

A case study of the attachment approach adopted at Hope School in Liverpool

The headteacher and senior leadership of Hope School adopted an attachment friendly approach a few years ago after research into attachment theory and children's learning at school (Bombèr, 2007; Bombèr, 2011) led to the realisation that taking a more attachment-focused approach to how they work with the children in the school would be more effective than the previous behaviourist approaches to behaviour management that had been centred around sanctions and rewards. This was a big risk as it involved supporting the children to manage themselves rather than taking a more traditionally controlling approach to behaviour management. The risk has proved worthwhile as the new approach is incredibly effective – incidents of challenging behaviour have decreased tangibly and there is widespread evidence from both staff and parents that children who struggled significantly to access learning in their previous schools have settled very well to learn at Hope. Children have also become more collaborative in their learning and more empathetic since the changes were implemented. Key elements of the school's approach that have had this impact are:

- There are still firm boundaries in place, giving children and staff both physical and emotional safety and enabling learning to take place. The difference is in how these boundaries are maintained – behaviour is now supported through relationship and consistency with the children rather than through the use of sanctions and rewards. This demands a lot from the staff but there are clear systems in place to support them.
- The no-exclusion policy means that children settle better at the school and learn not to keep pushing the boundaries as they know that nothing they can do will cause them to be excluded – so they feel safer and more accepted, and also know there is nothing to be gained by pushing the boundaries too far.
- Observations of children's behaviour and reactions to situations have shown that the removal of sanctions and rewards has in fact improved behaviour as previously, the possibility of rewards increased children's anxiety as they became overly focused on the reward.
- The school also works extensively with external partners such as occupational health, psychologists and cognitive behavioural therapists. This works on two levels as it supports children to better access the learning as they work through their individual barriers to learning, but also improves staff understanding of children's specific needs and barriers to learning and how these can be overcome.

I have become involved as I am conducting research in the form of a case study to further understand the impact of the approach that the school has taken. Over the past few weeks I have been conducting interviews with staff, parents and children to gain wider perspectives on the changes the school has made and what this has meant for everyone involved. All stakeholders have been able to give evidence of a positive impact on both children's learning and their attitude to school.

The next step in my research will be to gather together the data around pupil progress, attendance, and perspectives from external stakeholders such as the local authority. I will then draw together all the findings under key themes, to be fed back to the school to inform their work and further presented in the form of peer-reviewed research. Initial key themes that are emerging are the impact that creating the right emotional conditions has had on children's learning; and the importance of starting with staff attachment and wellbeing, as the school's approach has been effective due to the emphasis they placed on working on staff attachment to enable them to be in a position to give the children the emotional support that they need. This is hugely significant, particularly in the context of a school for children with SEMH needs.

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References

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