

# Handle with care – when students feel they don't fit

What should a teacher do if a child comes to them and says 'I don't fit in'? There is a difference between temporary disquiet and genuine distress, says Fidelma Murphy. But if you suspect it's the latter and caused by others, careful handling will ensure the child doesn't feel 'at fault'.



At some point in their career a teacher will be faced with a student in distress who comes to them and says that they don't fit in. How should they respond?

The first thing to ascertain is how profound their unease is. If you suspect it is temporary, a supportive, empathetic confidence-boosting talk should suffice. If you believe the problem is deep-rooted – and nothing to do with their school environment – you should immediately seek expert advice. But in some cases the reason they're feeling marginalised is all to do with how they are treated in school.

The fact that they have chosen you to confide in is important. All schools have tutors or pastoral colleagues whose principal job is

student support and wellbeing. But trust doesn't always follow neat organisational lines. It's essential that children feel they can go to someone they trust if they have a problem. And if it is you they trust to confide in, so be it.

It's sometimes difficult for adults to recall just how important peer attitudes and approval are to young people. Teachers and parents are obviously important influencers in any child's life. But in the importance stakes, both play an increasingly junior role to peers as children advance into adolescence.

To understand just how influential social pressure can be consider the following evidence. Researchers in the United States

recently offered a group of students, all of whom were in the top set for some subjects and in a lower set for others, free extra tuition at the weekend\*. They were asked to decide whether they wanted help privately and also publicly. In the lower sets, students were 25 per cent less likely to sign up publicly for the offer than they were privately. But in the top sets, these same students were 25 per cent more likely to enrol for extra tuition if the decision was public.

In other words, it was cool to be smart in an environment where everyone excelled but definitely not cool to admit to wanting help in a class that these very same students found challenging. The group dynamic was powerful enough to change individual behaviour.

So if a student comes to a teacher and says that they don't fit in, it's important to remember just how disconcerting peer disapproval can be.

Are they feeling left out, however, because of who they are or because of something they have said or done? If it's the former, if they feel they don't fit in because of who they are – their religion, race, sexuality, disability or size, for instance – then teachers should make it crystal clear that the problem doesn't lie with them but with their fellow students. The soul of any school lies in its willingness to respect and embrace difference. All the schools I know make a conscious effort to do just that. But that doesn't mean discrimination never happens.

Whatever the reason, if a child is being ostracised for their

difference, you as a teacher have a responsibility to address it and uphold the school's policy of inclusion. And if that policy isn't being observed or isn't understood, you should alert your colleagues to that fact that you all need to do a better job explaining it.

What advice should you give if a student feels marginalised because they have expressed unpopular opinions? Again, schools should be adept at helping students distinguish between unpopular views and harmful ones. Rational arguments that challenge consensus should be accepted, even encouraged, but expressions of irrationality or discrimination are not.

I appreciate it can become complicated when students appear to reflect the unacceptable views of parents. But if that is a persistent problem it may be best to invite the parents in for a chat and diplomatically remind them of the school's policies, which they agreed to abide by when they enrolled their child. After all, presumably they chose the school because on some level its values and aspirations accorded with their own.

In the final analysis, if a child feels they don't fit because of who they are or because of unpopular but perfectly acceptable views, then you should make it clear it isn't them who is at fault. It's incumbent on the school to foster a culture where children can distinguish unpopular views from harmful actions, and where difference is respected and tolerated. Kindness to others should never be an optional extra.

## Shaking off the blues

According to psychologist Cliff Arnall, the most depressing day of the year is always the third Monday in January – dubbed Blue Monday.

On Blue Monday, staff at Abbey Junior School, Berkshire, received a visit from well-being and mental health trainer Anne-Marie Gawen, who spoke about the science of happiness and how members of

staff could work to manage their stress.

Girls and staff brought in £2 so they could wear their bright, jazzy and colourful trousers to school, with the money raised going to help the Samaritans provide emotional support to those going through difficult times in their lives.



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\*The Impact of Peer Pressure on Student Achievement, Laura Peters, 2014