Steps to Creating a Thought Detective: Investigating Unhelpful Thoughts for School Staff

Children can learn to recognise automatic negative thoughts and practice challenging them.

By being a ‘thought detective’ children can be encouraged to examine their thoughts instead of just acting on how they make them feel.

Steps on how to encourage a child to be a ‘thought detective’:

1) First explain that our brains are amazing. Our brains take in millions of pieces of information every minute but that is way too much for us to pay attention to, so our brains create shortcuts.

The problem is sometimes these shortcuts go wrong……..

✓ Imagine you had a thought detective that lives on the inside, what might it look like?

2) Encourage the child to create their detective in as much detail as possible – what is its name? What does it look like? What does it sound like? Does it have any gadgets? Does it have any friends? What does it wear? etc. Allow the child to be as creative and/or silly as they like. This is the first step in empowering the child.

✓ Your detective’s job is to hunt for clues to work out whether your thoughts are helpful or not

3) This is a chance to explore and challenge negative thoughts just as we might with an older child/young person. You might like to create a detective’s clue book with the child. You can then practice together using an example e.g. the spider is going to eat me. Encourage the child to first identify the unhelpful thought and then to look for evidence to see whether it is true or false.

✓ Finish the investigation by linking thoughts and feelings

4) Here is an opportunity to acknowledge and accept the feeling, while challenging the unhelpful thought e.g. Spiders make me feel scared and gross but I know they can’t hurt me.

✓ Practice being a thought detective at home

5) Encourage the child to teach the parent the process and for the parent to become their co-detective at home!

For more information and resources on anxiety please go to bwc.nhs.uk/youve-been-missed