



EDUCATION OTHERWISE

*Different and equal*

# Fact Sheet: Mental health and anxiety

## Mental health and anxiety

Education Otherwise receives contact from families who are considering home education (or are home educating) due to their child's mental health difficulties, anxiety or suicidal ideation and attempted, or actual suicide. This can be a very difficult situation for the family. The following information is designed to help parents in this situation.

Mental health issues can include or be related to:

- Anorexia and bulimia
- Anxiety and panic attacks
- Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
- Bipolar disorder
- Borderline personality disorder
- Depression
- Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)
- Psychosis and hearing voices
- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and
- Schizophrenia

Mental health is about: how happy the individual is, how much they feel able to overcome challenges in life and how able the individual feels to socialise with others.

Education Otherwise most usually deals with mental health issues when:

- Contacted by a parent of a child who cannot attend school
- Contacted by a parent of a child with suicidal ideation, or anxiety

Every individual is anxious, or stressed sometimes, but this becomes a problem when it affects day to day life, including a child's ability to learn, or a parent's ability to provide education.

## Mental health and school

Children can often develop anxieties about school and our society presents school as the normal way for a child to receive an education. This often leads to parents and well



meaning professionals advising coping strategies for the child in order to help them to 'build resilience' and remain within the school system.

At Education Otherwise we fully support the idea of instigating coping strategies in the early stages, if the parent and the child believe that school is the right place for the child. However, Education Otherwise believes that home education can be extremely beneficial for many children with mental health

needs and that giving a child space to improve their health and hopefully recover, could improve the child's future significantly. Home education provides that space.

## Triggers for mental health issues

- Examinations or tests.
- Fear of failure.
- Self pressure to achieve.
- Feelings of inadequacy.
- Bullying.
- Peer pressure or wanting to 'fit in'.
- Feeling that teachers are against the child.
- Feeling overwhelmed by the noise, or the busy environment.
- Difficulties in coping with being prepared for each class.
- Physical illness.
- Puberty and hormonal changes.
- Relationship problems in school.
- Relationship problems at home.
- An individual pressure on the child of another nature.

## First steps

- Remember that a child who is not engaging with school due to mental health issues is not 'naughty' 'bad,' 'difficult' or lazy. The child is unwell.

- Listen to the child and ask them what it is about school which worries them, or makes them reluctant to attend.
- Remember that this is the child's individual experience and respect their feelings.
- If you feel that school is right for your child, work with school staff to address problems.
- Teachers may have observed particular times when your child is anxious, or particular circumstances that seem to cause anxiety. Use their knowledge to support your child.
- Make changes to support the child, such as asking for different start times, or a reduced timetable.
- Praise your child and ensure that the child know that they are loved, valued and that you are proud of them.
- Talk with your child about strategies which help them to manage their anxiety, such as spending time with particular friends, listening to music, crafts, reading, or following a hobby.
- Do not allow the situation to go on for a long period. If strategies do not work after a period long enough to test them without causing further anxiety to the child, consider home education.

## Home education

Should parents decide to home educate their child, the Education Otherwise website has sections on starting out, resources and fact sheets to download.

It is important to remember that home education is not replication of school at home; it should be tailored to the child's individual age, ability, aptitude and any special needs that the child may have. Mental illness can constitute a special need and should be accommodated.

It is this tailoring to the individual's need which makes home education work so well for children with mental health issues. A child who has mental health issues could benefit from experiential learning, where the child's interests lead the education. The child may benefit from moving away from all formal types of education for the short or medium term, or simply from having one to one support with their learning.

Many parents whose child has mental health issues and who are considering home education, worry about how the child will take GCSEs. Some young people with mental health issues have this same worry. This is often because society presents GCSEs as essential to a young person's future wellbeing, but this is not the case. GCSEs can be delayed, taken in smaller numbers over time, or not taken at all if the child's

ambition does not require them. This can often be a very difficult concept for a parent to consider, but it can be one which leads to positive changes for the child.

It is important that the child views home education as a positive decision to improve their situation. Choosing what is right for the child, at that point, is a positive choice to make.

Many children thrive within the school system and many children do not. Each child is an individual and for those children with mental health issues, it is vital that they receive the individual support that they need. This could be home education.

## Recognising signs of possible suicide

Indications include:

- Depression, anxiety and other mental disorders, or a substance-abuse.
- The child feeling hopeless and worthless.
- Previous suicide attempt(s).
- Physical illness.
- Social detachment, or isolation.
- Family violence and abuse at home.
- Knowing someone with suicidal behaviour, particularly friends, or celebrities.
- Coping with difference in an unsupported environment.
- Lack of a sense of purpose in life
- Trouble focusing or thinking clearly.
- Reckless, rash, or risk taking behaviours.
- Changed sleeping patterns.
- Threatening to or talking about wanting to hurt or kill themselves.
- Creating suicide notes.
- Significant change in personality, or appearance.
- Disposing of valued possessions.
- Talking about the future which is without the child.

## Do not ignore these warning signs.

It is important not to allow the situation to go on longer than essential; Seek professional help right away.

Actively listen to the child. Listen even if the child is not speaking, their demeanour and actions will speak volumes.

Never dismiss the child's feelings.

Support the child in maintaining social activities.

Encourage proper eating and sleeping.

Education Otherwise advisors are not trained counsellors and cannot support a parent of a child with mental health problems, other than to provide information on home education. Poignantly, however, the most common comment which our advisors hear following a child leaving school to be home educated is 'I have got my child back'.

In some very extreme cases, home education can save young lives.

