

How SEMH Schools use Therapeutic Interventions to Support Students

The Commission on Young Lives recently published its latest report, 'All Together Now: Inclusion not Exclusion'. The central question of this report is; how can we help vulnerable and marginalised students to thrive? Too often, mainstream schools lack an answer, landing on a solution that can drastically affect a child's prospects; permanent exclusion.

Permanent exclusions disproportionately affect certain children. Children with SEMH (Social, Emotional and Mental Health) as a primary need but who do not have an EHC plan are around 3.8 times more likely to be permanently excluded

The term SEMH was first used in the 2014 SEND Code of Practice. Before this, BESD (Behaviour Emotional Social Development) and EBD (Emotional & Behaviour Difficulties) were commonplace. The new abbreviation, SEMH, was the first to cut out the word behaviour to encourage practitioners to recognise that surface-level behaviours often indicated a child's need that is more significant. SEMH can manifest in different ways but typically results in a barrier to learning. Managing the emotions and behaviours of a child with SEMH often requires targeted interventions, not to mention a trauma-informed approach.

Mainstream schools cannot always meet their students' often-complex SEMH needs, typically because of lacking resource and training. The Fen Rivers Academy, based in Norfolk, is a therapeutic SEMH Special School offering full-time education and therapeutic support for up to 96 children aged between 5 and 16 years old, many of whom have previously been permanently excluded. When a child is pushed outside of the mainstream, our school offers the care and support that many of the most vulnerable children desperately need but have not had access to.

Inclusion and nurture are a central part of our school's operations. Our approach embeds a therapeutic delivery of the national curriculum, informed by a collective understanding of our children's needs and rights. This is underpinned by SEMH assessment, support plans and risk assessments, and the normalisation of conversation around mental health and wellbeing.

We also operate several therapeutic interventions, including sensory therapy, creative art therapy, rebound therapy, and forest schools.

Sensory Therapy specialises in teaching children how to adjust their level of stimulation to get into the best zone to learn. Sensory therapy techniques may also be beneficial for people experiencing feelings of anxiety. At The Fen Rivers Academy, the five senses are always involved in learning delivery; we notice and we imagine how what we are feeling manifests in our bodies, helping regulate sensory processing.

Creative Arts Therapies is a term for healthcare professions that use the creative and expressive process of art-making to improve and enhance the psychological and social well-being of individuals of all ages and health conditions. The artwork created in the presence of the art therapist can provide a focus for discussion, helping the child reflect and make sense of behaviours and emotions they may feel confusing and hard to put into words.

Rebound Therapy in our school has given students a fun and exciting weekly intervention. Rebound Therapy, when correctly applied, describes a specific methodology, assessment and programme using trampolines to provide opportunities for enhanced movement patterns, therapeutic positioning, exercise and recreation for children and young people. The whole-body movement supports students' mental health and well-being as well as their ability to be calm and have self-confidence in their bodies.

Forest Schools are nature-based communities where trained practitioners nurture exploration and discovery, creating meaningful experiences for positive lifelong impacts. Wellbeing is the foundation of our practice, and through recognising the social, emotional and physical needs of participants, we provide the guidance and facilitation for our time in nature.

Children who are not in school or not receiving the proper support at mainstream school become less and less able to manage their behaviours. Often, this leads to further marginalisation from society and yet deepening disengagement from learning. Through our approaches, continually refined and developed to cater to the needs of the individual, students leave us ready to progress onto the next stage of their life as a positive member of society. Their needs have been understood and met, giving them a pathway on which to thrive. And shouldn't this be the purpose of all young people's education?