



Behaviour and mental health in schools

Case studies of best practice

Introduction

Throughout our inquiry into behaviour and mental health in schools, we gathered evidence from schools, local authorities and organisations about the work they are doing to support both mental health and behaviour. In this briefing, we will set out case studies of best practice that we gathered to support our [Behaviour and mental health in schools report](#).

Embedding whole school approaches to mental health and wellbeing

1. Charles Dickens Primary School

Charles Dickens Primary School is a two-form entry school based in Southwark, London. The school is a research school, which means they work with the Education Endowment Fund to ensure that the approaches taken within the school are based on evidence. Alongside this, the school is also part of the Department for Education's behaviour hub programme as a 'lead' school.

Over the last few years, Charles Dickens Primary School has been on a journey to improve mental health and wellbeing within the school. A whole school approach is taken, where emphasis is placed on universal strategies to skill up pupils and build resilience. The school believes that such an approach helps to support pupils in being emotionally regulated.

At the heart of this approach is a wellbeing curriculum which is taught throughout the school, from nursery to year 6. All pupils are provided with a 'wellbeing booklet' to complete, and animations are available to accompany this so that pupils can share learnings at home and parents and carers can be involved.

Pupils are also taught a 'character curriculum' where they learn not only about what the school expects of them, but also wider learnings such as what to do if there is a disagreement and how to say sorry. For example, recently lessons have been held for year 6s on dealing with transition to support them as they make the move into secondary school. This helps to ensure that they feel as prepared as possible for the move.

Systems and routines in the school are strong and approaches to both behaviour and mental health are consistent. As a result, the school has seen a decrease in low-level disruption and has been able to keep the use of school exclusions down.

In addition, the school provides a wider network of support for families. An Early Help Manager is employed whose main role is to engage with and support families, and regular coffee mornings are held for parents where experts are invited to provide advice and guidance on key topics. The school has also recently introduced 0-2 provision for members of the local community.

Building effective systems of support around children, families and schools

2. Southwark Council Inclusion Charter and mental health support for young people

In 2020, Southwark Council agreed a clear objective for 100% inclusion in education for its students. Southwark's goal is to ensure that children are always included in education and that provision is available for a wide range of complex educational needs, alongside superb mainstream provision. This was agreed following a steep increase in permanent exclusions in the borough in 2017/18.

Working with head teachers and partners on the local safeguarding board, [the Inclusion Charter](#) was taken to Southwark's cabinet and launched in July 2022, cementing the goal for 100% inclusion in education in the borough. Southwark is planning an event for agencies in the borough to come together to sign the Charter. The Charter sets out:

- To commit to supporting multi-agency approaches to working with those children who are struggling with inclusion at an early stage
- To develop and continually evaluate high-quality alternative provision for children who may need to be outside mainstream settings
- To identify the inequalities that drive disproportionate exclusions and put actions in place to better understand and specifically address them
- Not to encourage parents to explore elective home education as a resolution to issues with inclusion
- To implement a trauma-informed response to behaviours of concern in children.

Southwark is the first local authority to have launched an education inclusion charter of this kind. This is coupled with an ambition to ensure that 100% of children and young people in Southwark have access to the emotional wellbeing and mental health support they need.

The council has invested £2m in mental health in schools through Southwark's Improving Mental Health and Resilience in Schools Programme (IMHARS), a whole school and inclusive approach to mental health and resilience in schools. IMHARS is a preventative programme which aims to build capacity and resilience so that children and young people can cope with the challenges of life. In addition, the council aims to deliver sustainable, universal infrastructure across all schools in Southwark. To date, 100% of schools in the borough have accessed the programme and wider offer.

Southwark Council also ensures young people can access mental health support in the community through The Nest, an open-access service for young people based in Peckham, delivered by Groundwork London on behalf of the council. The Nest provides support at the point of need, without requiring a professional referral, and offers early intervention and prevention for emotional issues and low-level mental health concerns such as worries, anxieties and stress. The council have provided funding so that The Nest can deliver services directly to schools, with over half of schools in the borough now using Nest services.

Embedding relational and restorative approaches

3. Saxon Way Primary School

Saxon Way Primary School is a two-form entry primary school based in Medway, in an area of high deprivation. Over half of the children on the school's roll are in receipt of Free School Meals and a large number of children are known to social care. A high proportion of children in the school are also impacted by poor mental health.

Over recent years, the school has made a significant change in their approach to behaviour. The use of exclusions in the school used to be frequent and sanctions were at the centre of their behaviour policy. The school has made significant strides in reversing this approach to a place where the use of exclusions is now rare and the approach to behaviour is centred on the needs of pupils and understanding the underlying drivers of behaviour.

The school's behaviour policy has been replaced with a relationships policy. This policy has created a positive approach to supporting pupils, particularly through incidents of conflict, and sets out clear expectations of the school community. School staff were involved in the development of the policy, and all staff have received training in trauma-informed care.

Expectations within the school focus on the three Bs: Be Safe, Be Ready, Be Respectful. To support this, the school has an Expectations Matrix, which identifies how children are expected to behave in different areas of the school and this is focused on positive behaviours. These expectations are communicated to all children, who are taught the positive behaviours set out in the matrix. Changes have been made to the physical environment to support the expected behaviour the school would like to see from pupils and to ensure that pupils feel valued.

The school's values (kindness, excellence, independence, resilience, relationships and responsible) are displayed throughout the school and are embedded in the curriculum.

A restorative approach is taken to manage conflict within the school in order to give children the opportunity to have their say and be heard. The school timetable has been amended to allow these conversations to happen, with a 15-minute quiet reading session being put in place after break and lunch to allow teachers to address any issues that happened during this time and to have restorative conversations.

The school has also taken steps to ensure support is in place for parents and carers. Each morning, teachers are expected to stand at their classroom door to greet each child and members of the senior leadership team (SLT) and support staff stand at the school gates to welcome children. The school has found that this approach has enabled contact with parents and has been crucial in helping to build relationships.

Further to this, there is a Wellbeing Centre on the school site which not only provides a community space for parents and carers to come together, but also provides an opportunity for them to access support. Both the school's Senior Mental Health Lead and Wellbeing Coordinator have received training to provide support and counselling for parents and carers, and the local authority will be providing support services such as parenting programmes.

4. Carr Manor Community School

Carr Manor Community School is an all-through school serving 4–19-year-olds, based in Leeds. There are over 1500 students at the school and 200 members of staff. Relationships are central to the school's approach to inclusion. Restorative and relational practices are used across the school to build a culture that promotes a sense of belonging and connectedness. The school has four core values, which inform everything they do:

- Know our children well
- Partners in learning
- Character for learning
- Enjoy and achieve

Key to this is the school's coaching programme, which it believes is fundamental in developing strong relationships across the whole school community. All adults - teaching staff and non-teaching staff - lead timetabled "Coaching Circles" three times a week: Monday check-in, Wednesday check-up and Friday check-out. Each circle has approximately eight to ten pupils gathered from all year groups.

These check-ins provide the opportunity to get to know one another and share targets, worries and achievements, whilst mid-week sessions explore topics such as careers and financial education, health and wellbeing and citizenship, while building resilience and independence.

Coaches are also the child's advocate in the school and can support them with any challenges they may be facing. The model ensures that staff know pupils well and enables them to identify issues in their home or school life before they manifest as behavioural issues. In addition, coaches liaise with parents to support pupils' learning, including working with parents when children are managing difficulties or significant challenges.

The coaching programme has had a profound impact in building strong relationships across year groups, staff, pupils, and families. It has enabled better identification of wellbeing or safeguarding concerns and laid strong foundations to positively support with challenging behaviour and restorative practices. As a result of the practices adopted by the school, there have been no permanent exclusions in 18 years and the school has the lowest number of fixed-term exclusions in Leeds.

5. Trafalgar School

Trafalgar School is a secondary school based in Portsmouth with approximately 1000 places. The school uses relational approaches to build strong relationships across the whole school community. This means all school policies, including the behaviour policy, are built on the foundation of strong relationships. The school believes it is these relationships which create a sense of belonging in the school and enable pupils to feel safe in the school community.

Community circles take place in every tutor group on a Monday and Friday, which are key in building relationships. Community circles are not only a space to have informal conversations, but also to address any issues and to focus on personal development. They

enable tutors to check in on pupils and to address any challenges they might be experiencing. Every adult in the school, regardless of their role, is a Form Tutor which places the pastoral system at the centre of everything.

In terms of the school timetable, the school has three 100-minute lessons per day. These longer lessons not only encourage depth of learning whilst supporting stamina, but also enable teachers to develop and maintain strong relationships and reduce the need for lots of movement during the school day.

The school has a culture of high challenge and high support. When conflict does appear in the school, they work restoratively to deal with this. Whilst all pupils understand they are responsible for their behaviour and that there are consequences for misbehaviour, they are given the opportunity to learn from their actions and make changes to their behaviour through restorative conversations. They believe that because pupils feel safe in the school, this enables them to put things back together and have these conversations when conflict does occur.

In terms of high support, the school has a 'three centre' approach for young people, which includes a specialist centre for Social, Emotional, and Mental Health needs, a centre for autism and a centre for young people with special educational needs and disabilities. These centres each have specialist expertise so that the school can effectively meet the needs of all pupils and ensure they can all be successful in their mainstream lessons.

Following the implementation of these approaches, the school now has low use of school exclusions, high attendance, low staff absence and high staff retention. Most importantly to the school, they have created a school community where every pupil feels like they belong.

6. The New School

The New School is an educational charity founded three years ago with a vision to evolve and enrich the education system and take a more innovative approach to young people's engagement in learning and their wellbeing. The New School is an independent school currently serving 90 pupils from reception to year 8 in South-East London; it will grow to incorporate year 11 by 2026. 75% of the school's intake are previously home-schooled and a number of pupils have additional needs, although it maintains a comprehensive demographic. Children are in mixed year group classes and are taught based on their current level of achievement.

There are four key elements of the school's approach to education, which enable and encourage children to take responsibility for themselves as learners and for their behaviour around the school:

- **Democratic education:** The school uses teaching methods that give young people the choice of what they study and how at certain points of the day. This translates to a mixture of core subjects and optional subjects, meaning a more individualised curriculum, and self-directed time. The school also holds weekly workshops run by both teachers and pupils on a range of different subjects as decided by young people. Examples of workshops being run in the school include knitting, extended

maths and origami, but these change on a half-termly basis.

- **Relational practice:** The school focuses on developing positive and supportive relationships with its pupils. This is achieved through small class sizes, the use of democratic processes and restorative practices. Each day starts with the class coming together to check in, have breakfast with one another, set out what they are going to do in the day and address any issues as a class.
- **Sociocracy:** This process enables staff and young people to be involved in decision making processes about how the school operates through sociocracy circles. The school believes that this process supports the holding of boundaries for their pupils by involving them in the development of and accountability for school rules.
- **Restorative practice:** The school uses restorative practice approaches to manage conflict in the school. This approach allows all voices to be heard and holds people to account for their actions in order to reach an appropriate resolution.

The model the school takes has been evaluated by the University of Nottingham, which found improvements in children's confidence, wellbeing and their sense of belonging in the school. The evaluation also noted that the restorative justice approach taken by the school led to improvements in discipline and to the development of trusting relationships. The next piece of research is currently underway with University College London, which aims to identify the activities that create the change in young people's wellbeing and mental health.

The impact and cost benefit savings of this action research model are being used to build data and understanding of how to evolve and fund models of education within the system to meet the current needs of young people.

Local system support for building relational and restorative approaches

7. Gloucestershire County Council

Since 2016, Gloucestershire County Council has been on a journey to implement restorative practice across children's services. In 2016/17, Gloucestershire was the 4th highest excluding county in the UK, with 141 permanent exclusions. Restorative practice was the chosen approach due to the strong evidence base that it supports the reduction of exclusions, improves attendance, and supports wellbeing and staff retention.

This was reflected in initial pilots the council implemented across children's services, including two schools. The outcomes from the pilots included reduced exclusions, increased attendance and better relationships between staff and pupils. For example, the secondary school that took part in the pilot reduced its suspensions by 54% in the first year and increased overall attendance by 1.3%, while the primary school reduced suspensions by 82% and increased overall attendance by 1.5%.

Following the success of the pilots, the council's Director of Education began a five-year investment plan to roll out restorative practice across more schools. Almost five years later, the council is working with 6 secondary schools, 4 specialist and alternative settings and 43

primary schools to embed a whole school restorative practice approach. A further 32 schools have undertaken a restorative intervention or have implemented an aspect of restorative practice.

Restorative practice is also well used across youth support and youth offending services and has been used as part of the early help service and children's social care team.

Gloucestershire County Council offer a whole school approach to restorative practice. The programme is an immersive one and begins with a two-year leadership programme. It also includes a comprehensive blended learning approach for the whole school community entitled 'Trauma Informed Relational Practice', encompassing all the elements needed to effectively respond to poor behaviour that may lead to exclusion or non-attendance. Learning is further embedded through practice learning circles, facilitation skills training and peer support networks both locally and nationally.

In 2021/22 exclusions in Gloucestershire were down to 108, which the implementation of restorative practice has contributed to alongside a wider focus on promoting inclusion across the county. As well as reduced exclusions, schools embedding the approach report improved attendance, staff retention and overall wellbeing, with progress and attainment levels also increasing. School leaders also report better relationships within their schools and within the broader system.

However, the council recognises that restorative practice is much more than a tool to manage behaviour and reduce exclusion; it's a whole school approach to culture change, which takes time, commitment, and a trauma-informed lens to embed fully. Schools adopting the approach report that they are now more inclusive environments for staff and pupils, with ultimately better outcomes for the whole school community.

8. Brighton and Hove Council

In September 2018, guidance was issued to Brighton and Hove City Council (BHCC) schools on developing an [Attachment Aware Behaviour Regulation Policy](#). This guidance encouraged BHCC schools to follow a relational approach to behaviour, exploring the links at a whole school level between training, policy and practice. Many schools across the whole range of ages and SEN and disabilities in the city have since been following this guidance and are at different stages of their journeys in following an attachment-aware or trauma-informed approach.

Alongside this, Educational Psychologists (EPs) in BHCC have led on whole school Emotion Coaching training to schools, as well as parents-carers and the wider children's workforce. Emotion Coaching is an evidence-based and universal communication strategy that supports the emotional regulation of children, young people and adults. Schools have been supported by the local authority EPs to use an Implementation Framework to plan Emotion Coaching training and follow up embedding work, to ensure links across whole school policies, priorities and practices. EPs have encouraged engagement from key influencers such as the school's senior leadership and governors, to support systemic changes, with many positive impact measures noted for pupils, staff and parent-carers across the city.

Educational Psychologists within the Brighton & Hove Inclusion Support Service (BHISS) follow a 'team around the school' approach, alongside specialist practitioners, teachers and Primary Mental Health Workers to offer advice, consultation and support around a wide range of SEN and disabilities. BHISS Educational Psychologists have also led on developing a [SEND Guide for schools](#) and [Early Years settings](#), as well as the [ATTEND Framework](#) to support Emotionally Based School Attendance (EBSA), which has helped shift towards a more systemic understanding of presenting behaviour and mental health needs which often co-exist alongside other SEND needs, rather than viewing them only through an SEMH lens.

Support for young people outside of mainstream provision

9. Red Balloon

Red Balloon is an educational charity providing tailored therapeutic, educational and social re-engagement programmes to children and young people unable to attend mainstream school due to mental ill health, bullying or trauma. The purpose of the charity is to support pupils to re-engage with education and build the skills and confidence they need to re-integrate with their peers. Red Balloon works with 11–21-year-olds, but most of their current cohort are aged between 14 and 19. A typical referral to the provision is when a student is in year 10. Red Balloon has both physical and virtual centres to best meet students' needs.

There are physical centres in five areas across the South-East region of England. All centres are intentionally created to not look or feel like schools, as Red Balloon understands that school and what it represents can potentially be traumatising for the children and young people they support. The centres are made to feel like home and are relaxed environments, with students not required to wear uniforms.

Red Balloon of the Air is the charity's blended (online and in-person) provision. This provides both learning and therapeutic support online, enabling students to engage and make progress even before they are ready to leave the safe space of the family home. The provision builds gradually over time, with learning and support beginning online, then in the community with their link mentor, and eventually leading to sessions within centres, once students feel confident to attend in person.

Red Balloon uses a process of negotiated teaching where students are able to develop their strengths and interests in order to support re-engagement with learning. Each student has an individualised timetable of online and in-person sessions which are delivered one to one, in pairs or in a small group. Students are also given the opportunity to access a negotiated range of different activities such as cooking or forest school, and termly trips are organised for those who are able to attend.

Therapists provide online and in-person therapy and psychological support to help students overcome their challenges and develop resilience. Alongside this, each student is assigned a mentor who is their advocate and trusted adult. The mentor works one to one with the student on a bespoke set of wellbeing and social re-engagement goals, providing any support they need to build self-confidence. The mentor also acts as a bridge between the

professionals involved in the student's life to ensure their needs are represented.

The provision takes a whole family approach by ensuring parents and carers also receive the support they need. Red Balloon provides family support sessions and individual parent support sessions, and there are monthly parent support groups.

Where appropriate, students work towards formal and less formal qualifications. Each centre is a registered exam centre, and so provides a familiar and safe environment for students to take their exams. When students have built and developed the skills and confidence to move on, Red Balloon plans and fully supports their transition from the programme to their next school, higher education, or the world of work.

To read the report and its accompanying documents, use this QR code:

