



Educational psychology

● Find out which combinations of A-levels are suitable for entry to a psychology degree by going to the British Psychological Society website (www.bps.org.uk) and investigating the careers section.

Psychology is an increasingly popular subject at A-level and university, but many students are not sure what psychology is or what they would be doing if they chose to study psychology or to work as a psychologist. Jane Leadbetter tells us about her job as an educational psychologist.

Many television programmes show psychologists helping to solve crimes, commenting on families who are experiencing difficulties or helping parents to control their difficult children. They all show psychologists applying their knowledge of psychology to everyday situations, but what is the subject of psychology about?

According to the British Psychological Society website (www.bps.org.uk): 'Psychology is the study of people: how they think, how they act, react and interact. Psychology is concerned with all aspects of behaviour and the thoughts, feelings and motivation underlying such behaviour.'

Working as an educational psychologist

Educational psychology is just one of the careers you can choose if you have a degree in psychology (Box 1). It is a fascinating and worthwhile job as it focuses on tackling the problems encountered by young people in education. These may involve learning difficulties or social or emotional problems.

Educational psychologists normally work in schools, colleges, nurseries and specialist settings. They spend some of their time working with children and young people to assess their difficulties and suggest ways forward. They also spend a lot of time in

Box 1 Other types of psychology

Interested in psychology but not educational psychology? Here are some other types of psychology courses listed by UCAS:

- animal psychology
- applied psychology
- applied social psychology
- behavioural science
- business psychology
- clinical psychology
- cognitive psychology
- cognitive science
- counselling psychology
- developmental psychology
- European social psychology
- experimental psychology
- forensic psychology
- health psychology
- human psychology
- occupational psychology
- psychology of communications
- social psychology
- sport psychology

Find out more about these and other courses on the UCAS website (www.ucas.com).

Box 2 A typical working day

Nursery visit

Today starts with a visit to a nursery. A child is causing concern because he is not talking to other children and does not interact socially with them. Perhaps this child has a speech or language problem?

After observing the child and playing alongside him in the nursery, I meet with the important people in the child's life. These are the child's parents, the staff in the nursery and, in this case, perhaps a speech and language therapist, to discuss the particular worries and to suggest plans that can be put into place.

I will probably make a follow-up visit to see the child at home, to do a detailed assessment with the child to find out the exact nature of the problem. The health services will also be contacted to check on the child's overall development. Psychologists know how children develop and can detect if a child is developing differently from the usual patterns.

School visit

Later in the morning it's a school visit to check how a class teacher is getting on with a plan to improve the classroom environment. The behaviour of some boisterous and unruly pupils is causing problems. After observing how the classroom is arranged, how

the lessons are planned and how the teacher manages the children, I made suggestions about how things might be improved. The teacher has tried some of the suggestions and noticed that the lessons have improved. Psychologists know about factors that affect behaviour and aggression and also about 'classroom ecology'.

Teacher session

The first afternoon session is with teachers, not children. Educational psychologists train teachers and other adults in schools. This afternoon is a training session about children's social and emotional needs. Other sessions have been about new initiatives such as peer mentoring and paired reading. After a training session there will be more visits to help the staff to put the new systems in place and ensure that they work properly.

Home visit

Late afternoon is a home visit to a family whose child has been referred for help. This visit is about finding a suitable school. Some children need a fresh start at another school or are in danger of being permanently excluded from their current school. It is the time to find out the parents' views and to compare the child's behaviour across the very different environments of home and school.

Speech and language specialists work with children who have difficulty speaking, hearing or understanding spoken words.

- Get involved in any peer listening and peer mentoring groups at your school.

- Go to www.psychnet-uk.com/games/games.htm to try some psychological games.

- Find out about the lives and work of some famous psychologists at www.psychnet-uk.com/training_ethics/psychologists.htm

schools with teachers and others discussing problems that arise within the whole school, or within particular classes, and, of course, with specific children who may be causing concern.

The work is incredibly varied as it involves children and young people from the age of 2 to 19. Box 2 describes a typical working day. More and more educational psychologists are working closely with other professionals who are concerned about children's wellbeing outside schools.

How to become an educational psychologist

To be an educational psychologist, you must have a degree in psychology. You will need very high grades at A-level to gain a place on a suitable psychology course.

After graduating you must spend at least 2 years working with children in a range of settings; many people train and then work as teachers to gain the experience. Finally, you need to complete a 3-year doctoral course at university to qualify as an educational psychologist. It's a long training, but it's worth it in the end!

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Educational psychologists often assess the needs of individual children

