



Rees Centre



School Factsheet 2

Successful implementation of attachment and trauma awareness

The Alex Timpson Programme began in 2017 and will be evaluating the implementation of attachment and trauma awareness (ATA) in 300 schools across England over a five-year period. This document draws on early findings from the Programme and on three earlier projects evaluated by the University of Oxford.

This document has developed out of surveys and interviews with senior leaders, teachers and other school staff about their experiences – positive and negative – of introducing attachment and trauma awareness approaches in their setting. It is hoped that these insights will help those considering implementing similar approaches.

Attachment and trauma awareness

Interest in how children develop positive human relationships and how these are impacted by adverse life experiences has been a growing area of research over the last 30 years. While there are competing perspectives to understand the precise mechanisms at work, there is now strong evidence that attachment and trauma can impact profoundly on the ways in which children learn and how they interact with others.

Schools have chosen several different ways of implementing ATA, but they typically involve some element of staff training and changes to school policies, procedures and practices. This document does not advocate a particular theoretical or practical approach, nor a particular form of training. Its focus is on the **enabling** and **inhibiting** factors that contribute to whether implementation is successful or not.

Enabling factors for successful implementation

- **Whole school approach.** Schools stressed the importance of a whole school approach, notably involving non-teaching staff such as receptionists, meal-time supervisors and others who routinely come into contact with pupils. In particular, the less-controlled time outside the classroom can be particularly challenging for young people with attachment and trauma issues. It was also important that senior staff were visibly involved in training and other activities in order to reinforce their commitment to the initiative and that new staff be trained.
- **Continuity in engagement** is important, with initial training being reinforced and amplified through additional follow-on sessions that provide opportunities for staff to deepen their understanding of attachment and trauma or to develop new practices with their colleagues. Successful strategies have included standing items on staff meeting agendas and review of key school documents to ensure coherence with an ATA approach – e.g. behaviour and sanction policies. Opportunities to discuss implementation with other schools is also valued highly by school staff.
- **Use of attachment and trauma awareness vocabulary.** A deep implementation was facilitated by adopting the vocabulary of ATA and the consistent integration of this into the everyday language of the school, including policy documents, classroom resources and conversations with pupils. School staff report that this can be initially awkward, but that it helps to cement a change of ethos and develop markedly different relationships with pupils based around getting behind the behaviour by acknowledging the pupil's anger, frustration or fear; this use of vocabulary can be extended to relationships with parents.

- **Direct pupil involvement.** Following on from the previous point, some schools report how they have involved pupils directly in the implementation process. This has included cascading the training received to pupils in an age-appropriate format, either on a one-to-one basis with pupils who have difficulties or to whole year groups through PSHE lessons. The early findings from the project suggest that pupils readily understand the key concepts and that it can help them understand and regulate their own emotions.
- **Trust in school staff.** A number of schools have highlighted the importance of building trust in school staff among vulnerable pupils who may have few or no trusted adults in their lives. This can focus on one 'significant' adult who the pupil sees as 'looking out for them'. This may need particular attention during periods of transition for the pupil, where previous trusted relationships may be lost.
- **Staff access to talking therapies.** One of the side effects of moving to an ATA approach is that there is more discussion of relationships and emotions within the school environment. This can initially place pressure on staff if they do not feel supported to have those conversations – one potential solution is to ensure that staff, especially those dealing most frequently with affected pupils, have access to talking therapies themselves.
- **Combination of complementary approaches.** Several schools have reported that they have combined ATA training with physical and procedural changes to the school environment, for example, the creation of 'safe spaces' or 'chill out' rooms, procuring library books that focus on emotions or the introduction of a system of 'time out' cards. This combination of complementary approaches helps to reinforce the whole school nature of the change, as well as providing new tools for staff to use.

Factors potentially inhibiting successful implementation

- **Lack of senior leader support.** Unsurprisingly, senior leader support for implementation is viewed as essential. Where this is not visibly present, the shift to ATA processes is likely to be marginalised and seen as the concern of a subset of staff (e.g. the SENCO or designated teacher for children in care). Active engagement with, and support from, governors is also seen as useful.
- **Active resistance from staff.** Some schools have reported active resistance from staff to ATA manifesting as scepticism or stubbornness. This can be found across the staff team and can have a corrosive effect on the willingness of others to engage positively with the process. It appears from the early findings that this might be more common in secondary schools and among non-teaching staff who may feel they lack a direct stake in understanding pupils' attachment and trauma issues.
- **Staff recovery from trauma.** A perhaps unanticipated element of this resistance from staff may be that they are themselves recovering from trauma. This can obviously impact on their ability to engage with pupils around sensitive issues of relationships and emotions, and staff may require additional support.
- **External pressures.** All schools are subject to external pressures around funding, staffing, inspection and so on. These can pose a challenge for implementing ATA, especially where there may be a perceived conflict. For example, ATA can be seen as time-consuming within the context of already-constrained staff time or in conflict with zero tolerance behaviour policies. This can potentially be overcome by a very clear articulation of the long-term benefits such as fewer behaviour incidents requiring staff intervention.
- **Related schemes.** A small number of schools reported that their ability to engage with ATA was complicated by involvement in related schemes such as Thrive. There may be considerable overlap between initiatives focused on vulnerable pupils and this needs careful navigation to avoid unhelpful duplication or contradiction.

Additional resources

Webinar: ['What benefits and challenges do secondary schools face in implementing whole school approaches to attachment and trauma?'](#) Richard Glenny, Deputy Headteacher, Priestlands School (secondary), Hampshire.

Webinar: ['How do schools address attachment and trauma?'](#) Duncan Roberts, Headteacher at Maple Cross School (primary), Hertfordshire.