

# Spotting the signs that pupils are struggling

Whether a pupil is struggling academically, emotionally or with safeguarding issues, staff need to be alert to warning signs. Adele Bates describes what to look out for

## Author details

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How do you know when a pupil is struggling academically or otherwise?

- They put their hand up and ask for help.
- They look for other resources in the classroom – dictionaries, computers, past work, displays etc.
- They use the support order you taught them of Brain, Book, Buddy, Teacher.
- They have a word with you after class.

Yes. It can look like that. Sometimes it can also look like this.

- They chat to their friends.
- They distract themselves and others from the work.
- They become withdrawn.
- They become angry in your lessons and backchat.
- They destroy any work they have attempted.
- They put their heads on the desk and sleep.
- They play on their phone.
- They refuse to enter your classroom.
- They refuse to go to school.

The challenge, as educators, is that the first list is what we would hope happens, but in reality, it is the second list we experience more.

The tricky thing about the second list is that these signals often look like behaviour issues and not signs of struggling.

## Communication difficulties

Pupils are not always able to communicate clearly when they are struggling. The behaviour is the communication.

I once taught a pupil who climbed the walls. She was unable to sit for more than two minutes, could not engage with the work, often selected to be mute and when she did communicate with me it was fairly rude.

This was a mainstream year 8 class with around 33 other pupils. It was early on in my career and this school, so I thought it best to first consult the behaviour policy, follow the 1,2,3 out method that it suggested and see what happened.

It didn't work. I was addressing the surface symptom of the behaviour and not the issue.

We also need to be aware of very personal, individual struggles our children may be going through

I did some investigative work and spoke with the SENCO. We spent the next few weeks trying different learning strategies with the pupil that included timers, smaller tasks, a different seat in the classroom and a test for dyslexia – and slowly we got there.

She concentrated for increasingly long periods of time, produced work and even contributed to class discussions (all while refraining from wall climbing).

I learned an important lesson – that pupil was struggling with my work. She was unable to articulate that, and so the poor behaviour came out.

It was my job to adapt the learning for her to be able to access it. To do that I first needed to know what the struggle was.

## Spotting the signs

So, what should you look out for?

It's a tricky one. All pupils will react in different ways, so keeping curious, not assuming anything, questioning and a bit of trial-and-error-magic-guess-work will help no end, but here are some general signs that will be useful to consider.

### A child struggling academically

- Distraction, anything to avoid doing the work – even if this is engaging you in topics they know you love talking about! It's sneaky but it's often a very successful strategy to avoiding work.
- Frustration and anger.
- Spending a very long time on one task, exceeding expectations in that area (usually as they feel comfortable here and it avoids facing the tasks they find challenging).
- Chatting to friends for help or, again, as a distraction.
- Not opening their book or computer file – they feel like they will fail, so why bother starting?
- Refusal to engage in group work or class discussions.

- Pens inexplicably breaking – especially ones that require a 20 minute toilet visit to clean up the ink.

## **A child struggling emotionally or with mental health**

- A change in their usual behaviour, e.g. a sudden withdrawal, increased aggression, increased tiredness, increased apathy
- Anxiety
- Symptoms of depression
- Erratic behaviour
- Seemingly inexplicable outbursts
- Increased difficulties in friendship groups
- Changes in eating or sleeping patterns

## **A child being triggered by past or current trauma**

- Challenges forming positive relationships
- Difficulties around eating and their relationship with food
- Overly clingy
- Irritable, aggressive, difficult to soothe or engage
- Anxiety
- Passive
- Sexualised behaviour
- Sadness and depression

## **A child with safeguarding issues**

Like the above, keeping in mind the four types of abuse.

**Physical:** Bruises, broken bones, scratches, bite marks, burns or scalds.

**Emotional:** Unconfident or lack self-assurance, struggle to control emotions, difficulty making or maintaining relationships, act in a way that is not appropriate for their age, self-harm.

**Sexual:** Anxiety and depression, eating disorders, post-traumatic stress, difficulty coping with stress, self-harm, suicidal thoughts and tendencies, pregnancy, STIs, feelings of shame or guilt, drug and alcohol problems, relationship problems.

**Neglect:** Poor hygiene and appearance – hungry, smelly, poorly dressed for weather conditions, difficulty using menstrual products. Developmental problems - medical or health issues, skin conditions, weight or growth issues. Housing and family issues – no heating at home, in unsustainable living conditions, being left alone, taking the role of carer for adults or siblings.

## **What about in/after/during a global pandemic?**

We will see different behaviours.

Routines and boundaries are important as they make us feel safe. (How many teachers found it difficult to not have bells ringing and not leave the house?) Schools should maintain these as they can.

In addition, we also need to be aware of very personal, individual struggles our children may be going through. They may not come out as we would expect.

Each of us have experienced 2020 in a unique way and some of us have had additional struggles. Unfortunately, we know domestic abuse, loneliness, isolation, and mental health issues have all been affected.

Ideally, we can build in 'check in' moments as part of our routines. A brilliant [tool for this is free writing](#).

We can't expect our pupils to be able to articulate challenges they're experiencing beautifully every time, especially when we struggle with that as adults.

Keep an eye out for the signs, keep curious, adapt, and support where you can. And please remember to seek your own support when your own signs come up too.