

Educational psychologists work to improve the learning and wellbeing of all children

A large part of our job is about working with children who experience special educational needs, but this doesn't represent the range and variety of work that we do.

We work with children and young people who experience a broad range of needs, some examples include children and young people who:

- Find communicating difficult e.g. have trouble expressing themselves or find playing with others tricky
- Find an area or areas of learning difficult e.g. are having trouble learning to read or remember things
- Might be feeling low, worried, angry or want to hurt themselves
- Have a disability or sensory impairment
- Writing reports to support the statutory assessment process

As well as working with children who experience a wide range of needs, we work a lot with parents, teachers and other professionals. This work is wide ranging and benefits all children. Some examples of this type of working include:

- Training small groups of staff or whole schools
- Running parent workshops
- Supervising head teachers, teachers and support staff
- Doing research in schools e.g. finding out whether something has worked or not
- Helping schools write policies
- Supporting schools with organisational change
- Working to reduce school exclusions
- Working to identify and reduce inequalities for children and young people

This is just a small sample of the work that EPs do. If you want to know more, talk with your EP.

Educational psychologists work in a variety of contexts

The majority of EPs are employed by local authorities but work across public and private sectors is becoming more prevalent (DfE, 2019). Working contexts for EPs include:

- Local authorities

- Social enterprises
- Community interest companies
- Cooperatives
- Charities
- [Multi-academy trusts](#)
- Private EP services
- Private sole traders

There will be differences in how EPs within these contexts offer and deliver psychology, but all educational psychologists are registered to practice with the [Health and Care Professions Council](#) (HCPC) meaning that they all need to adhere to the [same standards of conduct, proficiency and continuing professional development](#).

Psychologists are also likely to practice in line with various codes of ethics, for example the [British Psychological Society Code of Ethics and Conduct](#).

Getting an EP involved early on can be most effective – even if it is for reassurance

Early intervention can be powerful, though sometimes people can wait until a situation feels at crisis point before requesting EP involvement.

Rarely, in our experience, do problems suddenly appear. Often, adults who work with children and young people have a gut feeling that something isn't right. We'd encourage you to think about speaking to your EP at this early stage, even for reassurance. Sometimes an EP might suggest that the best support would come from another agency or professional.

By working together and sharing expertise, any actions or next steps, will be right for that child at that particular time

EPs don't have magic wands and won't be able to 'fix' the problem or offer simple strategies that will solve all difficulties that a child or young person might be experiencing.

Understanding 'the problem'

EPs know that by the time they're asked to work with adults, children and young people, 'the problem' can be or seem complex and messy. Often we're asked to work in situations where the problem has been around for a long time. Although the people we work with often really want the problem to stop or go away, it wouldn't be fair to arrive

at a school and assume that there are easy actions that need to happen and everything will be fine. This often leads people to feel like an EP hasn't listened or fully understood how serious the problem is.

It is likely that strategies and interventions will have been tried but, for whatever reason, the situation hasn't improved. Discussing this with an EP, who can use psychology to help unpick what has been tried, is likely to help towards working out what to try next.

Working together

Every child is unique, as is every class, teacher, parent or carer and so every solution needs to be carefully considered and any suggestions need to be right for everyone involved. While certain suggestions or actions might be right for a school, they might not be right for a particular child. EPs will most often want to work with different people to jointly solve a problem. Teachers have expertise about their classrooms and the curriculum. Parents and carers have deep expertise and knowledge about their children. EPs have expertise in child development and psychology.

Coming together and sharing all this expertise is the best way to solve problems, but we're also aware that this isn't a quick fix process. In our experience one of the most powerful steps forward is having a shared understanding of what is going on, and what changes we would like to see in the future.

EP assessment – what does this mean?

EP assessment can be any number of things which help to develop a holistic understanding of a child's life – their needs, views and perhaps more importantly, their strengths

No two EP assessments are the same. Sometimes there is a view that an EP assessment means one particular way of working, or doing one particular thing and so it can be a confusing term. Really, an EP assessment is anything that an EP does to try and make sense of the situation.

We know that every child is different. They have their own needs, strengths, skills and aspirations. Also, every family, school, classroom and teacher is different. With all this difference it might be odd if an EP did the same thing with every case they worked on.

So what types of things would an EP do to make sense of a situation?

There are a range of tools or techniques that an EP might use to try and make sense of the situation they are working with. It's impossible to list all of them and the best advice would be to talk to your EP to ask them what they are doing and why. We've tried to cover the most common ones below:

Having a conversation

Having a conversation can often be the most useful way of trying to understand what is going on, from different perspectives. Parents, teachers and children will all have different views about 'the problem' and it's important to try to understand these views. EPs might call these conversations different things e.g. a consultation or a joint problem solving conversation.

These conversations involve a great deal of psychology. EPs think carefully about the questions they ask, including when and how these questions are said. An EP's work is really helped by those involved allowing plenty of time in a safe space to really talk and think about the situation that is causing concern.

Gaining a child or young person's views

This is an important part of an EP's job. Often, we're asked to become involved to support a child or young person who seems to be experiencing difficulties. [Children and young people are at the centre of our thinking](#) and work and so it's important to try to understand what they think about what is going on, what the difficulties are and what they think is working well.

Again, there are a huge range of [tools and techniques that an EP can use to gain a child's view](#) and no two children will be the same. In most cases, an EP will decide what tools or techniques to use based on the conversations they have with adults that know that child best.

Observation

Often it can be useful to observe a child at school. This can help an EP understand what life might be like for the young person they're working with. An observation can give an EP the chance to think about what a child or young person might be struggling with, but also what's already working well in a particular situation. A key focus of these observations is exploring environmental influences on a child's learning, wellbeing and development.

It can be difficult for school staff to have the time to carry out an in-depth, focused observation and so sometimes an EP might spot things that have previously been missed. EPs might carry out observations in lots of different ways e.g. at different times,

in different places. This is because we know that children and young people can behave in different ways in different environments.

Cognitive assessment

Cognitive assessments can be done in lots of different ways and a cognitive assessment is not the same as a cognitive test.

This can be a tricky term to understand. 'Cognitive' refers to anything to do with thinking or learning. This means that a 'cognitive assessment' might look at a whole range of skills e.g. memory, problem solving, attention skills, learning.

A cognitive test is usually a series of activities carried out in a controlled way, designed to 'test' different skills. They are also referred to as psychometric assessments.

- Cognitive tests can give a series of scores that can then be compared to a larger group of children of the same age.
- Cognitive tests can tell us what a child can do in the test situation with no help or encouragement (we sometimes call this mediation).
- Cognitive tests give a snapshot of performance on the day

There are lots of other tools that EPs can use to carry out a cognitive assessment with children and young people. A popular and effective way is to do a dynamic assessment with a child or young person.

Dynamic assessments (as the name suggests) are ways of working with a child or young person that help people understand a few things:

- What a child or young person can do by themselves
- What they can do with the careful help of an adult
- What type of help and support is best moving a child's learning on

Dynamic assessment also allows an EP to explore other things that can affect learning. These things include motivation to learn, how the child thinks about themselves as a learner (mindset) or the impact of the language used by the EP or the task itself.

It can be useful if a teacher watches an EP carry out a dynamic assessment – lots of what they observe will be directly relevant for the classroom. Cognitive tests usually can't be observed.

“We need an EP report”

It's important to think about why you need an EP report and what you hope it will do or give you.

Just like no two EP assessments are the same, [no two EP reports are the same](#). When EPs hear that a report is needed, they're likely to want to know a few things:

- What is it you hope a report will do?
- What do you think a report will give you?
- What would be different if you had a report written by an EP?

EPs do write lots of reports; these are often the products of our work. In our experience it is usually EP involvement i.e. what the EP does, that people value most. Once we have been involved, we can then decide together what type of product is going to be most useful e.g. a letter, a record of our conversation, or a lengthier report.

Sometimes there is a big focus on an 'EP report' because there can be an assumption that EPs are gatekeepers to something called Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), or places at a special school. This is not the case. The information provided by an EP is designed to identify a child's strengths and needs, and then describe the types of things that should be in place to make sure that a child's needs are met. An EP report can details what was agreed during the EP's work, and it can help people to make decisions but it shouldn't say whether a child should receive an EHCP or what school they should go to.

Document produced by - *Dr Deborah Churchill, Dr Amanda Gaulter, Dr Sue Roffey, Dr Cathy Atkinson, Dr Mary Stanley-Duke, Dr Will Shield, Dr Emily France, Dr Adrianne Reid, Dr Amy Such, Dr Jen Waite*