

Snapshot from the Bridge

... and more inside....

- Oasis Academy Brightstowe joins **Supported Partnership** programme
- **Brief Interventions** in 3 further schools
- Fundraising for **Parent service** in Millpond and May Park Primaries
- **Staff supervision and consultation** in 2 additional schools
- Third intake for **Postgraduate Diploma** run by Wessex Counselling and the Bridge in Schools, for counsellors working in schools.

Defusing a ticking time bomb

There is mounting evidence that the crisis in children's national mental health services is deepening. In April this year, Young Minds warned: "Yes, the system is overwhelmed. Children and young people face a mental health crisis and the government's promised improvements are not happening fast enough."

A recent report found that in one region, 60% of children and young people referred by GPs for specialist help received no treatment.

This is partly because of the gap in early intervention, following cuts to community-based and voluntary-sector services. As a result, increasing numbers of young people are becoming seriously unwell. NHS services struggle to cope, often forced into upping referral thresholds, down-grading staff, and limiting therapy to brief interventions to make their budgets stretch.

The Bridge in Schools is one of the few organisations in Bristol, working to bridge the service gap. The need is especially acute for children aged 5-11, since commissioned and Council funded counselling programmes focus on young people aged 11 upwards.



The number of Bristol children aged 5—11 with mental health problems was recently estimated at 2,390. Yet only a small percentage will get expert help through the NHS.

Our **supported school partnerships**, are specifically there for children and parents who cannot access help through statutory or fee-paying services.

The partnerships focus on areas of high deprivation because of the significant correlation between poverty and poor mental health. We work in neighbourhood schools in the lowest 20% of the National Index of Deprivation. We have been particularly successful in working with children and parents from BME communities who have traditionally had problems accessing services. For instance, last year 56% of families in our East Bristol programme were of BME origin, matching the local population profile, compared to only 28% in the local NHS service.

In our partner schools, children and families see highly trained staff, rarely to be found outside specialist NHS services or costly private clinics. We are uncompromising about maintaining this level of expertise, so that the best help is there for the most vulnerable.



The Parents Service

“Mother has regained a healthy weight again and says she feels free...”

Our Parents Service is a source of therapy for parents of children attending some of our most deprived schools.

These children’s emotional and educational progress may have reached its limit due to the unresolved emotional problems at home. Parental issues include:

- Childhood trauma
- Multiple loss, especially where parents are from conflict situations
- Post natal anxiety or depression
- Family breakdown
- Domestic violence or abuse
- Drug and alcohol dependence.

Parents have often had problems accessing GP or NHS services, due to past experiences and/or chaotic lifestyles. The therapist provides consistency, patience and support, which many parents have never received from any other source.

The service has exceeded expectations: four parents were seen in the eight months of 2014.; 13 parents were seen in 2015. There are now waiting lists for the service in both schools.

Delivering counselling and support to clients in the service can be challenging. Individual circumstances can be turbulent, with parents coping with poor housing, poverty and social isolation.

Some clients will disappear when they hit an anxiety/crisis spot, and then return after a few weeks. The retreat and return to therapy often becomes part of our work, the therapist

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reserving the time and space for the client, and on their return, working with them to understand the earlier withdrawal. In the process, the therapist has to continually assess how robust the client is to deal with complex issues both from the past and from the present day.

Patience and perseverance is needed when making appointments: parents’ phones often run out of credit or are lost. Appointments can be forgotten, highlighting not only challenging lifestyles but also parents’ low expectation of receiving support for themselves. Many have lacked space in their lives to look at their own difficulties.

Evaluation demonstrates very significant improvements in parents’ capacity to cope; tension and anxiety; feelings of despair and hopelessness; relationship with their children; and reduction in risk. In particular, there has been significant movement of clients from clinical to non-clinical levels of distress.

“L, a mother from one of the local BME communities, had 6 months of therapy. L has several children, and her little girl H had significant anxiety. She was unable to speak in school, with quite severe eczema.

L found the work very helpful. She talked about having had a difficult start to motherhood. Both during her therapy and afterwards, L said that it had been very important to have a space to talk and reflect on things, and that she would recommend it to all parents. She described feeling “much better”.

At the same time, her little girl H was seeing the Bridge child therapist. There was much joined up thinking during this time. By the end of the work, H had become able to speak in school for the first time. This transformed her school experience, socially, emotionally and academically.”

Learning About Me

The Learning About Me group is an early help group for children at risk of falling behind, because of emotional and social difficulties.

At Cabot Primary, children in the pilot were flagged to join the group by teachers at the end of Reception. All were working and playing below age level, with very little ability to sit still, self regulate or cope with being in a group.

Every week they were collected from class by their Learning Mentor and the Bridge therapist, who worked as a team so as to build capacity in the school. There was a chair and a cushion for each child, and a chair for their elephant puppet, whose big ears were brilliant for listening.

Each group began with a welcome, following by relaxation exercises, such as 'Relax Like a Cat', lying on the floor, muscle relaxation, and deep breathing. This was important to help the children to focus and develop some self regulation skills.

Then the group began a task together, sometimes modelled by the workers. Because of the young age, and the mix of very quiet children and more dominant, challenging children, there was a structured approach, which aimed to be responsive and sensitive to how the children were feeling (and making the workers feel).



There was a lot of work on listening, observing and mirroring one another, to help the children reinforce the building blocks of social interaction. Later, the focus shifted to recognising and naming feelings, and short narrative stories about an imaginary 5 year old.

The group ran for the year, following current guidance on supporting well being in schools by offering longer term, substantial, group input at an early stage, to prevent later mental health or behaviour support referrals.

The children enjoyed and appreciated the group very much. There was very clear progress for 4 of the 6 children in terms of memory, doing tasks together, being still and focusing. For two children with more challenging and unusual behaviour, the workers were able to advise on further assessment and support measures, as well as giving them a supportive and more individual experience at school.

Stepping Up Steps Down . And On!

4 years on, Big Lottery funding for our Stepping Up programme is drawing to an end.

The programme, led by the Bridge, brought together 5 local organisations to support vulnerable children making the transition to secondary school.

Empire Fighting Chance, Bristol Drugs Project, Creative Youth Network, Hawkspring, and the Bridge built a responsive support programme for children moving to Fairfield (2012-14) and Oasis Academy Brightstowe (2014-16).

Support began in the last term of

Year 6, following children into and through Year 7.

" Without Stepping Up, I think the children who received counselling would have suffered greatly in their first year at secondary, and would have got into trouble or become non-attenders" Primary School LM

Oasis Academy Brightstowe have now invited the Bridge and Empire to continue work in school, with a special focus on children at risk of exclusion. The work includes support to school staff and direct work with children and families.



Did you know that you can follow us on Twitter @bridge_therapy ? We regularly share stories about young people's mental health and general wellbeing as well as tweeting our own thoughts on these issues.

Feedback Page

Some quotes from schools

What does the Bridge contribute to your school?

“The children that have been supported by our therapist have all made great progress in terms of their emotional well-being. **Often this has also impacted on their academic success as they are less anxious in class and therefore can concentrate more.**

The parents who have worked with the parent counsellor have been **especially grateful and have found the process valuable**—even telling other parents about the service who have then come and asked if they can access it!”

“Our therapist has been invaluable in providing advice around the children that she has worked with, to the teaching staff and SLT. **But in addition to that, many of the strategies that she has suggested have been useful for other children.**“

“ We have had another very positive 12 months of support from the Bridge, including individual pupil counselling, group supervision, individual supervision and parent counselling.

The counsellors are highly skilled, professional, warm and very supportive. **They are a key part of our school.**”



“How does supervision and consultation help your staff?”

“In this past year, the supervision sessions really seem to have moved on to a different level. These are considered to be very important spaces to reflect on anxieties and support each other. Staff look forward to them. The level of discussion about individual children and what their behaviour may be communicating has developed, showing an increased awareness of children’s needs. **It feels like real learning has been able to take place in the past 2 years.**”

“The Bridge Foundation is very much part of the school family now. **Our knowledge about supporting children’s emotional and mental health has much improved** due to being able to have in-depth discussion with our therapist. Knowing that we have the capacity to support children in this way is especially comforting.”

One Child’s Story

B hated her new school when she arrived aged 7. She had already found school difficult and her single parent dad had moved her from her first primary. B refused to do anything in class and although a bright girl, she was behind all her classmates. Her behaviour was challenging, she could not accept praise, and had frequent extreme meltdowns. Despite, patient and experienced staff support, she was spending more and more time out of the classroom. Instead of settling, things seemed to be going backwards. Staff worried that she would soon be at risk of exclusion.

B saw her therapist for a year. In the sessions, she gradually relaxed and started a long imaginary game. Through the play, and the unfolding relationship with her therapist, she showed her worry about separating from dad and also her anger with him. Alongside her therapy, the school worked sensitively to put in place behaviour strategies and a solid mentoring relationship for B.

Dad reports that B is now much happier. There has been a big reduction in her emotional outbursts and challenging behaviour. Her learning has picked up and she is back on track with her classmates.