

Focussing on attachment

Nicola Marshall looks at what schools can do to support pupils with attachment issues

The culture of any environment is really important. It determines what's acceptable and what isn't. It sets the tone for how people are treated and how their needs might be met. Real change happens when we address the ethos of an establishment – the things that are difficult to put your finger on or explain to someone else. It might be the values that are played out through the people or it might be the atmosphere of the unspoken expectations or demands on someone.

Whenever I enter a new school, its culture is the first thing that hits me, be it the feeling of warmth and nurture you get from the receptionist or frontline staff, or the calm, uncluttered nature

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of the building. Sometimes, on the other side, you can sense the strict, business-like attitude in some schools, particularly secondary schools.

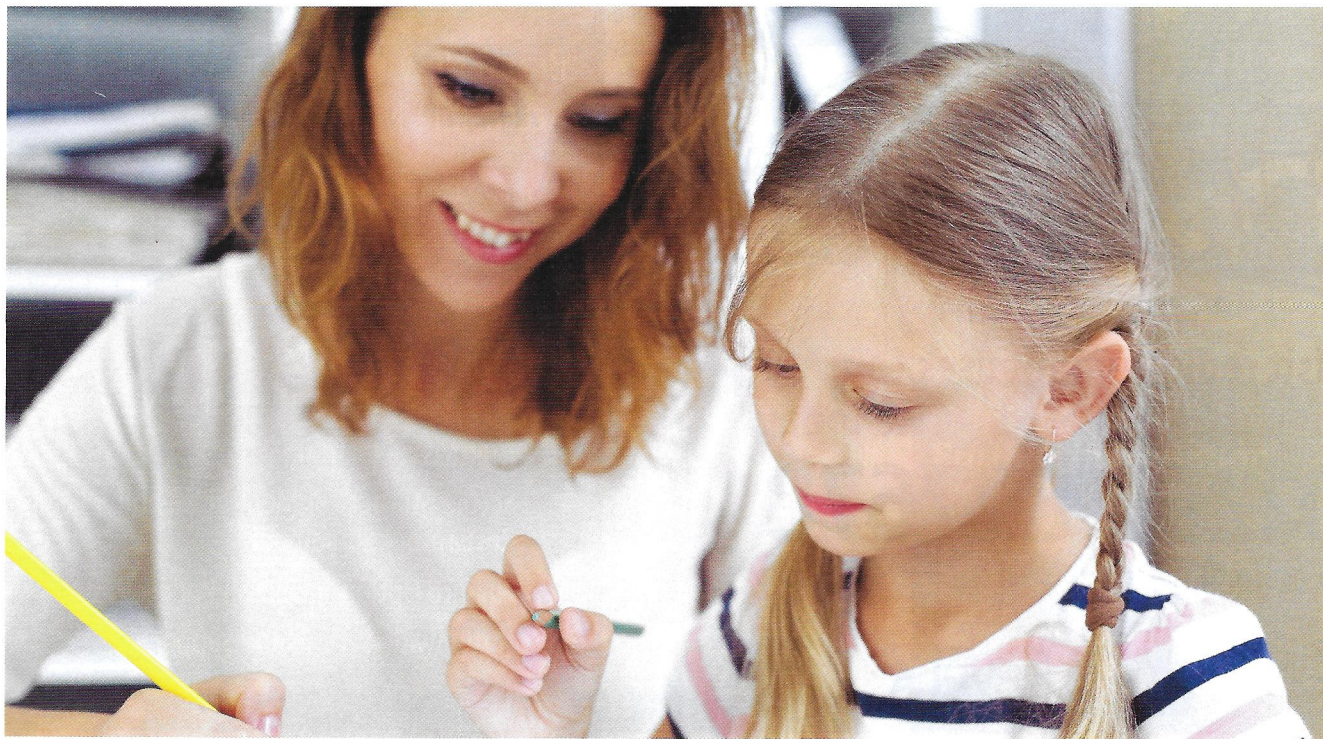
Whatever the culture of a school is, you can guarantee the pupils feel it too. They know if it's a welcoming, friendly place or somewhere where fun is in short supply. Of course, a teacher can make a huge difference in one classroom, but if the overall feeling of

the school isn't compatible with that teacher's lovely nurturing style, the inconsistency will be all too apparent to the children.

What must be so confusing for young people are the huge differences in teachers' attitudes and approaches towards them. In any given situation, one teacher might seek to understand what's behind a pupil's behaviour whilst another focuses solely on the nature of the behaviour itself and treats the young person accordingly. How is the child supposed to feel when faced with such discrepancies?

Cultural shift

So, in this climate, how do we create a culture for our children and young



people that provides them with the best opportunities for development emotionally, socially, physically, spiritually and intellectually? How can we create an ethos that is pro-individuality and celebrates difference, where all children are presented with opportunities to fulfil their potential rather than barriers to learning?

Much has been said in the media in recent years about creating an attachment aware culture in schools, something which I think is very important. However, I'm not convinced that "awareness" goes quite far enough. Yes, it would be great if all our school staff understood the complex needs of vulnerable children and young people and were aware of the messages these children receive. The behaviour of these children is sometimes confusing and knowing why is helpful. We need more than just awareness, though. We need focus. We need to shift our attention from just academic achievement to look at the whole individual. It's about flipping our reactive attitude on its head and not singling out the "disruptive" children. It's about looking at how we can create a space for recovery for those who need it whilst enhancing the learning experience of those who sit at all stages along the spectrum of attachment, from secure to disordered.

There are three key areas that can help us to focus on good attachment across all our children and young people.

Policy

Probably the hardest and most important area for schools to address is our obsession with modifying behaviour. What we have at the moment are systems that essentially work on the premise that children and young people have the same level of respect for authority that they used to have and, indeed, that they all have the same understanding as each other and the ability to change their behaviour when we tell them to.

Zone boards, sticker charts, marble jars, sun and dark clouds, house

points, incentive schemes, yellow and red cards, isolations, detentions, time outs and exclusions all rely on a child's ability to join the dots between their behaviour and the consequences. If I know that when I speed in my car I might kill someone and end up in prison, does it stop me speeding? It should, and most of the time it does, but there are odd occasions when I forget, or maybe my anxiety over being late, or whatever it might be, takes over and drives my behaviour to ignore the rules.

Children and young people who've not had the chance to develop cause and effect thinking and may be operating in the survival part of their brain cannot manage their behaviour just because we move them down the zone board or show them a red card. In fact, for some children, being "on a red" gets them the most attention and that's what they most crave. They need someone to notice that they are struggling and to keep them safe.

Moving away from these punitive, shame-riddled systems will take time and can be messy. We have to concentrate on relationships and understanding the child's experience of school. We may even have to change our approach to certain children, when we consider what their early experiences might have been like.

People

Relationships are very important for all of us, but for children who have not formed good attachments so far in their lives, they are vital. For any child to feel safe and calm, and to be able to learn, they need to feel accepted by people, feel that they are valued and have a sense of belonging in their class and school.

Abraham Maslow's famous "hierarchy of needs" explains how we all have basic needs that have to be met before we can move on to the more sophisticated levels of creativity, independence and self-actualisation. Feeling loved and belonging and having good self-esteem must be present before we are able to be creative. We

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need to focus more on those lower levels of Maslow's pyramid for our children and young people so that they have the grounding and confidence to be able to reach out into areas of learning.

There are, perhaps, two main ways of building better relationships in schools (see below). The first is the one that most schools already do, but the second is what will change the culture in a school. The first may help and provide support for individual children and young people, but the second has the potential to transform our education system.

1. Appoint a key adult

These people make it their duty to build relationships with specific children. This is essential, particularly for those students who struggle to be in school or have difficult attachment needs. Often, schools are doing this without realising it; they might be using a teaching assistant or a pastoral worker to "deal" with a child, usually to take them out of the classroom and help them to regulate. This is a good option but probably won't change things in the long run in terms of the child being able to be in the classroom. Sometimes this is the only option, however, as the child may be too aggressive or unpredictable to be in the classroom.

2. Train and encourage all staff to have a different approach to relationships and teaching

If we could get people to understand that how they interact with a child has a huge impact on how that child feels, behaves and learns in the classroom, then we might see a difference in our results. If a child reacts in a negative

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way to a specific teacher, why is this? They may not like the subject, of course, or they may just take a dislike to the staff member for no apparent reason. However, it might be something about how that adult makes the child feel about themselves. We spend so much time trying to get children to change their behaviour, but what about us?

Relationships are tough. Even at the best of times, they are rarely straight forward for any of us. For so many of today's young people, though, they can be even more difficult, as they try to navigate a labyrinth of blended family structures, not to mention all the anxieties related to school.

Practice

It's one thing to have a good strong attachment focused policy and people who are trained and feel confident to build good relationships with their students, but it's another to have the tools to work this out in practice. Here are some things to consider.



A "key adult" can build an important relationship with a troubled child.

Children may be acting at a much younger age emotionally due to early experiences

Be proactive not reactive

Children with difficult behaviours can elicit a very reactive response from staff. We may feel on the back foot with an unpredictable child. However, there are ways that we can be more proactive, which will allow the child to feel safe and calm and thus lower the triggers for the child:

- look at the surroundings; are they too cluttered and stimulating for the senses? We tend to go for bright colours and hanging displays in the UK but other countries, such as Finland, have found bland colours and a clean-cut approach helpful in creating a calm environment (see Elizabeth Jarman's work on a communication friendly approach)
- are there triggers for the child's dysregulation? Look at break times and unsupervised time; is the child so hyped up that they then can't regulate when you want them to sit still? Before lunch, is there a change in behaviour as the smell of food filters through? This may trigger the child's chief survival concerns – food, safety and knowing when parents are coming back
- consider the adults that the child reacts to. Sometimes we focus so much on the child's behaviour that we forget we are involved too. Is the child different with different members of staff? If so, what's changed, not the child but the adult. Maybe we need to step back and reflect on our own approach first.

Emotional age not chronological age

In many cases, children may be acting at a much younger age emotionally due to early experiences. When they are stressed they may regress a lot further back than you would expect and exhibit behaviour that is in-keeping with a much earlier stage of their development. They will need time to feel safe before they can participate in an activity.

Ask yourself these questions:

- what stage of development is this child at right now?
- what would I do if this child was chronologically the age they are acting at?
- what is stopping me from allowing this child to experience those earlier stages of development, if that's what they need right now?
- how can I help the child to build the emotional development that they've missed in early years?

While creating an attachment aware culture is a brilliant first step, focusing on how we can make this culture an everyday reality that pervades everything we do in school is essential, if we are to meet the complex needs of children today, particularly those with serious attachment issues. **SEN**

Further information

Nicola Marshall is the adoptive mother of three and the founder of BraveHeart Education, which provides training and support services to those living or working with vulnerable children, including looked-after and adopted children: www.bravehearteducation.co.uk