



Supporting learning and social and emotional development through nurture groups

Why nurture groups are valuable

'Nurture groups can change children's lives. If all schools were run on nurturing principles, the long term benefits to children and society would be immense'

Marion Bennathon

Nurture Group Network

Nurture groups are a preventive intervention to meeting the social and emotional needs of children in schools. First developed by Marjorie Boxall during the 1960s and 70s they are discrete classes located within mainstream schools to address the difficulties of children arising from impoverished early nurturing. They support children who are not ready to meet the social, emotional and intellectual demands of school life.

Nurture principles are drawn from research on early infant attachment (John Bowlby 1969) and its implications for child development. Children with poor attachment may find it difficult to build relationships and to trust adults with resulting negative impact on the learning process. Recent developments in neuroscience suggest that early infant experience, especially stressful and low nurturing environments, can have negative impact on brain development and that early intervention which helps to redress this, for example, via nurture, can have positive neurological effects.

How nurture links to what schools are already doing

The national Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning programme (SEAL) supports schools to promote social and emotional skills at a whole school level and to build on this in meeting the additional needs of children. Nurture groups proactively promote emotional health and well being for children with additional needs (families and staff too) and attempt to address underlying problems which impact on learning.

What does a nurture group look like?

Nurture groups have a number of characteristics and principles that have emerged through research, practice and networking. They provide a secure and predictable learning environment where the developmental needs of each child are addressed. On becoming more emotionally secure, resilient and confident, children find their capacity for cognitive learning increases.

Nurture group principles

Children's **learning** is understood **developmentally** (responding to children at whatever level they are at, assessing developmental progress through the Boxall profile, accepting attitudes of staff)

The Nurture class offers a **secure base** (anxiety is minimised, provides a balance of educational and family experiences, focuses on the promotion of positive relationships, structure, routine, reliability and predictability).

Nurture is important for **self esteem** (children are valued as individuals, small achievements are recognised, everything is verbalised, adults and children share activities (play/meals/reading/talking/listening/feelings).

Language is a vital means of **communication** (putting feelings into words, naming feelings, developing extended conversations)

All behaviour is communication (what message is this behaviour trying to convey? Making links between the internal and external world of the child)

Transition is important in children's lives

In classic form, nurture groups are classes of 8-10 children based in a central part of the school and staffed by two adults. Nurture staff are skilled at modelling effective social and emotional skills within the structured and predictable environment of the nurture group. In this way they work to increase a child's capacity to empathise and to develop the positive and trusting relationships that not only underpin effective learning but reduce the likelihood of later mental health problems. The personal qualities and characteristics of nurture staff are therefore as important as qualifications and experience.

Children usually attend the nurture group for a substantial part of each week (flexible depending on their needs) over a period of between 2 and 4 terms. Children remain on the roll of their mainstream class, links are maintained (they register each day and attend selected activities) and they return to this class outside nurture group support. The learning environment provides missing learning experiences with an emphasis on communication and language development.

The identification, selection and resettlement of children is based on observation and on systematic assessment, using teacher assessment, the Boxall Profile, Goodmans Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (and other tools used by the school). In Sheffield, nurture groups have found the Emotional Literacy Assessment and Intervention ELAI (NFER) and Pupil Attitudes to Self and School (PASS) useful too.

Schools have been encouraged to explore SEAL materials and to use SEAL learning outcomes when developing the nurture curriculum and IEPs.

What makes a successful nurture group?

- A solid foundation at whole school level
- Compatibility of the nurture group principles and ethos and whole school ethos and values
- Perceptions and support of mainstream head and staff
- Attitudes, knowledge and understanding of staff
- Effective professional development
- Effective teaching and learning
- Quality of the relationship between nurture staff
- Quality of support (for children, families and staff)
- Nurture group composition

What is and what is not a nurture group

For professional and pragmatic reasons there are variations on the classic nurture group, usually in terms of time spent in the group or involvement with the mainstream class. To be termed a nurture group it should adhere to the core principles of the classic approach (developmental emphasis and holistic curriculum) but may differ in structure and/or organisational features from the classic groups.

Some groups are not nurture groups but are informed by group principles. They depart radically from the organisational principles described (for example; by taking the form of 'havens' or 'sanctuaries', being run by a single adult (often a teaching assistant or learning mentor) and with a focus on social skills only.

In Sheffield

A range of schools and centres enthusiastically opted in to the nurture group programme including Primary, KS3 and 4 PRUs, secondary, primary and special schools. We have a lively and supportive Nurture Group Network that meets half termly and a programme of CPD for nurture staff and schools.

Example of activities in a primary nurture group

Registration with mainstream class, followed by morning routine, such as welcome activity, opportunity to share news or engage in group activity, how we are feeling activity, exploration of visual-time table, action songs or rhymes.

Breakfast or 'Toast Time' is an integral feature of nurture groups. It takes place each day in a routine way and in a 'family-like' atmosphere. Adults provide effective role models, interacting with each other and with children in ways that mirror positive parenting and promote effective relationship. Children develop and practice a range of social and emotional skills and academic learning through specific activities such as: setting a dining table, choosing recipes, preparing food, sitting down and sharing a meal together, exchanging ideas and developing social conversation with both adults and peers around the dining table, taking turns, using good manners and appropriate social language, using crockery and cutlery appropriately, clearing away and washing up and following routines and simple instructions, taking personal responsibility

Reading together or choice from rotating activities, such as outdoor learning, games, gardening, art, non directed play, shopping, cooking and sharing food

Small group and individual learning opportunities based on IEP targets. Directed play, focus on core curriculum targets (from class teachers).

Circle time. This may be based on SEAL theme/learning opportunity and use a talking object.

Children return to class for assembly, lunch and playtimes to maintain contact with classmates and teacher

Some ideas for getting started.....

- Explore the theory and practice of nurture groups through reading, visiting and talking to nurture group practitioners. Try to make links with other schools and LAs. Teachers TV has video clips of nurture groups and the Channel 4 Dispatches programme 'Britain's Challenging Children' is interesting. Check out whether you are ready for a nurture group (look at your SEAL self review, take a deeper look at behaviour issues (such as behaviour as a means of communication, behavior management, behaviour/discipline policy) and at

your provision at waves 2 and 3. Think about how you manage transitions such as the start and end of day, before and after holidays etc

- Discuss the idea of a nurture group with senior leaders to see how well it fits in with the school improvement plan and with existing provision for children with additional social and emotional needs. Raise awareness of the principles and practice of nurture across school – explore whether it is right for you and if so, how it might be resourced
- Try out some elements of nurture practice in your current situation. You could examine your assessment processes, look at the SDQ and Boxall Profile Handbook and try out the Profile with some of the children in your care
- Appoint and train nurture staff and carry out whole school INSET to develop understanding of nurture principles and practice and to explore the roles and relationship between nurture and mainstream staff. Use your usual school processes to share information about nurture with parents and carers
- Resource the nurture classroom. Plan curriculum/everyday activities and develop the nurture group timetable. Be clear and confident about your approach to behaviour management
- Identify and select children according to your referral process and using effective assessment techniques. Start with a smaller group and gradually add children as confidence grows.
- Celebrate success, share learning and solve problems together!

Impact

Research by Professor Paul Cooper (University of Leicester) shows the impact that nurture can have, not only on the individual child but also on the whole school community. (Cooper and Whitebread, 2008; O'Connor and Colwell, 2002; Cooper and Tiknaz, 2005, Binnie and Allen 2008).

Researchers and practitioner experience suggests that nurture groups:

1. Improve attendance and attainment (building confidence and self esteem)
2. Promote inclusion
3. Support children to develop social and emotional skills
4. Promote mental health and teach children the skills to develop and maintain positive and trusting relationships
5. Promote communication and language development
6. Help break the link between a poor start in life and later youth offending behaviour
7. Support parents to become partners in education

To find out more about nurture groups go to www.nurturegroups.org