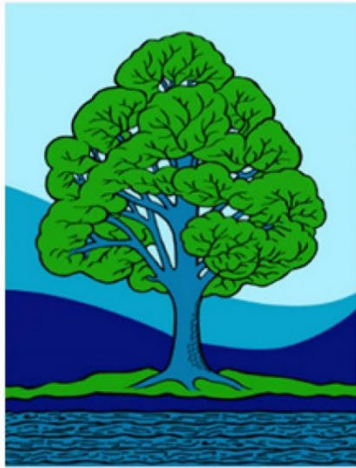




Rivertree Free School

Dream • Discover • Develop

Article 24: *You have the right to the best health care possible, safe water to drink, nutritious food, a clean and safe environment, and information to help you stay well.*

Mental Health and Wellbeing Access Document

Policy Status: Statutory

Review Cycle: 1 Years

Owner: Headteacher

Date: March 2026

Approved by: SLT

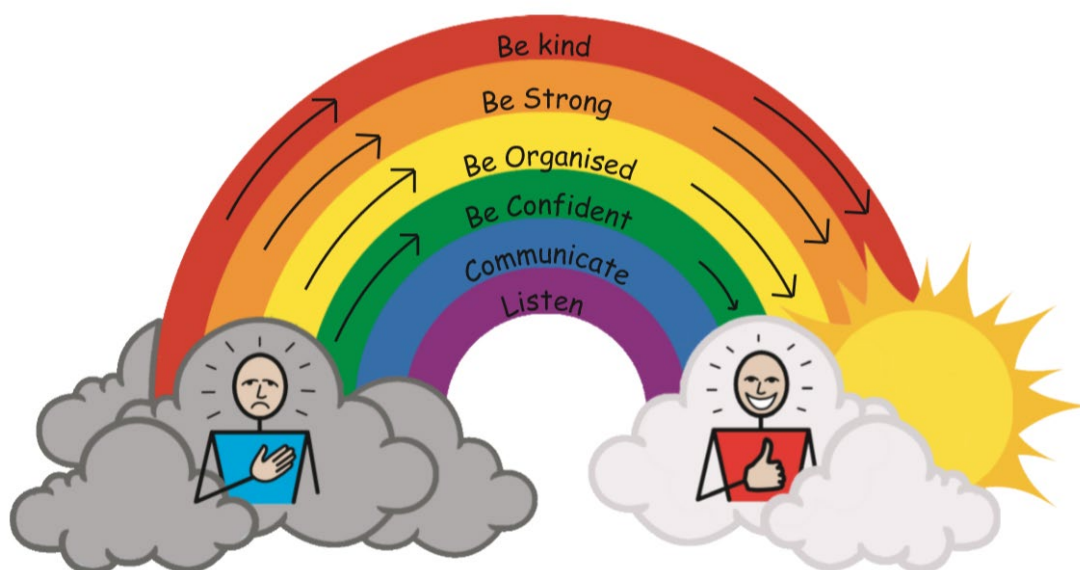
Date: March 2026

Review Date: March 2027

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Looking after everyone



Introduction

Rivertree Free School is a special school catering for pupils aged 2-19 with profound and multiple learning difficulties, autism or communication difficulties. Those learning difficulties range widely and therefore all learning is specific, individualised, and personal to each pupil. Mental health and wellbeing play a huge part in the daily lives of many at Rivertree Free and this document aims to clarify the ways in which we manage this, ensure everyone is supported and ensure that positive mental health and wellbeing is at the forefront of our work.

Our vision outlines this; *"we will ensure that positive emotional wellbeing and mental health is recognised and respected in all aspects of learning"*. Teaching and practicing positive mental health and wellbeing strives to enable every staff member and pupil at Rivertree Free to feel positive, manage and share theirs and others' emotions with care, positivity and understanding every day.

This access document will outline the progress and achievements we have made, our aspirations for the future and the way in which mental health and wellbeing is viewed and managed across Rivertree Free. One section is based on staff wellbeing and another on pupils. Together we want to break the stigma around mental health, and for Rivertree Free to be a positive, mentally healthy place in which to thrive.

Aims

1. To develop and maintain a whole school approach to positive mental health and wellbeing
2. To ensure that all staff and pupils are aware of how we talk about/communicate and maintain a mentally healthy approach to daily learning
3. To ensure everyone is equipped with skills to manage theirs and others' emotional needs with greater passion and independence
4. To develop and maintain a 'let's talk' approach for all staff and pupils around mental health and wellbeing
5. Make sure that wellbeing is at the forefront of everything we do, every day
6. Ensure all staff have read and adhere to the Mental Health and Wellbeing Access Document
7. Ensure that mental health and wellbeing is included and respected in all aspects of learning and in all relevant policies (safeguarding, pedagogy 1&2 for example).

What is Mental Health and what does it look like for Rivertree Free?

What is mental health?

Everyone has mental health. Mental health can be good, or it can be more difficult at times. Being 'mentally healthy', can mean we simply have the skills and coping strategies at that time to manage the ups and downs of everyday life, however sometimes this can be impeded, and we can need support.

The World Health Organisation (2014) defines mental health as;

"...a state of wellbeing in which every individual achieves their potential, copes with the normal stresses of life, works productively and fruitfully, and is able to contribute to their community. Mental health includes our emotional, psychological and social wellbeing. It affects how we think, feel and act." http://www.who.int/features/factfiles/mental_health/en/

About Rivertree Free – the pupils and staff, in relation to mental health

Pupils

At Rivertree Free, our pupils have an extremely diverse range of needs, levels of understanding and communication skills. Communication is key for our pupils, however there are many methods of communication used and therefore the pressure is on those working with the pupils to understand them and their needs, wants, communications, and to be able to identify possible low wellbeing and/or mental health difficulties. Consequently, it is important that staff are aware of how/where to signpost pupils and their families and how to offer that support where it is needed.

Staff

We have a plethora of staff at Rivertree Free, including senior leadership, teaching, support, admin, kitchen, site, and lunchtime staff. The job for staff is often challenging, whether it be challenging behaviour, medical needs of a pupil, communication difficulties, working in a large team, managing stress and so on. All staff face daily challenges of some kind; often this can impact on their own mental health. The pressures are undoubtedly ongoing, and we don't always have the skills or mind-set at the time to manage these pressures without it impacting on our own mental health. It is vital that staff are given support networks to allow them to talk, receive advice and possibly access therapies where appropriate. Despite this, we see huge achievements, smiles, and celebrate progress on a daily, if not hourly basis for both pupils and staff. Rivertree Free is a diverse and fun place to work, and we continue to strive towards always making it a happy and healthy place, for staff and pupils alike. We work as individuals, small teams, phases and a whole school team and consistently share the passion to try and improve pupils' lives, celebrate their progress, and ensure they are happy, healthy and safe.

Pupils Mental Health and Wellbeing

Many of the pupils at Rivertree Free are diagnosed as living with PMLD (profound and multiple learning difficulties) ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder), ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder), Down's Syndrome, PMLD (profound and multiple learning difficulties), global learning delay and many more syndromes / disabilities. Although mental health is a widely discussed topic, and we continuously work towards reducing the stigma around talking about mental health, it is still a significant difficulty to maintain the right support for many of our young people.

Often, many people have the same view as James Robinson, Mencap (2016);

"Some people don't understand there is a difference between a learning disability and mental health problems. We explore what the differences are between learning disability and mental health, and whether it's possible to have both."

Much of the research around children and adults with learning difficulties, also having a mental health difficulty is very new and therefore there is not much evidence to support this. One of the biggest reasons is that often mental health professionals find it hard to 'prove' whether it is a mental health difficulty or simply part of that person's special need / learning difficulty.

At Rivertree Free this is something we have a large focus on. We evidence behavioural changes, safeguarding concerns, emotional or physical change continually. We use the recordings to evidence if we think that there may be some mental health difficulties underlying for those pupils. As we get to know the pupils better, it becomes easier for us to understand what the 'usual' behaviours, mannerisms, and communication for those pupils are, and therefore where there are changes to this. We also use our knowledge of the disabilities themselves, to analyse where mental health difficulties are different to their disability. Knowing the pupils so well, enables us to be 'experts' in understanding them and being compassionate and positive, yet observant of changes to their state of mental health.

We can evidence this through:

- Communication with the child themselves
- Communication with families and other professionals
- Safeguarding chronologies (My Concern)

- Behaviour incident reports
- EHCP reviews
- Feedback from meetings, class discussions, social care etc.
- STAR recording (see Behaviour Access Document)
- General recordings of changes / concerns around those pupils

All these pieces of evidence allow us to build a bigger picture of what is happening for that pupil, allowing us to potentially support them within school, or signposting for support from outside specialist services. We carefully liaise with the pupils, ensuring their best interests and views are always at the centre of any discussions and decisions made, including them within decisions where possible. We also ensure we liaise closely with other agencies working with that pupil, especially their families.

If any member of staff, has a concern about a pupil's emotional wellbeing or mental health, they should always ensure proper procedures of monitoring, recording and referral are followed, this is discussed later in the document.

Pupil wellbeing is at the heart of all aspects of learning within Rivertree Free, whether this be structured activities or otherwise. Within Rivertree Free all staff are trained to safeguard children and have regular updates to this training. All staff are also given guidelines and information regarding abuse, what that can look like and how it can impact upon the pupils, therefore often also impacting their mental health.

As a specialist school in communication, staff are experienced in the use of alternative and augmentative communication (AAC) and use a range of means to communicate with the pupils they are working with. This might include the use of aided language displays, pragmatic organisation dynamic display (PODD) books, the picture exchange communication system (PECS) and sign supported English. The Speech and Language Team (SALT) are in regular contact with teachers and other staff to provide basic training and targeted support for individual pupils. These specialisms allow us to communicate more effectively with all pupils and therefore allows us to understand their wants, needs and feelings more clearly (see *Communication Access Document - CAD*).

All the above, training, updates and expertise shared with staff, enables us as a school to be effective observers and listeners and therefore be proactive about how we are supporting the pupils' mental health and wellbeing, and where (if required) we are stepping in to provide additional support, or in some circumstances using other professionals to support them. At present we liaise with several other agencies/services to provide the best support for our pupils, such as:

- Music Therapy – we have some pupils accessing music therapy. These sessions are based on detailed information about the pupil, including their emotional needs, communications and so on. It is a vital part of how those pupils express their feelings and emotions.
- CAMHS support
- Speech and Language Therapy
- Occupational therapy
- Physiotherapy
- Paediatrician appointments and an on-site nursing team to provide training.
- Services for People with Learning Disabilities - based at Twinhoods (18 years of age +). This service involves Clinical Psychologists, Psychiatrists, Learning Disability Nurses, Occupational

therapists, Physiotherapists, Speech and Language Therapists, Arts Therapies and Positive Behavioural Support, including the 24-hour Intensive Support Team.

- Social care (Children with Disabilities Team within Bedford Borough & Central Bedfordshire and occasionally others)
- Virtual School (for looked after children)
- Respite networks / homes (i.e. Foxgloves Respite home)

Within school we offer / support the following;

- CiN (Children in Need) Meetings are social care led but attended by school staff often. As a school, we could instead advise, we can make referrals to social care for respite for families and pupils, Early Help referrals for more targeted support, referrals to Carers in Beds for support for Young Carers and families, Nursery Nurse referrals for behavioural support, liaise with our health professionals when we have concerns which could involve calling an interim paediatrician review
- EHCP reviews – all parents and relevant professionals are invited to annual review meetings to discuss their child's progress, needs and any concerns they may have. From Year 12 onwards, Annual Reviews are held in a person-centred Format. An approach based on self-determination theory (Carl Rogers), these reviews support improvement of support and mental health by:
 - *"Making sure that we're truly taking into account the experiences of the person, their family and those supporting them when reviewing how well things are going.*
 - *Creating an environment where people are made to feel comfortable in expressing themselves honestly. Developing actions that are based on experiences and learning, leading to an environment where we're constantly improving our support"* (<http://helensandersonassociates.co.uk/person-centred-practice/person-centred-reviews/>)
- Behaviour Support – who can be available to discuss any potential triggers to behaviour and suggest practical solutions to trial (this can link to calming methods etc for pupils)
- Individual assessments – for example if a safe space needs to be created for an individual pupil, teams work together to try and manage this
- Mental Capacity Act Guidance: is in place to ensure staff support students from 16 years of age properly in relation to their rights to make their own decisions for themselves. Having agency and control over our own lives is essential for good mental health for everyone.
- Transition Support – A member of SLT manages transitions and offers Information, Advice and Guidance to students and families from year 9 onwards around all areas of preparing for adulthood. This has a role in supporting mental health of both students and families through;
- - Trying to support students and families to see transition as a process of gradual change; supporting the multi-agency process of effective proactive planning so that changes are discussed and considered well in advance of any expectation to take action; offering reassurance and emotional support to parents, whom undoubtedly carry the weight of decision-making and worry about the changes and unknowns involved in transition; working carefully with external agencies to ensure effective and individualised transition arrangements are in place, once post-school provision/plans are identified.

- CPSHE & RSE curriculum – which covers, emotions, relationships, consent, social skills and relationships, sex education, health and much more. All of which are broken down into individualised sessions.
- Pupil Mental Health First Aider

Our non-negotiables are;

All classes to have an 'emotions chart', zones of regulation display or activity of some kind, giving all pupils a way to express their feelings and emotions (see pictures below for examples;)

PODD book with emotions / feelings page to allow users to express through pictures.



A generic symbol chart that pupils can all access and use to say how they're feeling, or how someone else is feeling.



A display board within class to support understanding of emotions, also used to both communicate and teach understanding of feelings.

Feelings board - important to note sometimes we 'don't know'. Photos are also a good representative of what it may look like. This is available for all pupils to use.



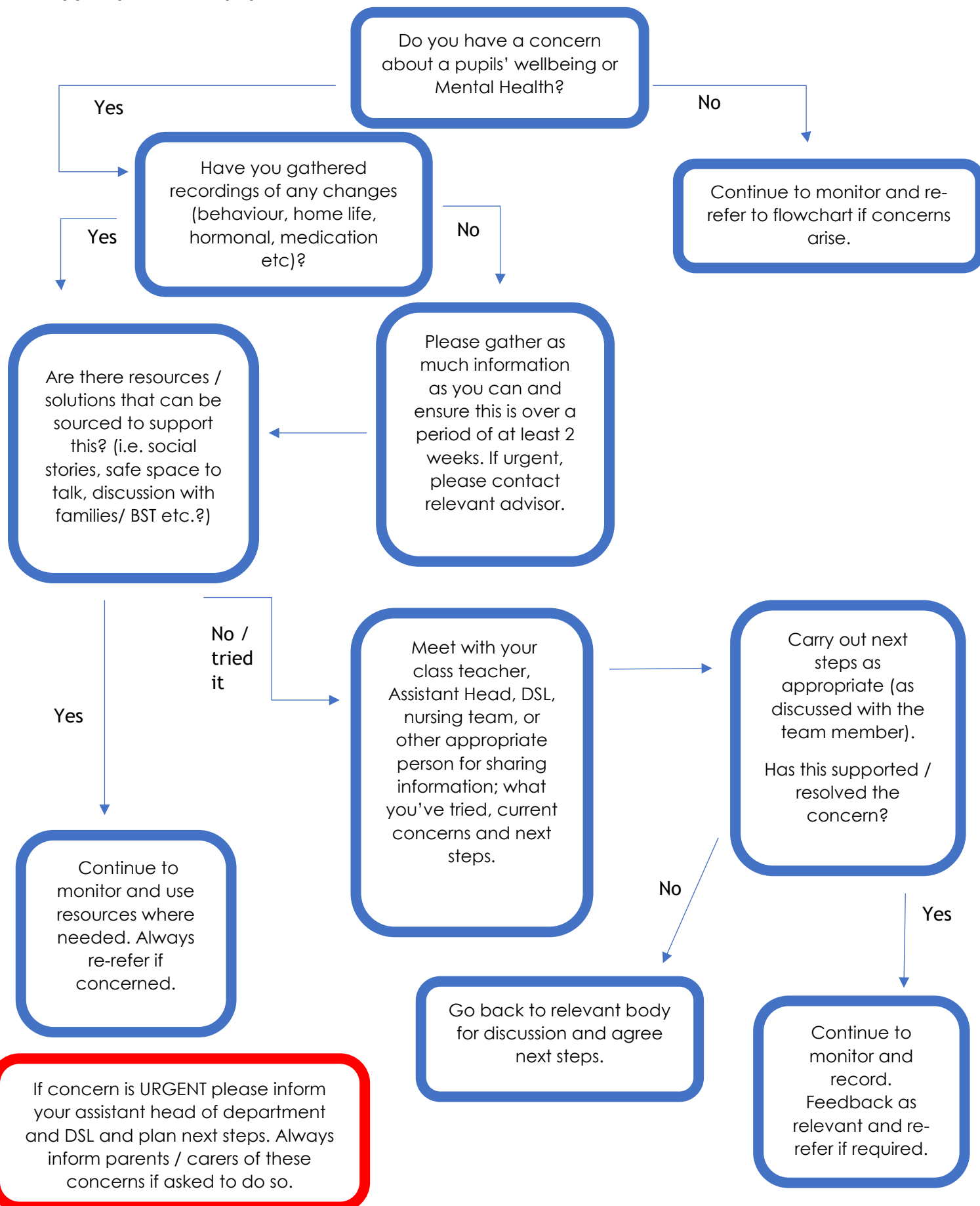
- Wellbeing to remain part of all aspects of learning, i.e., if a pupil needs a 'time out' during a lesson, this should be granted to support their wellbeing and independence to manage this *(Please note, at these times, their wellbeing & safety is the priority over other areas of learning)*
- All pupils will be treated equally, regardless of disability, ability, level of understanding etc.
- All pupils will access CPSHE and/or RSE sessions which include learning about feelings and emotions (this may be discrete or otherwise)
- All pupils will be taught skills to manage their emotions as independently as possible (within their abilities), yet also given support where this is required/necessary
- All pupils will be kept safe whilst at school, both physically and emotionally
- All staff to be aware of how to create and use a social story with a pupil and what its purpose is, or to know where to go for support with this.
- Calm voices to be always used (unless danger arises, or otherwise stated on BSP or care plan)

- Staff to dress appropriately for the role and for pupils' needs
- Staff to have an open and friendly approach and show positive body language
- Staff to manage their own emotions and ensure they are ready to work and ensure this does not impact on pupil's wellbeing
- All pupils to be aware (at individual levels, as decided by class staff), who they can communicate with about concerns, anxieties and emotions
- Ensure all pupils have enough time-out if they need it, we cannot tell a pupil how long they'll need to calm down or be ready to learn
- Staff to not discuss their concerns about school/pupils/staff in the staff room with others. Use specified areas / sessions / platforms for this

Language:

- Reassure pupils, however, do not assume how they are feeling and tell them something different (use open questions if necessary)
- "It is okay to feel ..." and use strategies to support how to manage this better
- Use sign language with pupils as much as possible where appropriate to do so
- Use key words and simple language relevant to developmental level of pupils
- Teach the pupils as individually appropriate how they can better self-manage their emotions more independently (this may require additional support at first, and for some, ongoing)
- Positive language to always be used (i.e. telling the pupil what they can / need to do rather than what they can't / shouldn't do)

Support process for pupils



Resources that may be used to support pupil's emotional wellbeing

Social Stories

What is a social story?

This is usually a symbol written simplistic page or several pages of information to support a pupil through something new, give instruction or support. The National Autistic Society (<https://www.autism.org.uk/professionals/teachers/myworldhub/socialstories.aspx>) says that 'A Social Story accurately describes a context, skill, achievement or concept according to ten criteria. These criteria guide Story research, development, and implementation to ensure a patient, supportive quality. They also ensure that the format, 'voice', content, and learning experience are descriptive, meaningful, and physically, socially, and emotionally safe for the child, adolescent, or adult on the autism spectrum.' At Rivertree Free we have found however, social stories can be supportive for other children, not just those with autism.

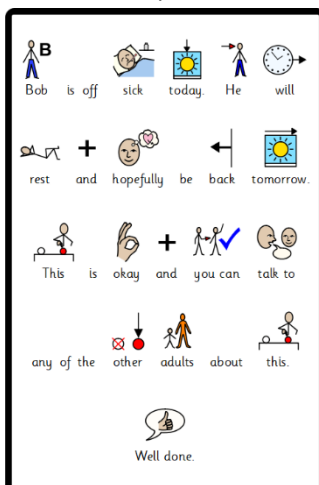
What is important, is that the social story is written in a way that the pupil can understand it, only key words / symbols / photos are used, they are relevant and true, they are individualised to suit the pupils needs / understanding.

What can they be used for?

Social stories can be used for many things, the most typical being;

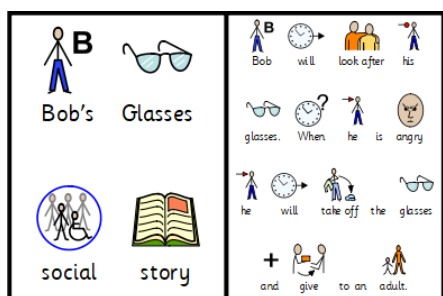
- When something new is happening (i.e. new event)
- To support behaviour
- To support self-regulation of emotions / feelings / behaviour
- To make them aware of new information
- To prepare them for something different

See example's below;



1. When an adult was off sick so class would be different (simplistic social story)

2. A pupil needing to wear new glasses but did not want to, and needed support to take care of them (a pupil with higher level of understanding);



If guidance is needed to draft a social story, please speak to an Assistant Head or a member of the behaviour support team who can support.

Safe Spaces

Throughout school, we have several classrooms with 'safe spaces' incorporated into the classroom. These can look different depending on the needs of the pupils;

- small spaces with no equipment
- tents within classrooms,
- small work booths
- sensory circuit rooms
- quiet rooms

It is vital for positive wellbeing that a pupil has the option to have time on their own should they choose to and should it be safe to do so. Pupils' individual behaviour support plans will give more detail on what support / guidance is required for this. There can be times when it is unsafe for pupils to be in area with others and these spaces are used to ensure safety of all, including that pupil, this will be part of their individual behaviour support plan.

Safe spaces allow some pupils the opportunity for better self-management/regulation of emotions and behaviour, however also allowing them a space to share with trusted adults if needed. Time is key when supporting pupils' emotional needs, we all need to be given time to think about how we're feeling, why, what happened, how can I make it better. Other resources (i.e., emotion charts, social stories etc. can then be used to support).

Examples of what some safe spaces can look like;



Dark tent

For pupils to use as a 'time out' space when they prefer to be alone. Often the darkness can be very calming.



Quiet areas

A room with beanbags / cushions and calm lighting for pupils to relax and have some space. Even when choosing to spend time alone, pupils continue to be monitored by staff.

In all the above places, pupils must be monitored and able to be seen, doors must NEVER be locked or blocked.

Post incident learning

We all use PIL with our pupils, probably without realising we do it. It is important that we find a way to communicate with pupils about incidents, to allow learning and to re-build relationships. This may be immediately after an incident (ensuring the pupil is completely calm and not at risk of re-entering an escalated state), a few hours afterwards, or the next day. For each pupil, post-incident learning will look different.

This is one examples of a resource that could be used:

- The Three L's

This is a way of structuring post-incident interaction with the pupil. This visual should be accessible in all classrooms (many staff carry this on their lanyards).

Listen "What Happened?"

Link "How did that make you feel?"

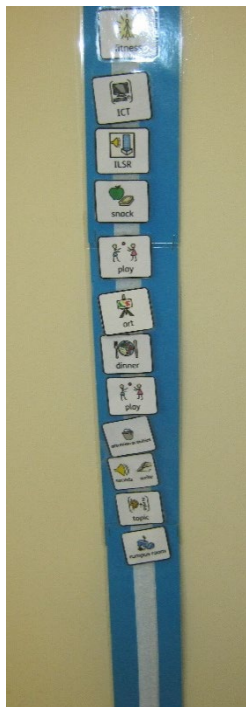
Learn "The next time you feel that way what could you do?"



Other 'everyday' resources / strategies

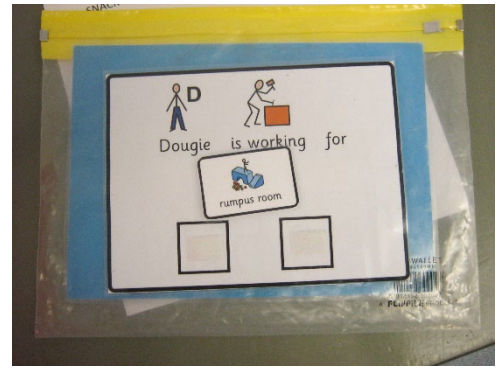
Many of the common, everyday emotional needs relate to anxiety, transition difficulties, understanding, or lack of understanding, communication, change, self-management of emotions and so on. Some of the basic things we can have in place to support these are;

- Schedules
- First & then boards (which state the activity happening 'now' and the one 'next' – this is changed as activities change.
- Reward charts
- Conversation (at individual levels)
- Consistency of approaches from all staff
- CPSHE or other feelings-based activities (don't just talk about it at the time!)



Here are some examples of everyday resources used across school;

(left) Symbol schedule
Working for chart (right)



Recording concerns r.e. wellbeing

My Concern

My Concern is an online safeguarding tool and allows us to build a chronology of events / concerns for specific pupils or families. It enables us to evidence and upload any concerns / updates for individual pupils. The benefit of this system is that it allows us to create and see the 'bigger picture' for those pupils. These concerns include;

- Body maps
- Verbal concerns
- Notes from meetings
- Things that the pupil has disclosed
- Notes from parents/carers
- Health/personal care concerns
- Communications had with parents, social workers etc.
- General safeguarding concerns around the child / family
- And any other concerns, communication or general information regarding the pupil or family.

This tool enables some staff to view the chronologies, therefore making it easier to build a 'bigger picture' of what is happening for that child. This tool will also allow the DSL's (Designated Safeguarding Leads) to set tasks for whoever has alerted to those concerns (i.e. write a note in the diary, phone the parent to ask). By doing this, it allows all professionals and people around the child to ensure that all information is gathered to therefore support the pupils emotional mental health & wellbeing.

It is important that any communication with a parent, concern around child or family related to any of the above, is put onto My Concern as soon as possible and must be done the same day. Always alert the DSL's if urgent concern.

DSL: Katie Davis, DDSL Rebecca Bancroft

Why does this relate to emotional wellbeing?

It allows staff to better support the pupils individually, i.e. being aware that a pupil has moved home, would allow us to better support that pupil with understanding that it is different, change is okay etc. Social stories may be used to explain what will change and what will be the same and hopefully support them to manage their emotions around this.

Staff Mental Health and Wellbeing

As mentioned above, the staff to pupil ratio is often high to enable us to support the pupils, and it is imperative that teams work together, whether it be class teams, phase teams, teachers, LSA's etc. We aim to ensure that all staff members and their contribution to school life is valued and appreciated. We have several pathways to ensure we are giving opportunity for staff to discuss any concerns they have for their own wellbeing and mental health, and we encourage people to talk and see if they can form a solution to those difficulties.

Staff wellbeing is so important, especially as the stresses and challenges within a typical school day can be overwhelming and difficult to manage, therefore we strive to ensure all staff are always aware of the support networks available to them.

The current support we have in place for staff within school is;

- A dedicated team of Mental Health First aiders whom you can go to for confidential advice, 'chats' and simply as a person to talk to. Mental Health First Aiders is ~~Katie Davis~~ Sirena Hand and Rebecca Bancroft
- Talk to your colleagues – (if you are confident to do so), talk to a trusted colleague and share concerns, see if they can help (where appropriate)
- Share with line manager and other members of SLT; are there any concerns that can be managed and improved 'in house'?
- Appraisal process for ALL staff to include wellbeing; specific time for staff to raise concerns or difficulties
- Return to work meetings to support and include wellbeing of those staff members and ensure time to discuss any concerns with the person.
- Signposts to outside support (see leaflets in staffrooms or via Mental Health First Aid Team)
- Half termly drop in 'chats' to be available for all - with SLT
- All staff are able to be communicated with via email, please don't hesitate to contact them.

The current support accessible for staff outside of school (agencies);

First port of call in a non-emergency is always your GP. Book an appointment to see them and discuss as openly as you can what your feelings / thoughts are. They may re-refer you onto another place.

Other signposted services for school staff are;

Care First – who offer an advice, information & counselling service.

Log on – username; bedfordschools001, password; borough1234

Bedfordshire Wellbeing Service – <https://bedfordshirewellbeing.service.nhs.uk/>

Using this service you can chat, self-refer for support, read online guides and support, sign up for webinars. They provide CBT (cognitive behavioural therapy), counselling etc.

NHS – The NHS website provides general advice & support for many topics; depression, anxiety, pregnancy, talking therapies, alcohol misuse, OCD and many more. They also provide support leaflets for many mental health & wellbeing areas, please find link here;

<https://www.selfhelpguides.nhs.uk/bccg/>

For more support ideas and networks, please contact Mental Health First Aiders who can signpost you to other support networks. The Mental Health First Aider team will be sending out information and signposting to other services, advice and so on a very regular basis throughout the school year.

What to do in a crisis

There are free listening services available in a crisis or at any time you need to talk:

These services offer confidential support from trained volunteers or counsellors. You can talk about anything that's troubling you, no matter how difficult:

- Call 116 123 to talk to Samaritans, or email: jo@samaritans.org for a reply within 24 hours
- Text "SHOUT" to 85258 to contact the [Shout Crisis Text Line](#), or text "YM" if you're under 19
- Switchboard. If you identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender, you can call [Switchboard](#) on 0300 330 0630 (10am–10pm every day), email chris@switchboard.lgbt or use their webchat service. Phone operators all identify as LGBT+.
- Shout. If you would prefer not to talk but want some mental health support, you could text SHOUT to [85258](#). [Shout](#) offers a confidential 24/7 text service providing support if you are in crisis and need immediate help.
- Teachers and Education staff can call the Education Helpline to talk about anything, even if not in crisis on **08000 562 561**

In an emergency or out of hours, if you have harmed yourself or are worried about someone else, or are worried that you might harm yourself, you can go to:

Bedford Hospital

Accident and Emergency Department
South Wing, Kempston Road, Bedford MK42
9DJ

You can also call on **01234 355 122**

Luton & Dunstable Hospital

Accident and Emergency Department
Lewsey Road, Luton, LU4 0DZ

Lister Hospital

Accident and Emergency Department
Coreys Mill Lane, Stevenage, SG1 4AB
You can also call on **01438 314333**

You can also call on **01582 491166**

In a crisis where you feel life might be in danger, please call 999.

Other networks of support are:

Who?	What kind of support?	Contact details?	Where?
Bedfordshire Wellbeing Service	Cognitive behavioural therapy / group therapy (anxiety, depression, worry or mood management etc) / individual therapy and more.	Website: https://bedfordshirewellbeing.service.nhs.uk/ Phone: 01234 880400 – Mon – Fri (9am - 5pm) Email: elt-tr.bedfordiapt@nhs.net For Healthcare Professional Referrals: Email: elt-tr.bedfordshirewellbeing.service@nhs.net	21 Kimbolton Rd, Bedford MK40 2AW.
Mind	Peer support / youth support (16-25) / Anger awareness / Suicide prevention / Wellbeing in the workplace.	Website: https://www.mind-blmk.org.uk/ Phone: 0300 330 0648 Email: hq@mind-blmk.org.uk / Bedford - bwc@mind-blmk.org.uk	Mind BLMK works from Bedford Wellbeing Centre, at 3, Woburn Road in Bedford, but supports people across the whole borough.
Wellbeing at work	Confidential 24 hour support service	Phone: 0845 862 2113	N/A
BCAT (Bedford Counselling & Training)	Group therapy & counselling services for; depression, anxiety, work stress, loss, relationship issues etc).	Phone: 01234 219905 Email: enquiries@bcat-team.org.uk	BCAT 71 Gwyn Street Bedford, MK40 1HH.
Care First	Advice, counselling & information service – 24 hours	Online - https://carefirst-lifestyle.co.uk/ Phone: 01234 360340 Log on above.	N/A