arc
The Attachment Research Community

National Association of
Virtual School Heads
Looking after learning

Call to Action

Attachment and Trauma Awareness -

teaching, learning and emotional wellbeing in schools

attachment

research

community

Building Connections & Improving Outcomes

Summary

The past year has seen a heightened focus on issues of teaching, learning and support for pupils, teachers and parents/carers in schools, following the Covid pandemic. This document lays out the recommendations and rationale of the signatory organisations for policymaking in England to support recovery and build resilience for all members of the school community, and especially the most vulnerable, in order to improve performance, mental health and wellbeing and to narrow attainment gaps.

To be able to learn, all children need to feel safe, in a calm, orderly positive environment. More than ever, all children, young people and adults in schools, and especially the most vulnerable, will need support to recover their sense of well-being and rebuild trusting relationships in order that they thrive.

Attachment relationships in families are fundamental to enabling children's learning and sense of safety. Attachment needs which are not met in families because of trauma – loss, neglect and abuse – profoundly affect children's sense of safety and development. Schools cannot replace families but secure, trusting relationships address the needs of all children and can do much to support the most vulnerable.

The signatories recognise the particular need to support school leaders in implementing their proposals. The recommendations are for better support for a core understanding of attachment and trauma to enable school leaders and the whole workforce to create a culture that supports vulnerable children to build trusting relationships, resilience and enables all children to achieve their potential.

Introductory Statement

In every school there are children with a variety of vulnerabilities, including children in care, those with social work involvement, those who have suffered significant trauma, or who have unmet emotional and attachment needs. Those children are more likely to suffer from poor mental health, less likely to reach their full potential, more likely to be excluded, and to be at risk of exploitation. These issues may disproportionately affect certain groups such as Black and ethnic minority communities, LGBTQ+, children in care or previously in care, and those with SEND. By implementing an attachment and trauma aware approach, schools can address the emotional well-being and mental health needs of these and of all students, thereby improving their learning, behaviour and performance overall, and begin to narrow the attainment gap between different groups.

The proposals in this document are rooted in research evidence and professional interpretations of best practice. They complement DfE Guidance on supporting mental health in schools (DfE, 2018a) and on teaching about mental wellbeing (DfE, 2020). The proposals recognise that these issues are best addressed at school level by school leaders who empower their staff to develop their own solutions, supported by a national policy framework which promotes these approaches and understandings. This is particularly the case in developing a recovery strategy for schools, in the light of the Covid pandemic. Recognising the pressures on schools, the signatories believe that these recommendations support a whole school approach which is efficient and effective in improving learning and well-being outcomes for all children.

Attachment and Trauma

1. This document focuses on two distinct, but often overlapping, concepts related to a child's experiences of the world around them:

   a. **Attachment** – relates to a theory of human development which stipulates that early care provides an evolving foundation for all future relationships and the extent to which these involve a sense of security, trust and mutuality that enables the child to enjoy learning. Attachment aware schools strive to provide a secure base for all members of the school community

   b. **Trauma** – the impact of unresolved occurrences that gave rise to fear, helplessness or horror may have a profound effect on the child's feelings of physical and emotional safety. Experiences of trauma (such as abuse or witnessing domestic violence) may shape a child's responses to future stressful situations. At their most severe, these experiences can lead to recognised mental health issues such as post-traumatic stress disorder, while developmental trauma can impact on children's relationships and ability to feel safe in the school environment. It is estimated that up to three-quarters of adult mental health issues have their origin in childhood (Kessler et al 2007), while one in four children may have experienced trauma sufficient to impact on school behaviour (O'Connor and Russell, 2004).

2. Recent 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 his/her emotions and handle stressful situations.

3. Some children with unresolved trauma and/or unmet attachment needs may show behaviours in school that include disengagement, self-harm, depression risk-taking and oppositional behaviour. They may also struggle with focussing on and taking pleasure in learning.

4. Not all children experiencing adversity will act out in this way (Harvard University, 2021), and many can demonstrate considerable resilience. However, schools need to be aware of and respond to unmet attachment needs and trauma (Rutter, 2006a; 2006b; 2007) in order to ensure children achieve their full educational potential. Supportive relationships and experiences outside the family and especially in school can be particularly important

5. Successive reports (Allen and Duncan Smith, 2009; Field, 2010; Allen, 2011), including the recent Leadsom Review, have drawn attention to the importance of attachment in children's early development, and the need for all services to take this into account:
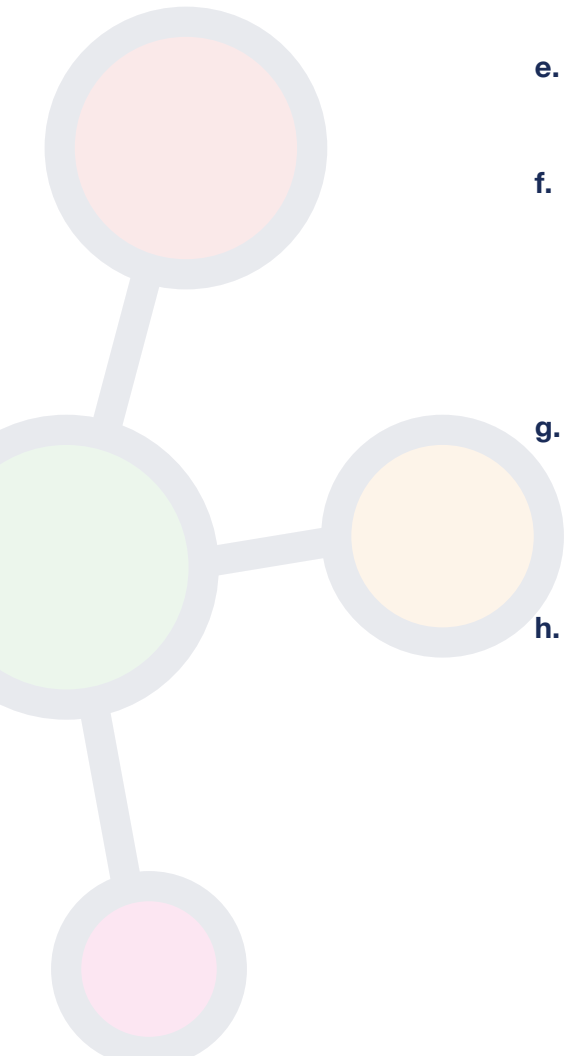
   Securely attached infants are much more likely to go on to become adults who cope well with life's ups and downs, build strong relationships at work and at home, and are better equipped to raise their own children. (Leadsom, 2021 p.5)

The role of schools

6. The state and wider society has a responsibility to help all our children to gain the maximum benefit from their educational opportunities. This involves the avoidance of stigmatisation, the creation of schools as well-ordered and safe environments which reduce anxiety, and the building of positive and trusting relationships: all of which optimise children's learning. Schools are a key site for the growth and development of all our children and the signatories recognise the need to support all school leaders and staff in achieving these goals, particularly in the current post-Covid situation

7. The evaluation reports and local professional feedback from a number of projects based on attachment, trauma aware and associated approaches (e.g. emotion coaching (Gus et al, 2017; Rose et al, 2015), nurture groups (Colley and Seymour, Forthcoming; Sloan et al, 2020; Hughes and Schlosser, 2014; Reynolds et al, 2009), restorative approaches (Daniels, 2013; Gonzalez et al, 2019; Gomez et al, 2020; McCluskey et al, 2008) in schools demonstrate clear evidence of improvement in pupil attainment, behaviour and well-being, including significant reductions in the numbers of exclusions. These also indicate a positive impact on professional practice and increased self-confidence among staff at all levels in addressing issues of behaviour, relationships and pupil well-being (See Appendix 2)

8. This evidence also suggests a 'whole school approach' is the best way of creating an optimum learning context, as outlined in the DfE publication 'Supporting Mental Health in Schools and Colleges (DfE, 2018b). By whole school we mean leadership, management, policy, teaching, learning and assessment, pastoral and curriculum, approaches which are offered to the whole school and its wider community– see Brighton and Hove Council (2018). Though not prescriptive, this approach might include: (Langton and Boy, 2017; Bergin and Bergin, 2009)

   a. Prioritizing good relationships between adults and children, for example e.g. by means of emotion coaching(Harrison, 2021);

b. Supporting staff by means of: training; supervision; counselling; and the promotion of self-care;

c. The creation of the school as a 'secure base' for children by encouraging: staff availability and sensitivity; principles of acceptance and cooperation; and enabling all children to feel included as full members of the school (University of East Anglia, 2020). Schools also need to provide a secure base to staff, that builds their resilience and enables them to support children's wellbeing, manage behaviour positively as well as offer quality teaching;

d. Organisational structures based on the principles of nurture, but also routines and rituals that encourage a sense of safety and comfort. Continuity of place and people are important, and benefit may be gained when essential transitions (across years and schools) are facilitated;

e. Timetables that enable the practicalities of building and maintaining the 'team around the child';

f. Systems of behaviour management that are relational, empathetic and aim to understand conduct through the lens of a child's prior experiences. Restorative approaches are valuable as are calm-down spaces, time-out cards and open-door policies;

g. Working in partnership with parents/carers is considered important: parental expertise is welcomed; parents/carers are encouraged to contribute to the whole school community; and staff members support parents/carers;

h. There is a range of carers who may be involved, for example: kinship carers, special guardians, foster carers, residential care staff and adoptive parents. This partnership should ensure continuity of approaches at home and school for more vulnerable children and the involvement of appropriate community, religious and voluntary organisations, to encompass ethical and cultural sensitivities;

i. Schools that are embedded within their communities are more likely to encourage student bonding, and inclusive extra-curricular activities are beneficial (Bergin and Bergin, 2009);

j. Schools should also consider opportunities to work with other voluntary and statutory agencies such as Pupil Referral Units, social, health and youth workers, and to share the perspectives and support which they can bring to children and their families (see Pendlebury, 2021) .

9. Given that many children encounter adversities, the important role of schools in their ongoing development has been acknowledged over the last decade:

a. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) published the results of its extensive evidence review in 2015 (NICE, 2015), concluding that *'Schools and other education providers should ensure that all staff who may come into contact with children and young people with attachment difficulties receive appropriate training on attachment difficulties'* (p.5).

b. The ITT Core Content Framework published in 2019 (DfE, 2019), makes it clear that trainee teachers should be prepared:
   > *to support pupils with their mental health, including – but not limited to – by creating respectful cultures within their classrooms where pupils feel motivated and valued. Throughout, the ITT Core Content Framework highlights the importance of building strong, positive relationships with pupils – as well as their parents and carers – as a means of supporting all pupils to achieve.* (p6)

c. The 2019 Timpson Review of school exclusions (Timpson, 2019) concluded that initial teacher training *'should include expert training on the underlying causes of poor behaviour (including attachment, trauma and speech, language and communication needs), and strategies and tools to deal effectively with poor behaviour when this arises'* (p.13).

d. A 2018 report from Become - the national charity for children in care and young care leavers (Become, 2018) found that 75% of teachers had received no training about supporting children in care before they qualified, concluding that *'All routes into teaching should include information about children in care, including trauma and attachment aware behaviour management'* (p.4).

e. A 2018 report from Adoption UK (Adoption UK, 2018) found that among 1,972 adopted children of compulsory school age across the UK, 65% of respondents disagreed with the statement *'My teachers understand and support my needs as an adopted young person'* – this rose to 74% disagreement among children at secondary school, 73% agreed with the statement *'Other children seem to enjoy school more than me'* – this rose to 81% among children at secondary school, and 79% in all schools agreed with the statement *'I feel confused and worried at school'.*

f. The first recommendation of the report Safely Reducing the Number of Children Going into Care was that 'attachment and trauma awareness should be embedded in schools and social work'. They pointed out that: 'the majority of teachers feel inadequately prepared for dealing with such vulnerabilities' (Centre for Social Justice, 2021).

10. There is strong evidence from a range of studies, government and parliamentary reports that the best and most effective training and support for staff is when schools themselves take the lead: *'It needs to be sustained and the duration is 12 to 18 months. It needs to be collaborative, based on real problems… the teachers are facing… The teacher needs to be an active participant… It needs to involve external expertise and it needs to end with some kind of solution focussed understanding' (House of Commons, 2017).* Similarly, evaluations of attachment aware-related schools programmes have demonstrated the importance of school senior leadership in promoting whole school solutions (Rose et al, 2016).

11. Based on the above, a renaissance in support for schools around attachment and trauma, including new forms of practice, whole-school workforce development, national guidance for senior leaders and a strong regulatory framework may be timely, with an emphasis

on the whole school community. This is particularly pertinent, as the Covid-19 pandemic has intensified this need. Many children have experienced bereavement, the loss of relationships and disruption in routines. Schools are currently working towards a 'recovery curriculum' (Carpenter and Carpenter, 2020) to re-establish vital relationships and support children in particular difficulty.

12. Implementing these proposals would be unlikely to increase costs for schools, which are already under pressure to support children's mental health needs, recovery from Covid lockdown and to reduce exclusions. Apart from some initial costs for staff training and support, the evidence suggests that such approaches can actually reduce financial costs, reduce incidents of low-level disruption and levels of stress for pupils and staff alike. As one headteacher stated:

Even if we were to express it in terms of crude economics (and it is about far more than that), there is no way a school can afford not to be doing this work. These children place demands on the school system which, if not properly addressed, far outweigh the demands of learning to manage and work with them properly. (Rose et al 2019)

Recommendations

This Call to Action is intended to link the wellbeing and mental health needs of pupils and staff with the broader needs of the school as a learning community. It seeks to support schools, and particularly school leaders, in developing their recovery programmes, following the Covid pandemic, both in terms of their short-term, immediate needs and their longer-term strategies.

In view of the rationale provided by this paper, the signatories are making the following policy recommendations:

1. The DfE Advice on Mental Health and Behaviour in schools should be revised to ensure that all schools and settings have teaching, pastoral care and behaviour management policies which take account of the emotional, developmental and relationship needs of all children and adults, including those with unmet attachment needs and trauma; should use the advice of experts in child and adolescent mental health as appropriate; and should not use behaviour management strategies that are potentially damaging.

2. There is specific encouragement and support for providers to incorporate attachment and trauma in the child development module in all initial teacher training courses, along the lines proposed in the 2019 ITT Core Framework Document;

3. Issues of child development, attachment and trauma are part of the framework for National Professional Qualifications for school leaders;

4. There is specific ongoing support to headteachers and school leaders in addressing issues of child development, attachment and trauma, including through specialist advice and supervision to take account of the leadership pressures they face;

5. There is ongoing continuous professional development and support, including regular updates on child development, attachment and trauma, for all school staff, especially through the Early Career framework for Newly Qualified Teachers;

6. The schools' inspection framework references how the school or setting has ensured that understanding of attachment and trauma is implemented in the school's work on 'personal development' and 'behaviour and attitudes', and this is reflected in staff CPD and support programmes.

7. The children's services inspection framework reflects the effectiveness of the local authority in supporting inter-agency co-operation and workforce development to ensure a common understanding of attachment and trauma, between education, health and children's social care.

Initial Signatories:

- Adoption Matters

- Adoption UK

- Alex Timpson Trust

- Attachment Research Community (ARC)

- Become

- Centre for Research on Children & Families, University of East Anglia (UEA)

- CollectivED The Centre for Coaching and Mentoring at the Carnegie School of Education

- National Association of School Based Teacher Training (NASBBT)

- National Association of Virtual School Head Teachers (NAVSH)

- Social, Emotional, Behavioural Difficulties Association (SEBDA)

- The Care Leaders

- The Fostering Network

- The Mulberry Bush Organisation

- Universities Council on the Education of Teachers (UCET)

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Appendix 1 –
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Appendix 2 –
Detailed evidence base for Emotion Coaching and Attachment Aware School approaches

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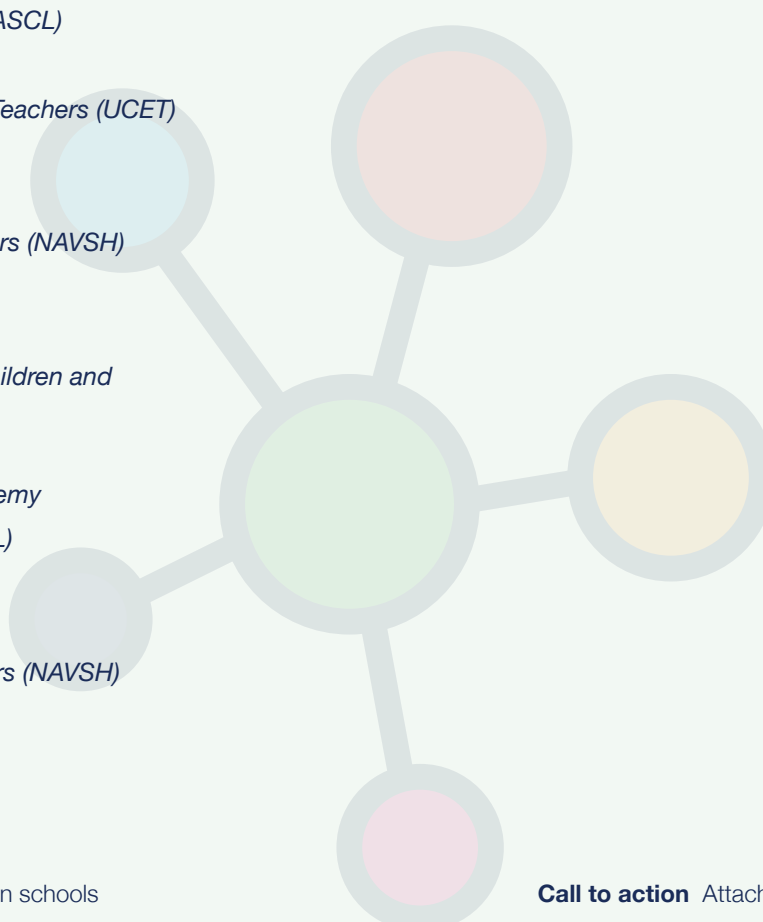
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