





Attachment aware, trauma responsive policy and practice

How can The Virtual School support settings to become attachment aware and trauma responsive?

By Carrie O'Rourke, Assistant Head of The Virtual School



There are so many myths and questions about what working in a trauma informed way means for colleagues in education, and the return of a colleague from a term's secondment to headship in a West Sussex school has given us in The Virtual School a unique opportunity.

When the Virtual School team embarked on our own learning journey to become an Attachment Aware and Trauma Responsive school, we were able to test and

apply what we learned to our advisory work, but Sam Norton has been able to implement her new knowledge and skills in a school environment. Her reflections on her experiences as a headteacher for the last term has provided an insight in to the power and positive impact for the whole school community of a trauma informed approach:

"The children really felt we were on their side; every day was a new start and we looked for the positive in every situation, no matter how hard things were."

The concept of trauma informed education does not mean that there are no rules or boundaries, but it certainly challenges us to consider the usefulness of some of the policies and approaches used in education settings. Sam is curious about what children are carrying when they come to school, taking the time to really listen and responding to young people based on what we know about how their brains and bodies respond.

The Virtual School team spent 6 months studying towards accreditation, and understanding the neuroscience and theory behind the impact of adversity and trauma on brain development really challenged our thinking about how and why young people struggle to engage in learning. The evidence clearly shows that educational outcomes for young people who have experienced adversity are significantly poorer than their peers. In fact, the impact of the multiple Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) of many of the children needing social care involvement is far reaching impacting on their development and future life prospects. The evidence tells us that around 12.5% of the population has more than 4 ACEs, resulting in significantly poorer physical and mental health, education, employment, and relationship outcomes in adult life than those without.







With the crisis in school attendance, escalating number of exclusions and incidents of dysregulation and school avoidance rapidly increasing, we needed to know how to mitigate the impact of this adversity in an education environment. We needed some ways forward, and we were told that our training would "challenge who we are, how we are, and what we do."

As Sam told her staff team:

"We make adaptations for Maths and English; we need to make those adaptations to enable learning in the widest sense."

Many of the strategies to enable a young person to feel safe and a sense of belonging, which are needed to learn effectively, are underpinned by healthy attuned relationships with a reliable, consistent adult. And who is better placed to provide that than colleagues in settings and schools?

From The Virtual School's own learning journey, we know that education providers have varied experiences and understandings of trauma informed practice. We have used our learning to develop a training offer that is accessible to everyone, whatever their level of understanding. Our training courses are all provided at **no cost** to West Sussex settings, or to colleagues from outside the County who are supporting children and young people living in West Sussex.

For more information about accessing our training, please visit the training and events page on our website, or get in touch via wsvs@westsussex.gov.uk to discuss how we can support you in your own learning journey.