

BOOK REVIEWS

SUPPORTING THE EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES: A WHOLE SCHOOL APPROACH**Reviewed by Andrew Colley,**

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Supporting the emotional well-being of children and young people with learning disabilities is a timely and very well-intentioned book. It outlines a structured, three-part 'emotionally able' approach to supporting the emotional well-being of children with severe and complex learning difficulties. Each of the main chapters of the book is devoted to one of the three stages of this approach as follows: initial engagement; developing an emotionally supportive classroom; and supporting the individual child.

The inspirations for this concept are principally the work of the Belgian early years education academic Ferre Laevers, as well as John Bowlby's attachment theory, but the authors also draw on their own extensive and varied experience in a number of relevant fields including teaching in both mainstream and secondary schools, residential social work and child psychology.

The key strengths of the book include its definition of well-being from an international policy perspective, in the first chapter; and its insistence on the key and unambiguous obligation of schools to support young people's emotional needs. Having stressed this in the early chapters, the book offers a wealth of ideas and activities which the class teacher and the leadership team can use to support pupils who are emotionally vulnerable; although a few of these are presented in ways that a busy classroom teacher may find time-consuming, and possibly confusing, such as where classroom strategies are 'divided into three key areas ... each of these areas are then divided into three categories, each with three sub categories' (p. 44). However, the suggestions in chapter 2 for 'auditing the present situation' are innovative, focusing on 'what has been working well' and 'where the children

have surprised you', and the paragraph in the overview of classroom strategies on 'feeling loved' is refreshing and important.

Chapter 3, 'Supporting the individual child', is the longest and, in general, the most successful part of the book. It clearly identifies many of the reasons why a child might be emotionally distressed and includes a coherent and accessible discussion of attachment theory. By advising staff to 'imagine what a child might say' and 'imagine yourself in his shoes', it shows quite an original approach to identifying the causes of emotional distress in a non-verbal child with complex needs, and the 'how/how' approach to generating strategies would be an exciting and accessible initiative for any class team to try out. Crucially, and again, very refreshingly, the book also emphasises that 'in order to support and address the emotional needs of children ... the emotional needs of the school staff and class teams must also be supported' (p. 76).

There are templates and proformas within the book to support the teacher to adopt a structured approach. Of these, the 'individual profile of emotional well-being' is one of the more useful and accessible, employing a clear Likert-scale approach, whilst acknowledging that 'differences in scoring are not unexpected' (p. 80). However, as with all the templates and proformas in the book, it would be more useful if they were available as copiable documents in an appendix or via a download link.

The book is not without its flaws and contradictions and three of these are particularly surprising in a book so rooted in the wide practical experience of the authors. In the very first chapter, 'The background to Emotionally Able', 'IQ' is referenced when seeking to define

children with learning difficulties even though this measure has not been used in an educational context now for many years and is largely seen as unreliable. Similarly, references to 'developmental age' and 'adapted Early Years Curriculum' are not in line with current thinking, which emphasises the importance of treating a child with learning difficulties as the age they actually are. Lastly, an important, and otherwise very valid, subsection of the book on managing transitions out of class for a child who might find them emotionally challenging is undermined by what appear to be overly behaviourist suggestions such as 'blocking any opportunity to run' and 'preventing any movement in the wrong direction'.

It is also unusual, in an otherwise very contemporary book that devotes a lot of its early pages to international policies around well-being, to find hardly any references at all to key post-2015 UK policies and practices such as the statutory Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Code of Practice; Education, Health and Care plans; annual reviews; person-centred planning; or the key role of the SENCO.

Setting aside these weaknesses, this is a book that most teachers new to working with pupils with complex needs, and some more experienced ones, will find very useful. It contains some real nuggets of wisdom such as: 'Emotionally able even if learning dis-Abled' (p. xviii) and 'the first step in creating a whole school approach is to develop a shared understanding' (p. 24). Above all, it is packed full of useful strategies and suggestions and is well worth reading, if only for the final long main chapter on 'Understanding an individual child', and the postscript 'It takes a village to raise a child' which is so wise and interesting that one wonders why it wasn't placed at the beginning. ■