

What does a relational approach in education mean?



A **relational approach** places relationships at the heart of children’s learning, development, and wellbeing. It recognises that feeling **safe, connected, and valued** is essential for children to thrive - emotionally, socially, and academically.

Why do relationships matter?



Secure attachments in early childhood lay the foundation for trust, resilience, and self-worth. When children experience consistent, warm, and attuned care, they learn that they are lovable and that others can be trusted. However, not all children have this secure base. Experiences of neglect, inconsistency, or trauma can disrupt attachment, leading to behaviours that reflect unmet emotional needs - not defiance.

In every classroom, there are children whose early relationships were insecure or disorganised. Their brains and emotional responses may be shaped by adversity, making relational understanding and support essential - not optional.

What is a relational approach?



Relational approaches are inclusive, evidence-informed practices that shape all aspects of a school’s culture, from ethos and policy to everyday interactions. They prioritise connection over control and understanding over punishment.

Rather than focusing solely on behaviour, relational approaches seek to understand what behaviour communicates, considering the emotional and relational context behind it.

What are the core principles?



- Trust and Safety:** Building secure, positive relationships with pupils.
- Empathy and Attunement:** Responding to emotional needs with compassion.
- Behaviour as Communication:** Understanding actions as expressions of inner experience.
- Inclusive Environments:** Ensuring every child feels seen, heard, and supported.
- Restorative and Trauma-Informed Practice:** Repairing relationships and fostering resilience

Why does relational inclusion matter?



Relational inclusion places relationships at the centre of efforts to support vulnerable pupils, especially those in care, with SEND, or at risk of exclusion. It shifts the focus from “fixing” behaviour to **supporting children through connection**, making inclusion a lived experience, not just a policy.

Relational approaches offer a more effective and compassionate alternative to traditional behaviour systems, which may achieve short-term compliance but risk long-term harm, especially for children with complex needs.

By embedding relational practice across the school, we create environments where all children can feel safe, connected, and ready to learn.

What might it look like in school?



Virtual School have purchased membership for all schools in Hampshire to be members of the [Attachment Research Community \(ARC\)](#) ARC is an audit tool and framework to support schools in their relational journey and capture the work being completed in this space as it will look different for every school. If you would have not yet joined, please register with the Virtual School <https://forms.office.com/e/Qd7Bwz2ZtW>