Happy in School

The case for using nurture to tackle the attendance crisis

nurtureuk

Attendance is worse than ever, but there's something we can do.

Attendance: "The issue of our time"

Calls for action on school absence are coming from all quarters. Tens of thousands of children in England are now regularly missing school. Across the academic year 2022/23, 22.3% of pupils missed 10% or more of their possible sessions, classing them as 'persistently absent'.[1] The current climate has led the Children's Commissioner Rachel de Souza to describe attendance as "the issue of our time".[2] The link between attendance and educational outcomes is well understood[3] – but attainment is just one part of the story. Children who are not in education are also at increased risk of violence and exploitation and face potentially dire consequences for their futures.[4]

Mental health challenges, the effects of trauma and adverse childhood experiences, and special educational needs are just some of the factors contributing to the attendance crisis,[5,6] – all issues that have been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic and its lasting impacts.[7] Traditional teaching methods are simply no longer working for our pupils and it's time to do things differently.

nurtureuk believes that nurture approaches are a key part of the solution to this emergency. We are calling on policymakers and education bodies to make nurture the norm in schools to help tackle the attendance crisis.

What is nurture and who are nurtureuk

Nurture as a practice was developed in the late 1960s in Hackney, London, by educational psychologist Marjorie Boxall. She had become concerned that many young children – especially those from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds – were entering primary schools with severe e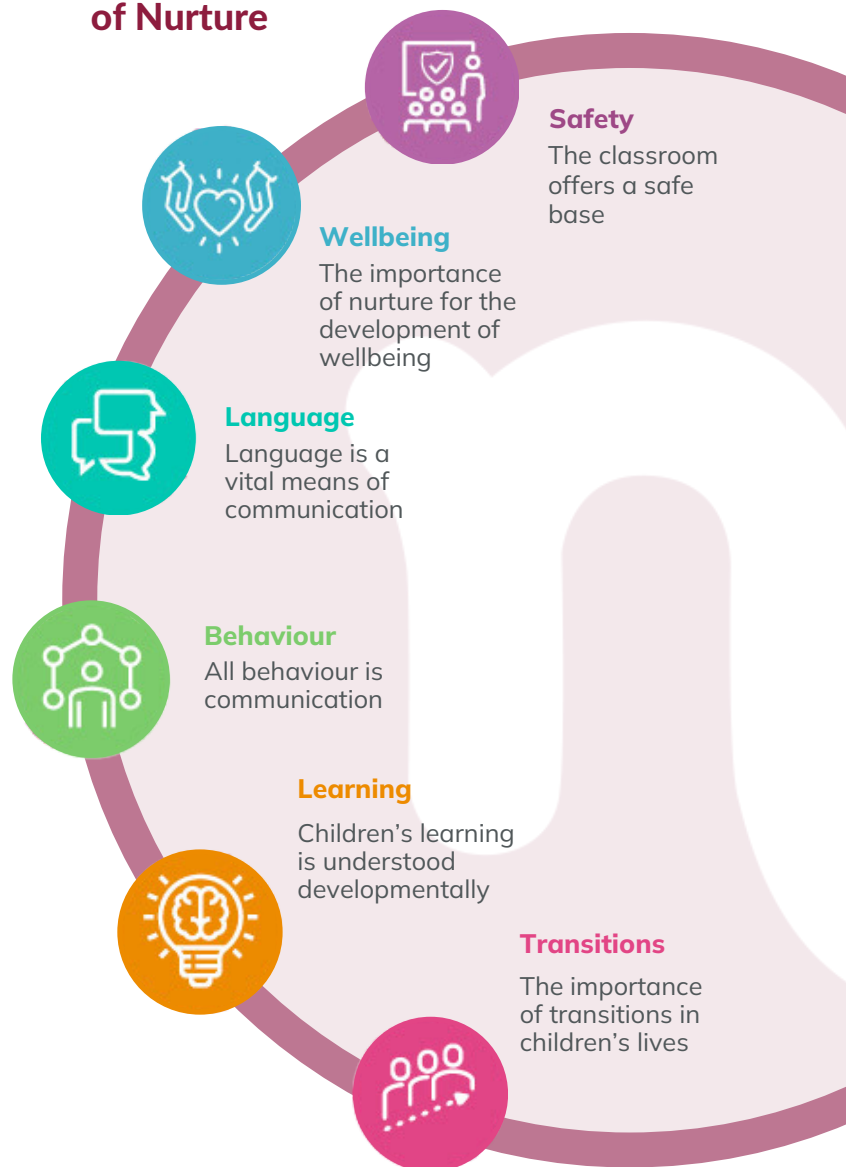motional, behavioural, and social difficulties. **So Boxall developed a way of relating to and teaching children and young people that helps them form positive relationships, builds resilience, and improves their social, emotional and mental health and wellbeing.**

Nurture approaches are rooted in attachment theory and help children form good relationships with school. They develop positive and inclusive school cultures. Nurture helps children develop vital social skills, confidence and self-esteem, and encourages them to take pride in achievement - addressing the social and emotional needs that can hamper learning. It is a highly effective way of supporting improved behaviour and increased attendance in schools, leading to better attainment and reduced exclusions.[8]

"I've got numerous pupils who have not been excluded because nurture has changed how we meet their needs. I'm not just thinking of one child here, there are so many! They stay in mainstream, we are managing them and they are managing themselves."

Neil Hutchins, Assistant Headteacher at Heathcote School and Science College in London

Nurture provision follows the six principles of nurture:

The Six Principles of Nurture

Safety
The classroom offers a safe base

Wellbeing
The importance of nurture for the development of wellbeing

Language
Language is a vital means of communication

Behaviour
All behaviour is communication

Learning
Children's learning is understood developmentally

Transitions
The importance of transitions in children's lives

nurtureuk is the national charity dedicated to using nurturing approaches in school to improve the mental health, wellbeing and life chances of children and young people. In the last year, nurtureuk has reached over **201,800 children** and young people, across **4,200 educational settings**. We are commissioned by local authorities, school trusts and violence reduction units, as well as working with schools on an individual basis.

The graduated nurture approach

nurtureuk's graduated approach to nurture ensures that every child has the opportunity to flourish, by giving them access to the support they need, when they need it. It centres on identifying and addressing children's unmet social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs.

The graduated approach begins by using the Boxall Profile® to identify early indications of SEMH or behavioural concerns amongst children and young people. A whole-school nurture approach is also encouraged, with nurturing intervention strategies put in place to help all children and young people develop social and emotional skills.

Nurture groups are a focused, short-term intervention intended for particularly vulnerable children and young people or those struggling with challenging social, emotional and behavioural difficulties who need targeted support.

What teachers say

"I genuinely think, if we hadn't done this when we did it [implemented nurture], at least two of my [year 10/11] boys would be in prison now."

Holly Woollcott, Designated Safeguarding Lead, Fulston Manor School, Kent

"I truly believe that nurture has been instrumental in our success here at Norbury Manor Primary School. By creating a safe and welcoming environment for all of our students, we are able to foster a culture of learning and growth that will serve them well throughout their lives."

Headteacher Sonia Potter

"Our attendance is where it's never been before and our exclusions are lower than they've ever been. I feel we're much richer and stronger as a school as a consequence of nurture."

Neil Hutchins, Assistant Headteacher at Heathcote School and Science College in London

"We recently had a little boy who ..... kept trying to escape the school. And it was genuine fear – he just went into flight...The boy we saw then, now he's out playing, he's [...] made friends."

Kent school teacher

Nurture:
the evidence so far

Northern Ireland's Department of Education has facilitated the use of nurture groups across the country. As of 2023, Northern Ireland's Nurture Advisory and Support Service stated that "the Department of Education currently funds 62 nurture groups in primary schools." [9] An evaluation of nurture group provision in Northern Ireland, carried out in 2020, used a non-random control group design, involving a total sample of 384 children, aged 5–6 years, from 30 nurture group schools and a further 14 matched schools with no nurture group provision in Northern Ireland.

The trial found there is clear and consistent evidence of improvements in social, emotional and behavioural outcomes for children attending nurture groups compared to those in the control group, using both the Boxall Profile® and the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ). Teachers **"felt that they could see clear improvements in the children in relation to punctuality, increased attendance and significant reductions in social, emotional and behavioural difficulties."** [10]

In Glasgow, four nurture groups were opened in 2001, and provision then expanded rapidly, leading to guidance being produced by Glasgow Psychological Services in 2017: 'Glasgow's Extended Nurturing Principles' provided the basis of a training framework for 8,000 staff in 313 education establishments.

As of 2017, there were 68 nurture groups in Glasgow primary schools. [11] Between 2006 and 2017, there was a 71% reduction in exclusion, and **"many other improvements, such as the staying on at school rate, higher attendance, teacher absence, attainment overall, and specifically for looked after young people."** [12]

A 2017 Glasgow psychology services report on Glasgow's nurturing city, found that **"nurture has been a substantial part of a success story in education in the city which can point to a clear reduction in pupil exclusions, an increase in attendance and a dramatic improvement in Glasgow establishments' capacity to hold on to the most vulnerable young people."** [13]

A nurture group pilot project across three schools in Hampshire found that **"children in nurture groups made significant social and emotional gains after attending a group, and schools reported an "improved attendance rate where this was a concern."** [14]

The 2019 Department for Education - commissioned Timpson Review of School Exclusion found that "**done well, as I have seen during this review, [nurture groups] can be an effective approach in reducing children's social, emotional and behavioural difficulties while strengthening their academic performance**."[15]

In 2019 nurtureuk released the findings of a study in which primary schools assessed the social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs of every pupil in their school using the Boxall Profile®. Conducted across four terms in 25 primary schools in England, teachers in the pilot used the Boxall Profile® to assess the SEMH needs of more than 6,800 pupils. 10% of children assessed had severe SEMH needs. Whilst this was in line with government figures for diagnosable disorders like ADHD and behaviour difficulties, **the study also found that a largely hidden 26% of all children were found to have moderate SEMH needs.**[16]

As well as uncovering previously unidentified need, the pilot showed how gaining an understanding of the SEMH needs across the whole-school population empowered teachers and schools to do something about it. Teachers who took part in the study reported that not only did their understanding of the children's underlying needs that caused difficult behaviour improve, but they were able to adapt their practice to better support children's needs within the class.

If support was put in place following assessment, there was a 23% increase in the number of pupils who had no apparent SEMH needs after just five months.[17]

Project case study
Nurturing Kent

nurtureuk has been commissioned by Kent County Council to deliver a three-year programme (the Nurturing Kent Programme), running from September 2021 to September 2024, working with 300 mainstream primary and secondary schools across the county to develop inclusive policies and practices. Each school is enrolled in our National Nurturing Schools Programme (NNSP). This is an 18-month programme, with each school developing a bespoke whole-school approach to embed a nurturing culture.

Whilst the programme is still underway, initial qualitative feedback from teachers and leaders at participating schools in late 2023 has shown that nurture approaches have had a positive impact on children's social, emotional and mental health, and that this has had a corresponding effect on absences and school refusals.

In their own words
Nurturing Kent

"We recently had a little boy who joined in September, and he basically kept trying to escape the school. And it was genuine fear – he just went into flight." The school instituted nurturing approaches: "They've got to want to come to school." "What we did was arrange for him to come in for breakfast, so that he could come in gradually. And we got him some Lego [to provide] a focus to come in for." Over time, this nurturing approach to school avoidance led to a drastic change in his relationship with school. "The boy we saw then, now he's out playing, he's […] made friends." **Kent school**

Another school shared an example of "5 and 6 year olds [who] didn't want to come to school," due to "low-level anxiety that's having an impact on them at school." The plan they use to support these children in school is as follows: "We set up their plan for the day." Specifically, "their biggest [concern] is the hall, so at 12 o'clock I set up their plan for the hall, we decide where they're going to sit, what they're going to eat. And then at half past 12 every day when they finish, they will come to me and I will set up their plan for the playground, and then at the end of the day we do a reflection: […] what were the really good things, what was not your favourite thing today, that I can help to change for tomorrow. I don't get many of those any more." **Kent school**

"We have a child in Year 6 who is very deregulated emotionally and who had enormous difficulty getting into school, though he masked well in class. We were able to talk and record with parents trigger points at home and develop a plan to support him. […] The difference this has made is that he is rarely in the Headteacher's Office, mornings at home are much calmer and he enters the classroom ready to learn. […] The small changes in approach has enabled staff to have a deeper understanding and respect for the challenges he faces on a daily basis." **Kent school**

"Using the principles has supported getting [school avoidant] children back into school effectively. [For example] thinking about the classroom as a safe base […] I'm currently working with one girl at the moment who could be at high risk of anxiety-based school avoidance. But [we are] unpicking that and using those principles of the safe base of the classroom." **Kent school**

nurtureuk **Happy in School**

Making nurture the norm

The attendance crisis must be swiftly addressed or the UK risks a lost generation of children. We know from the difference that nurture provision makes, the vital role that understanding and properly supporting children's wellbeing plays in supporting attendance and enabling children to flourish at school.

Improving pupil wellbeing and developing students' social and emotional skills is integral to improving attendance. Schools must be welcoming and inclusive places where children feel safe and supported if we want them to attend.

We're calling on policymakers to make nurture the norm and tackle the attendance crisis by supporting children to be **#HappyInSchool**, ready to learn and achieve their potential.

Our four-step plan

1

Assess

All schools should be required, and properly supported, to regularly assess all children's SEMH needs in order to track progress and better tailor support.

2

Explain

Government attendance guidance should:

- be clear about the vital role played by whole school cultures that prioritise wellbeing,

- specify that adults supporting pupils with poor attendance must refer to a child's personal SEMH assessment to understand barriers and identify appropriate and child-centred strategies to help improve their attendance.

3

Support

All schools should use nurture practice (defined by adhering to The Six Principles of Nurture) to support pupils' wellbeing and behaviour in schools.

4

Research

Further research and evaluation should be commissioned to expand and deepen our knowledge of the impact nurture makes on pupil wellbeing, behaviour, attendance and reduced exclusions.

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