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TOP TIPS for building relationships with vulnerable pupils in your new class

Welcoming and settling a new class in September is both exciting and hard work. Not only are there a sea of names, faces and personalities to establish relationships and routines with but twice as many parents and carers to get to know as well. No doubt you have a range of tried and tested activities and strategies to use in those first few days of the new term. However, for some children, the settling and relationship building will take longer, with a little bit more thought and attention needed than perhaps for the majority of pupils. Children who are, or have been, under the care of children's services, be it as a currently looked after child (LAC), those on a Team Around the Family (TAF), Child in Need (CIN) or Child Protection (CP) plan, or those who were previously looked after (PLAC – adopted or on Special Guardian Orders), may have found the summer break far from easy and find it extremely difficult to fall back into the routines and structures of the school day.

For some children, the summer holidays may have brought about unexpected placement changes (which may or may not lead to a change of school); there may have been contact visits with birth families that have caused dysregulation in emotions and behaviours; respite care with unknown carers that has required the forming and ending of new relationships in a short time; the uncertainty of changes day-to-day when the usual school routine is not in place; the managing of increased unstructured time or the heightened excitement of fun summer activities, which can be just as hard to regulate as disappointment or stress.

These children will (hopefully) be well known to you and, no doubt, you will have spent time with their previous class team working on a supported transition before the holidays. However, in our experience, it is worth spending that little bit of additional time and effort at the start of term to build strong relationships with these vulnerable pupils, to ensure a strong foundation for the year ahead.

A good relationship with someone means you feel happy, safe, and secure in their company. This means that clear boundaries can be set, and the child knows what to expect. All children need to know that there is an adult at school whom they trust and who will make time for them and for our children with vulnerabilities developing a connection with key adults is even more important. One of the great things about the relational approach is that can be easy to implement. Most of us already use this approach in our everyday practice.

So, what are the small changes you can make to your classroom practice, and your interactions with the children in your class, that will help you to build strong relationships with them. Here are some of our top tips...

Making Individual Time



Try to plan in times throughout your week for time with individual or small groups of children, particularly your children with vulnerabilities. With all the pressures already on teacher's time these don't have to be large amounts of time, but we always found if we didn't ring fence this time other properties would quickly take over. Good opportunities for individual time are:

- Eating lunch with your class once a week
- Popping out into the playground when you are not on duty to chat or play a game with children
- 5 minutes 1:1 quiet reading time
- Looking at a piece of their work together

When these short interactions take place regularly, they provide meaningful interactions for these children and build up trust between you.

Remembering and noticing



The first interactions with the children in your class set the tone for the day. Use this time to make personal interactions with the children, asking how they football training went, noticing that they have started reading a new book. By remembering the small things, you are showing them that they are important to you, and for some children this can completely change their day.

Try and continue this throughout the school day, noticing when a child looks proud of a piece of work and complimenting them on how good it is. When coming in from break and lunch ask children what games they played, show interest in their interests.

Not only will these interactions help to create a nurturing culture in your classroom and make children feel valued, but they also act as model of how you expect children to treat and speak to each other.

Communication with parents and carers



At the beginning of the year parents and carers are often as nervous as their children about building relationships with the new teaching staff in their child's class. Taking time in the first few weeks to introduce yourself to them, and to email or verbally celebrate the successes their child has had at the start of the school year shows you know and value their child and recognise their strengths. If there are then times later in the school year when you have to more challenging conversations about difficulties that their child is having, you have already established a positive relationship meaning that parents will be more willing to listen and engage.

Understanding the background information



As teachers we are given so much paperwork to read it can become overwhelming. However, for our children with vulnerabilities it is important that we understand their background, their triggers, thoughtful language we can use and how we can best support them. Key documents such as PEPs (Personal Education Plans), Care Plans, EHCPs (Education, Health and Care Plans) and Educational Psychology Reports (to name a few) hold vital information that can help ensure you put the right support in place for the children in your class and made adjustments that can make such a difference. Making time at the start of the year to thoroughly read these documents, share them with the other adults in your class and set actions from them can ensure a more successful start to the year.

Holding in mind



To feel secure our vulnerable children, need to know that they are important to you and that you won't forget them. Small acts throughout the school day to show that you are 'holding them in mind' can make a significant difference to them. These acts are small, a smile and a mouthing of well-done across the classroom, sharing a joke, a post it note saying 'brilliant' stuck on a piece of work or a 'thumbs up' when you can see how hard they are trying to listen. For children who find coming into school challenging transitional objects given to them by their teacher can help ease anxieties. They are all small gestures, but they show the child that you are always looking out for them, you care, and you are on their side.



Health warning! The first few weeks can sometimes provide a 'honeymoon period' where the child appears settled and complacent, but this can be a protective barrier they are putting up until they feel safer in the new environment. As they become familiar with the new adults and routines, they can begin to feel safe to let their true feelings out, or the buildup of stress can no longer be contained; this often presents as dysregulated behaviour (flight, fight, freeze, fawn). Working hard to establish strong relationships early on will be invaluable to supporting the child as the term progresses.

In conclusion...

Please remember, there is no magic wand; relationships take time to establish, and our vulnerable youngsters are often hesitant to trust new adults in their lives. Every child is individual and will need an individual approach to relationship building, as well as a supportive team around them; your designated teacher for LAC (DT) will be able to guide and support you in school, so please seek their advice.

Remember, at the Virtual School, we are here to help. We can provide consultation sessions for teachers and DTs (contact virtualschool@hants.gov.uk) to chat through any difficulties arising for LAC pupils (we can also give general advice for the PLAC and Children with a Social Worker cohorts), so please get in touch. We would also recommend exploring support from our colleagues at the Primary Behaviour Service (PBS) and the Educational Psychology service (EPs).

“If relationships are where things developmental can go wrong, then relationships are where they are most likely to be put right”

(Howe 2005, p278, quoted in Bomber & Hughes, 2013, Settling to Learn, p5)