

The National Parent Forum of Scotland (NPFS)

The NPFS are pleased to have the opportunity to contribute to the Education and Skills Committee regarding counsellors in school education. As parents, our children's well-being is of the utmost importance, and we recognise the significance of this in their ability to learn and develop. By prioritising well-being, children and young people leave school with not only academic skills, but also the emotional and social skills necessary to contribute to society and live happy and fulfilling lives. Ultimately, children and young people are not able to engage in their learning if their well-being is not nurtured. All of us, adults and children alike, face challenges in life where we may need some extra support. This could vary from a short-term difficulty in family life, to a longer-term mental health need, and school counsellors have a key role to play in all of these situations to support children and young people in their learning and development.

The role of school counsellors supporting a variety of needs

The NPFS recognise that throughout life all of us may face challenges, difficult times, and periods of mental ill-health. This is the same for children and young people, and therefore school counsellors can play a vital role in ensuring they are supported emotionally in order to thrive. Parents want to know that when they send their child into school, their child feels safe, supported, and equipped to face life's challenges. It is therefore important that school counsellors are available to support a variety of children with a variety of needs. This may range from a diagnosed mental health condition such as anxiety or depression, difficulty at home due to family illness or separation, caring responsibilities a child may have, or their home situation, such as being a looked after child. Some children may be facing several of these listed challenges at once, and other factors such as English as an Additional Language can be a barrier for support. As parents, we want all of our children's needs to be supported through school counselling when needed, and therefore it is important that Additional Support Needs are identified as fluid, varied, and diverse. For children and young people to be effectively supported, school counselling should be available for a variety of issues, and not restricted if a child does not have a diagnosis.

The availability of school counsellors

The NPFS recognises that for many children school is the universal, and therefore one of the only services, that they receive. Long waiting lists and high levels of criteria required for services such as CAMHS means that many children and young people wait for long periods of time without any support. Parents often feel that it is not until a crisis has already happened that their child can access support. School counselling is therefore an opportunity for all children to feel supported at the time it is required, and parents would like to see school counsellors as an accessible service with the potential to bridge the gap many children fall into when waiting for specialist services such as CAMHS. To promote accessibility, appointments should not only be scheduled, but also available on a drop-in basis so that support is available at the moment that it is required. It is important that this support in schools is proactive, rather than only being reactive once a crisis has already happened.

Relationships and Communication

Parents consistently identify the importance of empathetic and understanding staff across the school. This is key for building trusting relationships between a child and the school counsellor; however, it is also important for parents to have a relationship

with their child's school counsellor. Difficulties a child or young person faces are rarely isolated, and it is therefore important that school counsellors can communicate compassionately with the wider family, and notably the parents. School can be the ideal place for this, as there are opportunities to support the whole family. Siblings often attend the same school, and therefore can receive support for similar issues such as a family bereavement. Schools can also support the siblings of children with additional support needs who can often be overlooked. Parents accept that school counsellors often deal with emotional and sometimes confidential issues, however whenever appropriate it is important that parents are involved in the process. This is so parents can be best equipped to support their children at home, but also so that school counsellors can be equipped to know and support a child in all contexts. It is important that there can be open communication so that parents are listened to. Ultimately, it is most often parents who know their children and their needs best.

Summary

Overall, the NPFS recognises the importance of counsellors in school education and the integral role they play in promoting children and young people's well-being. This is essential for them to not only attain academically, but to also to develop the social and emotional skills required to be a happy and active member of society once they leave school. This means that school counsellors have a key role to play in many children's lives at some point during their education, whether this is due to short-term issue, or a more long-term condition. Therefore, it is important that counsellors in school education are not restricted, and that a variety of difficulties children face are accepted as an additional support need worthy of support. Similarly, school counsellors can play a vital role in bridging the gaps that can exist in services such as CAMHS, and therefore needs to be accessible as a universal service for young people which is proactive, rather than only intervening once the crisis point has been met. Finally, in order to effectively support a child or young person, relationships and communication not only with the child, but with parents and the wider family are important to ensure that a wholistic approach has been taken to understand a child's world, and to support them in all contexts. Parents play a major role in their children's lives and are most likely their child's first port of call for support. Therefore, parents cannot be excluded when supporting a child with their well-being.

The NPFS appreciates the opportunity to submit evidence to the committee regarding Counsellors in School Education.

Kind Regards,

Joanna Murphy, Chair of the National Parent Forum of Scotland