

Relational Approaches to Inclusion

Relational approaches are universal practices that value the essential nature of relationships in managing behaviour and enabling individuals to develop, learn, adapt and thrive.

There are well documented concerns regarding young people's mental health and well-being, long standing national trends which show the disproportionate exclusion of children from disadvantaged and vulnerable groups and the negative impact of exclusion, both in the short and long term and increases in EBSA.

Evidence from [Behaviour-and-Mental-Health-in-Schools-Full-Report.pdf](#) consistently highlighted that behaviour is often driven by unmet need where young people, parents, carers and professionals overwhelmingly said that behaviour is linked to both mental health needs and to special educational needs (SEN) and disabilities.

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. In addition, positive teacher student relationships have been shown to be central to the well-being of both students and teachers (Roffey, 2012 [ECP29 4 inside ECP29 4 inside](#)).

Why do relationships matter?

At their best, relationships help us feel happy, healthy and secure. They can protect us from the big challenges many of us experience, including mental and physical ill health and poverty. With the right support in place, relationships education is an opportunity for children and young people to develop the skills they need to have healthy and reliable relationships for life.

Only by experiencing these relationships can children and young people identify and practise healthy and reliable relationships in their own lives. This helps them learn to understand and regulate their emotions, behaving more appropriately. They can become more resilient and more supportive, empathetic and inclusive with one another. And with better relationships with peers and teachers, they can be more receptive learners, improving their future life chances.

With healthy and reliable relationships at the heart of what they do, schools can improve the wellbeing of the whole school community. Pupils with positive relationships are likely to do better academically. And improved staff relationships mean higher morale and retention.

Relational practices maintain thriving children and young people. It is widely recognised that a child's emotional health and wellbeing influences their cognitive development and learning in school with a multitude of research on link between higher attainment when CYP experience connectedness and belonging in school as

well as their physical and social health and their mental wellbeing in adulthood
[Impact Study Report Oxford International Curriculum \(oup.com\)](#)

Research offers an optimistic perspective that focusing on relationships between teachers and pupils has wide reaching implications, offering the potential to:

- Support development of a positive emotional climate (Rucinski et al, 2018)
- Increase positive behaviours, as well as behaviour for learning (Driscoll and Pianta, 2010; Lei et al, 2016)
- Result in positive changes in emotional regulation, social competence and resilience to academic challenge, leading to increased academic achievement (Bergin and Bergin, 2009; Roorda et al, 2017)
- Enhance a pupil's sense of school belonging (Quinn, 2017; Allen et al, 2018)
- Increase wellbeing for teachers and staff involved (Split et al, 2011)

Relational practice shapes all levels of a school setting, including ethos, policy, procedures and everyday interactions at the individual level. In general, the relational approach places emphasis on relationships, respect, responsibility and restoration which have been shown to be more effective in addressing issues of discipline and conflict than traditional behavioural approaches, where systems rely solely on the use of rewards and sanctions to encourage compliance.

Relationships and interactions are a vehicle through which we can:

- Develop openness to trust
- Build a sense of security, belonging and connection
- Teach and embed skills to manage and regulate difficult emotions
- Develop awareness of ourselves and the emotional needs and perspective of others
- Resolve conflict
- Repair and restoring relationships following conflict

Key Theories that Support Relational Approaches to Inclusion

Attachment Theory

Attachment theory and research confirms the overwhelming importance of safe relationships for children, and the emotional distress and challenging behaviours that may arise when children's need for secure attachments remain unmet.

Polyvagal Theory

Polyvagal Theory was proposed by Dr Stephen Porges. He emphasised that our behavioural responses represent the way in which our nervous system is regulating the body's response to stress. Children's behaviour is therefore adaptive and designed to support their survival, rather than reflecting intentional misbehaviour. Polyvagal Theory therefore suggests that the goal for supporting children's learning and behaviour should be to first provide a sense of safety, containment, and social engagement.

Relational Approaches to Inclusion Guidance and Toolkit

The Relational Approaches to Inclusion Guidance and Toolkit is soon to be published online and aims illustrate a clear relational approach and language to support schools and colleges to develop whole school approaches and embed relational principles into policy and practice for school staff.

This guidance reflects the commitment to supporting schools and settings with the inclusion of children and young people in the widest sense. Children and young people are relational beings, educational and teaching are relational acts and schools are sites for relational experiences. School climate and culture provides the conditions for emotional wellbeing and mental health for young people in education (see [Conditions for mental health in education: towards relational practice.](#)) Therefore relational practice promotes and supports mental health and emotional well-being (MHEW). There is a huge evidence base showing the impact of better MHEW on attendance and attainment.

The Relational Approaches to Inclusion Guidance and Toolkit provides information and guidance on how to embed relational principles into policy and practice.

The guidance is organised into the 8 principles of the whole school approach to well being and includes a whole school relational approaches audit. The audit can be used to identify areas for development and the reader can defer to the relevant guidance and toolkit section for an overview, practical steps and resources.

The structure links to West Sussex County Council's Thriving in Education children's mental health and emotional well-being and thriving model with prevention and promotion at the heart of academic resilience.

A review of the literature demonstrates the importance of leadership and management in driving organisational change, staff development and well-being, pupil and parent/ career participation in additional to child-level work that synthesise together in a successful relational culture. This is because leadership and management, ethos and environment, staff, pupils and parents/carers shape relational practice at all levels of a school setting from the universal everyday interactions to targeted approaches for those most in need.