



# Relational Approach to Education

## Meeting the needs of our children and young people

### Summary

This document connects the terminology and aids the understanding across the education system to provide a focus on:

“ Relational based approaches across education, supported by a Trauma Informed & Attachment Aware workforce to meet the learning needs of **all** children and young people. ”

## Overview

It is vital that any approach to whole-school behaviours ensures that there is a calm and safe learning environment that supports good quality outcomes for children and young people.

When children and young people feel safe and their words, thoughts and actions are valued they develop a sense of belonging to school and this is the heart of the whole-school Relational approach. Children and young people want to be in a school environment where they “feel individually welcomed, respected, included, and supported by others within the school social environment.”<sup>1</sup>

A whole-school approach to positive learning behaviours is best served by evidence-based, research-led approaches.

This approach would benefit from including/integrating support for children & young people and their teachers/key adults by building relationships that ensure all academic, social and emotional needs are met.

This document provides an overarching language that recognises:

- [Adverse Childhood Experiences](#)
- [Attachment Aware](#)
- [Emotion Coaching](#)
- [Nurture](#)
- [Resilience](#)
- [Restorative Practice](#)
- [Trauma Informed](#)

The common area is a recognition that relational approaches will support our children & young people, teachers and their educational settings to be inclusive, calm and purposeful learning environments.

In schools where belonging works, young people tend to be happier, more confident and perform better academically. Their teachers feel more professionally fulfilled and valued, and families feel more connected.<sup>2</sup> Evidence has shown how focussing on the child’s well being maximises their academic potential and improves school attendance.

Furthermore, there continues to be developments around key roles in schools eg Mental Health First Aiders, that will need to be integrated and aligned to any changes in policy and practice.

An education system and practice that has a more child-centred approach, and is evidence-based has been proven to show positive impact on children’s attainment, inclusion, behaviour and attendance.

More importantly, this will support an inclusive education that meets all the learning needs of all children and young people.

“ We want to support all children and young people to be happy, healthy and safe ”

## Introduction

All those who work with children and young people will not disagree that in order for those in their care to thrive, their social and emotional needs to be adequately addressed so that they become ready to learn. However, there are some children and young people attending school who are distracted and distressed, if they arrive at all.

Many of the children in our classrooms - some would say most - have experienced trauma. They might have experienced neglect, abuse, violence, bereavement or family breakdown. They might have refugee status, have a parent in prison or be a young carer. The experience of trauma can have lasting adverse effects on relationships, health and learning.

Children and young people who have a good start in life are shown to have significant advantages over those who have experienced missing or distorted early attachments. They tend to do better at school, attend regularly, form more meaningful friendships and are significantly less likely to offend or experience physical or mental health problems. Children who have missing early childhood nurturing experiences or who have experienced early childhood trauma are less well prepared for the transition into school environments and are more likely to engage in destructive patterns of behaviour and relationships leading to exclusions and disengagement from learning.

Many of the children who have experienced – or are still experiencing - trauma come from backgrounds of disadvantage and need targeted support to close the equity gap. Previous research has shown that social emotional wellbeing in childhood is a key predictor of mental health later in life (Goodman, Joshi, Nasim & Tyler, 2015).

High-quality school-based programmes designed to improve social emotional skills have been shown to impact not only the social emotional wellbeing of pupils, but also their mental health, behavioural issues, academic attainment and substance misuse (Early Intervention Foundation, 2017).

Without early intervention and support, those children are likely to see their SEMH issues escalate into more complex and embedded difficulties, increasing their risk of school exclusion, poor attainment and other negative outcomes (Lereya & Deighton, 2019).

It is clear that schools have a vital role to play in helping children recover from trauma. Educational approaches that take account of trauma can have a powerful positive impact on children’s attainment, inclusion, behaviour and attendance.

Schools should not see this as a new approach to teaching in the current climate but as a complementary framework that they can then adapt into their individual settings. This is not about signing up to an off-the-shelf training course, but about considering a school’s core beliefs, the needs of its pupils, and its commitment to supporting them to achieve their very best.

Examples of such approaches can be behaviour-specific praise (using the child’s name, naming the correct behaviour and prompting the child to behave in that way in the future), as well as the principles of unconditional positive regard, consistency and empathy between learners and educators are used to improve a child’s sense of safety and security in the school setting, and to limit triggers associated with the fight-or-flight stress response. (Monash University, Australia Five principles of trauma-informed care).



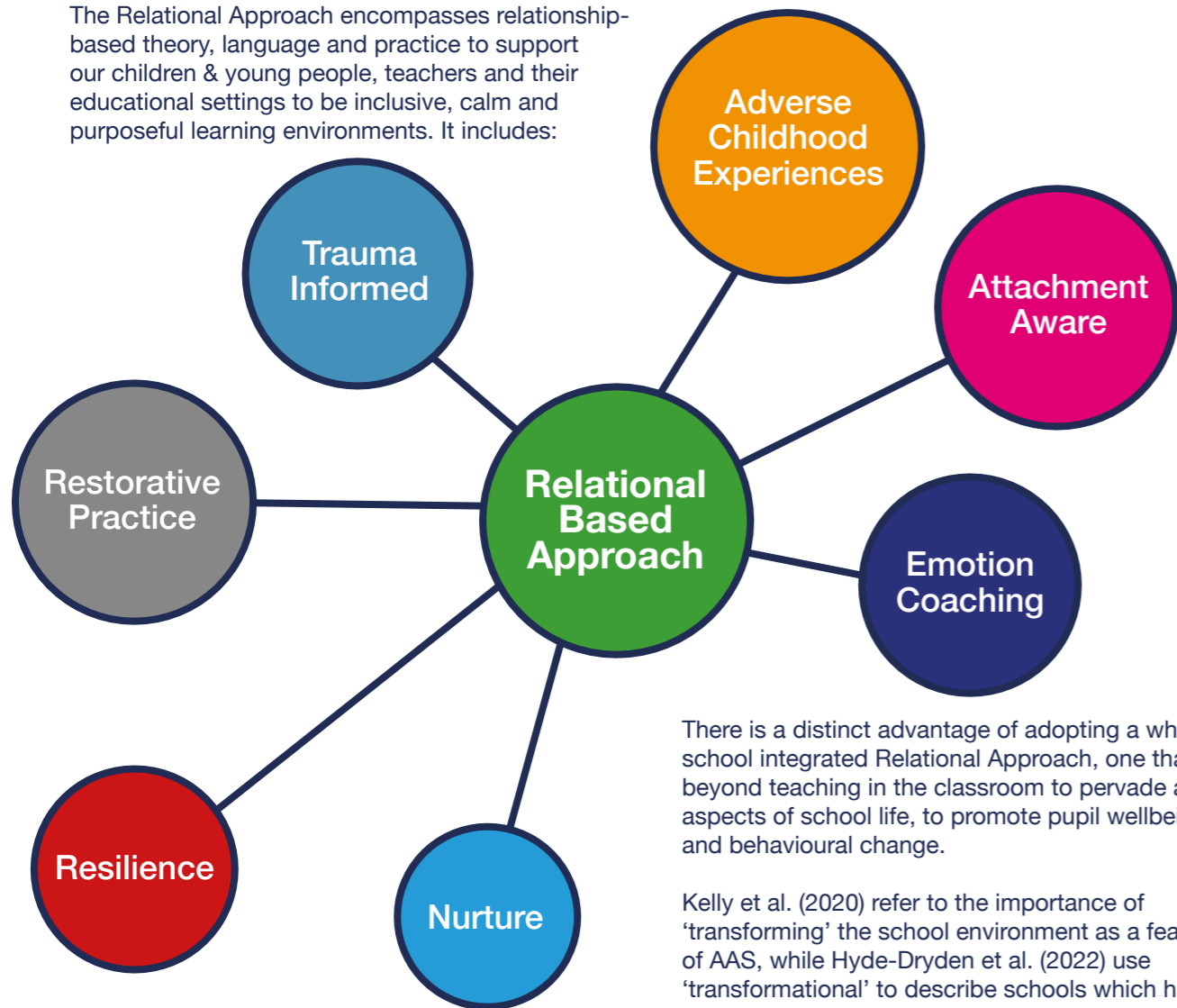
<sup>1</sup> <https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/sense-belonging/202201/the-science-school-belonging>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/shut-up-and-leave-me-alone-why-schools-need-to-be-places-of-belonging>

## What Is A Relational Approach?

“ Relational based approaches across education, to ensure a Trauma Informed & Attachment Aware workforce are supported to meet all the learning needs of all children and young people ”

The Relational Approach encompasses relationship-based theory, language and practice to support our children & young people, teachers and their educational settings to be inclusive, calm and purposeful learning environments. It includes:



There is a distinct advantage of adopting a whole-school integrated Relational Approach, one that goes beyond teaching in the classroom to pervade all aspects of school life, to promote pupil wellbeing and behavioural change.

Kelly et al. (2020) refer to the importance of ‘transforming’ the school environment as a feature of AAS, while Hyde-Dryden et al. (2022) use ‘transformational’ to describe schools which have successfully implemented it. However, Scales et al. (2020) distinguish between approaches which merely express a ‘caring’ approach to students and those which actually use relationships to challenge and empower them.<sup>3/4</sup>

Rooted in evidence, the Relational Approach offers a range of opportunities for children and young people to engage with missing early childhood experiences, giving them the social and emotional skills to do well at school, and develop their resilience and their capacity to deal more confidently with the trials and tribulations of life.

## Why is there a need for a Relational Approach to education?

Research by the UK Trauma Council (2021) and others (e.g. Teicher et al 2016) suggests that unmet attachment needs and trauma impact directly on adaptive brain development, particularly on the child’s ability to regulate their emotions and handle stressful situations.

The COVID-19 pandemic caused unprecedented disruption in children’s lives, potentially unsettling their emotional, and social development. Many known risk factors for child mental health disorders have intensified and access to sources of support has reduced. Children of all ages have been affected and there is a strong call for a relational-based approach to education across all ages;

### • Early Years

Speech and language delays were reported across all age groups as children had fewer opportunities to develop their communication skills at home. Children struggled to adapt to new situations and missed out on opportunities to socialise and develop self-regulation skills.<sup>2</sup> A Relational approach to education offers a range of opportunities for children to engage with the missing early experiences that hampered their learning, giving them the social and emotional skills to do well at school and with peers, and to develop their resilience and self-confidence.

### • Transition Across Educational Phases

All setting changes for children and young people across their educational journey will impact on their education. Primary school aged children transitioning into Secondary school during the pandemic have missed out on key socialisation and relationships making it more challenging for them to engage in education. Many feel a lack of belonging and safety which has impacted their anxiety and mental health. As a result children are not seeing school as the safe base it once was and are effectively not turning up. This could also apply to children who move school within a phase, or indeed transition into Post 16 learning.

A Relational-approach trained workforce that is able to recognise and understand the wide-ranging impacts of transitions and life changes on children and young people’s social, emotional and mental wellbeing.

### • Attendance and School Exclusions

The rate of absence in schools in England has increased significantly since the pandemic. The most recent statistical release from the Department for Education (DfE), relating to the autumn term 2022/23, shows that persistent absence had risen to 24.2% of pupils.

Those with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) have significantly higher rates of absence than their peers due to a lack of resources available in mainstream schools. Often many are placed in alternative provision without a proper understanding and assessment of their needs.

The use of permanent exclusions by schools has begun to rise again after a pandemic lull, while suspensions continue to rise. Statistics show one in 17 secondary school pupils were suspended from school at some point last academic year (2023-24). This is the highest level since recent records began and followed a similar pandemic lull as seen in exclusion rates.

In order to safeguard children and young people’s mental health, and encourage positive behaviour there needs to be recognition that the pandemic constituted a traumatic life event for a significant proportion of children and young people, who are in need of relational approaches and increased support to help them recover with minimal long-term impact.

Improving pupil wellbeing and developing students’ social and emotional skills is integral to improving attendance. Schools must be welcoming and inclusive places where children and young people feel safe and supported if we want them to attend.

‘The most successful schools understand that building learner engagement and improving attendance is a continuous process that begins with developing trusting relationships between school staff and learners. They understand that learners’ wellbeing is the responsibility of all staff and that every interaction and engagement has an impact on learners’ sense of worth. Staff know their words and actions affect learners’ attitudes and, where learners feel respected and valued, this fosters a greater sense of belonging and engagement, meaning learners are then more likely to attend school’. ([Guidance on improving learner engagement and attendance, Oct 2023](#))

## Relational Approaches Supporting Adults

### Staff Wellbeing/Recruitment and Retention in Education

A relational-based approach for the education workforce can substantially support the recruitment and retention of teachers. The concerns around reports that the DfE found that 40,000 teachers resigned from state schools in 2023 – almost 9% of the teaching workforce, and the highest number since it began publishing the data in 2011.<sup>5</sup>

There is a distinct advantage of adopting a whole-school integrated relational approach, one that goes beyond teaching in the classroom to pervade all aspects of school life, to promote both pupil and staff wellbeing and behavioural change.

### Adults Across Learning Communities And Sectors

The main focus of this document is supporting children and young people. The needs and approaches of adults who impact cannot be ignored and should be considered alongside strategic approaches and workforce development.

It is increasingly important that approaches across Education, Social Care, Health, the Criminal Justice System and working with Parents & Carers is connected, informed and complimentary.



## What are the benefits to a relational approach to education?

The process of developing a relational-based culture will be different for every school. It isn't about signing up to an off-the-shelf programme, but about looking at a school's core beliefs, its knowledge of its pupils' needs, and its commitment to supporting them to achieve their very best.

Implemented properly, a relational approach to education can be easy to implement. Most schools are already using this approach in their everyday practice but may not realise what they are doing is rooted in relational approaches. Examples could include greeting pupils and families/carers at the school gates, acknowledging pupils by name, remembering facts about their hobbies/interests etc are simple behaviours that can have a lasting and positive impact on children/young people.

Research has demonstrated that investing time and resources into improving relationships in schools leads to positive outcomes around inclusion, engagement, attainment and achievement in the short term and community safety and cohesion in the longer term. (Behaviour in Scottish Schools Research BISSR).

There are many examples of evidence that relational approach to education is beneficial and has shown the following benefits;



### For Children and Young people

- Improves mental health and reduces anxiety
- Creates nurturing and safer spaces for them to express their emotional needs
- Reducing the possibility of re-traumatisation
- Builds their resilience, confidence and self-esteem
- Enhances social and language skills
- Promotes self-reflection and self-regulation to improve behaviour
- Increases attendance and enjoyment of learning that leads to increase in attainment
- Improves behaviour

### For Schools

- Builds trusting relationships with children and young people as well as colleagues
- Creates a nurturing environment for staff to be feel cared for and supported
- Creates a proactive approach to pupil and staff safety and wellbeing
- Creates choice and empowerment to teach through evidence-based therapeutic approaches
- Reduces unnecessary interventions/approaches leading to reduce costs in the long term
- Reduces the volume and frequency of negative incidents within the learning environment
- Improves culture based on positivity leading to better retention of school staff

### For Parents/Cares/Community

- Builds trusting relationships that creates better understanding and the support needed for children, young people and their families
- Increases the positive social, emotional, mental and physical development of children/young people
- Reduces the negative perceptions of education
- Improves the social environment to create a wider positive impact on the community

## Other Information

[ARC Call To Action](#)

[Working definition of trauma-informed practice - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

[Trauma-informed practice: toolkit - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](#)

[Addressing trauma and adversity | Resources | YoungMinds](#)

[Five approaches for creating trauma-informed classrooms - Monash Education](#)

[12477 Restorative Justice Inquiry Report v3.indd](#)

[Mental health guidelines | Hub | NICE](#)

[Attachment in the Classroom: The Links Between Children's Early Experience, Emotional Well-being and Performance in School Heather Geddes \(2006\)](#)

[Bergin, C., & Bergin, D. \(2009\). Attachment in the classroom](#)

[Attachment and Emotional Development in the Classroom: Theory and Practice David Colley and Paul Cooper \(2017\) London, Jessica Kingsley](#)

[Attachment Aware Schools: the impact of a targeted and collaborative intervention Janet Rose, Rebecca McGuire-Sniekus, Louise Gilbert and Karen McInnes \(2019\): Pastoral Care in Education, Volume 37, Issue 2 pp 162-184 02643944.2019.1625429](#)

[The Trauma and Attachment-Aware Classroom | Adoption UK Charity Rebecca Brooks \(2019\)](#)

[\(PDF\) Cornerstones of Attachment Research \(researchgate.net\) Robbie Duschinsky \(2020\)](#)

[Hadleys-AATI-Report.pdf \(ox.ac.uk\) Neil Harrison/ Rees Centre \(2022\)](#)

### Key agencies/organisations for support/advice

There are a wide range of organisations that are actively engaged in this work including:

[Adoption UK Charity](#)

[Attachment & Trauma Aware approaches in education | ARC \(the-arc.org.uk\)](#)

[nurtureuk: Helping every child become able to learn](#)

[Restorative Justice Council | Promoting quality restorative practice for everyone](#)

[Welcome \(navsh.org.uk\)](#)

<https://uktraumacouncil.org>

We welcome other aligned organisations to join this work.  
Please contact [admin@the-arc.org.uk](mailto:admin@the-arc.org.uk)

## Thanks to all our supporters



The National Association of School-Based Teacher Trainers



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