



This NEPS Handout has been developed by educational psychologists and is based on current knowledge in this area. It is intended as a guide only. Not all the advice here may apply to any one student or situation. Teachers and parents may wish to identify the strategies that will work best for them.

## Listening to Children and Young People

The guidance here is intended to support adults in their work with challenging and vulnerable children and young people. When children are experiencing difficulties in school, a trusted staff member should offer support in a sensitive and appropriate manner to allow the child to talk about his or her experience or thoughts. In the case of child protection concerns, please follow specific guidance from the Department of Education and Skills and the HSE.

The suggestions presented here are adapted from: **(Prever, M. (2006). *Mental Health in Schools; A Guide to Pastoral and Curriculum Provision*, The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP): Paul Chapman, Publishing and *The Art of Good Listening* from the National Aging Information & Referral Support Centre.**

### Being Available

- It is important to remember that when you support a pupil in this way you are part of the support system within the school and other people should be aware of what you are doing. For your own professional safety, it is important to listen to a pupil in a place where he can be overlooked by/ is accessible to colleagues, but not by pupils/ peers.
- Be available- let pupils know that it is ok to talk to you.
- Make time and space for real listening to happen.
- Be available to listen with your full attention, not whilst doing something else.

### Starting the Conversation

- Recognise and communicate that talking about a problem may be difficult for the young person.
- Offer as much confidentiality as you can within child protection guidelines.
- Explore with the pupil the limitations of what can remain private from the outset and return to these periodically. This gives the young person control over disclosure.

## Active Listening

- Work to receive genuinely what the young person is telling you, even if you are thinking and feeling differently, have different values or see the situation from a position of experience. Do not stop listening because you do not agree.
- We can communicate interest by maintaining eye contact, not fidgeting or asking too many questions; our posture and responses should show we are trying to understand and want the young person to continue to tell their story.
- Listen patiently and attentively and be accepting.
- Maintain good eye contact unless this is experienced as threatening.
- Be comfortable with silence. It may be that the young person needs to think or feel.
- Silence can also be very helpful in diffusing an unproductive interaction.
- Do not interrupt; your role is to facilitate talk.
- Do not assume you know what the young person is saying.
- Always remain calm when the pupil is sharing with you.
- Understand the feelings, not only the content, of what is being said. Sometimes this may involve looking beyond the stated words.
- Believe what young person's say. This is how they see it at this moment in time.
- Listen with your eyes. Facial expression, body posture and arm movements tell a lot about what is really going on for the young person.

## Responding

- Ask few questions, those that you do ask should be open-ended in order to elicit more than a one-word or yes or no answer.
- Rather than offer solutions help the young person to identify options.
- Person-centered theory is based upon the idea that ultimately we know what is best for us and given the right conditions we will find our own way. Good listening will help pupils to identify options and decide a course of action. Solutions suggested or imposed by adults are often resisted, short-term or only agreed to by the young person in order to maintain relationships or please the helper.
- Use a variety of brief responses, such as nodding your head, or saying '*uh-huh*', '*I see*', '*go on*', '*what happened next?*', to communicate that you were listening and to encourage the pupil to continue.

## Responding using specific techniques

- **Restating-** To show you are listening, repeat every so often what you think the person said – not by parroting, but by paraphrasing what you heard in your own words. For example, *'Let's see if I'm clear about this....'*
- **Summarizing-** Bring together the facts and pieces of the problem to check understanding – for example, *'So it sounds to me as if ....'* Or, *'Is that it?'*
- **Reflecting-** Instead of repeating, reflect the speaker's words in terms of feelings-for example, *'This seems really important to you...'*
- **Giving feedback-** Let the person know what your initial thoughts are. Share pertinent information, observations, and experiences. Then listen carefully to confirm.
- **Emotion Labelling-** Putting feelings into words will often help a person to see things more objectively. To help the person begin, use 'door openers' - for example, *'I'm sensing that you're feeling frustrated....worried....anxious....'*
- **Probing-** Ask questions to draw the person out and get deeper and more meaningful information - for example, *'What do you think would happen if you...?'*
- **Validation-** Acknowledge the individual's problems, issues and feelings. Listen openly and with empathy, and respond in an interested way- for example, *'I appreciate your willingness to talk about such a difficult issue....'*
- **Effective pause-** Deliberately pause at key points for emphasis. This will tell the person that you are saying something that is very important to them.
- **"I" messages-** By using "I" in your statements, you focus on the problem not the person. An I-message lets the person know what you feel and why-for example, *'I know you have a lot to say, but I need to ...'*
- **Redirecting-** If someone is showing signs of being overly aggressive, agitate, or angry, this is the time to shift the discussion to another topic.

## Managing Your Feelings and Responses

- Be aware of your own feelings and recognise when the pupil's words or story resonate with your own material or experience.
- Be comfortable with anger as long as it is expressed in words and feelings, and not in physically destructive ways. Anger represents feelings which are unexpressed/ unheard
- Where appropriate, say what you are feeling. Model how to share emotions.
- Be prepared to admit your limitations and refer on when you feel young persons are at risk or that what they are telling you makes you feel 'out of your depth'.