

Parental complaints that involve mental health issues

Given the symptoms of mental health problems it is not surprising that they can sometimes seem to evidence themselves in the complaints process. Does this change your approach and how do you deal with parents who appear to exhibit signs of poor Mental Health?

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Mental health problems are common - 1 in 4 people will experience poor mental health at some point in their lives which means that schools are likely to encounter parents with these problems. Given the symptoms of mental health problems it is not surprising that they can sometimes seem to evidence themselves in the complaints process. Does this change your approach and how do you deal with parents who appear to exhibit signs of poor Mental Health?

Top tips

1. Identify whether the complaint is about the school or is it actually more about the parent
 2. Has it come from 'nowhere'?
 3. Does it snowball to everything that has happened going back historically?
 4. Is the complaint coherent and structured or is it a rant which could be considered disproportionate to the concern?
 5. Does the complainant request realistic/rational outcomes or is it difficult to know the preferred outcome?
 6. Is it defensive and angry suggesting that the school is against them and deliberately being difficult/evasive/ out to get them?
 7. Is it aggressive and personal?
8. The school is not a diagnostician for parents but an awareness of how a complaint is being registered with the school may help to have an understanding of how best to approach the problem. Deal with what is presented but be aware that the individual may not be thinking rationally and may be acting out of character. There may be other things going on in their lives that is causing high anxiety or stress.
9. Be careful about any notes that you keep. Make sure that your records are accurate, measured and factually correct. Do not give any opinions or make any judgements It is likely that a Subject Access Request will be made to access the 'hidden data' that the school has 'against' the parent. Record everything as if that SAR has already been made.
10. Do not dismiss the complaint out of hand but follow the published process. Keep any responses calm and measured. Avoid any emotional or personalised responses.
11. Do not spend extended time on trying to placate at the 'concern level'. Offer one explanation and move on to level 2 if required. If the complainant will not engage in the process then make it clear that the issue will be regarded as closed and no further correspondence on the topic will be answered.
12. Allow the parent time at any hearing process to have a full say but retain control of the process. Keep the meeting on track as far as possible and communicate the outcome clearly and succinctly. Do not phrase the outcome letter in any way that will allow further

discussion or consideration. If needed seek advice on correspondence and communication strategy.

13. Consider the children and whether the parent's behaviour is such that there is concern for the welfare of the child. Is the child withdrawn/ anxious/ frustrated? Is there a change in behaviour/ attendance/ school readiness? Check the parent/child interaction at meet and greet times. If necessary make a referral to social care and follow their advice and directions.
14. If a parent is canvassing others in the playground and causing concern, consider whether it is such that it is appropriate to ban the parent or restrict communication. The behaviour would need to be sufficiently intimidating to cause alarm. Alternatively, unwanted approaches to parents or staff may meet the threshold of harassment – this is an option open to individuals or the police might be able to be called in for a public order offence. These are last resort measures but it may be that the police are already aware of the individual and that it is part of a bigger picture. The school has a duty of care to the school community and needs to protect them from unwanted and unwarranted attention.

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