

MODULE 3.3

SHARING CONCERNS WITH PARENTS

Table of contents

Objectives	3
Outcomes	3
Key messages	3
Concerns about a student	4
Checklist for working through a concern	5
Approaches to raising concerns	6
School procedures on raising concerns	7
The importance of discussing / working through options with senior staff	8
Planning to share concerns with parents	9
Information gathering	9
Who should be involved?	9
Making the initial contact	10
Method of sharing concerns	10
Communicating concerns to parents	11
Example conversation starters to help parents share their views	12
Parent responses	13
Examples of active listening responses, depending upon the parent's reaction	14
Problem solving with parents	15
Examples responses	15
Dealing with aggressive parents and staff self-care	16
Diverse background consideration	16
Cultural considerations	17
References and key readings	18

Sharing concerns with parents

Objectives

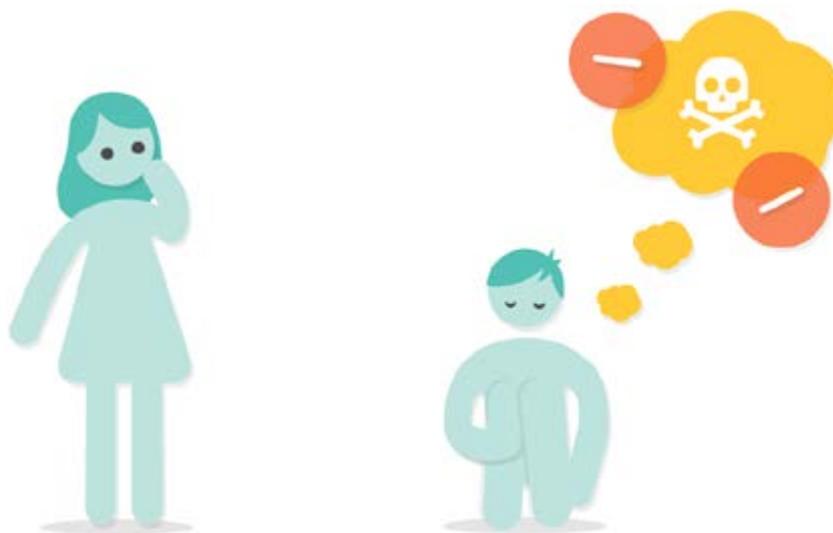
- School staff have skills for initiating conversations with parents if worried about their child's emotional health.

Outcomes

- Enhance understanding of the importance and benefits of staff members raising concerns about student mental health with parents.
- Increase awareness of the process within the school when concerned about a young person, and the planning required before talking with parents.
- Develop skills and strategies for communicating effectively with parents when concerned about their young person.

Key messages

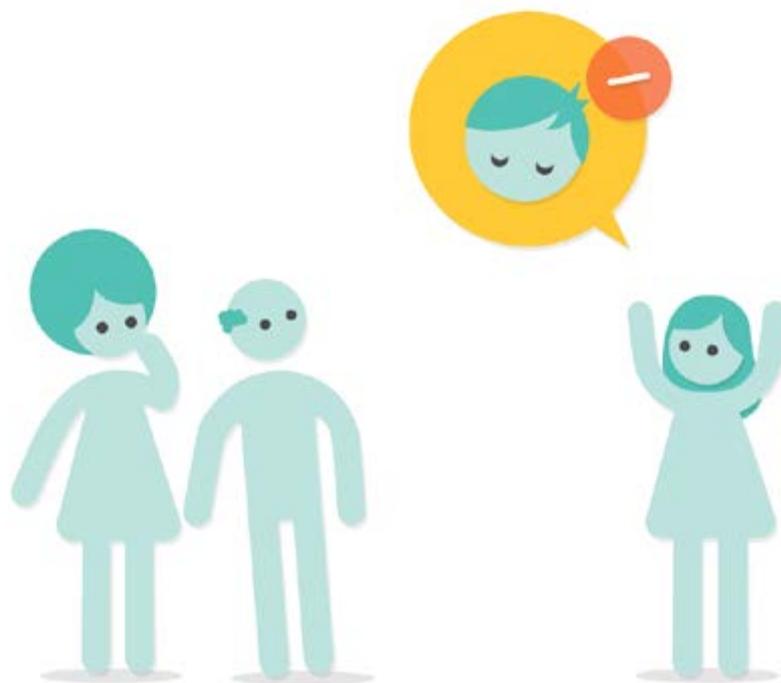
- School staff are in a position to get to know students, and are well placed to notice mental health issues of concern.
- Schools have processes to support school staff when they notice issues with students.
- There are a few general principles or tips that all school staff should know.
- Parents may have a range of responses when school staff raise concerns with them.
- School staff self-care, when working with parents, should be built in to processes and planning.



Concerns about a student

As school staff members get to know students over the course of a school year, and potentially over many years, there may be times when they become concerned about their emotional or mental wellbeing. This may stem from noticeable changes in their thinking, behaviour, peer relationships or academic performance. In general, the longer the difficulties persists and the greater the impact it is having on the student and/or others, the greater the level of concern.

When staff become sufficiently concerned about a student's wellbeing it is important that they feel confident enough to 'check-in' with the student and/or family and to facilitate support if that is wanted or needed. Obtaining timely support for students and families is the goal to avoid difficulties becoming too entrenched or deteriorating to the point whereby the student and family are in crisis.



School staff will be familiar with raising worries or concerns about student learning, but may feel less confident when raising concerns about students' emotional wellbeing. They may feel that they need more information, or a list of signs and symptoms to do this. For more information on signs and behaviours to look out for, **see Module 4.3 When should I be concerned?**

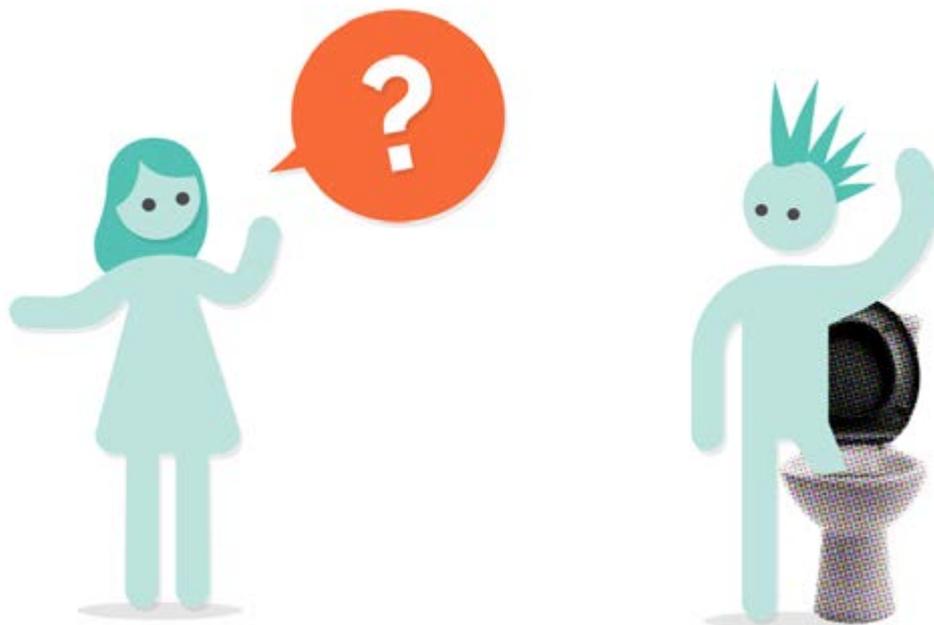
Checklist for working through a concern

If school staff do become concerned about a student, the following checklist can help them work through the concern:

- What is the concern that you have noticed? How is this affecting the student's work, friendships, coping with school, etc.?
- What is it about the concern that bothers you most? Are you making any value judgements?
- How worried is the student about this? How is it affecting the student?
- Does this concern remind you of another time when you had a similar concern? If so, how was it handled? What worked?
- Could there be cultural aspects relating to this concern? How might you find out?
- Do other staff have similar concerns?
- What confidentiality considerations do you need to think through? Would you be breaching the student's trust if you raised the concern with the parent or shared it with other staff?
- Have previous attempts been made to raise the concern with the student and family? By yourself or others?
- Should the concern be discussed with the student? Does the age of the student make a difference?
- Are there known risks associated with raising the concern? Do you need to follow up on it now or can it wait? If you don't raise the concern what could be the consequences? If you wait, when do you need to review the situation again?



Approaches to raising concerns



Different types of concerns will require different approaches:

- A concern about student safety, for example, may require mandatory reporting or other legal obligations.
- Concerns related to changes in student behaviour or attitude are often handled directly with the student in the first instance – with the teacher ‘checking-in’ with the student to get an understanding of what is happening to gauge the level of concern and the likelihood that any difficulties will be ongoing.
- More serious worries or concerns may need to be taken up with parents, ideally with agreement from the student.
- If there is no immediate apparent risk, it may be more appropriate to wait and observe the situation for a while, or perhaps gather more information from other staff members.

Some concerns may relate to emerging difficulties the family is experiencing (eg. reduced income, strained relationships) and affecting their immediate ability to cope and support their child. You may or may not know about these difficulties. Be sensitive in any responses in order to respect and support the family.

School procedures on raising concerns



Schools will have their own policies and procedures to guide staff in what to do when they have a concern. The policies and procedures will be different for every school and should consider the following questions:

- What concerns should be handled by individual teachers and other staff members?
- At what point should concerns be referred to leadership or welfare staff?
- What is the process for staff to respond to their legal obligations around mandatory reporting if a student or parent shares information that raises concerns for the staff member about the student's safety?

(See the national legislation factsheet: <http://www.aifs.gov.au/cfca/pubs/factsheets/a141787/>)

- What resources can staff refer parents to?
- If staff know about local services, when is it appropriate to share this?
- How do staff respond to families with shared custody of the young person?
How will staff know who they should approach with concerns, and who they can disclose information to?
- What additional training might staff require in order to effectively communicate with parents?
- How will the school work with parents who would benefit from additional support from leadership or welfare staff?
- When is it appropriate for staff to request support from leadership, or other senior or welfare staff, to assist with conversations with parents?

The importance of discussing and working through options with senior staff

There will be a number of circumstances when senior staff should be consulted:

- The concern or worry is serious, and it is clear that it needs to be dealt with carefully. This includes issues related to student safety or risks to others. There will be school guidelines, or legal obligations, that need to be followed in these cases.
- There is a history of difficulties with the family, or the family is already linked into services. This could mean that there are already staff who are working with the family, and these existing relationships could be utilised to raise the concern.
- The staff member requires support in relation to the concern. This could be due to a number of reasons, including:
 - inexperience in working with families
 - the concern has triggered a response in the staff member and they require support
 - the staff member has previously experienced difficulties engaging the student or their family, and believes that they may not be the best person to raise the concern.

It will be useful if the school develops guidelines or a flow chart, which supports staff in knowing the process for dealing with concerns they have. This should include the types of concerns, some way of gauging the seriousness of the concern, times when the staff member could discuss the concern with the student and/or family directly and those times when the concern should be raised with senior staff.

As part of a whole school approach, teachers form a key part in the team supporting students. They see students throughout the school day, and are well placed to notice things that concern them.

Including the student's ideas in the planning for the discussion, or offering to include them in the conversation, will show a respect for the student while also encouraging them to maintain some responsibility in resolving the issue. Discussing the concern with the student can also provide some insights that will better inform the staff member about the situation.

Planning to share concerns with parents



Information gathering

Gathering as much information as possible, with tangible examples of the concern, and its impact on the student, staff member and school is important when planning the conversation with parents. It is useful to run through the concerns checklist (see above).

Who should be involved?

When planning to share concerns with parents, consider who is best placed to have the conversation.

- Wellbeing staff**
 Depending upon the type and level of concern, it may be more appropriate for a teacher to refer the student to wellbeing staff, rather than make contact directly with parents. This will particularly be the case if the family is already working with the wellbeing staff, or if there are a number of teachers with concerns requiring a co-ordinated approach.
- Benefits of a pre-existing relationship**
 If the parent is known to a staff member, it may be easier to make contact and raise the concern than if there is no pre-existing relationship. A pre-existing positive relationship may also have enabled some knowledge of each other and some level of trust to be developed, which will assist in raising concerns. The staff member may also be better placed to understand the context for their concerns, which will help them to consider how to approach the parent. If the parent feels like the staff member understands their situation this will also help the interaction. It will also be helpful if the parent has had positive contact previously with the staff member so that the concern is raised within a context of an overall interest in the student, not just as a negative observation or complaint about the student.
- Including the student**
 Decisions should be made about when and how to include the student, particularly older students. If the student is attending the meeting, then staff should help them understand why the meeting is happening, and ensure they feel comfortable to speak.

Making the initial contact

- Contact preferences:**
 Checking if there is a preferred way for the parent to be contacted, for example by phone or email, will help to ensure they are contacted quickly and efficiently.
- Timing of contact:**
 As soon as staff are sufficiently worried about a concern, owing to its longevity or seriousness, they should contact the family. Timely contact will help families feel more in control and that the situation is still at a point where proactive action can be taken.
- Amount of information shared:**
 Deciding how much information to share during the initial contact should also be considered. Do you focus on just the key concerns or do you attempt to cover all issues?



Method of sharing concerns

A decision about whether the concern can be discussed over the phone, or whether a meeting is necessary, will help to set the scene for the parent.

- Over the phone**
 Sometimes a face to face meeting may be preferable, but not possible within the timeframe. Also, the parent may wish to know what the concern is before they agree to meet. Therefore, being as prepared as possible when making the first phone call is important.
- Face-to-face**
 If a face-to-face meeting is preferable and possible, it is important to set the right scene for the conversation. Choose a quiet, confidential, yet safe, office or space.

Communicating concerns to parents

Planning for the discussion with the student and their family is important, and is usually easier when the staff member has an existing relationship with the family. The staff member needs to approach the family in an open manner and be prepared to explain the concern. Provide clear examples and convey the message that the school wants to support the student and family.

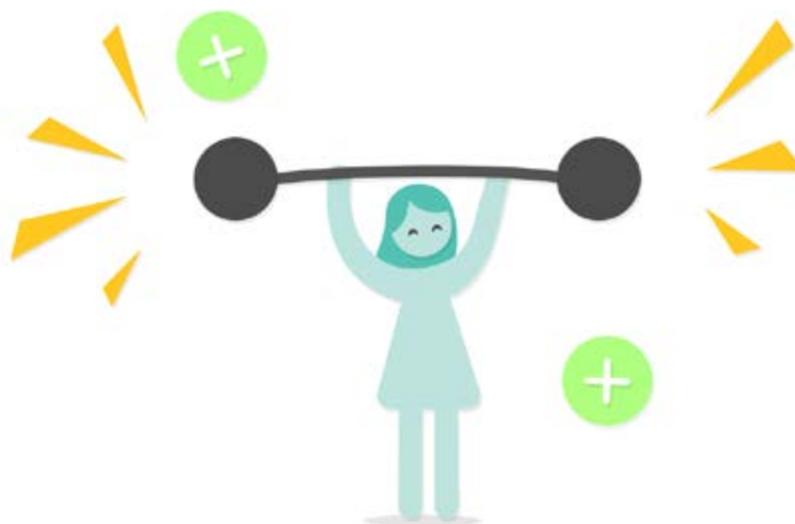
- **State the concern clearly**

State your concern clearly, using non-judgemental language to reduce any defensiveness or misunderstanding. Keep in mind the following points when explaining your concern to parents:

- » *What is my concern?*
- » *What have I noticed (use examples)?*
- » *What impact is the concern having on student / parent / school / community / me?*

- **Take a strengths-based approach**

When communicating concerns, staff should take a strengths-based approach. A strengths-based approach does not mean issues or concerns are not raised – rather it includes strengths in the conversation and ensures that the negative aspects are not the sole focus of the conversation. It also helps parents to recognise that you genuinely care about their child and have their best interests at heart.



"I've noticed that Dieter has been much quieter than usual lately, and is struggling a bit with his school work. This really isn't like him as he's usually pretty cheery at school, and always says hello and chats to me. I wanted to check this out with you. Have you noticed any changes at home?"



- **Send a message of support and of wanting to work together**

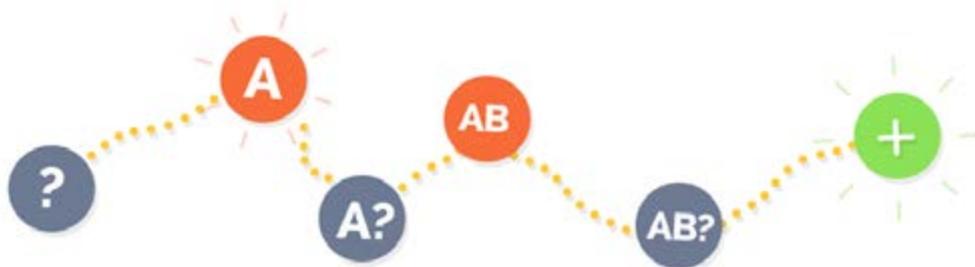
Adopt a positive solution-focused approach that sends a message that together the school, parents and student will be able to resolve the issue. This will help in maintaining the relationship, and keep the parent feeling hopeful and supported.

- **Listen to the parents' perspective**

After allowing some time for the parents to process the information, it is important for the school staff member to listen to them to gain a sense of how they feel about the concern being raised. This may provide more information about the issue (for example, is it part of a bigger issue, or a school-specific concern?). Alternatively, there may be a need to schedule another discussion to allow the parent to have some time to think it through, or discuss it with other family members or the student.

Example conversation starters to help parents share their views

- *"I'm wondering whether you have similar concerns?"*
- *"Have you noticed any changes at home?"*
- *"What ideas do you have about what's happening?"*
- *"Do you have any questions about what I've said?"*
- *"Is this something you've heard before, or thought about before?"*
- *"Is there more information that would be helpful for you?"*



Parent responses



When the concern has been raised, there may be a range of responses from the parent - such as surprise, shock or embarrassment. Conversely, the parent may be relieved because they have had the same concern, and didn't know what to do about it.

Regardless of their response, parents will often appreciate staff raising concerns when expressed non-judgementally and empathically. Not only does it show a high level of care, but also helps them feel that they are supported in their parenting. This is particularly true if they are also concerned about their young person, but didn't know what to do about it.

Some parents will be able to articulate quite easily how they feel, and may be able to quickly decide how they will respond. For example, they may decide they need to talk to their child and gather more information, or problem solve it with them.

It can be helpful, in all conversations, to use active listening to show the parent they are being heard, and also to help them sort through their thoughts and feelings.

Examples of active listening responses, depending upon the parent's reaction:

- *“It sounds like this has come out of the blue to you, and you're quite surprised by what I've shared with you”*
- *“Am I right in thinking you are not really surprised about this and that you are also concerned?”*
- *“You have heard about this, but it seems like something else to you. Would you like to check this out with (NAME)?”*
- *“This news has come as a bit of a shock and I can see it has upset you.”*
- *“I get the impression you are not overly concerned , and that we probably shouldn't be too worried about this”*
- *“I'm hearing that you're relieved that I've raised this concern.”*
- *“It seems you're not sure about this and need some time to think about it”*
- *“Sounds like we've got some different views about this, but that we do agree on ...”*



Some of these examples include a summary of the parent's views (paraphrasing) while others emphasise the feelings the parent has. They all aim to clarify or confirm what the staff member is hearing, and provide the parent with the opportunity to say more to enhance understanding or to simply acknowledge that the staff member has heard them accurately.

Active listening skills are covered in more detail in **Module 3.2 Communicating with parents.**

Problem solving with parents

After the parent has had some time to reflect and consider the information that has been provided, it could be useful to then ask what would be helpful. It is important parents and carers play a central role in any proposed next steps or solutions. It can be helpful to ask if another meeting, perhaps with the young person as well, would be helpful to discuss this further.

Suggestions about possible ways of responding:

- The parent discusses the situation with their young person and includes them in the solution. In the meantime the staff member monitors the situation at the school.
- The parents use their own support system, including friends and family or professional supports.
- The school refers the parents and students to additional support. This could include support through the school wellbeing processes or through external community agencies.
- The student is supported at the school by other staff aware of the situation. Including the student in discussions about this would be best to ensure confidentiality.
- Mentor arrangements are made with peers, staff or external agency staff.
- A checking-in process is established, where the staff member regularly meets the student to check on progress.
- Regular phone contact is made with the parent to monitor progress.

Examples responses:

- ***“So you’ll have a chat with Dieter at home tonight and see if anything is bothering him at school. I’ll follow up as well and check in with him next time I see him. Then we’ll talk about it again next week.”***
- ***“I can refer you to our student welfare coordinator if you would like to talk about this some more. She will be able to tell you who else can help your family.”***

Problem solving together

Any plan needs to work for the student, school staff and the family. Solutions that have been developed together are more likely to encourage ownership of the solution and be more likely to be successful.

Dealing with aggressive parents and staff self-care

It is possible that some parents will respond aggressively to a concern that has been raised by a staff member. If there is a history of aggressive responses from a parent, or a staff member is worried about an aggressive response, then ideally senior staff will lead the planning of any possible meeting. This planning will consider which staff member/s are best placed to participate, and ensure staff and parent safety is given priority, and in accordance with policy guidelines.

It is also important that staff members understand debriefing arrangements for staff when they are worried about the outcomes of any meetings that have occurred with parents or students. A knowledge of the external supports available (for example, Employee Assistance Program) is also useful.



Diverse background consideration

Raising concerns with families from diverse backgrounds will require additional planning and possible specialist support. For example, it will be important to find out whether the parent or family member speaks and understands English, or whether an interpreter will be required. Resisting the urge to have the student or other family member translate is important to ensure accuracy, and not place the student in the role of interpreter.

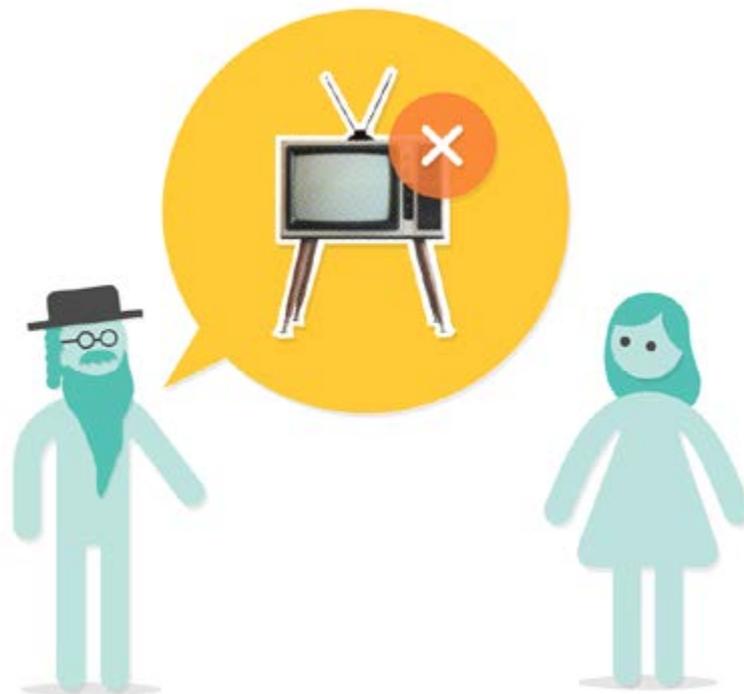
Working with interpreters requires some specific skills and knowledge. There will be guidelines available to the school, which outline when it is appropriate, when funding may be provided for this and how to access an interpreter.

Cultural considerations

Some concerns the teacher wishes to raise may be particularly sensitive because of the cultural background of the family. Support may be required from community elders to guide the school on how best to approach parents and families. Having discussions with community elders about the types of concerns that may be sensitive, rather than specifically about a particular student or family, could be useful prior to meeting with the family. These discussions would need to take into account confidentiality issues.

Similarly, there may be some concerns that appear at a school level that actually relate to the cultural background of the family. For example, students may be absent due to cultural or religious events (such as sorry business in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture). A sensitive approach to this is more likely to be seen as respectful to the importance of cultural traditions.

An appreciation of the complexities facing the lives of families from diverse backgrounds can be very useful for staff when considering raising concerns with parents. Some concerns may be related to issues facing the family, such as homelessness. Sensitivity around these pressures can alleviate the risk of further isolating the family, staff feeling unsupported by the parents and the student's needs not being fully understood.



MindMatters is a national mental health initiative for secondary schools developed by *beyondblue* with funding from the Australian Government Department of Health.

See more MindMatters resources at www.mindmatters.edu.au

References and key readings

- Evans, M.P. (2013). Educating preservice teachers for family, school, and community Engagement. *Teaching Education*, 24, 123-133
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- Lines, C., Miller, G.E., Arthur-Stanley, A. (2011). *The power of family-school partnering (FSP): A practical guide to school mental health professionals and educators*. Routledge.