Promoting Positive Relationships and Behaviour in Educational Settings
The Context

The Scottish approach to behaviour in schools has evolved significantly in the past two decades from punitive discipline policies to a focus on building relationships and promoting positive pro-social behaviour. This shift in focus to relationship-based approaches has been embedded systematically into curriculum delivery and education related policies and guidance including those that promote attendance and participation, and those that reduce barriers to learning and exclusion. A number of national reviews, the Independent Care Review (Feb 2020 report) and the ASfL Implementation Review (June 2020 report) and the incorporation of United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) into Scots law (March 2021) has required many educational establishments and local authorities to review their current practice, policies and guidance around relationships and behaviour. Such reviews need to ensure that they are compliant with legislation and take account of the recommendations of the national reviews and current research. This resource is designed to support this work.

Some common principles are interwoven across all Scottish education related legislation and guidance including articles in the UNCRC:

- children have a **right to education** (Article 28)
- children have the right to get the support they need to benefit fully from their education and fulfil their potential (Article 29)
- children need to be **included, engaged and involved** in their learning (Article 12)
- wellbeing, positive relationships and an inclusive ethos and culture are the foundation for learning (Article 2, 3, 6, 23 & 31)

Ethos and culture is the essential element to the development of good relationships and the creation of effective learning environments. In order to create these environments in all educational settings there needs to be a shared understanding of inclusion, wellbeing, equality and equity underpinned by children’s rights and how these factors affect relationships and behaviour. Scottish Government’s guidance “Developing a positive whole school ethos and culture: relationships, learning and behaviour” is complimentary to the delivery of Curriculum for Excellence, the implementation of Getting it Right for Every Child and the aspirations of the Scottish Attainment Challenge and the National Improvement Framework.

No significant learning occurs without a significant relationship. (Comer, 1995)

Universal support, curriculum, and pedagogy

All staff have a responsibility to know and respond to the individual needs of learners, and to promote and support their wellbeing and readiness to learn. Curriculum for Excellence is a key driver in helping children and young people learn about healthy relationships, positive behaviour, and social and emotional wellbeing. High quality teaching and a curriculum that meets the needs of all learners also plays a significant role in engaging children and young people in learning and reducing the need for support with their behaviour. Children’s rights and entitlements are fundamental to Scotland’s approach to inclusive education which promotes social inclusion and is underpinned by an ethos of social justice.
Developing good relationships and positive behaviour in the classroom, playground and wider community is essential for creating the right environment for effective learning and teaching. Where children and young people feel included, respected, safe and secure and when their achievements and contributions are valued and celebrated, they are more likely to develop self-confidence, resilience and positive views about themselves. This applies equally to all staff in the learning community. (Better relationships, better learning, better behaviour, 2013). Scottish-based research (1.17-1.29) indicates that good relationships and learners participating in decision-making positively affects attainment (see Learner Participation in Educational Settings). Research also suggests that relational learning environments, where high expectations and structure is balanced equally against warmth and support, encourage engagement, improve attainment, and lead to less bullying in educational settings.

In both the Independent Care and the ASfL Implementation Reviews children and young people told us clearly what they want from their educational experience:

- their rights to be fully recognised and realised
- relationships to be prioritised
- to be listened to and included (never marginalised or stigmatised)
- school to be a safe space
- to be supported in ways that meet their needs
- they want this support to be consistent from all the people who support them.

FILM: It’s All About Relationships: Embedding relational, trauma sensitive approaches in education
Healthy Relationships Top Tips: Suite of resources from Public Health Scotland to help you promote good practice in supporting children and young people’s mental health and wellbeing through good quality relationships, and as a resource to aid discussion and to support transitions or critical points in a child or young person’s life

The ability to build and maintain relationships to support wellbeing and learning are part of the GTCS, SSSC and CLD professional standards. For example the GTCS CLPL standards include:

- Social Justice: Building and fostering positive relationships in the learning community which are respectful of individuals.
- Trust and respect: Understanding health and wellbeing and the importance of positive and purposeful relationships to provide and ensure a safe and secure environment for all learners and colleagues within a caring and compassionate ethos.
- Professional Knowledge and Understanding 2.1.1: As an accomplished teacher you have an enhanced and critically informed understanding of the stages of learners’ cognitive, social, emotional, physical and psychological development and know how to use this information to support every learner’s wellbeing.

Click here for more resources and professional learning on Relationships, Rights and Participation.
Inclusion, Wellbeing, Equality and Equity

**Inclusion** happens when education settings create environments that meet the diverse needs of all learners (Article 2) through personalised learning and support that takes account of individual needs, choices and circumstances. An inclusive ethos is one where there are high expectations that everyone can learn and work in a peaceful and safe environment and where everyone’s contribution is valued and encouraged. This inclusive approach not only allows children and young people to thrive but also contributes to their understanding and appreciation of diversity and their understanding of how to build a more just society.

**Wellbeing** Culture and ethos, linked to shared vision and values of an education setting, where everyone feels respected and valued are key determinants in maintaining positive relationships and wellbeing. The mental, emotional, social and physical wellbeing of everyone within a learning community can be positively developed by fostering a safe, caring, supportive, purposeful environment that enables the development of relationships based on mutual respect. Learning through the health and wellbeing aspects of the curriculum reinforces and develops the knowledge and understanding, skills, capabilities and attributes which children need for mental, emotional, social and physical wellbeing now and in the future.

**Equality and Equity** (Articles 2, 23, and 26-29) Education settings that promote equality treat individuals fairly, value and celebrate diversity and challenge all forms of discrimination. Children and young people have equal opportunities, and effective strategies are in place to support inclusion and remove any barriers to learning. Equity in education ensures that every child has what they need to achieve the same outcomes as others. In simple terms, those who need more support, get more support. In education this translates to all children and young people being well supported regardless of their personal, social or family circumstances.

Click here for resources and profession learning to support Inclusion, Wellbeing, Equity and Equality.
Behaviour Management vs Relational Approaches

In our day to day lives we are exposed to the behaviour of others and other people experience how we behave. Our behaviour is a response to our thoughts and feelings that are often driven by experiences and memories. Our responses can change through learning or to meet the demands of new situations. We cannot manage someone else’s behaviour however we can use our relationship to support them to change their own behaviour to something that is more positive and healthy for them. In the context of education influencing, teaching and/or supporting positive behaviour may involve a vast range of skills from helping a child or young person to regulate their emotions through to proactively helping them learn new more positive ways to behave.

Stepping Stones - Promoting Positive Behaviour: A Professional Learning Activity created for newly qualified teachers (requires GLOW login)

Practitioners’ views about how to promote positive behaviour can still be extremely polarised. Personal views range from those valuing systems that rely on control and compliance with strict rules in order to avoid sanctions, to those that more closely align with national guidance, children’s rights and are based on strong relationships. The social discipline (or capital) window below helps us see how the different approaches reflect different levels of support and challenge.

Although punitive, rules-based, and relational approaches both reflect high levels of challenge and expectations around boundaries they involve very different levels of support. Punitive approaches are much easier to implement but much less supportive for both the person whose behaviour is adversely affecting others and for the
person harmed by that behaviour. Criminologist John Braithwaite (1989) asserted that punishment used as a social regulator is problematic as it shames and stigmatises wrongdoers, often marginalising them, and fails to change their behaviour. No educational policy or practice should ever be stigmatising (see UNCRC Article 2 and 29) or negatively impact on a child or young person’s wellbeing or learning (Shame and its effect on children’s reading).

Behaviour management (top left above) often focusses on what to do after unacceptable behaviour has occurred. It relies on rule setting and sanctions as a reaction to rule breaking. The idea is that the sanctions act as a deterrent to unacceptable behaviour. This model is relatively easy to establish, it does not require relationships in order to run, and it does work for the majority of compliant learners. However it requires people to enforce negative consequences for non-compliance which often has a negative impact on relationships. Behaviour is functional, designed to meet needs. Imposing sanctions doesn’t rely on any consideration of the purpose of the behaviour or the need the behaviour is communicating to us (Nurture Principle 5). If needs are not supported the behaviour will more than likely recur and may even escalate. Learners who repeatedly break the rules because they have no alternative strategies to have their needs met can quickly find themselves in a negative cycle of punitive measures which can lead to disengagement from learning and/or exclusions. Some of our more vulnerable learners, such as those who have experienced adversity or trauma can be disproportionately and negatively affected by these approaches. Rules-based systems also show little regard for the person who has been harmed. A sanction for the person who has caused the harm is easy to administer however it does not necessarily support or help the person harmed.

Relational approaches (top right above) are often mis-perceived as the ‘soft’ option that allows disrespectful or irresponsible behaviour to go unchecked. If implemented properly however they involve equal measures of challenge and support and create boundaries based on shared expectations or values which are proactive, preventative and positive. Relational approaches build social capital. In other words they help to build environments that reflects knowledge and understanding of what it takes to be cooperative and behave in ways that provides emotional and physical safety for everyone. ‘By doing so, a climate or environment for teaching and learning can be created, maintained and repaired when needed’ (Thorsborne and Blood1, 2013: 31). Relational approaches create emotionally safe environments (Nurture Principle 2), encourage cooperation, and discourage behaviour that hurts others. Adopting relational approaches at a whole school level takes time - time for staff to develop a shared understanding of the underpinning principles, time to learn, practice and refine the skills and strategies to support the approach, time to become confident and consistent in their use. They are not a quick fix. Learners and parents also need time to become familiar with and trust the relational approaches being used.

Boundaries are necessary to support emotional and physical safety. They provide points of reference for respectful interaction and are an expression of what is important to us and what we expect of ourselves and each other. Unlike rules which are directly linked to negative consequences if they are broken, boundaries can be explicitly linked to positive consequences that are a result of everyone in the learning community respecting them. Children’s rights should be at the heart of agreeing boundaries, routines and shared expectations about how people treat one another. In line with Article 12 children and young people should be full partners in agreeing what the shared expectations and boundaries are. The CIRCLE Framework is a useful tool for examining boundaries and routines at establishment and class level.

Why is the approach taken an ‘equity’ issue? Relational approaches however are more effective for more learners that are vulnerable and who often struggle to follow the rules. Interestingly punitive approaches may appear to work for some of the more vulnerable learners some of the time however this will often be the case when the learner has a good relationship with staff and doesn’t want to disappoint them. Educational settings need to focus on understanding why the child or young person is behaving in the way they are, and provide the right support at the right time to help them with what they need.

Self-Evaluation frameworks Education Scotland’s suite of inspection frameworks provide a set of standards to evaluate the quality of education services and organisations. The quality indicators recognise the value and effectiveness of inclusive, relationship and rights-based practice. Guidance on how to involve learners effectively in self-evaluation and school improvement can be found in the How good is OUR School?

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Relational Approaches to Promote Positive Behaviour

ALL adults in an educational establishment should know why relationships are important in creating a learning environment and take personal responsibility for building and maintaining relationships with learners, parents and each other. In this way adults can model the behaviour they would like to see.

Relationships form the basis of all relational approaches. Helpful relationships are simply the positive connections between people that foster positive social interactions and establish an environment of trust and support. In a trusting and supportive environment people can disagree and challenge each other.

Relational approaches include those that are nurturing, trauma-informed, restorative, solution orientated, and encourage compassion and connection across communities. Practitioners who are committed to relational approaches will generally:

- show unconditional positive regard to learners (accepting and supporting them exactly as they are without evaluating or judging them)
- understand and respond to behaviour in a respectful, child friendly and holistic way, considering the individual in the context of their family, community and culture
- proactively develop responses to support learners’ wellbeing and learners who may be at risk of disengaging or of being excluded
- actively listen, with purpose, to children and young people
- focus on inclusion, wellbeing, and addressing barriers to learning rather than punitive processes
- help children and young people to be aware of and understand the impact of their actions and behaviours

Many different types of relational approaches are used in educational establishments across Scotland. No one approach is better than the others and none are mutually exclusive. Relational approaches compliment each other, however, when combining approaches, for example nurture and restorative approaches, care should be taken to ensure common language and skills are used across the establishment to avoid unnecessary complexity and confusion.

Common relational approaches currently being used in Scottish educational settings include:

- Nurture and trauma-informed approaches (including Compassionate and Connected Classrooms and Communities)
- Restorative approaches (including peer mediation and solution oriented schools) and Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP)

Adopting any approach involves our values, how we think, how we behave ourselves, and what we expect from our children and young people. This means that differing views between practitioners may make achieving consistency in using whole school approaches across settings challenging. Whole school approaches can only be effectively implemented by involving everyone in the learning community – children and young people, staff, parents and carers, partners, and the wider community. The value of spending time as a school community exploring the link between wellbeing and learning, the psychology behind behaviour, and the benefits of using relational approaches cannot be under-estimated in helping to develop shared values and thinking, and to building skills and confidence in using these approaches. This learning process will never be achieved with one-off events but should be continuous and on-going. For effective implementation relational approaches should be embedded in the organisation’s shared vision and values, improvement planning and an annual cycle of professional learning. For example using an Implementation Science Approach.

Every relationship has the power to confirm or challenge everything that has gone on before. (Bomber, 2007)

Click here for a tool to help you reflect on how well you or your establishment is doing in terms of relationship building, maintain and restoring.
Nurture and trauma-informed approaches (including compassionate and connected classrooms and communities)

Being nurturing means being both supportive and challenging. Nurturing approaches can help children regulate their emotions, relate to others, and behave positively. They encompass both universal and targeted support for individuals or groups. Largely based on attachment theory and an understanding of the impact of early adversity and child development, nurturing approaches focus on the learning environment and are based on the understanding of 6 core principles:

- All our children and young people’s learning is understood developmentally
- Our learning environment offers a safe place for all children and young people
- Nurture and nurturing relationships are important for the development of wellbeing
- Language is a vital means of communication
- All behaviour is communication
- Transitions are important in children’s and young people’s lives

Being trauma-informed means having an increased understanding of its impact such as poorer wellbeing, social and educational outcomes. Experiencing trauma is common and can affect both children, parents/carers and school staff. In relation to behaviour, trauma can cause difficulties with regulating emotions, difficulties with trust and relationships, and increase the likelihood of risk taking or self-harming. Additionally, those affected by trauma may be less likely to seek or receive the help or support they need. NES (NHS) have produced a comprehensive framework exemplifying trauma-informed practice for the Scottish workforce (Transforming Psychological Trauma) and an Introductory FILM (8.41 min) about Trauma Informed Practice for the Workforce. Staff wellbeing is central to trauma-informed workplaces. Practitioners who are trauma-informed can:

- offer consistent relationships that engender trust
- recognise and understand the distress caused by trauma and its impact (10 things about childhood trauma every teacher needs to know)
- recognise an individual’s strengths and resources, and be ready to support these
- reduce the risk of re-traumatisation

The Compassionate and Connected Classroom and Community (CCC) professional learning and resources are based on evidence-based practice which complements nurturing approaches and contributes to staff understanding and practice around trauma and adverse early experiences. This professional learning and classroom resource promotes knowledge and practical skills around attachment, attunement, resilience, social and emotional learning, self-regulation and co-regulation, and neuroscience. CCC may be particularly useful for educational settings whose practitioners have different levels of experience and expertise by providing opportunities to refresh knowledge and skills. CCC can be delivered in a modular style, as online learning or through establishment based professional learning.

Click here for a comprehensive summary of supports and resources including professional learning on Nurture and trauma-informed approaches in education.
Restorative Approaches

Being restorative can be proactive (relationship building) or responsive (relationship repairing) and can be used at every level from everyday informal interactions to more formal restorative meetings. Restorative approaches articulate with, and compliment all other relational approaches, and influence the emotional atmosphere in a learning community. A restorative approach recognises that people are the experts of their own solutions and if implemented effectively will promote accountability and maximise personal responsibility. A restorative approach provides a framework of values, thinking, and language that is helpful when something needs to be repaired or restored. In different contexts this could be:

- effective communication
- relationships or friendships
- empathy and understanding for another person’s perspective
- trust and respect (this could mean a sense of security, self-confidence, self-respect, or dignity)
- understanding the impact of our own behaviour on others
- repairing or replacing damaged materials or resources

All practitioners can behave in a restorative way by demonstrating restorative values and using restorative thinking and language.

Restorative values:
- promote relationship building, conflict resolution and reconciliation
- create environments where social and emotional learning and personal development can be supported
- embrace qualities such as open-minded thinking, compassion, empathy, perseverance and cultural sensitivity

Restorative thinking:
- helps us understand another person’s behaviour and reflect on our own behaviour
- find solutions to disagreements and potential conflicts
- promotes self-compassion, empathy and compassion for others
- often involves thinking together which helps to develop our openness to alternative ways of thinking and potentially new ways of behaving

Restorative language and having restorative conversations can generate opportunities for listening and participation, co-operation, build an awareness of social responsibility, and sensitively recognise social and cultural differences. Relationships are the essential component of restorative approaches.

Managing and leading restoratively. Restorative approaches are for everyone in the learning community therefore managers and leaders need to be sensitive to and take account of the emotional needs of their staff if they are to support them in being restorative. Responding restoratively in more formal ways, such as restorative meetings after incidents, requires a higher level of skill and if managed poorly can damage trust and relationships. This higher level of intervention, requires a higher the level of knowledge and skill, and professional learning of leaders and managers should reflect this.

Click here for more information and professional learning on restorative approaches.
Establishment Policies: Relationships, Rights and Behaviour

Policies should empower us to create a learning environment that articulates with our shared values and vision, rather than shackle us to a rigid set of rules and instructions. Relationships, rights and behaviour policies are an important element in creating a learning environment that works for everyone – children and young people, staff, parents and carers, partners, and the wider community. Unfortunately, historically for many, Relationships and Behaviour Policies have been subjects of controversy, often viewed as being imposed with insufficient consultation, not recognising the needs of all stakeholders, and rarely seen as contextualised enough to take account of local factors. For this reason any refresh or rewriting of policies that support relationships, rights and behaviour should involve a participative process with all stakeholders and should be tailored to the specific context of each local learning community. If implementation of a refreshed or new policy requires a cultural shift or change in practice then sufficient time should be allowed for this to happen. Any educational setting’s policies should be constructed around its context and culture and ideally promote and support:

- high-quality classroom practice that allows ALL children and young people to develop their talents and abilities (Article 29)
- a solid platform of relational practice, reflection (HGIOS) and personalisation (BtC3)
- an understanding of why children and young people display different types of behaviour, based on an awareness of trauma and anxiety and effective support strategies in place for individuals who need them
- an understanding of a wide range of additional support needs and strategies to support these through universal and targeted support


Consistency: The success of any policy relies on how consistently it is implemented by everyone within a setting. This was a strength of traditional behaviour management policies as they explicitly provided a consistent response when specific rules were broken. A consistent response, although easy to administer, does not take into account the individual needs of a child or young person. If we are to always act ‘in the best interests’ of the child (Article 3) our response should reflect that different children and young people need different things and these could change over time. We can and should however always be consistent in our approach to relationships, rights, and behaviour even if our responses are flexible to meet the needs of the learner. Relational and emotional consistency is key, children need to know that they can trust their relationships with adults. The behaviour of adults needs to be a consistent factor in that relationship. Implementing a whole school relational approach such as nurture and/or restorative approaches promotes consistency in adult behaviour across an educational setting.

Exclusions: All educational settings should be safe and free from psychological and physical harm for both the children, young people and adults in them. All children and young people however have a right to an education (Article 28) and to be protected from a life of underachievement and social exclusion (Articles 15, 29 & 31). This does not however mean that we should never exclude a child or place a child in a specialist educational setting. If our focus is to always act in the best interest of the child (Article 3) then we may need to use the full range of supportive interventions. An exclusion may be necessary to provide breathing space, an opportunity to hit the reset button, or allow time for planning an intervention. Exclusions however should be rare, a last resort, and never framed as a punishment. Relational approaches support an ethos and culture that minimises exclusions. Any child or young person who is repeatedly excluded should be considered for whether they have an additional support need, and appropriate supports and plans should be put in place. See Scottish Government’s guidance on guidance on Preventing and Managing Exclusions: Included, Engaged and Involved Part 2 (Annex C is particularly useful as it provides checklists of key considerations to be made prior to, during, and after an exclusion).
Supporting Staff Wellbeing and Professional Learning

All adults working with children and young people in any educational setting should receive professional learning to enable them to have a good understanding of the theoretical underpinnings of relational approaches and what they mean both in practical terms and emotionally for staff. They need to be able to understand children’s and young people’s behaviour in terms of their needs, including those with attachment issues or who have experienced trauma. Staff also need to be self-aware around their own possible traumatic experiences. Time should be set aside for regular professional dialogue about relational approaches and regular opportunities for continued professional learning. Developing a common language for describing children’s behaviour and needs as well as strategies for support is also helpful.

To enable staff to be able to sustain their support for the well-being of children and young people through providing secure relationships, they need to be supported in their own well-being. Research has shown that stress in the workplace is often related to a lack of agency and control. Like children and young people, adults need to feel that they are listened to and that they are able to affect change. Respectful relationships are key to this. Ensuring that staff are partners in planning and decision making also helps to bring about responsibility and shared ownership of the plans and outcomes they are working towards rather than simply accountability.

Staff will need to have the time and space to reflect on their practice both individually and with others. Peer coaching may be helpful for sharing ideas and problem solving. School leaders also need to be aware of the ‘secondary stress’ symptoms that can impact on staff who are working with children and young people who have experienced trauma and loss. In these cases professional supervision can provide an essential opportunity for staff to understand and manage intense feelings and projections that can lead to compassion fatigue. Opportunities for staff to learn and socialise together supports positive relationships. Activities such as mindfulness, yoga, and exercise support well-being.

COVID-19 has highlighted the need for increased awareness of and support for staff wellbeing. Resources and professional learning to support staff wellbeing include:

- Strengthening support for school staff and Support for the Education Workforce
- NES Wellbeing Planning Tool
- CYP’s Mental Health and Wellbeing: School Staff Wellbeing (requires registration/login)

Professional Learning and Leadership Programmes (requires GLOW login):

- Finding ways to wellbeing through coaching and self-empowerment
- Excellence in Headship – Supporting the health and wellbeing of headteachers
- An antidote to teacher stress: Restorative practices as a wellbeing initiative

### Relevant Policy and Guidance Links

- [Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014](#)
- [Getting it right for every child](#)
- [Developing a positive whole school ethos and culture: relationships, learning and behaviour](#)
- [Included, Engaged and Involved Part 1](#)
- [Included Engaged and Involved Part 2](#)
- [Respect for All: National approach to anti-bullying](#)
- [Adverse childhood experiences](#)
- Legislation
- [Scottish Government (SG): Policy Guidance](#)
- [SG: Guidance for education relationship policies](#)
- [SG: Promoting and managing school attendance](#)
- [SG: Preventing and managing school exclusions](#)
- [SG: National Guidance](#)
- [SG: Factsheet](#)