Improving teachers’ confidence in supporting the mental health needs of children with learning disability

Parmar R, Prevezanos P-G, Gibson A

Background:

Up to 40% of children with learning disability (LD) suffer from a co-morbid mental illness (1). Recent studies have established that teachers are the most frequently accessed source of mental health support for children with learning disabilities and their families (2). While this is undoubtedly a privileged position, teachers’ confidence to take on that role can be lacking.

Aims and Methodology:

Our team approached teachers and teaching assistants from a primary and a secondary school for children with learning disability, and asked them to complete a questionnaire rating their confidence in various areas related to supporting their pupils’ mental health needs. The questionnaire also collected qualitative data to inform the content of a planned educational intervention (Table 1).

Responses to the initial questionnaire (Chart 2) suggested that two thirds of teaching staff lacked confidence in the areas addressed by the teaching session.

This number reduced significantly following the session (Chart 3 and 4), with the second questionnaire identifying that only one fifth of teaching staff continued to lack confidence.

We also interviewed a number of senior teaching staff from both schools, to allow further development of the educational intervention.

We then delivered a 90-minute educational session at each school, discussing mental illness in children with learning disabilities. The session focused on prevalence, aetiology, manifestation and management strategies and was adapted for our non-clinician audience.

Following the session, we asked our audience to complete the confidence questionnaire for a second time, to establish if there had been an improvement in their confidence in this area.

Results:

A total of 67 attendants returned the survey questionnaires, they had a mixed level of teaching experience (Chart 1).

Conclusions:

Our Pilot Quality Improvement project demonstrated that a simple training intervention is sufficient in improving the confidence of teaching staff in supporting the mental health needs of their pupils.

Reflection - This project marks only the beginning of a mammoth task ahead requiring building links with various agencies who can deliver appropriate care in this area.

Next steps - to evaluate effectiveness of this improved confidence level in supporting children.

References: