



# Ask the Expert: SEN

What can an ordinary teacher do when faced with an unexpected gesture of trust from a troubled student? Carol Frankl addresses the issue...

## Q

I am a secondary school maths teacher, and also deputy head of Year 9. I've been especially concerned recently about a student in this group, who has become very quiet and withdrawn over the past few months. She often seems tired and moody – when previously she was always a very bright and engaged

learner. Recently, I took her aside, told her that I was worried, and asked if she wanted to share anything. After several attempts at evading the question, she eventually admitted that she is unhappy at home, and also that she has been skipping meals in order to lose weight. She didn't connect the two. How can I best support her through this, and should I be involving anyone else at this stage? At the moment I am keeping it confidential, but could this potentially place me in a difficult position, professionally speaking?

**A** It certainly sounds like your student may be going through what are generally referred to as 'mental health issues', but are better known to educators as 'emotional difficulties'. Unlike young people with challenging behaviour, individuals who are experiencing this – as you have observed with your Y9 student – may not draw attention to themselves in lessons and indeed may be very quiet and compliant, which can often mean that their needs are overlooked.

Fortunately, your vigilance has enabled you to spot the tell-tale signs of emotional distress, such as poorer quality work and reluctance to join in class activities or contribute to class discussion, which means that you can now start working on strategies to help her.

Many teenagers, particularly girls, who are anxious or worried will self-harm rather than misbehave. This might involve behaviour associated with eating disorders such as anorexia or bulimia, or they may even attempt suicide. These young people need support and understanding and appropriate handling by their teachers – and in a different way from young people with challenging behaviour.

You have chosen absolutely the right first step by taking this student aside and saying you have been worried. It is important in these situations to provide opportunities for young people to



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**CAROL FRANKL** HAS OVER 30 YEARS EXPERIENCE IN THE FIELD OF SEN. IN ADDITION TO BEING A PASSIONATE EDUCATOR, SHE IS A REGULAR SPEAKER, A PROVIDER OF SEN TRAINING AND CONSULTANCY, AND FOUNDER AND MANAGING DIRECTOR OF THE SOUTHOVER PARTNERSHIP, ONE OF THE UK'S LEADING INDEPENDENT AND MANAGED SEN ORGANISATIONS, WHICH PROVIDES A MULTI-FACETED APPROACH TO SEN, INCLUDING A SPECIAL SCHOOL (THE SOUTHOVER PARTNERSHIP SCHOOL), AND EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT SERVICES COMPRISING A SUPPORT-IN-SCHOOL SERVICE, A SPECIALIST SUPPORT TEAM OF EXPERTS AND STAFF TRAINING AND CONSULTANCY. FIND OUT MORE AT [SOUTHOVERPARTNERSHIP.COM](http://SOUTHOVERPARTNERSHIP.COM).

communicate with you and also that you *actively listen* to what they are saying in a non-judgemental way, which is something that can be harder than it might first appear.

The best way to develop your active listening skills is to practise with a friend or colleague. It means consciously attending to what the other person is saying, without getting distracted by the content or things going on around you. Active listening requires not forming opinions or counter arguments during a gap in the discussion; those behaviours show a lack of understanding and genuine attentiveness.

Ways of showing you are actively listening include the use of body language that shows interest, sometimes nodding your head or otherwise signalling that you are attending. Asking for clarification of a point or for additional information also demonstrates active listening. Provide feedback by reflecting back what you have heard, rather than what you personally think about what you have been told. Summarise the student's dialogue from time to time, requesting clarification where necessary. Defer any judgement until the young person has finished speaking, and then, again, clarify what you have heard. A good way to show active listening is to reflect back what you have been told, by summarising rather than repeating 'parrot fashion'. You can be candid but sensitive in your response and respect the other person's point of view even if you differ in opinion. This shows you are truly valuing what your student is saying.

Remember, it has taken a great deal of courage for your student to open up to you at all, so this is indeed an honour and a responsibility. It may help her to keep talking through her home situation with you, but if you suspect that anything you have been told might cause harm to this student, you will need to let her know that you will have to pass on what has been said to ensure her safety – don't ever promise to keep a secret, as it's a promise you cannot be sure you will be able to keep, and therefore a potential breach of trust.

As a final precaution, it may be a good idea to speak to the child protection lead in your school in confidence and discuss any current concerns you may have. If the situation escalates, this person will know how to help and which individuals to approach.