

The Role of a Tier One Worker

As a Tier One worker your role is three-fold:

- Offering general advice
- Identifying mental health problems early in their development
- Pursuing opportunities for mental health promotion and prevention

(You may also be helping to support specialists with their programmes for the young people and this may require you to respond in certain ways to behaviours).

Offer general advice

You should feel confident enough to offer basic general advice to young people and/or their families. This may be around basic mental health promotion or contact details for other organisations if you feel they would help.

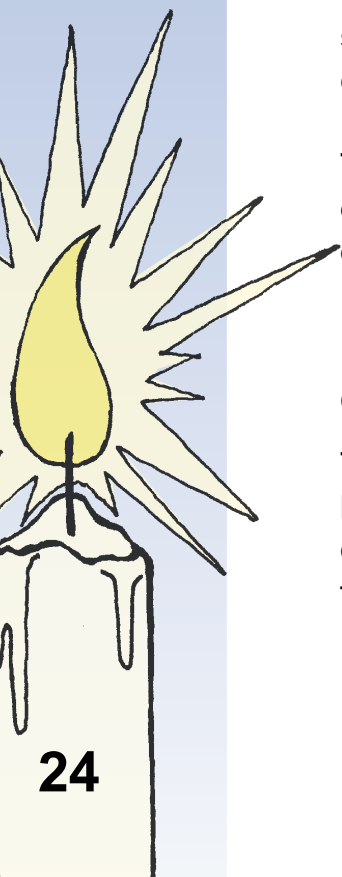
When you feel you need some support and guidance or to refer a young person for specialist support you should have the local knowledge and information to do this.

Who you should refer to will depend on local circumstances and senior staff should be able to give you details of the people you will need to contact if you need to make a referral.

There may be differences in the expectations of your role depending on your work setting and you may need to clarify these with your organisation.

Identify mental health problems early in their development

This resource will increase your skills in identifying potential mental health problems early on. You may be able to support the young people displaying these behaviours yourself or know where to refer them to if you feel this is necessary.



As a Tier One worker it is important to recognise that no one is expecting you to be an expert in learning disability, mental health and cultural and religious issues. Your role is to work in a person centred way with those you support and seek guidance when required. Any intervention with young people offering support with their mental health will be better than none.

Pursuing opportunities for mental health promotion and prevention

The best measures possible are those that seek to avoid a mental health problem before they occur. Many of these are simple to understand such as encouraging a good diet and healthy living activities such as exercise. Others will already be common to those working with young people who have a learning disability such as 'Person Centred Planning' and 'Life Story' work.

What will help you undertake your role?

Self-awareness

Anyone who has attempted to understand what is troubling a distressed but inarticulate child or young person will recognise the feelings of helplessness that can arise.

This can lead to feelings of anger and rejection in the helper, and adults may then think 'let them get on with it,' but it must be remembered that it is often a failure on the part of adults that has contributed to the development of the problem in the first place.

The first aim must be ensuring that no contact with a young person makes it less likely that they will go for help in the future – remember, they may not be ready to talk yet. Learn from your experiences as you go along, both positive and negative and respect the child's view even if an alternative adult view is presented.

Try to understand the young person

What's it like to be a child/young person these days? It will not be the same as when you were child, but you will remember enough of your childhood to know what was frightening or comforting, these things tend not to change.

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Try to understand their peer group

Potentially, friends and peers will have learning disabilities too and the kind of support they offer and interactions they have will perhaps need to be accompanied by support from you. It may be that you are the only person a young person talks to or responds to about an issue.

Try to understand their developmental stage/age

This is especially important when working with young people who have a learning disability.

Try to understand their life circumstances

A young person who has been let down, been abused, suffered many losses etc may not feel able to trust the most well intentioned adult. Establishing trust can take a long time and the process may have many ups and downs.

Actively Communicating

Active listening is more than 'listening'. It includes paying attention and proving this by paraphrasing what is said back to the child/young person, reflecting the emotions that you are hearing/seeing, and using body language to convey your interest – e.g. lean towards the child/young person, or if the child is smaller than you, bend or sit down so that you are on the same level.

Make sure that you are using language that the young person understands and be creative in the way that you communicate with them and understand how they respond to you.

Open questions

Open questions are those that allow some explanation in response, rather than a 'yes' or 'no' answer. Instead of 'do you like vegetables?' try 'what vegetables do you like?' As a child is giving you an explanation, remember to keep conveying your interest, looking at them, nodding occasionally, encouraging them to talk more. This can be difficult to achieve when working with children who have a learning disability, but that does not mean you shouldn't try.

Never promise to keep a secret

Promising this and then having to break this will affect the child's trust of you, and all adults in the future. By being clear that you will not keep secrets, that is not to say that you will tell everyone around you what they have said, you will not get into this position. If something needs to be told, give the child a choice in how this is done and explain what the time frame will be.

It is always better if they can say something themselves, but accept this may not always be possible.

Child protection procedures

All staff should have training in Child Protection before working closely with young people. This information can only support, not replace, this important training. Sometimes, children and young people will surprise you and may chose to talk to you about what adults term child protection issues. If this happens, the organisation you work for will have child protection procedures and these should be followed.

Do not panic or show the child that you are shocked. Calmly encourage them with open questions to talk as much as they can.

Always explain to the child/young person what you are doing at each stage and keep them informed and give choices where there are choices that they can make.

Cultural Issues

Don't be afraid to ask a child or young person about and observe "how they do things." This will enable them to give you some insight into their family and cultural life that might help you better support them. Everyone has a culture that is unique to them. Remember that you bring your own culture to any situation.

Don't pass things off as cultural differences, or lost in translation. Keep trying to communicate with the young person and their family until you are sure you both understand each other. See them as individuals who deserve the best service you can give.

Emotional language

Some children and young people may not know the words that can express how they are feeling, so may make one word answers and shrugs. Helping them develop an emotional language will allow them to start expressing their emotions rather than simply acting on them.

This can be very difficult for young people with a learning disability and it is important to remember that often behaviour (even challenging behaviour) is the young person using their own personal 'emotional language' to communicate.

Boundaries

Knowing what they can and can't do, it is very important that children and young people know what they can and can't do, or what is expected of their behaviour. It is always better to reframe what they can't do into what they are expected to do i.e. as a positive – e.g. instead of 'don't hit others', try 'treat others as you would want to be treated', 'respect other people'.

Be consistent, don't change the boundaries because you're having a bad day and want to take the line of least resistance!

Expect challenge - When setting boundaries, it is normal for children and young people to push at them, to see if they really exist! If they are able to push and push and there is no stopping, then that is not a boundary and will feel very unsafe to them.

Being there

Even if the child or young person doesn't talk to you, the main thing is not to put them off talking to someone in the future. Do what you promise, don't let them down!

Remember that how freely a child communicates depends on their level of cognitive, especially language, development and their emotional state. Listen and give full attention to the child as a non-critical and accepting adult. Do not appear to be shocked, anxious or express outrage at what they say.

Do not ask questions from which the child is forced into the position of withholding information. Avoid asking a list of direct questions and 'why' questions. (Barker, 1995)