

Return to Schools – Key Messages

Five Key Messages of the Return to Schools Document

- 1) **Health and Wellbeing are paramount to learning and engaging.** We understand from child development research and the literature on learning that without a child's wellbeing needs being met, they are unable to optimally engage in academia. This is particularly relevant during a national pandemic with children not accessing their typical full time education. For example:
 - Carpenter (2020) refers to a Recovery Curriculum focussing on meeting children's' presenting developmental level and their attachment needs,
 - Alston (2020) reminds staff that children will require safe bases to disclose how they feel and that past academic topics with need re-learning and re-engagement,
 - The Government Rapid Review (Holmes et al., 2020) emphasizes the need for play to help reconnect with children.
 - Brooks (2020) highlights that during this time outdoor learning will offer staff and children opportunities to socially distance whilst engaging in learning and reconnecting.

'Promoting physical and mental health in schools creates a virtuous circle reinforcing children's attainment and achievement that in turn improves their wellbeing, enabling children to thrive and achieve their full potential' (Brooks, 2013, p.8).
- 2) **Implementation is key.** We know from The Behaviour in Scottish Schools Report (Black et al., 2012) that whole school initiatives which reinforce a positive ethos with inclusive values are the most successful in terms of promoting positive pupil wellbeing. Nationally, there is a recognition that whole-establishment nurture can be viewed within a hierarchy of approaches aimed at helping address the development of children with emotional and wellbeing needs (MacKay, 2015; as adapted and cited in McNicol & Reilly, 2018, figure 1). Within education provisions, this often means disseminating the nurture principles, normally seen in smaller settings, at a whole establishment level (McNicol & Reilly, 2018). It is key that we focus on Whole Establishment Nurture during the phased re-opening of schools. This will help us consider the wellbeing needs of the school community i.e. the pupils, staff and parents.

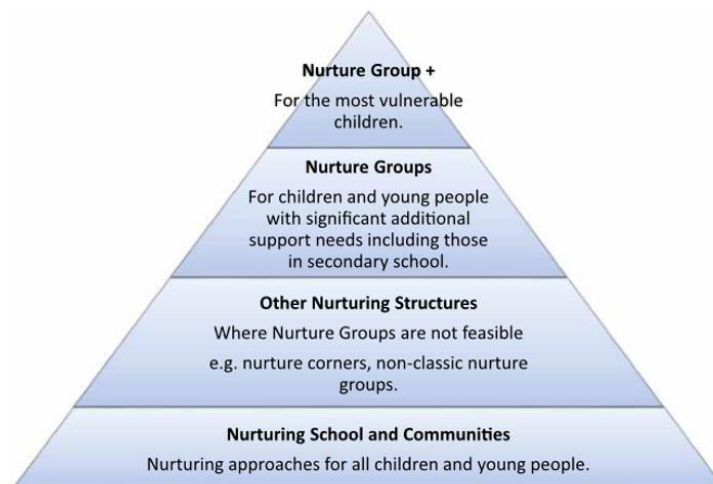


Figure 1: Continuum of Nurturing Approaches (adapted from MacKay, 2015).

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- 3) **The person is the intervention: attunement.** Carpenter (2020) explains that some children may have experienced added anxiety from their home contexts during lockdown, whether this be loss, bereavement, trauma etc. Such children may experience a rise in cortisol stress levels which can be triggered again during perceived hardship or difficulty (such as a first day back at school after a pandemic lockdown). During the phased re-opening of schools it is important that staff take an attuned, relational approach to interacting with their pupils (and each other). Attuned communication leads to positive attachment and affirmative internal models for children that in turn enable them to explore their learning environment and engagement successfully in academia.

Dane and Schneider (1998) advise that 'the quality of delivery' of support is central, hence the person delivering the support is often a key part of intervention success. Re-integration to schools after the pandemic lockdown will require that staff use the softer skills of communication (see Biemans' contact principles, 1990) to ensure children that education provisions once again offers a safe base. Staff should also actively listen to their pupil's experiences and support them to label and name emotions felt, so that these are better understood and easier to process. During these times staff will be acting as key secondary attachment figures.

- 4) **The six guiding principles of nurture (Bennathan and Boxall, 2000, see below) can continue to offer us a guide for supporting children during this time.** These can provide a helpful framework for supporting young people to recover from this period of unprecedented change in their routines. Carpenter (2020), Alston (2020), Moore (2020), the Government Rapid Review (Holmes et al., 2020) and Education Scotland (2017, 2020), offer us examples of how to implement these principles in a practical manner during these times. For example,

NP1 - The Government Rapid Review (2020) highlights that we should focus on play to help children reconnect and re-establish relationships, Alston (2020) explains that staff may need to go back over areas of the curriculum to re-establish links.

NP2 - Alston (2020) notes that children will need safe, cosy spaces to disclose how they feel.

NP3 - Education Scotland Whole Establishment Nurture Training (2017) advances that helping children to understand their strengths/abilities will create positive self-esteem and resilience.

NP 4 - Carpenter (2020) discusses a co-construction of the curriculum focussing on exploring children's feeling/perceptions. Using curious and reflective language such as *'how did that make you feel?'* and *'What did you hear?'*

NP 5 - Moore (2020) highlights that the PACE model of support (DDP Network, 2020) can help us better understand and respond to children's challenging behaviour during this time.

NP6 - Education Scotland (2020) highlight the importance of transition during this time. Education Scotland Whole Establishment Nurture Training (2017) highlighted the important of transition objects, soft starts, transition story books to support children through difficult times of change.

- 5) **Some children (and staff) may require extra support.** These are unprecedented times. Each child will have experienced lockdown in a different way. Alston (2020) explains that *"Many children will have suffered significant harm during this time. We need to be aware of this as a possibility for all our children, not just the ones*

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we had identified as vulnerable". Some children may have had a difficult time during lockdown, for example, they may have experienced

- grief or bereavement (losing a loved one),
- separation anxiety (living in a differing household from keyworker parents, not being able to visit grandparents) or,
- trauma (there has been a significant rise of domestic abuse during lockdown).

Carpenter (2020), advises: *Listen to what the children are saying. Compassionate Leadership is crucial at this time.*" This is true not only for pupils but for staff supporting each other. School management should make efforts to support staff during this time via a whole establishment nurturing approach. For children, establishments should draw upon their own and their authority resources regarding supporting children who are anxious, bereaved or those may require more targeted support in a nurture room. The BPS (2020) highlight that to support the phased return to school a focus on wellbeing, staying connected and having a sense of belonging needs to be a priority.

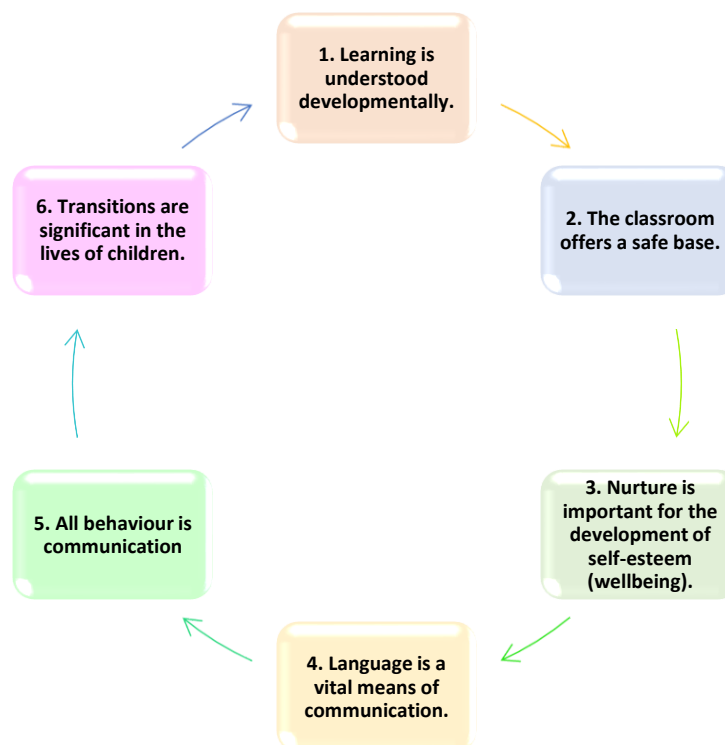


Figure 2: The Six Guiding Principles of Nurture (Bennathan and Boxall, 2000).

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