, mindful colouring, or play with small world resources.
- **Check in, check up, check out:** use a whole-class feelings board so children can indicate how they are feeling as they arrive. Check in with the child in the morning, check up midway through the day, and check out before they leave. You may notice patterns that help you support them better. Delegate this to your TA or SENCo when needed — share concerns and strategies clearly so observations can continue even when you are teaching the whole class.
- **Watch the child:** observe them in context. Find the right seating arrangement by discussing it with the child rather than assuming — sitting at the front may be the last thing they want.
- **Prepare and plan:** create an individual support plan that any adult working with the child can follow — including midday supervisors and supply teachers.
- **Buddy systems:** pair the child with a willing peer at break times. Teach the buddy how to show support and empathy, and suggest collaborative games. Check in with the buddy too — they will need support as well.

Conduct Disorder and Oppositional Defiant Disorder

- **Behaviour policy:** ensure the school behaviour policy is short, specific, and consistently applied. This gives the child with conduct difficulties a clear road map. Children showing antisocial behaviours can feel bombarded by instructions — a clear, whole-school policy that everyone adheres to reduces confusion and anxiety.
- **Words matter:** avoid labelling children as good or bad. Talk instead about pro-social and antisocial behaviours, and explain that certain behaviours are expected in any community in order for it to work. A classroom is a micro-society; children can learn to contribute to it collaboratively.
- **All behaviour is communication:** notice the behaviour and consider what is behind it or what has triggered it. There may be deeper problems in the child's life. Set high expectations and support appropriate behaviour, while also seeking to understand the cause.
- **Home/school approach:** liaise with the family regularly so that consistent approaches are shared across home and school. This helps the child understand expectations and trust the adults supporting them.
- **Emotion coaching:** use emotion coaching (see the OCD section above) to help the child become more aware of their emotions and manage their behaviour when self-regulation breaks down.

PTSD

- **Respond in the moment:** respond swiftly to a child in crisis. Breathing techniques such as petal breathing or 5-finger breathing can help bring a child back into the present and calm an anxious or panicked mind, shifting from fight/flight/freeze into a resting state.
- **Talking and listening:** many children with PTSD want to talk about their experiences but cannot always articulate how they are feeling — especially if they are young or have an additional diagnosis. Support them through drawing, mindful colouring, small world play, or playdough.
- **Social stories:** social stories present information in a literal, concrete way, helping a child understand a difficult situation unambiguously. They can also reassure the child that they are safe and that trusted adults are there to support them.
- **Consistency:** share expectations of pro-social behaviour consistently. Notice triggers, work with the child to recognise feelings that precede a crisis, and create a shared plan for all adults working with the child. Use emotion coaching to help the child return to a calm state.
- **Routines:** make each day as predictable as possible. When unexpected changes occur, share them both verbally and visually and explain why — this helps the child continue to feel safe and in control.
- **Working together:** arrange an early meeting with the SENCo and parents/carers. Use a communication book, email, or regular meetings to keep everyone updated. If trauma is ongoing, consider which outside agencies should be involved, and discuss any safeguarding concerns with your designated safeguarding lead immediately.