Restorative Practice
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Engaging Our Children & Young People –
Connecting The System

arc
The Attachment Research Community

Restorative Justice Council

Supporting Children and Young People

The commitment and dedication across the workforce supporting our Children and Young People (CYP) has seen some very innovative and effective practices introduced, developed and embedded, which places relational approaches at the heart. The Attachment Research Community (ARC), the Restorative Justice Council (RJC) and partner organisations, suggests that it is vital there is a strategic overview and commitment to 'connecting the system', in order that the work of all professionals and key adults, regardless of which sector they represent, complements and supports the work of others. This will ensure that the support, help and guidance available to children and young people is comprehensive, with no gaps, duplication or conflicting approaches/advice.

Key Recommendations

To ensure statutory systems of support for the benefit of all children and young people are connected, complementary and consistent the government needs to:

1. Undertake a **strategic review** of approaches used across Education, Health, Social Care and Criminal Justice to Identify the common areas of disengagement of children and young people.

2. Implement a **connected system of relational-based approaches** across Education, Health, Social Care and Criminal Justice to increase engagement with children and young people.

3. Implement a **national approach to language and terminology** across Education, Health, Social Care and Criminal Justice to develop and increase the consistent application and understanding of key professionals and children and young people.

4. Introduce, develop and embed a **national, connected CPD framework** across Education, Health, Social Care and Criminal Justice to ensure professional workforces have a wider knowledge and understanding of all support for children and young people.

5. Deliver the integration of **Relational and Trauma Informed, Attachment Aware Approaches** training and a wider approach to supporting children and young people with additional needs, into the ITT core framework to ensure the teaching workforce is better equipped.

6. Revise and refine the **Ofsted Education Inspection Framework**/Score Card, the **Ofsted Social Care Inspection Framework** (ILACS), and the **CQC** framework to reflect where good relationships help inclusive practices and improved outcomes for all children and young people.

7. Support Local Authorities to develop **IT infrastructures** to enable connected information sharing between agencies supporting children and young people.

In making these changes it is important to distinguish between approaches and settings which are universal – i.e., for every child/young person, such as schools – and those which are targeted towards individuals or groups, such as Youth Offender teams. We argue that the starting point should always be a universal entitlement. The fact is that – particularly for more vulnerable children who have not reached the thresholds for intervention by Social Care, Health or Youth Justice – the school is the one institution which they access. This places a significant pressure on schools and teachers to play their part in the connected system, but they cannot do this effectively without the support and collaboration of other partners.

While some other particular interventions may be appropriate – indeed necessary – for certain individuals, it is important that these be tailored to that young person's specific needs and circumstances, not based on 'one size fits all' approaches or stereotypes. Young people in care, for example feel this very keenly (Parker and Gorman, 2013). Woolgar and Simmonds (2019) demonstrate the way in which these approaches can lead to serious misdiagnosis or even missing signs of e.g., mental illness.

Executive Summary – Why is this approach needed?

This document outlines the evidence base for the societal and educational importance of a sense of belonging for children and young people and how this is intrinsically connected with a relational approach from the services that support them. A feeling of 'belonging' and connection is a key mechanism in ensuring all of our children and young people are able to lead purposeful, healthy, engaged lifestyles and develop into successful, independent, thriving adult citizens.

Consistent, trusting relationships, and a perception of care are foundational to building belonging and sustaining this connection. A unified approach to relationship building, across all elements of the system supporting young people from education, to social care and health will maximise positive life chances for all our young people and support a co-ordinated, connected system around the young person.

Such approaches are not an 'easy option' and numerous studies (e.g., Scales et al, 2020) have pointed to the need for 'caring' relationships to link with appropriate challenge on young people's own terms for them to be fully effective. At the same time, there is considerable evidence that the successful implementation of relational approaches improves the experience of adults involved, leading to improved well-being and staff retention (see Riley 2009, 2013; CPI, 2023).

The 'system' across Education, Health, Social Care and Criminal Justice for children and young people has increasingly come under severe pressure to meet need and support individuals through their most crucial and formative years in order that they can grow into successful and independent adults. There are a number of concerns that have emerged over the past few years around 'engagement' of young people:

- One in every five children and young people aged 8-25 have a **mental health difficulty** (NHS Digital, 2023).

- **Persistent absence has increased** by 15.3% since Spring 2023 and by 83% since before the Pandemic (CSJ 2024 https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/CSJ-Absence_Tracker_March24-1.pdf).

- **Suspensions & Exclusions** - The 790,000 suspensions and 9,400 exclusions in 2022/23 were **significantly higher** than any previous year, rising by 36% and 44% respectively on the year before. The suspension rate - the number of suspensions per pupil - of nearly one in 10 is also higher than it has ever been.

- **SEND** - A total of 18.4% of children in England have some kind of special educational need- up from 17.3% in 2023.

- SEND - There's been a 7.1% **increase** in the number of children on SEN Support.

- **Children In Care numbers** - In the last five years the population of looked after children in the UK has increased by 8%.

- 872,000 16 to 24 year- olds are currently **NEET** across the UK (Apr – June 2024 (ONS).

- School Belonging at 15 predicts NEET outcome (es aged 16-20) (Parker et al 2022).

- Youth Crime - reoffending rates among children and young individuals (32.2%) are higher than that of adults (24.9%), marking the first rise in eight years.

- **Youth Crime - increase** in the number of children and young people entering the youth justice system, marking the first rise in a decade.

- Only 1/3 Primary students and 1/2 of Secondary students in London report **a secure sense of school belonging** (VRU reference from Ceri Brown, Alison Douthwaite).

- **Relationship building promotes skills and wellbeing**_ (OECD (2024), Nurturing Social and Emotional Learning Across the Globe: Findings from the OECD Survey on Social and Emotional Skills 2023, OECD Publishing, Paris, *https://doi.org/10.1787/32b647d0-en*).

A. Education

A.1

Relational Approaches and Attainment/Progress

In Education there are increasing concerns around the disengagement of children and young people from their education and/or training. This is clearly being seen across schools, colleges and training providers through decreasing attendance, increasing suspensions and exclusions, increasing NEET's (Not in Employment, Education or Training), increases in SEND (Special Educational Needs & Disabilities), increases in CME (Children Missing Education) and, for some, underperformance in their academic progress. This is further compounded by the rise in the number of children and young people with emotional well-being/mental health issues that whilst they are physically attending their education or training, emotionally they are disengaged and unlikely to be learning. There has been an increase in the number of children in Early Years that are behind in their social, emotional and academic developments leading to them not being school ready. In schools and colleges, there are increasing dysregulated behaviours which are impacting on other learners, the teaching workforce and other key adults and professionals.

A.2

Relational Approaches And Well-Being

Educators in England are increasingly turning to relational approaches to support student wellbeing and behaviour. Many schools and educators are searching for practical approaches that include boundary setting, structure, and communicate school values, whilst also addressing student behaviour and reducing pressure on staff. Pianta's (1992) pioneering work linking attachment theory to teacher-child relationships has inextricably linked attachment to school readiness and school success (Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Commodari, 2013; Geddes, 2006). The Attachment Aware Schools (AAS) programme is informed by these developments (Kelly et al., 2020; Rose et al., 2019; Zsolnai & Szabó, 2021). A five-year study, involving 300 schools, was undertaken by the Rees Centre, University of Oxford, funded by the Alex Timpson Trust, between 2017 and 2022, which clearly identified the wide and positive impacts such approaches had had on the schools involved.

A.3

The Importance of Relational Approaches

Since the Covid pandemic, there has been a much wider understanding of the importance of attachment/trauma aware approaches, and, the need to see schools in a wider social context. Marmot (2020) indicated the links between poverty and poor mental health while the 2024 report commissioned by ASCL (Oates, 2024) highlighted the continuing effects of social factors on school performance. This recognition that attachment/trauma aware approaches should not be seen in isolation, and growing insight into the significance of the social context of schooling for all young people's development has led to a burgeoning focus on the importance of school belonging. This body of research draws attention to the less recognised ways in which attachment impacts educational outcomes and wellbeing for all.

A study commissioned by the London Violence Reduction Unit, involving nearly 3500 students in 76 schools and alternative provisions, across all 32 London boroughs identified the key factors impact young people's sense of belonging. Its findings informed the development of London's Inclusion Charter and concluded that *'what matters most to children's sense of belonging and safety and ultimately inclusion in school are relationships, underpinned by values of care, and nurture.'* (Brown et al, 2024). Parents and educators saw relationship challenges, both with staff and peers, as the two most significant barriers to belonging, while young people cited relational issues of being treated unfairly and worrying about bullying and unkind behaviour.

There is also an important link between relational approaches and future life chances. A three year study of the causes of young people becoming NEET concluded that 'building trusting relationship through supporting emotional wellbeing and general welfare, and generating a sense of feeling cared for and supported' were essential for interventions to be effective (Brown et al, 2022). These conclusions were also reflected in Ralph's (2024) study of a group of disaffected young people in a secondary school.

B. Social Care

B.1

Relational Approaches and Social Care

The post-pandemic landscape has witnessed an increase in families encountering significant challenges. This has led to more children entering care, a rise in families choosing home education, and a notable rise in applications for Education, Health, and Care Plans (EHCPs). Simultaneously, there are growing pressures to secure stable placements for Children in Care (CiC), which can jeopardise their emotional well-being and educational continuity.

B.2

The Importance of Relational Approaches

Restorative practice has emerged as a promising approach in social care, offering considerable social and financial advantages. It encompasses established methods such as Family Group Conferences, which engage extended family networks in supporting children. However, there is an urgent need for clarity around the definition of restorative practice to prevent its concept from becoming diluted.

For restorative practices to be successfully implemented, strong leadership is essential. Senior leaders need to actively champion and embody restorative approaches, aided by dedicated project leaders to ensure consistent application across various services. When effectively integrated, restorative practices can instigate a cultural shift within children's social care, prioritising collaboration with families and fostering positive relationships. Family networks are regarded as crucial resources in helping children remain safely in their homes, thereby mitigating unnecessary entry into the care system.

B.3

Evidence-based Practice

An inquiry conducted by the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Restorative Justice collected insights from local authorities, academics, and the Restorative Justice sector, revealing the complexities involved in adopting restorative practice within social care. It is widely recognised that these practices empower all parties involved, shifting away from a blame-centric culture towards one that nurtures healthy relationships. The report emphasised that restorative practices focus on building strong relationships and enabling families to participate in decision-making alongside social workers, which is expected to lead to positive changes and lessen the sense of being acted upon by external parties.

Currently, formal research on the effectiveness of restorative practices in social care is limited. Available data suggests potential cost savings and enhancements in local authority performance; however, further investment in research is needed to accurately measure these benefits. Assessing the impact of restorative practices presents particular challenges, as existing systems do not sufficiently document their use or outcomes.

Numerous obstacles impede the widespread adoption of restorative practices. These include the need for support from senior leadership, the challenge of effecting cultural and behavioural change within entrenched systems, and a lack of clarity regarding the expected characteristics of restorative practice. Moreover, funding uncertainties pose significant risks to the sustainability of restorative programs.

To successfully integrate restorative practices into social care, a collaborative effort across agencies is required, along with clear standards for practice and dedicated funding to facilitate adoption. A cohesive approach is vital to optimise outcomes for children and families, ensuring that restorative practices are effective tools for achieving positive change rather than just buzzwords.

C. Health

C.1

Relational Approaches and Improved Health and Well-being

Recent data from NHS England indicates a decline in the mental well-being of children and young people, which exacerbates their susceptibility to both in-person and online bullying. This data suggests that approximately 20% of children and young adults aged 8 to 25 are likely to have a mental disorder. It is concerning that it is estimated that only 34% of children and young people with a diagnosable mental health condition have access to NHS care and treatment.

Many affected children and young people originate from disadvantaged backgrounds, which restrict their access to extracurricular activities and heighten their vulnerability to bullying. Data indicates that children and teenagers aged 11 to 16 with a mental disorder are five times more likely to experience in-person and online bullying. The consequences of this can be substantial, affecting academic achievements, personal relationships, and physical well-being. These formative experiences also have a significant impact on mental health in adulthood, as many mental health issues emerge during childhood and require continuous treatment. The inadequate emotional support and mental health care provided to young individuals can lead to long-lasting consequences, emphasising the paramount importance of prioritising mental health alongside physical health.

C.2

The Importance of Relational Approaches

To improve outcomes for children and young people, it is essential to invest in early intervention and create non-judgmental support environments. Proactively addressing mental health issues can help prevent complications down the line and reduce the burden on healthcare systems. Although still in the early stages of development. One potential intervention is the adoption of relational or restorative practices, which are already in use within some NHS Forensic Mental Health Services.

Restorative practice offers a safe environment for young people to share their feelings, experiences, and the effects of bullying, facilitating emotional healing and release. This process helps victims feel heard and validated, which is vital for their mental well-being.

Furthermore, restorative justice encourages both victims and perpetrators to understand each other's perspectives, fostering empathy and decreasing the likelihood of future incidents. By addressing the root causes of bullying behaviour and promoting accountability, restorative justice can contribute to a safer environment for all young people, thereby enhancing their overall mental health.

Engaging in restorative processes empowers young individuals with the tools they need to navigate and overcome challenging situations more effectively. It also elevates the voices of bullying victims, allowing them to play an active role in resolving their issues, ultimately boosting their self-esteem and mental resilience.

C.3

Evidence-based Practice

Research indicates that restorative justice approaches can lead to a decrease in bullying and improvements in mental health outcomes among young people, supporting their implementation in schools and communities. When paired with mental health support services, young individuals will have access to ongoing assistance as needed. By applying restorative justice with young people affected by bullying, we can establish a framework that not only addresses the immediate harm caused by bullying but also promotes long-term mental health improvements, resilience, and positive community dynamics.

D. Criminal Justice

D.1

Relational Approaches to Reduce Youth Offending

The most recent report from the Youth Justice Board for England and Wales reveals a concerning increase in the number of children and young people entering the youth justice system, marking the first rise in a decade. A significant number of these individuals are first-time entrants, indicating a worrisome trend in arrests and court sentences. Notably, 56% of children aged 10 to 17 cautioned or sentenced had no prior involvement with the youth justice system. This highlights the urgent need for targeted interventions to address the root causes of offending among this vulnerable population. Data shows that young people in custody have a significantly higher reoffending rate compared to adults, while those who receive cautions rather than custodial sentences are less likely to reoffend. Furthermore, reoffending rates among children and young individuals (32.2%) are higher than that of adults (24.9%), marking the first rise in eight years. This situation raises serious concerns about the well-being of young people and the potential for a school-to-prison pipeline.

D.2

Relational and Restorative Responses

Restorative justice offers a transformative approach within the criminal justice system, emphasising the repair of harm caused by crime through inclusive dialogues with both victims and offenders. This process focuses on healing and reconciliation rather than punishment, giving victims a voice to express their feelings and helping offenders comprehend the impact of their actions, thereby fostering accountability and responsibility. Such an approach promotes mutual understanding and facilitates a path toward making amends.

The implementation of restorative justice involves various stakeholders, including police, courts, youth justice services, and community organisations, primarily funded by core youth justice sources. However, this leads to a patchwork of practices that vary across different youth justice services.

D.3

Evidence-based Practice

Research shows that 90% of victims who engage in restorative processes report satisfaction, and 96% of offenders feel motivated to avoid reoffending as a result of their participation. Restorative justice has demonstrated a 14% reduction in reoffending rates and has the potential for significant cost savings within the criminal justice system.

Despite these advantages, several barriers limit equal access to restorative justice services, including insufficient funding and inconsistent application of which offences qualify for restorative processes. Geographic disparities create a "postcode lottery" effect in service availability.

While restorative justice should ideally be accessible to all victims, there are limitations regarding its application in domestic abuse cases, necessitating careful oversight to ensure appropriateness.

An inquiry conducted by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on restorative justice has identified substantial gaps in understanding among the public and professionals, which leads to missed opportunities for both victims and offenders. Many key professionals lack the necessary knowledge to accurately assess suitability for restorative justice.

To tackle these challenges, the inquiry recommends a national public awareness campaign to enhance understanding of restorative justice, along with targeted training initiatives for professionals. Furthermore, a National Action Plan should be developed to support the integration of restorative justice within the criminal justice system, fostering collaboration across various sectors.

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