

Nurture in Northern Irish Schools: A briefing from nurtureuk

nurtureuk

Nurtureuk is the national charity supporting whole-school nurturing interventions. We work to ensure that every disadvantaged or disengaged child has access to a nurturing intervention to equip them with the skills and resilience they need to make the most of learning and school. We do this by supporting the development of nurturing interventions in schools through training, resources and support; making the case for nurture in schools with policymakers and politicians; and running an on-going research and evaluation programme to monitor evidence of outcomes.

Nurture interventions are educational psychologist-designed, teacher-led interventions for disengaged and troubled children. Nurture approaches remove behavioural barriers to engagement and attainment in schools by recreating missing or distorted early attachments and are proven to support greater academic attainment, improved behaviour and attendance, and reduced school exclusions.

“Increasingly, the children demonstrated their ability to self-manage their work and behaviour and showed a good understanding of the targets set to help them achieve positive outcomes. “

From Northern Ireland Education and Training Inspectorate’s Evaluation of the Nurture Unit Signature Project Pilot, 2016

The whole-school approach – National Nurturing Schools Programme

The National Nurturing Schools Programme (NNSP) is a whole-school approach that upskills teachers and other school staff to embed a nurturing culture to improve the mental health and wellbeing of all pupils and staff in a school. With one in 10 school children in the UK suffering from a mental health problem¹ and worrying levels of stress and exhaustion among teaching staff, the NNSP offers schools a way to develop a happier, more resilient and more successful school community.

We support schools to embed the six principles of nurture that have successfully underpinned nurture groups, the original nurturing intervention, for over 40 years, as the foundational element across all school functions. These principles are:

- Children’s learning is understood developmentally
- The importance of nurture for the development of wellbeing
- All behaviour is communication
- The classroom offers a safe base
- Language is a vital means of communication
- The importance of transition in children’s lives

Teachers are trained to focus on emotional needs and development as well as the academic learning of all pupils, and to embed the six principles of nurture throughout the policies and practices of a school. This enhances teaching and learning and promotes healthy outcomes for children, young people and the staff in the school. We also train teachers to use Boxall Profile, the educational psychologist designed tool to identify children and young people who need additional,

¹ Mental Health Foundation, <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/a-to-z/c/children-and-young-people>

more focused support or interventions, such as to be part of a nurture group. This programme takes place over a two-year period and requires the commitment of both senior management and teaching staff.

The Boxall Profile

The Boxall Profile is a unique online assessment instrument enabling teachers and education professionals to develop a precise and accurate understanding of individual children's social and emotional competencies, and to plan effective interventions and support activities. The Boxall Profile is cited by the Department for Education as a key measurement and identification tool to support pupils with mental health problems (Department for Education, 2018, *Mental health and behaviour in schools*) and is the most popular measurement used in schools to understand pupils' wellbeing and support needs (Department for Education, 2017, *Survey: supporting mental health in schools and colleges*). Currently, it is widely used when teachers identify that a pupil may have social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD), although increasingly schools are using the Boxall Profile to gain a better understanding of the wellbeing of their whole school populations. By profiling all children in a school, the teaching staff have a more rounded view of the children and young people in their care and their needs. The Boxall Profile is easy to use and a very cost-effective resource.

Nurture groups

Nurture groups are the original and best-known nurturing intervention. They are an educational psychologist-designed, teacher-led intervention for disengaged and troubled children, that remove behavioural barriers to engagement and attainment in schools through re-creating missing or distorted early attachments. First developed in Hackney, London nearly 50 years ago, there are now more than 2,000 nurture groups in nursery, primary and secondary schools across the UK. Within the whole school approach of the National Nurturing Schools Programme the six principles underpinning nurture groups are used to support all children and staff at the school. A classic nurture group exists to support children with more acute needs and benefit from this more intensive and focused intervention.

A nurture group is a small group of 6 to 12 children or young people supported by two trained adults. Nurture groups are, on average, provided 5 times a week for 2.5 hours a day per child and are the only intensive psycho-social intervention available full-time while allowing students to remain a part of their mainstream class. Placements in the nurture group can be either short or medium-term with the average pupil returning fully to their mainstream classes between two and four terms.

'Nurture children' are carefully selected using the Boxall Profile. Goals are set and outcomes and progress are captured using the Boxall Profile online, which gives nurtureuk access to outcomes data. Once in the group, a nurturing philosophy rooted in attachment theory is used to ensure that children with social, emotional or behavioural difficulties are provided with the early nurturing experiences that are vital to learning. Nurture groups turn children's lives around, ensuring no child is left behind, and are also an excellent 'sharp end' intervention. By allowing teachers dedicated time, and by providing a framework through which to work with individual children, staff are able to more accurately identify whether pupil's needs could be met in school or if another course of action is necessary, such as an assessment for SEN support.

Proven Outcomes

- **Greater academic attainment:** Children and young people attending nurture groups have been shown in quasi non-randomised trials to have significant gains in academic attainment as measured by their total scores on their baseline assessment.² In a report by Ofsted, nurture groups are highlighted as an intervention which saw pupils make “considerable progress from their starting points” in their “reading and writing skills”³.
- **Improved behaviour:** Nurture groups resulted in an improvement in pupils’ behaviour and improved social skills at school⁴ and at home.⁵ An evaluation of 30 groups in Northern Ireland shows that while 77.7% of children who entered nurture groups as part of the trial were exhibiting difficult behaviour, this reduced to just 20.6% at post-intervention test⁶.
- **Improved attendance and reduced exclusions:** Nurture groups have proven to significantly improve attendance⁷ and reduce exclusions⁸.
- **Attachment to teachers, school and community:** Nurture groups help develop affective bonds between teachers and students,⁹ result in an increased nurturing ethos at school¹⁰ and result in positive attachments to schools and the community.¹¹
- **Long-term mental health improvements and resiliency:** Controlled studies have concluded that students with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties are significantly more likely to improve in social and emotional functioning by attending nurture group provision in school rather than remaining in their mainstream classroom, gains that were found to be maintained over time.¹²

² Reynolds, S., Kearney, M. and MacKay, T. (2009). Nurture Groups: a large – scale, controlled study of effect on development and academic attainment. *British Journal of Special Education*, 36 (4): 204 – 212; Seth-Smith, F., Netali L., Richard P., Fonagy p. and Jaffey, D. (2010). Do nurture groups improve the social, emotional and behavioural functioning of at risk children? *Educational and Child Psychology, Volume 27*, No 1.

³ Ofsted (2012) 'Pupil premium: how schools are spending the funding successfully to maximise achievement'. www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/130016.

⁴ Cooper, P. and Tiknaz, Y. (2005). Progress and challenge in Nurture Groups: evidence from three case studies. *British Journal of Special Education, Volume 32*, Issue 4, pages 211–222

⁵ Binnie, L.M., and K. Allen (2008). Whole school support for vulnerable children: The evaluation of a part-time nurture group. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties, volume 13*, no. 3: 201–16.

⁶ Sloan, S., Winter, K., Lynn, F., Gildea, A. & Connolly, P. (2016) The impact and cost effectiveness of Nurture Groups in Primary Schools in Northern Ireland. Belfast: Centre for Effective Education, Queen's University Belfast.

⁷ Sanders, Tracy (2007). Helping Children Thrive at School: The Effectiveness of Nurture Groups. *Educational Psychology in Practice, Volume. 23*, Issue 1, 45-61.

⁸ Cooper et al (2001). The effectiveness of nurture groups: preliminary research findings. *British journal of Special Education*, 28 (4), 160-166

⁹ Cooper, P. and Whitebread, D. (2007). The Effectiveness of Nurture Groups: Evidence from a National Research Study. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties, volume 12*, n3 p171-190.

¹⁰ Binnie, L.M., and K. Allen (2008). Whole school support for vulnerable children: The evaluation of a part-time nurture group. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties, volume 13*, no. 3: 201–16.

¹¹ Walker, L C (2010). *The impact of nurture group interventions: parental involvement and perceptions* (Unpublished PhD thesis). University of Sheffield, United Kingdom.

¹² O'Connor, Tina and John Colwell (2002). The effectiveness and rationale of the 'nurture group' approach to helping children with emotional and behavioural difficulties remain within mainstream education. *British Journal of Special Education, Volume 29*, Issue 2,

Nurturing interventions in Northern Ireland

The importance of nurture has been recognised by researchers, politicians and policymakers:

- In 2016, Queens University Belfast (QUB) was commissioned by the Department of Education to undertake an evaluation of nurture groups and examine the impact of the 30 groups then funded by the Department. The evaluation found the provision to be “highly successful in its primary aim of achieving improvements in the social, emotional and behavioural skills of children from deprived areas exhibiting significant difficulties”.

It found that, whilst 77.7% of children who entered nurture groups as part of the trial were exhibiting difficult behaviour this reduced to just 20.6% at post-test. However, for those children in the control schools, 62.8% of children exhibited difficult behaviour at the start of the year and this remained largely unchanged at post-test (61.9%). The study also found that in comparison with the estimated costs of providing other additional educational services to children with behavioural difficulties, Nurture Group provision presents direct savings to the education system and that investment in Nurture Groups is “cost-effective and represent significant economic return to society”¹³.

- In 2012, the First Minister and Deputy First Minister announced the development of six Signature Projects under the Delivering Social Change framework aimed at tackling poverty and social exclusion and improving children’s wellbeing. This included the ‘Nurture Unit’ Signature Project which provided funding for 20 new nurture groups through to 2016¹⁴.

Drawing on positive evidence from the independent evaluation by Queens University Belfast, in 2016 the Northern Ireland Assembly agreed to mainstream funding for the groups established by the pilot project, and called for the opening of more nurture groups across the country.

- An evaluation of nurture groups carried out by the Education and Training Inspectorate of Northern Ireland in 2015 found improvements in attendance, wellbeing and behaviour in the children attending nurture groups. It also recommended extending nurture group provision.¹⁵

What you can do to support whole-school nurturing interventions

- Visit a nurturing school to see first-hand the positive impact of whole-school nurturing interventions
- Highlight the benefits of nurturing interventions in local press, especially by speaking out about the achievements of schools using nurturing approaches in your constituency
- Support the establishment of nurture groups and programmes in your constituency by meeting with school leaders, writing to relevant officials, and advocating for nurturing interventions on a local level
- Meet with the nurtureuk policy team to find out more about our work

¹³ <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/nurture-provision-primary-schools>

¹⁴ <https://www.nurtureuk.org/policy/policy-news/northern-ireland-assembly-continues-nurture-group-funding>

¹⁵ Education and Training Inspectorate, ‘An Evaluation of the Nurture Unit Signature Project Pilot’. Available at:

https://www.etini.gov.uk/sites/etini.gov.uk/files/publications/an-evaluation-of-the-nurture-unit-signature-project-pilot_0.PDF



For support on any of these next steps or for further information, please contact becky@nutureuk.org.