

Practice Guidance Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaires for Children in Care – emotional and behavioural needs

What is a Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)?

All Local Authorities are required to complete an SDQ to assess the emotional wellbeing of children and young people in care aged between 4 and 16 years. Understanding the emotional and behavioural needs of our children in care is important so that the relevant support can be put into place so that children and young people can be supported to achieve their potential. We know many children in care have had traumatic early experiences and this is one tool that can be used to understand how this impacts on them.

The number of SDQ's completed by the local authority for children in care is reported to the Department of Education each year to demonstrate that social workers and professionals working with children in care are considering their emotional and behavioural difficulties.

The SDQ is a brief behavioural screening questionnaire. All versions of the SDQ ask about 25 attributes, some positive and others negative. These 25 items are divided between 5 scales:



As a result of the questions answered when completing the SDQ a final overall score is achieved. There are a number of bandings that have been worked out that help identify if the score is indicative of more significant emotional well-being concerns:

- 'normal' 0- 13
- 'borderline' 14 -16
- 'cause for concern' 17- 40

It is important to remember that the SDQ is only a screening tool and should not replace other processes, assessments and/or knowledge of the child or young person and their behaviours. Therefore, social workers should not wait for an SDQ to identify additional support if a child or young person starts presenting with sign of poor emotional wellbeing or mental health. An SDQ can be completed at any time should any professional feel this is needed to access services and support for a child or young person.

Why should the SDQ questionnaire be completed?

It is important to routinely assess the emotionally wellbeing of our children and young people in care. National research tells us that it is important because –

- Children and young people in care have a higher prevalence of emotional and behavioural issues arising from neglect and abuse.
- Children and young people are likely to develop mental health problems and require the right support at the right time from the right provision.
- Children and young people in care often experience attachment difficulties and require therapeutic support.

The completed SDQ can be used in the following ways:

- To inform statutory health assessments.
- To inform whether the child or young person needs a referral for support including into CAMHS.
- To evaluate progress against emotional wellbeing outcomes as part of the overall health needs of children in care.
- To give commissioners of services a better understanding of the emotional wellbeing needs our children and young people in Bradford.

Who completes the SDQ?

The SDQ form is sent out by the Child in Care nurse before the health assessment and if necessary they help the carer to complete when the health assessment takes place.

Every child and young person must have a completed questionnaire within the last 12 months.

Once completed, the SDQ will be sent to the admin SDQ inbox –

SDQInbox@bradford.gov.uk

What happens with the SDQ information and what should the child's social worker do with this?

The SDQ score will be recorded on LCS under the SDQ Pathway by business support which generates the score. It is important that the score identified from completing the SDQ is recorded and considered as part of the updated assessment for the next child in care review when considering their emotional well-being. The **Independent Reviewing Officer** will need to ensure that the support identifies meets the needs of the child or young person as part of their care plan.

If the score is 17 or above the social worker will receive an alert in their tray and action as below -

- The social worker should share the score with the **child** or young person, children in care nurse and carer.
- The social worker should check what the score was last time and identify if it has changed significantly.
- If the score has increased significantly, the social worker should consider, what does this tell you about how things are for the child or young person and the carer at the moment? Does this tally with other things you are seeing for the child? If it has decreased significantly, what does this tell you? Have you seen changes that would echo what the score is telling you?

- If the score is more than 17, the social worker needs to arrange a Care Planning meeting to consider the support in place to meet the identified needs of the child or young person, as well as consider whether any further support is required for the carer. Increased SDQ scores can be an indicator of stresses within the placement and it is important that this is addressed within the care planning meeting.
- Plans identified to support the child's emotional well-being should be updated as part of the assessment process as well as the child's Care Plan.

How can I find the child's SDQ score and questionnaire?

On LCS go to child's CLA pathway and click on the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire. Click on their most recent SDQ and go to the Overall Score heading. This will show the Overall score and identify the scores in the 5 different attributes as referred to above.

Previous SDQ's will be below this and can be clicked on to identify previous scores.

What supports should be considered to address a child's emotional well-being?

The initial area of support to be considered will be support to the child and the carer by those already involved with the child. Many children and young people in care have experienced traumatic times in their lives and it is important that the social worker has an understanding of that trauma and how it is impacting on the child now and this is discussed with the carer and other key people around the child, such as the Children in Care nurse, and the child's teachers and the carers Supervising Social Worker (SSW).

Some questions to think about when reviewing the outcome of the SDQ scores and thinking about support –

- Does the carer feel confident in their skills in addressing the child or young person's emotional well-being or would they appreciate some extra support or training? Have they accessed training available to them already? Their **SSW** needs to be involved in these discussions.
- As the child or young person's social worker is there any particular direct work you should be undertaking with the child or young person when you visit? Liaise with your practice supervisor and team manager to identify and develop resources
- Would consideration of further or updated life story work be appropriate? Would planned life story direct work with the child or young person be helpful? Who could do this best? See Practice Guidance regarding Life Story Work https://bradfordchildcare.proceduresonline.com/local_resources.html#
- Would a referral to the Therapeutic Social Workers be appropriate? In particular, they can focus on supporting the foster carers in how they care for the child or young person to address their emotional well-being.
- If the child or young person is placed with an Independent Fostering Agency what therapeutic support is available for the foster carers and are they accessing that support? Do they offer support for the children?
- For children or young people living in children's homes what extra therapeutic support is available to support the care of this child? This may include support and consultation

to those caring for the child or young person as well as one to one work. Are BPP involved and supporting the child or young person?

- Have you discussed with the child or young person's school what support may be available in school and if they have any specific mental health support in school? Could the Pupil Premium be used to access some more therapeutic support? The Mental Health Support Team who work within education as part of the wider CAMHS offer may be able to offer support.
- For children or young people with neurodiversity needs this would need a referral to Specialist CAMHS for those aged 7+ or to the Child Development Centre for those under 7.
- There are a number of support agencies within local communities (both within Bradford and in other towns and cities where children and young people are placed) as part of wider CAMHS who offer support to children and young people who have emotional well-being concerns. Have you referred to these organisations for advice and support? Youth In Mind youth-in-mind.org/ are commissioned to provide this support in Bradford. Family Action provide some services <https://www.family-action.org.uk/what-we-do/children-families/bradford/>
- For children and young people placed outside Bradford links will need to be made with local agencies to identify what supports are in place in the locality.

If there is a view that the child or young person needs very specialist support a referral to the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (Specialist CAMHS) should be considered. If you are in doubt you can contact the duty worker and discuss the concerns before making a referral

Services that provide emotional well-being and mental health support are under pressure and there are often waiting lists for support. If a referral has been made for support but there is a waiting list, it is important that there is a plan of support in the interim to address the concerns.

Resources

Social work toolbox <http://www.socialworkerstoolbox.com/>

On line support <https://www.kooth.com/>

Step 2 Counselling <http://www.step2.org.uk/counselling>

Youth in Mind youth-in-mind.org/

Family Action <https://www.family-action.org.uk/what-we-do/children-families/bradford/>

Education linked mental health support <https://www.skills4bradford.co.uk/Services/5179>

Bradford Specialist CAMHS <https://www.bdct.nhs.uk/services/child-adolescent-mental-health-camhs/>

<http://www.safehandsthinkingminds.co.uk/books-cards-worksheets/>