

# ELSA POLICY

## WHAT IS ELSA?

ELSAs are Emotional Literacy Support Assistants. They are usually teaching assistants who have received specific additional training from educational psychologists (from whom they receive on going supervision following training). Their role is to support children and young people in school to understand and regulate their own emotions whilst also respecting the feelings of those around them.

### **Origins**

The ELSA (Emotional Literacy Support Assistant) project was originally developed within Southampton then Hampshire by Sheila Burton, Educational Psychologist. It was designed to build the capacity of schools to support the emotional needs of their pupils from within their own resources. It recognises that children learn better and are happier in school if their emotional needs are also addressed.

### **'Supervision' for ELSAs**

The ELSA initiative was set up with recognition from the outset that ELSAs should receive regular professional supervision from an educational psychologist. There is an expectation within the caring professions that practitioners receive supervision from other qualified and experienced practitioners.

At Herne, our ELSAs receive regular supervision with an educational psychologist at their supervision group, which is held twice a term. In the group are ELSAs from other schools in the local area.

### **Individual needs**

All children should be nurtured in accordance with their individual needs. There will always be children and young people in schools facing life challenges that detract from their ability to engage with learning, and some will require greater support to increase their emotional literacy than others will.

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

### **Prioritising pupils**

At Herne, the Home School Link Worker (who is also an ELSA), in consultation with class teachers and the SENDCo, prioritises pupils who may benefit from support. A 'Social & Emotional Wellbeing Referral Form' is filled out for each child, which helps

to identify and clarify the concerns. The ELSA can then set realistic 'Smart' targets (up to a maximum of three) and evaluate how the child has done when the sessions come to an end.

The aim of the referral system is to log all children who are felt to have a need for ELSA intervention and aims to be worked through in date order of referral. However, if a child is identified as having a serious need, they may 'jump the queue'. Sometimes a referral may be made but ELSA support is not the appropriate form of support. In these instances, the Home School Link Worker will discuss other support/interventions, which might be considered with the referrer.

At Herne, our policy is not to automatically continue ELSA support for a child who may have been receiving it at a different school. We believe in a period of settling and adjustment for new children of at least half a term, to monitor and observe the child in their new setting.

### **Communicating with parents**

It is good practice for schools to inform parents when providing their children with additional support. At Herne we write to parents to let them know their child is going to have some ELSA sessions. ELSA support is regularly available to pupils, so there is no need for parents to anxiously interpret this as an indication that there is something seriously wrong with their child. Parents may contact the ELSA if there is anything about their child they would like to discuss (see 'Respecting privacy' below).

### **Prioritising aims ('Smart' targets)**

The priorities for an individual pupil will be identified in discussion with other staff in the school. These priorities will inform the setting of aims for the programme. Where possible it is also helpful to have pupil input on target setting. Working on what is important to them is likely to increase the impact of the support. With the programme aims in mind the ELSA will plan support sessions to facilitate the pupil in developing new skills and coping strategies that allow them to manage social and emotional demands more effectively.

### **Planned programmes of support**

ELSA support is much more than having a friendly chat with an anxious pupil. It is also much more than problem-solving some difficulties a young person is having. ELSA support is about developing a respectful relationship in which the young person is enabled to think about their situation without feeling judged or criticised. It is intended to be short-term purposeful support, usually to help develop new skills or coping strategies that enable the pupil to experience greater success.

### **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.

### **Frequency and duration of support**

Most ELSA programmes run for around 6 weeks, helping children to learn specific new skills or coping strategies. This will encourage the work to have a clear focus. There will be some variation depending upon the needs and circumstances of the pupils. Generally, ELSAs deliver support programmes on a weekly basis.

Regularity is important as it provides consistency and gives pupils a clear message that they matter. How long each session should last should depend upon the developmental needs of each pupil, not on convenience of school timetables. Younger children usually have more limited attention span and some may engage well for only twenty minutes. Usually, half an hour is a good length of time for individual work.

### **Communicating unavoidable change**

There will be times when plans have to be changed. If an ELSA cannot meet a pupil at the arranged time, it is important for that to be communicated to the pupil in advance. Turning up to be told the ELSA is not there, or waiting to be collected by an ELSA who doesn't turn up, is very undervaluing for the pupil. If the ELSA phones in sick it is helpful to ask someone to specifically give a message of apology to any pupils he/she was planning to see. This helps to reduce any disappointment for those pupils.

### **Respecting privacy**

*The following guidance does not apply to safeguarding issues, where the ELSA is obliged to share information out of concern for either the pupil's safety or the safety of others.*

In their work, ELSAs need to respect the privacy of pupils and their families. With the development of a trusting relationship, an ELSA may find that a pupil talks freely and in detail about incidents or situations that are troubling them. There may be times when the ELSA thinks it would be helpful for other members of staff to be aware of a child's concerns or a family situation. Sharing information should be done with sensitivity to the youngsters and their families. For example, to say that a young person is anxious because of some current parental conflict in the home is respectful. To divulge personal details of who said or did what to whom verges on gossip and should be avoided.

It may sometimes be appropriate for an ELSA to talk with the pupil about what they would like to share and to secure their agreement so that their trust is maintained. The key guideline is for ELSAs to ask themselves who needs to know and how much they need to know, always keeping the best interests of the pupil in mind. It is not always in the best interests of a pupil for an ELSA to observe the strict code of confidentiality that applies to counselling or psychotherapy.

### **Ongoing support of pupils**

It is not intended that an ELSA work indefinitely with a pupil. If realistic intervention outcomes are identified at the start of the programme, it should be clear when those outcomes have been achieved. At this point the normal sessions should draw to an

end. In some cases however, a different kind of work may continue more informally, involving a lower level of contact. Some pupils may need to regularly 'touch base' with the ELSA to review their progress. They may need the opportunity to talk about difficulties as they learn to apply with greater consistency the new coping strategies they have developed. New learning will rarely follow an even path. It is helpful however to gradually reduce contact as time goes on. This will avoid over-dependence and encourage the pupil to develop supportive relationships with other adults in school, especially classroom support assistants.

### **ELSA as 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. 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, informal contact can be maintained.

### **Change as a result of ELSA intervention**

It needs to be appreciated that change cannot necessarily be achieved rapidly and is dependent upon the context and complexity of the presenting issues. For pupils with complex or long-term needs it is unrealistic to expect ELSA intervention to resolve all their difficulties.

The training and development of ELSAs is an ongoing process and wisdom is required to recognise when issues are beyond the level of expertise that could reasonably be expected of an ELSA. The supervising psychologist will be able to offer advice on suitability or nature of ELSA involvement in complex cases.

### **Supporting - not fixing**

Remember, ELSAs are not there to fix children's problems and in most cases, they cannot. 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.

### **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 difficult, but are trying to solve a problem they perceive. Their perceptions may need to alter through a process of reflection.

### **The ELSA role should not be confused with behaviour management**

ELSA time is not meant for sorting out incidents or telling children off. ELSA work should be fun - that is what makes the difference. It *is not* a reward for bad behaviour. By building a positive relationship with challenging children, the ELSA may be able to help them think about and reduce their troublesome behaviour.

### **ELSAs can make a difference in school when:**

- Staff understand and support ELSA work.
- Pupils are released from lessons regularly to enable continuity of support.
- There is a consistent, private space in which to work, free from interruptions.
- They have relevant background information on the child.
- They have regular time for planning and delivering programmes.
- They are not given too many children to work with at one time.
- They liaise regularly with teachers to discuss progress.
- They attend supervision regularly to get new ideas and develop their skills.

### **TALA (Therapeutic Active Listening Assistant)**

During the Autumn Term of 2023, Herne will also be introducing TALAs to work alongside our ELSAs. A TALA is a specialist teaching assistant who has been trained by educational psychologists to support children experiencing emotional or social difficulties. TALA offers an emotionally safe and supportive space in which pupils can explore their feelings and experiences. They are heard by the practitioner on a deep level using active listening. Practitioners listen to a child's views, experiences and feelings without judgement in an atmosphere of respect and empathy based on a secure and trusting working relationship.

### **Useful Links**

<http://www.elsanetwork.org/>

### **Monitoring Arrangements**

This policy will be monitored by the Headteacher and Home School Link Worker.

This policy will be reviewed at least annually in line with any relevant guidance.

### **Review Date**

September 2024