

Strength and Difficulties Questionnaires (SDQ) – A Guide for Schools

Introduction

'Promoting The Education of Looked-After Children and Previously-Looked After Children' (Feb 2018) outlines that the Virtual School Headteacher should work with Designated Teachers to ensure that schools are able to identify signs of potential mental health issues and know how to access further assessment and support where necessary. This is in line with Government advice for Designated Teachers (see Paragraphs 56 and 57 of the statutory guidance for Designated Teachers), <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/designated-teacher-for-looked-after-children>, which states that:

'Designated teachers should put in place robust arrangements to complete their element of the SDQ and engage with the relevant VSH and, where the school has one, the officer responsible for links with mental health services regarding this. Designated teachers should use the results of the SDQ to help inform the child's PEP'.

What is an SDQ?

The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) is a brief behavioural screening questionnaire for 4-17 year olds. It exists in several versions to meet the needs of researchers, clinicians and educationalists. Further information and questionnaires for different age ranges and professional use can be found on the Youth in Mind SDQ website sdqinfo.org/a0.html.

It can be used as follows:

- As a screening tool to assist in ensuring the emotional wellbeing and mental health needs of looked-after children are being met
- As a questionnaire with a rating between 0-40, where a rating of 17+ is regarded as an indicator that further follow-up may be necessary

It should not be used:

- As a sophisticated, free standing, quantitative psychological/psychiatric/psychometric tool
- As a threshold to be met to qualify for services. Children with SDQ scores below 17 may still have significant emotional wellbeing and mental health needs

Context

Currently the *minimum* requirement is for an SDQ to be completed for looked-after children after for one year in care and annually thereafter. The completion of SDQs and the average score of a Local Authority's looked after children is a key performance indicator.

All looked-after children who have been looked after (in care for a year or longer and are aged between 4 and 16yrs old) must have an SDQ completed on them by:

- Their carers, typically, foster carers or carers in residential homes at the request of their social workers who record the outcomes and act on them. This should include sharing with professional networks
- A teacher or member of support staff at their school/education setting, typically their Designated Teacher

Additionally, looked-after children can complete their own SDQs to provide additional information for discussions by professionals.

What are the benefits of completing the SDQ?

The SDQ provides a means of regularly measuring the emotional and behavioural experiences of looked-after children and supports the professional network to form a view about a looked after child or young person's (CYP's) emotional wellbeing. Regular review enables the network around the child and young person to act earlier to put in place appropriate support to minimise these needs.

Completing the SDQ

Who should complete the SDQ?

The SDQ needs to be completed by someone who knows the child or young person well and has regular contact with them. Ideally this would be someone who has had regular weekly contact for at least six months but preferably longer. The Virtual School recognise that this may be more challenging where there have been recent changes to settings. The Designated Teacher does not have to fill out the SDQ themselves but is responsible for identifying the most appropriate staff member to complete it, and ensuring it is completed. It is crucial that the person completing the SDQ is not basing their answers on a specific day but rather over a period of time otherwise the results may not provide an accurate reflection of the child or young person's needs.

How to complete the Teacher SDQ?

The Teacher SDQ will be completed electronically via the MK Professional Portal. This will ensure the results are added to the child or young person's records and allow for triangulation of scores.

The Teacher SDQ must be completed in advance of each Core PEP (twice per academic year).

Should it be necessary to delegate completing the SDQ form to another member of staff, a paper version is available *on the Youth in Mind SDQ website* sdqinfo.org/a0.html. Alternatively, please ask your Virtual School Officer to provide a copy. Please note, the responsibility for completing the electronic form remains with the Designated Teacher. Scanned copies of the paper form will not be accepted.

To prepare for discussion at the PEP meeting, the following questions may be helpful to consider:

1. Are there any concerns (high/very high) in any areas?
 - What may be contributing to this?
 - What is already in place that is supporting the CYP's mental health and wellbeing?
 - How do we know if this is making a difference?
 - What else can be put in place to support these needs?

Please note: Targets and support should focus on the root cause of difficulties. For example, consider whether difficulties with concentration and attention may be related to the CYP finding it difficult to settle to learning due to their emotional needs, rather than an underlying attention difficulty? If this is the case, targets and support need to focus on the emotional needs.

2. What other information does the network have about the CYPs emotional wellbeing? For example, but not limited to:
 - Foster Carer and Young Person SDQ if available;
 - Round Robin teacher views regarding CYP's emotional wellbeing and presentation across school;
 - In house systems for assessing CYP's wellbeing;
 - Information from other professionals involved with the CYP.
3. Is there a clear understanding of the CYP's areas of strength and difficulties in relation to their emotional wellbeing? If not, what needs to happen / what information needs to be gathered, and from whom, in order to develop this understanding?
4. Does the information gathered from a range of sources 'fit' with what the SDQ results are indicating? Do you need to find out any more information in a particular area to further explore this?
5. Are there any differences between what different sources of information are telling you? If so:
 - What may have led to these differences?
 - Consider whether the CYP presents differently in different contexts.
 - If so, what do we know about when they are managing well? How can we apply what is working well in one context to another context?
 - Does the person who completed the SDQ only see them in particular types of situations? Is this representative of their presentation and behaviour more generally?
6. What are the CYP's views about their own social, emotional and mental health needs?
 - What are their main concerns? What do they think might support them?
 - How can we take their views into consideration when identifying targets / strategies?

Schools and educational settings may also wish to complete an SDQ in other situations:

- When the child or young person's situation has changed e.g. carer, school etc. to evaluate whether this has had a positive or negative effect
- At the start and end of a planned intervention
- To quantify concerns
- As part of an application for statutory SEND assessments

Please do contact the appropriate Virtual School Officer to request that an SDQ assessment is delegated to you via the MK Professional Portal if you wish to complete an additional SDQ.

What are the next steps once the SDQ is complete?

During the PEP meeting, it may be helpful to consider the following questions:

- Are there any trigger points that can be foreseen that may impact the CYP's mental health and wellbeing (e.g. anniversary of significant events i.e. coming into care, parent or sibling birthday; transitions; exams; change in contact arrangement; sensitive curriculum topics etc.)?
- What additional support can be put in place in relation to these trigger points?
- Does the CYP have a trusted adult in school who they are aware that they can talk to about their emotional wellbeing and seek support / be signposted to additional support if needed?
- What additional support is available that might be appropriate for this CYP? e.g. school nurse/in-school pastoral support/key person/mentoring/extracurricular activities/group work targeting a specific area e.g. self-esteem; social skills; understanding and managing emotions etc.?
- Do current interventions/support need to be adapted in terms of frequency/length/group composition/contexts/target setting and/or progress monitoring?
- Does the child or young person need further consultation with appropriate professionals?

Please note that if a child or young person is at immediate risk/experiencing a mental health crisis, you should follow your school guidance and liaise with their Social Worker. This may involve attending A&E immediately.