

Hope School's Journey from Attachment-Aware to Attachment-Friendly

Dr Jennifer A Nock, CPsychol, AFBPsS, PhD , BSc (Hons), July 2016

Despite schools seemingly becoming more aware of attachment difficulties in their pupils, many have yet to embark on the journey from being attachment-aware to attachment-friendly. This article, the first of two, reports the journey towards attachment-friendliness at Hope School, Liverpool, a Key Stage 1, 2 and 3 school for boys with social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) difficulties. The behaviour of the boys can often be volatile and disruptive, they are frequently in a state of emotional dysregulation, and many have difficulties relating to peers and adults. Twenty-two per cent of pupils are Looked After, and almost all pupils are eligible for pupil premium, well above the national average. Under the strong and visionary leadership of the Headteacher and the SLT, the school has embarked on a journey to bring the school into the vanguard of attachment-friendly practice.

This is the first article of two, and it will outline the rationale for change, significant key events and interventions and how competing discourses within the school community have brought additional challenges to achieving attachment-friendly practice.

I first met Rohit Naik, the Headteacher of Hope School in March 2015. He shared a little of his own journey with Hope School, which was judged 'Outstanding' by Ofsted at its most recent inspection in Autumn, 2014. Although pupil behaviour had been judged as 'Outstanding', Mr Naik expressed concern that whilst the pupils behaved well in school, they were sometimes not able to maintain their good behaviour in contexts other than this particular school. This, at times, led to consequent exclusion from mainstream school or SEMH provision, following transfer at Key Stage 4, and/or involvement with the criminal justice system out of school hours or after leaving Hope School. Mr Naik believed that this was largely due to extrinsic factors on behaviour (e.g. staff expectations and strategies, including rewards), rather than appropriate behaviour being intrinsically motivated, that is, pupils learning to manage their own feelings and behaviours from an internal perspective, because of the sense of personal satisfaction and well-being that those behaviours bring.

Mr Naik expressed a desire to learn more about the effects of trauma on emotional and social development, and also to explore a more nurturing approach to behaviour than the traditional reward and sanctions type methods that the school was using at that time.

That conversation was the starting point of the school's journey from attachment-awareness towards attachment-friendly practice. Over the following several months, the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) developed a strategic plan to improve attachment-friendly practice, and initial training on attachment and trauma was delivered to the whole staff, including the leadership team. New staff who joined the school in September 2015 accessed catch-up training, ensuring that all members of staff were familiar with both theory and practice regarding attachment and trauma, an essential component of attachment-friendly practice.

Tackling the issues

SLT immediately began to operationalise their emerging strategic plan, starting by identifying current strengths, areas for development and putting in place necessary interventions and support for staff. Observations across the school were carried out in a variety of contexts. There was some evidence of attachment-friendly practice. For example, some staff allowed minor issues to slide, maintained a calm demeanour, used proximity and firm touch in order to neutralise tension and help pupils to stay regulated, used brain breaks and sensory snacks, and frequently employed humour to defuse potentially explosive situations. However, a number of areas needed development. For example, negative language and instructions were common, so many instructions began with 'Don't ...' In some lessons, there were too many 'voices' trying to settle children when they became unruly and/or dysregulated, and this only served to over-stimulate pupils even more. In many classrooms, the level of arousal was constantly high, and this meant that many of the pupils were dysregulated, impulsive and reactive. In one situation, a pupil was given 'time out', which he spent alone in a 'time out' area. He was closely supervised, but not in close proximity to an adult. For some pupils, particularly those with unmet attachment needs, the nearness of a trusted adult is necessary in order for the child to become regulated.

Following the first observations, SLT addressed some of the issues described above. They prioritised developing adult calmness, self-control and modelling appropriate behaviour. They also advised that staff avoid getting into 'tit-for-tat' exchanges with pupils, and reduce any interactions that raised children's stress levels, as these often back pupils into a corner from which they cannot escape. Instead, staff were asked to offer two good choices, e.g. *'Would you like me to sit with you, or are you better on your own?'* Staff were asked to

give instructions in a calm and positive manner, e.g. *'Don't get the Lego on the floor'* becomes *'Keep the Lego on the table, please'*; *'Don't get stressed!'* becomes *'Deep breaths and slow breathing.'* Staff were also asked to increase the use of proximity, pupil's name and frequent firm, respectful touch, as these often have a calming and grounding effect on dysregulated pupils. Four pupils were identified to receive an intensive intervention (described below), including the allocation of Key Workers to support each of the pupils.

The intervention programme for the selected cohort of boys

A small cohort of four pupils was identified: a six-year-old; two eight-year-olds and an eleven-year-old. After completing the Observation Checklist (Golding *et al*, 2013), which is a useful tool for increasing understanding of a child's emotional needs through observed behaviours, Key Workers drew up individual action plans, with reference to concerns, targets and actions for each boy. The pupils received intensive support, with the primary aim of developing an authentic attachment relationship with their Key Workers. It was hoped that over time, the interventions would reduce unwanted behaviour and increase the pupils' perception of safety, leading to increased ability to access the curriculum and social relationships within the school.

Initial concerns included *Predominately disorganised style of relating to peers; Uses his own emotion to keep safe; and High levels of anxiety-based, attention-seeking behaviour.* For each boy, a targeted programme of intervention included a daily meet-and-greet session on entry to school, a daily relationship-based play session with the Key Worker and a sensory and body work programme. Individual interventions included a weekly sand tray session, use of calm box activities when early signs of over-arousal were observed, daily massage and emotional literacy games and activities.

Competing discourses

As is usual when an organisation makes major changes to strategies and procedures, a number of competing discourses emerged early in the process. The discourse of the SLT was that the school would develop as a nurturing, therapeutic, educational environment, requiring nothing less than a paradigm shift in the thinking and practice of all staff,

challenging them to re-evaluate previously held assumptions and perceptions of the way things are and should be in schools. While senior staff were sensitive and empathic to staff concerns (described below), there was to be no deviation from the goal, and attachment-friendly practice would be mandatory, not optional.

This was very difficult for many staff members and while Key Workers were positive about their own developing relationships with the boys, they also raised a number of concerns about the anxieties of other members of staff. A second, competing discourse, was that the new approach would lead to a decline in academic progress, as the children on the intervention programme would not make good academic progress because of the high focus on social and emotional interventions. Considering the emphasis on academic progress, often to the exclusion of all other types of progress, required by current systems and policies, teachers were afraid of not getting the expected results. In addition to their obvious desire that all children achieve their academic potential, they feared that a hiatus in academic progress would impact upon their own feelings of efficacy and also, that they may be judged as not being good at their jobs. SLT addressed this concern by assuring staff that progress data would not be the only focus; instead, relationship-building would be prioritised. Staff were also assured that it was the firm belief of SLT that social and emotional interventions, in particular, the building of authentic attachment relationships within school, would ultimately lead to enhanced ability to access the curriculum. The safer the child feels, the more likely he or she is to drop hypervigilance, engage in the cycle of learning with curiosity and with the confidence to explore their learning world. The Key Workers, thus, had a pivotal role in getting the boys into a state of 'learning readiness'.

A third discourse was that that the new approach would lead to chaos in the school, with children's behaviour being out of control. Some staff found it difficult to adopt strategies that seemed contradictory to what they had previously been taught about 'behaviour management', particularly, the perceived lack of sanctions when the boys 'misbehaved'; some were critical of the Headteacher, whom they perceived as not acting decisively to address unwanted behaviours. SLT advised staff that there were indeed consequences, but the consequences were delivered with high warmth and empathy, with an emphasis on helping boys to understand and change their own behaviour, rather than with having behaviour changed, temporarily, through punitive measures. Again, there was a focus on

intrinsic rather than extrinsic controls on behaviour, which leaders hoped would serve the boys well not only in school, but in other contexts as well. Planning well for the boys meant that they were kept away from potentially explosive situations, and that adults worked hard to understand the causes and underlying communications of behaviour. Increasingly, there was a movement towards interpreting behaviour rather than reacting to it, with a focus on helping the boys to communicate their needs in more appropriate ways.

In conclusion

This initiative presented challenges to each member of staff, perhaps particularly to the Headteacher and other members of SLT, as it demanded a letting go of methods that have brought good results, including the aforementioned 'Outstanding' judgement awarded by Ofsted. It takes a truly visionary leader to embark on the journey, as attachment-friendly practice does not deliver quick results. Many members of staff have needed reassurance, understanding, patience and empathy from the leadership team, and this has been available to them, while commitment to the changes has been upheld by SLT. This is a fine line, often difficult to balance, but the expertise and honesty of senior leaders has paid high dividends.

A future article will report on and discuss the school's strategic planning for embedding attachment-friendly, trauma-informed practice into school policies and documentation, including the School Development Plan. The role of the Governing Body and training for parents and carers will also be explored, and there will be some suggestions as to why Hope School is succeeding in becoming attachment-friendly, when many others, who started with good intentions, have given up on the challenge.

References

Golding, K. (2013) *Observing Children with Attachment Difficulties in School*, JKP, London