

ELSA – Top tips and best practice

We have collated information about ELSA work and the role of ELSA's to inform this handout. It is hoped that this can be used to inform other members of staff and parents about the role of ELSA's, but also as a reminder of some of the key training points. The information in this handout has been taken and adapted from ELSA training materials as well as information from www.elsanetwork.org

The role of the ELSA

ELSAs are trained to plan and deliver programmes of support to pupils in their school who are experiencing social and emotional needs. The majority of ELSA work will be delivered on an individual basis, but sometimes small group work will be appropriate, especially in the areas of social and friendship skills.

The four key roles of an ELSA can be understood as someone who:

1. Helps children to learn and practise social and emotional skills
2. Provides additional individual time and space to develop a supportive relationship within which the child feels accepted and valued
3. Helps all staff to understand and support the child
4. Supports the development of emotional literacy across the school

ELSA intervention

It is important that ELSAs work to support social and emotional needs in line with the topics covered by the initial training. This predominantly will include:

- ✓ **Emotional awareness:** Ability to recognise how you feel and the ability to say how you feel.
- ✓ **Social skills:** Making eye contact, taking turns, speaking in an appropriate tone of voice, sharing, asking for help and paying attention.
- ✓ **Friendship skills:** Ability to initiate friendships, ability to maintain friendships and understanding what friends do and do not do.
- ✓ **Self-esteem:** Ability to identify own strengths, ability to accept praise, ability to accept criticism, perseverance and the ability to cope with new experiences/change.
- ✓ **Anger and anxiety regulation:** Ability to recognize when feeling angry or worried, knowledge and use of strategies to help calm down and the ability to seek help from others.
- ✓ **Loss, bereavement and resilience:** Helping pupils develop resilience and cope with challenges, including change, loss and bereavement, when appropriate.

ELSAs receive psychological supervision from educational psychologists but they are line managed from within their own schools. Part of the line manager's role is to assist in the identification and prioritisation of pupils who would benefit from support. This tends to be achieved in consultation with class teachers, form tutors, heads of year, SENCos and the ELSAs themselves. Creating an ELSA timetable provides clarity for the children and young people, staff who request ELSA support and the ELSA themselves, and is highly recommended.



Principles of ELSA

Supporting – not fixing

ELSAs are not there to fix children's problems and in most cases they can't. What ELSAs are able to do is provide emotional support. As they establish a warm, respectful relationship with a pupil they provide a reflective space where the pupil is able to share honestly their thoughts and feelings. The ELSA uses basic counselling skills (including active listening, problem clarification, open questions, thinking aloud, verbal and non-verbal prompts) to guide helping conversations. ELSAs will avoid rushing in with suggested solutions, ('Have you thought of...?', 'Why don't you try...?') and instead, assist pupils to reflect on their concerns and lead them explore possible strategies and solutions for themselves, ('Could you imagine another way of responding in that situation?' 'How do you think x was feeling at that moment?' 'What would you have liked to have been able to say/do?' 'What do you think might have happened if...?'). Sometimes it is appropriate to suggest some possible coping strategies but the key is to do this tentatively and to leave the pupil with choices, ('Some people find it helpful to do x , y or z. I'm wondering if any of those things could work for you.')

Keeping psychological needs in mind

It is easy to become focused on trying to change unhelpful behaviours without thinking sufficiently about the psychological need the behaviour might be expressing. Behaviour does not occur in a vacuum. It is helpful to think that children are not setting out to be challenging but are trying to solve a problem they perceive. Their perceptions may need to alter through a process of reflection. ELSAs need to develop the skill of hypothesis-forming. If the young person were able to put into words what they are wishing to achieve through a particular behaviour, what do you think they might say? In doing this there needs to be flexibility of thinking. It may be possible to come up with a variety of hypotheses, some of which will fit better than others. Once some hypotheses have been formulated, an ELSA can begin checking out to see which fit the situation best. Developing an understanding of the behaviour leads on to identifying alternative ways of meeting the need. Understanding informs intervention. This is one reason why regular access to psychological supervision is vital for ELSAs.

Having a consistent time and place to work

We all like some consistency of routine. Most of us are more comfortable in a familiar environment. Familiarity helps us to relax. By providing a regular time and place for a pupil to meet with the ELSA, the pupil receives the message that they are important. If contact is irregular and in different places, the pupil is likely to feel that they are being fitted in rather than prioritised. We want pupils to prepare themselves for working with the ELSA in the same way that an ELSA needs to prepare herself for working with the pupil. If they don't know when that will be, they are less likely to think about the session in advance.

A time limited intervention

Rather than using an ELSA as part of a pupil's permanent support structure, it is better to see the intervention as time-limited to assist the development of specific skills, usually up to a term (8-12 weeks). Once new skills are acquired, time needs to be allowed for consolidation. Further intervention towards additional aims could be considered at a later date if desired. As an ELSA is part of the permanent staff within school, some informal contact may be maintained for a time to enable graduated withdrawal of support for those pupils who may need this.



ELSA targets

For ELSA to be most effective it is important that they are working towards targets with each child and young person. The priorities for an individual pupil will be identified in discussion with other staff in the school, and where possible, the child or young person themselves. These priorities will inform the targets an ELSA is working to support a pupil to achieve. It is beneficial to involve pupils in target setting so that, where possible, targets can be set based on things that are important to them. Some examples of SMART targets include:

- To be able to identify (5) different emotions
- To be able to display (5) different emotions
- To be able to describe how I am feeling (and why)
- To be able to make regular eye contact when interacting with (familiar people/friends/new people)
- To be able to ask friends for help (with work/at playtime)
- To be able to pay attention when (an adult/friend) is talking (what would this look like for individual pupil; nodding/eye contact/replying in context?)

Working within professional competence as an ELSA

Settings are understandably eager to make use of the expertise of their ELSAs, especially when they are able to witness the skill and knowledge ELSAs demonstrate in their work. As a consequence, the role of ELSA is sometimes misjudged, and work suggested which exceeds the level of training an ELSA has received. It is important for ELSAs to raise concerns of this kind during supervision as well as with their line manager, and for the whole school community to be clear on the role and remit of ELSAs.

What an ELSA intervention is not:

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| × Long-term counselling | × Family therapy |
| × A nice chat | × Self-harm nurse |
| × A reward for unacceptable behaviour | × A quick fix |
| × Behaviour management | × Magical problem-solver! |
| × An alternative to CAMHS | |



Some final tips!



Stay with the feelings



Create a reflective space



Don't fix the problem!

