**What Does an ELSA Do?**

**Supporting – not Fixing:**

Remember, ELSAs are not there to fix children’s problems. In most cases they can’t. 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. They will avoid rushing in with suggested solutions, (‘Have you thought of…?’, ‘Why don’t you try…?’) Instead, they will assist the pupil to reflect on their concerns and lead them explore possible strategies and solutions for themselves, (‘Could you imagine another way of responding in that situation?’ ‘How do you think x was feeling at that moment?’ ‘What would you have liked to have been able to say/do?’ ‘What do you think might have happened if…?’)

Sometimes it is appropriate to suggest some possible coping strategies but the key is to do this tentatively and to leave the pupil with choices, (‘Some people find it helpful to do x, y or z. I’m wondering if any of those things could work for you.’)

**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.

ELSAs need to develop the skill of hypothesis-forming. If the young person were able to put into words what they are wishing to achieve through a particular behaviour, what do you think they might say? In doing this there needs to be flexibility of thinking. It may be possible to come up with a variety of hypotheses, some of which will fit better than others.

Once some hypotheses have been formulated, an ELSA can begin checking out to see which fit the situation best. Developing an understanding of the behaviour leads on to identifying alternative ways of meeting the need. Understanding informs intervention. This is one reason why regular access to psychological supervision is vital for ELSAs.

**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.

We want pupils to prepare themselves for working with the ELSA in the same way that an ELSA needs to prepare herself for working with the pupil. If they don’t know when that will be, they are less likely to think about the session in advance.

**Communicating Unavoidable Change:**

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

**Three Keys for Successful ELSA Work:**

In establishing good rapport with pupils there are three important keys that contribute greatly to the success of the ELSA role.

**When working with the child the ELSA will aim to:**

1. **Stay with the feelings:**

* Attend to the message beyond the words
* Notice and acknowledge the feelings a child is showing (facial expression, tone of voice, body language)
* Adjust their tone and expression to fit with the child’s
* Reflect back a feeling that might match what they are hearing (‘When I hear that I have a sad feeling; I wonder if that’s how you feel’)
* Pick up the child’s emotions to help them know that they have been heard
* Focus on feelings as much as facts
* Take time to build rapport with the child

1. **Create a reflective space:**

* Pause for thought; avoid rushing to fill the silence
* Leave time for the child to process their thoughts and feelings
* Reflect back key points of the message you are hearing (sometimes using their own words)
* Wonder aloud, in place of too many questions, to invite but not require comment (‘I wonder what you were thinking as that happened’)

1. **Avoid trying to fix the problem:**

* Resist expectations to resolve children’s difficulties
* Encourage a child to think about choices
* Help them develop problem-solving skills
* Avoid providing the solution they themselves think will work
* Stay curious – open to a range of possibilities
* Value the learning that comes from experience
* Understand that ideas mean more when they come from the child