

EVALUATION OF NURTUREUK'S NURTURING KENT PROGRAMME

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Executive summary

The Nurturing Kent programme

Following a 2019 Ofsted inspection of Kent County Council's provision for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), nutureuk was commissioned by Kent County Council to engage 300 mainstream primary and secondary schools in the Nurturing Kent programme.

Through a programme of training, consultancy, assessment and learning, the programme aimed to support schools to implement a whole school approach to nurture within their school context. Running between 2021-2024, 298 Kent schools enrolled on the programme, 88% of which completed all the core training modules. Forty-two schools (14%) went on to apply for the National Nurturing Schools Award.

nutureuk

As a charitable organisation, nutureuk works to improve the social, emotional, mental health and wellbeing of children and young people by promoting nurture and inclusive practice across the educational system. Rooted in attachment theory and neuroscience, nurture is an approach that supports children to develop social skills, confidence and resilience, and consequently aims to improve behaviour and increase attendance in schools.

The evaluation

In autumn 2023, nutureuk commissioned Ludvigsen McMahon to carry out an independent evaluation of the Kent programme, focusing on the programme's impact on students' engagement, well-being, attendance and behaviour in participating schools.

Using a mixed-method approach, a key component of the evaluation was to go beyond statistical data and focus on the lived experiences of students and staff. By looking at the 'nurture journey' of four case study schools (two primary and two secondary schools), the evaluation explored how schools went about developing an inclusive and nurturing school environment within their specific context. The evaluation team also worked directly with 29 students through a micro peer-led research project, supporting the peer researchers to carry out 67 interviews with other children and young people in their schools.

Key findings from the peer-led research

Having secure and positive friendships were fundamental to students' experience of school and ultimately their social and emotional wellbeing. For many a 'bad day' at school was defined by difficult peer relationships. It is therefore vital that schools recognise their central role in supporting students' peer relations within school. Children and young people often need help with preventing conflicts, healing relationships and making new friends.

Students who had been taught techniques to identify and regulate their emotions by school staff, such as breathing techniques, fidget toys and movement breaks, found that they work

well and had therefore started using them independently at school and at home to self-regulate. When students began to self-regulate more regularly and consistently, this was the point where schools began to see a reduction in challenging and chaotic behaviour.

Findings from the four case studies

Wentworth is a large primary school, which since Covid had seen an increase in their students' social and emotional needs, as well as some very challenging behaviour at school. By introducing a range of nurturing strategies, such as zones of regulation and nurture groups, and by involving school staff, parents and children, Wentworth implemented a whole school approach to nurture. As a result, behaviour incidents have decreased and attendance increased among children targeted for support – a result of a range of individual, group and whole school approaches.

Wittersham is a small village primary school with one-in-four students with SEND needs. Following a leadership change, the school developed a longer-term plan to broaden its remit to focus on students social and emotional needs. Through training and specialisation, the school has successfully upskilled existing teaching assistants, enabling the school to increase support to children and their families. A new nurture provision has ensured that parents felt the school was accessible and children felt nurtured and cared for.

Barton Court is a selective grammar school exploring how to balance high academic expectations with a focus on students' emotional wellbeing. Building on existing initiatives the school has established a new wellbeing room, trained up a cohort of peer mentors and trialled reflective sessions for teachers to share ideas on what works for individual students. With nurture on the school's development plan for next year, Barton Court will explore whether nurture is a solid approach for their staff and students, before potentially widening the implementation to a whole school approach.

Barton Manor is a new and growing secondary school with a high proportion of students eligible for Pupil Premium among its Year 7 and Year 8 cohorts. Building a new school has been a unique opportunity to situate young people's social and emotional wellbeing at the centre of the school. By implementing a comprehensive and multi-faceted approach to nurture, supported by a large pastoral team, the school has been able to support vulnerable students to enjoy school, who may otherwise have fallen through the net.

Sustainability

The case study schools invested significant resources and staff time in implementing a nurturing approach. They had senior leadership support, were passionate about nurture and had in some cases included nurture in their behaviour policies or on their school development plan. This suggests that schools were committed to continuing their nurture journey. In a survey of schools involved in the Nurturing Kent programme, most said they were likely to continue using the Boxall Profile® assessment tool, and three-quarters had put plans in place to sustain a nurturing approach longer term (15 out of 19 respondents). While the sample is small, this is an encouraging finding, which suggests that as the programme

comes to an end, schools who have invested time and resources in programme participation have plans in place to continue.

Areas for development

- **Limited targeted support**

Although participating schools established new or expanded their targeted support for individual children, their nurture provision was frequently still limited. Consequently, demand is likely to exceed the availability of support, which may impact some students' social and emotional wellbeing.

- **Self-reporting SEMH needs**

If schools rely on children self-reporting their needs, it is likely that some children will not be identified. Vulnerable students experiencing complex and difficult circumstances, such as domestic abuse or being a young carer, may mask or hide their difficulties, and may therefore not receive much needed support.

- **Streamlining the Boxall online platform**

As Boxall assessments are the most efficient way to identify students' needs, nurtureuk should consider adapting the online platform to make whole school assessments more efficient.

- **Training for headteachers, alongside existing training offer**

Given the importance of senior leadership and headteacher buy-in to programme success, nurtureuk should consider introducing a short training session specifically targeting SLT and headteachers, to ensure that headteachers fully understand and value the nurture approach.

Conclusion

By recognising that mainstream schools in Kent operate in very different contexts from each other and have different starting points, this evaluation explored the nurture journeys of four case study schools. Peer-led research with children and young people in the four schools also provided an effective way to understand, with confidence, students' experiences of nurture within their school.

The case studies highlight the different steps schools have taken to become more inclusive and nurturing of their student's social and emotional needs through a whole school approach to nurture. They demonstrate how nurturing approaches have helped schools better identify and support their students' needs, and create a 'web of nurture'. Combined, this helped increase some students' attendance, reduce challenging behaviour, improve students' social and emotional wellbeing, and consequently improve the entire school's learning environment.

Glossary

Boxall Profile® – a tool to assess the social, emotional and mental development of pupils aged 4-18

EAL – English as an additional language

ELSA – Emotional literacy support assistant

Exit or wellbeing pass – a pass that allows students to leave the classroom during lessons

CAMHS – Child and adolescent mental health

CPD – Continuing professional development

FLO – Family liaison officer

JPD – Joint practice development is a peer-to-peer approach to continuing professional development (CPD)

Makaton – a language programme that uses symbols, signs and speech to enable people to communicate

Principles of nurture – The six principles of nurture which underpins nurtureuk's nurturing approaches

Persistent Absence – when students fall below 90% attendance

PHSE – Personal, social, health and economic education

Pupil Premium F1RST – a whole school initiative, which aims to give disadvantaged students priority in all aspects of their education

Restorative Justice – an approach to justice that aims to repair the harm done to victims through communication between victim and offender

SEND – Special educational needs and disabilities

SEMH – Social and Emotional Mental Health

SLT – Senior leadership team

TA – Teaching assistant

The Solihull Approach – an early intervention framework of support that aims to increase the emotional health and wellbeing of both children and families

Zones of Regulation – a social emotional regulation approach

Widget – a symbol-based language used predominantly for people with learning disabilities

WSA – whole school approach

Worry monsters – a soft plushie with a zip mouth designed to help children with anxiety

1. Introduction

1.1 Background to the Nurturing Kent programme

A 2019 Ofsted inspection of Kent County Council's provision for children and young people with special education needs and disabilities (SEND), highlighted a number of areas where outcomes for SEND children required improvement. The report was especially concerned about the capacity and willingness of mainstream schools to offer high quality and inclusive education in Kent.

In response to this, Kent County Council invested in a number of different programmes across the county to help schools build capacity and strengthen their inclusive practices in mainstream settings. Nurtureuk was commissioned in 2021 to work with 300 mainstream primary and secondary schools to develop their policies and practices to become more inclusive. Delivered over three years, through a phased approach, the programme offered participating schools a range of training courses, resources and bespoke guidance, with the aim of each school developing a whole school approach to nurture, and consequently improve their inclusive practice.

As one of the largest local authorities in England, Kent County Council has almost 600 schools, which includes a high number of very small schools, as well as 32 grammar schools.

1.2 nurtureuk

As a charitable organisation, nurtureuk works to improve the social, emotional, mental health and wellbeing of children and young people by promoting nurture across the educational system. Rooted in attachment theory and neuroscience, nurture is an approach that supports children to develop social skills, confidence and resilience, and consequently aims to improve behaviour and increase attendance in schools.

The Nurturing Kent programme is a fully-funded programme, which over an 18-month period gave participating schools access to a comprehensive training programme to help schools implement a whole school approach to nurture. In addition, to the training, schools also had access to the Boxall Profile® assessment tool, developed specifically to assess children and young people's SEMH needs, as well as one-to-one consultancy and support, to implement a bespoke approach to nurture within their school context.

Running between 2021-2024, 298 Kent schools enrolled on the programme, 88% of which completed all the core training modules. Forty-two schools (14%) have since gone on to apply for the National Nurturing Schools Award.

1.3 The evaluation

As the programme entered its final year, nurtureuk commissioned Ludvigsen McMahon to independently evaluate the impact of the Nurturing Kent programme, focusing in particular on students' engagement, wellbeing, attendance and behaviour in participating schools.

To gain a better understanding of the impact of a nurturing approach, and to understand the context of how nurture was implemented within schools, we used a mixed-method approach to data gathering. The key to the evaluation was to go beyond statistical data and focus on the lived experiences of students and staff in the participating schools. By looking at the 'nurture journey' of four case study schools, the evaluation explored how participating schools went about developing an inclusive and nurturing school environment within their specific context. We also worked directly with students through a micro peer-led research project, to look at how children and young people perceived the impact of a nurturing approach.

The main methods of data collection have been as follows:

- Preliminary focus groups and conversations with school staff representing seven schools participating in the programme.
- Recruitment of four case study schools – two primary and two secondary schools. The following evaluation activities took place in each of the four case study school settings:
 - Interviews with 4-5 **school staff**, such as the SENCO or inclusion leads, head teachers, assistant heads, family liaison officer (FLO), emotional literacy support (ELSA), behaviour managers, teaching assistants and classroom teachers.
 - Interviews with 1-3 **parents**, one of which was also a parent governor. We also attended a parents' 'SEND and wellbeing coffee morning' in one school, and developed a parents' nurture questionnaire completed by 225 parents in another school.
 - **Behaviour and attendance** data. How this data was shared varied between the schools, but included data on persistent absence, behaviour incidents, detentions and suspensions.
 - **Observations** of 1-3 targeted group sessions with students, including nurture groups, forest school, ELSA-inspired session and social club.
 - **Guided tour** of schools to see their nurture facilities, such as classroom nurture nooks, forest school, dedicated nurture and sensory rooms, worry boxes, wellbeing display boards and other facilities.
 - **Website review** to understand how the schools spoke about nurture publicly. This also included newsletters and letters to parents, and their behaviour policies.
- A micro peer-led research project in each of the case study schools with 6-8 students who had experience of nurture groups or nurturing approaches. A total of 29 peer researchers took part in the project - 14 students in the two primary schools (aged 9-10 years) and 15 students in the two secondary schools (aged 14-15 years). Combined, the peer researchers carried out 67 interviews with other children and young people in their schools.
- An online survey distributed to all schools taking part in the Nurturing Kent Programme. The survey was completed by 24 staff participants.

To enhance the evaluation findings and to provide a direct connection with those experiencing nurture in Kent, we also produced a series of mini audio 'podcasts'. These are

based on interviews with nurture experienced children and staff within two case study schools, and can be accessed throughout this report and in appendix 1.

2. Involving children and young people in peer-led research

In each school, peer researchers were selected to participate in a small peer-led project, primarily because of their experiences of nurture groups and nurture approaches, or because of their role as peer mentors within the school. Many, but not all, faced vulnerabilities, such as being a young carer, self-harm, domestic abuse, health problems, bullying and being looked after. Some had SEN needs and others had personalised plans to, for example reduce stress throughout the day or to ease the transition between home and school.

Taking place over two whole school days, we worked with the peer researcher over the following sessions:

- An initial focus group with the peer researchers themselves to explore their experiences and understanding of nurture within their school. This session used object elicitation and drawing to facilitate conversations about nurture.
- A session to co-produce interview questions in order for the peer researchers to interview other students in their school about nurture. The primary school students made 'chatterbox' games to help them ask other children their questions¹, while secondary students developed an interview guide. The questions varied between the four schools, as the peer researchers tailored questions to their specific school context.
- A practice session focused on introducing the research to other children and young people, asking follow-up questions and using audio-recorders.
- A 'fieldwork' session where the peer researchers, working in pairs, used their interview guides and chatterboxes to ask their peers questions and record their answers.
- A debrief session to discuss the experience of being a peer researcher and to explore what they found out from other students in their school.

The peer researchers interviewed 33 primary aged students (ranging from Year 2 to Year 6) and 34 secondary aged students (ranging from Year 7 to Year 10) – a total of 67 students.

Overall, the peer researchers were curious about what they would be doing, and quick to open up and actively engage in the peer research activities. In one school, the students were initially very reserved and insecure about working with one another and with us. This was overcome by introducing an additional ice-breaker activity, where they were on their feet asking each other simple questions. This helped the group warm up to each other and us as evaluators.

¹ A chatterbox is a childhood game, which in a research setting can be used as a short interview guide. The game is played with children until it reveals eight interview questions.

Across all four school, the peer researchers excelled in the task of interviewing other students, and demonstrated high levels of empathy, understanding, concentration and verbal communication skills. Most were very nurturing in how they approached interviewing other students, especially with students younger than themselves. By listening attentively, rewording questions if necessary, and by encouraging them to continue, the peer researchers acted with care. They took the project seriously, and rose to the challenge of interviewing their peers with commitment and excitement.

The information gathered by peer researchers was rich, with most students giving considerate and thoughtful answers relevant to the evaluation. Overall, the micro peer-led research was a very effective way of collecting data, which provided an invaluable insight into how students experienced their school.

2.1 Findings from the peer-led research

In this section, we summarise the findings from the interviews carried out by peer researchers with their peers across the four case study schools. It highlights the overarching themes that came from children and young people about their experiences of school, such as the importance of relationships, managing emotions and access to nature in school.

2.1.1 Relationships

Friends and peer relations were incredibly important to all children and young people in the four case study schools. They formed a key part of students' experiences of school – positive when they felt secure in their friendships – and negative when they had disagreements with their friends, or had insecure peer relations.

Seeing their friends was a big draw to attending school, and times and places during the school day where they could see, talk or play with their friends were highlighted as favourites. This included lunch and break time or a specific lesson like PE where they could see friends that they didn't have other lessons with during the day.

For many a 'bad day' at school was defined by difficult peer relationships, for example when they got into arguments or fell out with their friends.

Students talked about the important role teachers and other members of staff played in making, keeping and resolving friendship issues. In all schools, staff helped students sustain their peer relationships by talking with both parties when there was a disagreement, and supporting them to hear each other and understand each other's point of view. Specific school staff were described as keen to help students resolve any difficulties they had with one another and this helped students trust staff in the school. Two primary school children explained that they were 'friendenemies' – best friends and enemies, and often would say very hurtful things to each other, like 'you ruin my life' and 'I hate you'. However, attending nurture group had helped them reflect on how that made the other person feel and to think about what they could say to make the situation better again.

'If your friends are being mean, [our teacher] will usually take the group out with the people that are being rude to and then she'll talk about a compromise or something that can help us with our friendships' (Primary student)

'My friend did something terrible in a group chat and she was suspended for two weeks. What she did could have ruined her friendships, but the school brought all her friends together with her and helped them work it out. They didn't just punish her, they thought about what happened next' (Secondary student)

2.1.2 Managing emotions

Many students talked about ways they could regulate their own emotions while at school. Some students mentioned being taught self-regulating techniques by staff which they found worked well and therefore had continued to use independently at school and at home. This included using breathing techniques, mindfulness exercises and walking away from situations, which were distressing or stressful. Some students mentioned using a fidget toy, play dough, wrist band or something important or comforting to them, like a charm or their fluffy pencil case. Such items helped them anchor and calm down, and consequently assisted them in dealing with stressful situations or when they felt overwhelmed.

When such techniques did not work, students would often seek support from a friend or a teacher. During the peer-research project, when one child by mistake deleted the audio recording of another child's interview, we observed how the students first tried to calm themselves down using play dough. Later with the support of school staff, a restorative justice conversation was carefully handled to defuse their upset and angry feelings. This allowed both students to move on and to continue with the task at hand.

In one school, where the zones of regulation had been in place for some time, children were confident in explaining what the zones of regulations were and what the related colours meant, and how they used this approach to identify their emotions and to communicate them to others.

A few students also talked about how friends helped each other to regulate their emotions, for example by telling a joke or trying to get them to talk about something else to distract and calm them down. In one primary school, a group of children discussed a specific episode where everyone had been really angry because their football match had been cancelled:

'Everyone in our school was so angry, but I wasn't at that rage [point yet], so I could tell [my friend] a joke. I was sad because football was cancelled, but I didn't feel that [shakes his hand in front of his heart to indicate built up anger or rage]' (Primary student)

2.1.3 Students' feelings about school

The vast majority of students interviewed said that they liked their school. Students in both primary and secondary schools talked about enjoying school for particular lessons which they found engaging and interesting, and many talked about creative approaches to

learning, such as world book day and sports tournaments which they found especially engaging. Some students mentioned the attitude and temperament of staff, which demonstrated they cared about the students and this made them feel positive towards school.

For some students, especially in one of the secondary schools, sanctions were a source of much debate, and many felt their school was strict and that sanctions often were too tough. This was especially the case for things that seemed relatively minor to the students, such as uniform breaches and forgetting equipment, and in such situations the school's behaviour management system was described as petty.

'I just dislike [teachers] for giving out punishments too easily even though I haven't done anything wrong or I have done barely nothing wrong, like for something little [peer interviewer: can you give an example?] ... There was this one time I was playing around with a paintbrush just a bit. There was no paint on it. I was just like fiddling with it because I'm very movement'y. So I fiddled around with it, and then I got in trouble, because I was doing it a bit too close to [friend]. But other than that, I feel school is great'. (Secondary student)

Two students mentioned feeling distressed by staff shouting at them or other students.

A few students interviewed reported mixed feelings about going to school in the morning, and often such anxieties were related to uncertainties about what lay ahead. At its most extreme this had resulted in students refusing to attend school, crying uncontrollably or 'acting out'. Some mentioned that their school had supported them in making such transitions more positive, for example by having a calm or safe space they could go in the morning, or by having staff check-in with them.

'Getting used to school can be nerve racking, but by the middle of term you have friends, you know what time to leave to get to school, you know which teachers to go to' (Secondary student).

Overall, the primary school students felt their schools were nurturing and this was demonstrated by the way staff interacted with them, took their difficulties seriously and supported them to overcome any problems they faced.

I do have a problem. My mum has problems, she has [health issues]. So I told the teachers about it and they sent me to nurture and that has helped me out a lot with it. (Primary student)

In one secondary school, the students interviewed also reported feeling nurtured. This again, was based on their experiences of staff and the different interventions and strategies that helped them regulate their feelings, such as exit passes, restorative justice techniques, free period related products. Taken together, this showed them that the school cared. Some compared their school to stories told by friends and family about other schools, and concluded that their school was more nurturing than those schools.

In another secondary school, students repeatedly talked about being academically nurtured and feeling their academic possibilities were of importance, and while some also felt emotionally nurtured, a few said they didn't have any staff member who they felt comfortable enough to speak to about personal or emotional issues. Instead, they would seek out friends and family for support, if needed.

2.1.4 Nature

Unexpectedly, nature was mentioned in all four schools as something students valued. Some students talked of a 'place outside they go to', which made them feel safe, and others named being outside as the best part of the school day. Nature seems to be something that supported the students to self-regulate their emotions and improve their school day.

A few students wished there was more nature surrounding their school. During one interview, a student mentioned that she would love more opportunities to be outside or involved with nature. In response the peer interviewer highlighted that their school had a gardening club which he attended and would welcome her to. Sharing this information and encouraging her to attend shows the kind and nurturing manner the interview process facilitated.

'I don't really like indoor play, it's just not as fun as being outside... I like forest school – the different activities and cooking outside' (Primary student)

3. Case Studies: Four schools' nurturing journeys

3.1 Wentworth Primary School

Area: Kent North School type: Single school academy Size: 652 students Pupils with identified SEND (SEND support and EHCP): 14% Free School Meal: 18%

Theme: implementing a whole school approach in a large primary school

3.1.1. Background

Wentworth is a large primary school located in the north of Kent, bordering outer London. Wentworth previously expanded to become a three-form entry school, which in part altered the demographic profile of the school. Consequently, the number of children receiving Pupil Premium increased, children with SEND and English as an additional language (EAL) also doubled, and currently, approximately 30% of children attending Wentworth are identified as having speech and language needs.

These demographic changes, together with the impact of Covid, saw the school having to deal with more and more challenging behaviour among students, especially within one

specific year group. The school observed gaps in children’s social and emotional learning – they struggled to share and take turns, and many were experiencing stress and anxiety. Requests for wellbeing support, school counselling, and referrals to CAMHS and other external agencies increased, as parents, teachers and school leaders were concerned about their children. Breaktimes were particularly problematic, with behaviour incidents happening on a daily basis, and peer disagreements frequently resulting in punching, kicking and fighting in the playground. Besides being chaotic and stressful for all involved, such incidents also disrupted learning and often took hours for staff to resolve, just to see arguments escalate again when the children couldn’t move on.

While Wentworth has always valued child-centred and relational practices, there was a point when the school acknowledged that something different had to be done. The school implemented a number of initiatives, including additional PHSE lessons. A staff – pupil mentoring programme was introduced, initially with 60 children but the programme quickly grew to 200 children being paired with an adult mentor in school. However, as school leaders highlighted, when whole year groups need additional support, it is no longer individual interventions, but a rigorous whole school approach that is required. Hence, led by their students’ growing social and emotional challenges, addressing these needs became an absolute priority for the school in order for students to thrive and achieve academically.

Around this time, Kent County Council was promoting the ‘Nurturing Kent programme’, and an email offering a fully funded two-year project with nurtureuk landed in the school’s inbox. Wentworth felt very positive about the whole school approach to nurture and signed up to the programme almost immediately. They did, however, experience some initial delays when one member of the school team went on long-term sick leave, and it took some time to identify another suitable staff member to take their place. However, Wentworth has since attended all the programme training, had their 12-month review and are looking to apply for the National Nurturing School Award in the near future.

3.1.2. How they did it

With backing from the headteacher, the nurture leads within Wentworth - an assistant head and a classroom teacher – did the nurtureuk programme training and began to introduce a whole school approach to nurture in Wentworth.

They began by introducing nurture to the whole staff team, including teachers, teaching assistants and midday supervisors, setting the scene for why the school felt it was the right approach, and to seek feedback from staff. During training sessions, staff worked in groups to identify what the school already did well and any gaps, making sure that everyone understood the six principles of nurture. The ‘all behaviour is communication’ principle resonated especially strongly with staff. Assemblies on the six principles introduced nurture to students, as did a meeting with governors, before sending out information to parents. The school also used parents’ evening to further explain the school’s nurturing approach and to share resources.

The next step was to update the school’s behaviour and wellbeing policies. Previous policies were identified as quite authoritarian, largely focusing on sanctions. Underpinned by the

principles of nurture, the school's new behaviour policy emphasises the importance of inclusion and supporting pupils to self-regulate. The zones of regulation, to help children identify and communicate their emotions, were introduced across the school, together with self-regulation techniques. The school also made calm lunchtime spaces and sensory boxes available, which included things like play dough and fidget toys.

Alongside this, the school assessed all students using the Boxall Profile®. This was a time-consuming process. To make it quicker and less repetitive for classroom teachers completing the assessments, the school lead gave assistance by logging in 650 times to set up individual profiles on the online platform. The data the WSA assessment produced was incredibly useful, and the school identified that 30% of their students had significant SEMH gaps. While some findings validated what they already knew, others were surprising, such as children's low self-esteem and low resilience. Having solid and quantifiable data about children's SEMH needs was used in reports and brought to the attention of governors. It was also used to identify trends across the school and in classrooms, and to make funding decisions. On the back of the Boxall findings, the school freed up staff time to trial the introduction of weekly nurture groups with children from the most challenging year group.

Some interventions, such as the school counsellor, play therapist and mentoring programme were already in place, but other targeted interventions were introduced as part of the nurturing approach, including ELSA support and TA trained Lego therapists. A room used for storage was cleared, painted and furnished by school staff during their holiday to create a new space for the nurture groups. Hence, the school now has three dedicated nurture spaces, used for lunchtime nurture club, ELSA support and nurture groups.

A number of other things within the school were also adapted in the light of a more inclusive and nurturing approach. Pupil Premium and attendance meetings now focus on ways to support and understand the child and their family, in order to address attendance issues. As many of the students' conflicts revolved around playtime football, the school managed access carefully and employed sports coaches to help children develop better sportsmanship and to referee specific matches. A children's survey also highlighted that children often felt unsafe in the playground because they couldn't find a teacher, and in response staff started wearing high-viz jackets to be more recognisable. Midday supervisors and other staff, also wore lanyards with restorative justice questions to help them respond in a consistent and nurturing way when talking to distressed children.

3.1.3 What happened

The school lead had initially anticipated resistance from different stakeholders, but over the past 18 months the school's nurture approach has been positively received, including by parents who have welcomed the school's focus on emotional wellbeing. In a parents' questionnaire, all but one parent agreed that supporting children's emotional development, mental health and wellbeing should be a priority for the school.

While the journey to embed nurture is ongoing, early feedback is positive. Breaktime is no longer chaotic, and challenging behaviour has declined significantly. When incidents do

happen, they are quicker to resolve and less likely to escalate, and consequently have less impact on learning.

Having used zones of regulation across the school for over a year, staff and parents describe how children are better able to identify their emotions and communicate them to those around them. Three-quarters of parents (77%) who completed the nurture questionnaire in their school (n=191) said that they as parents were aware of the zones of regulation and understood how they could be used to support children. Remarkably, almost half of parents also said that their children used the zones of regulation at home (e.g. 'I feel like I'm in Red zone' to communicate that they are angry or upset). This is a very encouraging finding, as it shows that children have increased self-awareness and a better emotional understanding – an important part of being able to self-regulate their emotions.



[Click here: To hear from an Assistant Head teacher about the difficulties the school faced at breaktime transitions and the impact the nurturing approach has had on students.](#)

Especially those children attending nurture groups and other interventions routinely use techniques and tools to self-regulate their emotions in the classroom, playground and at home, but also support their peers to self-regulate. Group and individual interventions were seen to make children less anxious, more confident, have more empathy and better able to deal with their feelings. Consequently, they felt emotionally secure and enjoyed school more. Specific examples of positive outcomes for children were also forthcoming. One child, for example with selective mutism had started talking to adults and peers within the school. Parents interviewed, who had children in the nurture group, also reported that their children were happier in themselves and in their friendship groups, and no longer said they wanted to hurt themselves or cried every morning coming into school.



[Click here: To hear two students talk about their experiences of school following the introduction of nurture tools](#)

This is backed up by statistical data. Nine children were part of Wentworth's first nurture group. In 2022-23, in the year prior to the introduction of the nurture provision, 57 behaviour incidents were recorded between them – of which 41 incidents (72%) were deemed severe and involved physical aggression. The following year, after the implementation of the nurture provision, the same children had between them 14 recorded behaviour incidents – all deemed to be low level behaviour – a decrease of 75%. For the same group of children, staff recorded 41 incidents in 2022-23, where they had concerns for students' wellbeing, mainly around self-harm. One year later, in 2023-24, no wellbeing incidents were recorded for the children attending the nurture group. The students' attendance also improved from an average of 96.7% to 98.8%. These are remarkable improvements for this group of children and the school, and are result of a range of individual, group and whole school approaches.

In light of the positive impact of introducing a whole school approach to nurture, Wentworth has plans in place to sustain their nurturing journey. The school has budgeted to

continue to provide nurture groups and to assess students yearly using the Boxall Profile®, but longer term they would like to assess all students twice a year.

3.2 Barton Court Grammar school

Area: Kent East School type: Multi Academy Trust Size: 1,004 students Pupils with identified SEND (SEN support & EHCP): 9% Free School Meals: 10%

Theme: Balancing high academic expectations with students' emotional wellbeing

3.2.1 Background

Barton Court Grammar school is a selective school located in a historic town in Kent. The secondary school has a stable student population, with many students commuting from all over coastal Kent to attend the school.

As a high performing grammar school, the school is unapologetic about its high expectations for students to work hard and strive to achieve academically. However, the school also recognises that learning and academic excellence often goes hand in hand with student and staff wellbeing. So, when respected and credible staff within the school, who led high performing departments, wanted to introduce a more holistic and nurturing approach focusing on students' social and emotional wellbeing, alongside their academic development, this was welcomed by the senior leadership team.

While students' needs haven't necessarily presented more challenging behaviour within school, many students experience a range of social and emotional difficulties, which for some has impacted their school attendance. Barton Court has over the past few years experienced an increase in poor attendance. With a growing need for support across Kent, Barton Court has also seen waiting lists for external support, such as counselling grow longer, and frequently the external support they used to make referrals for no longer exist.

Barton Court signed up to the Nurturing Kent programme in 2022, but the roll out was held up when one key staff member left the school and another went on leave. Work to reintroduce the programme and increase the profile of nurture within the school recommenced in early 2024 – and the school is currently waiting to hear about the outcome of their application for the National Nurturing School Award.

3.2.2 How they did it

As a school Barton Court has often welcomed initiatives that aim to improve the learning environment of its students, and has consequently been involved in a number of other initiatives, including HeadStart and Thinking School. The nurturing approach is building on the foundations of these initiatives.

A peer mentoring scheme, forms a key part of Barton Court's nurturing strategy. While there has been peer mentors in the school since 2000, the current approach was introduced as part of the HeadStart Kent initiative. Learning from that experience, about thirty students are being trained and supported to become peer mentors. The training, which includes an anti-bullying element, focuses on theoretical and practical approaches to peer mentoring, as well as empathetic listening and body language. The current plan is for peer mentors to be paired up with individual students in school, but there are also ideas for peer mentors to run lunch time clubs or sessions in the wellbeing room, delivering activities such as board games and drawing for wellbeing. The peer mentors will also feed into the school's wellbeing forum. The intention is also for Year 11 psychology students to carry out an action research project to assess the impact of the peer mentoring scheme.

Alongside this, Barton Court has also created a new wellbeing room, by moving the six-form common room to another part of the school. This allowed the school to establish a dedicated space which combines the existing SEND room with wellbeing. The room is staffed all day and is used to reintegrate students back into school following severe absence issues or suspensions. Students with wellbeing passes, are also able to drop-in if they are struggling in their classroom, although staff encourage young people to stay for the first ten minutes of their lesson before using their exit pass. The wellbeing room also hosts a 20 minute weekly social club for students with SEND needs who meet, talk and play games before school to help students 'decompress' before going into their first lesson.

The school has also introduced a number of staff wellbeing initiatives, such as Friday cake and specific staff wellbeing days, with organised activities such as basket weaving and Indian head massage. Staff can also access the school counsellor, which some staff have taken up. To support staff management and workload issues, the head teacher run progress and innovation meetings with head of years, and specific training on supervision and line management has also been delivered. Talking about emotional wellbeing is encouraged, and a recent staff survey shows that almost all members of staff now feel they can talk about an issue relating to their own wellbeing with the head teacher, compared to less than 30% four years ago.

Short staff CPD sessions have introduced nurture and the Boxall Profile®, with more sessions booked in. The school has assessed a relatively small number of students using the Boxall Profile®, primarily when making referrals for external support. However, a more proactive approach is now being considered, using Boxall Profiles to help identify more vulnerable students and to help the team build up a picture of students' needs, challenges and potential strategies. The school has found the assessments useful when talking to parents, but less useful for students with severe absence with who staff are less familiar.

The SENCO has trialled a few joint practice development (JPD) sessions with a small group of teachers to focus on one particular student. The aim of such sessions was to provide a platform to help staff share ideas and reflect on what works for this young person. This has reportedly been a successful way to implement small adjustments in the classroom to support students' engagement.

3.2.3 What happened

Building on the foundations of other nurturing initiatives, such as HeadStart Kent, Barton Court is working to deliver more staff training and to implement the peer mentoring scheme.

While it is still early days, the school has made progress in some areas, such as having their first wellbeing room, which is a fantastic space from which the school can expand its nurture provision. However, it was clear from the peer researchers' interviews that most students were still unaware of its existence or did not perceive it as a space available to them.

The school is also taking some important first steps by broadening their vision and actively considering how students' social and emotional wellbeing are supporting their academic achievements. By focusing on building a common framework with staff, working on nurturing communication strategies and making small adjustments in the classroom, the school is also communicating more widely that nurturing practice is not about lowering expectations, 'being soft' or letting 'children get away with it'. Rather it is about being proactive and recognising that there are different pathways to supporting students' wellbeing and academic achievement.

A few positive examples demonstrate how this can be done:

For one young person, reflective JPD sessions led by the SENCO, meant that he was now having a better relationship with one of his teachers, and by extension was able to take part in the school's enrichment day for the first time. In the past, this young person has struggled with the changes to the school day that enrichment day entails, so for this young person to manage this transition was a small, but important step.

Conversations with one young person had helped the school devise an adapted version of the zones of regulation to help this Year 9 student identify, regulate his emotions (e.g. the boy described himself as 'fizzing') and communicate them clearly to his teachers. This has been effective in managing his behaviour, as suitable strategies could be put in place to help him self-regulate, such as movement breaks or a staff check-in.

In interviews, one parent highlighted how staff at Barton Court had supported their young person and family following a very difficult incident. The school had responded in a very caring and supportive manner, and had put in place multiple pragmatic and workable solutions, such as changing the seating plan, allowing the young person to get changed for PE elsewhere and wearing a charm to calm her down. These small adjustments enabled this young person to attend school more regularly and make new friends. This parent highly valued how staff had listened and taken their young person's concern seriously, which had significantly helped their recovery over the past year and improved attendance.

With nurture on the school's development plan for next year, alongside literacy and other core priority areas, this will give Barton Court the opportunity to explore whether nurture is a solid approach for their staff and students, before potentially widening the implementation to a whole school approach to nurture.

3.3 Wittersham Primary School

Area: Kent South School type: Church of England Size: 135 students Pupils with identified SEND (SEN support & EHCP): 24% Free School Meals: 18%

Theme: Utilising limited staff resources within a small village school

3.3.1 Background

Wittersham is a small village primary school, located to the north of Rye in a rural area of Kent. As a Church of England school, the school's ethos is underpinned by Christian values and a close connection to the neighbouring church.

Known locally among parents for having a good reputation for inclusion and being able to support children's needs well, the school has recently become a 'magnet' school for children with additional needs, including health problems. This is reflected in the school's SEND register, with almost one-in-four children attending Wittersham having SEND needs.

While the school used to have a strong community feel, the school also traditionally focused more on academic achievement than meeting children's social and emotional needs. Too often children's lack of progress was, for example, perceived as cognitive rather than deriving from their SEMH needs.

With a senior leadership change in 2022, the school wanted to broaden its remit by specifically addressing social and emotional needs within the school. Like children across the country, the Covid pandemic impacted children's needs at Wittersham and staff observed 'pockets of sadness' among some students, as well as a lack of engagement in learning that was not always by choice. However, the school also experienced that in trying to meet everyone's individual needs they were at risk of developing multiple individual approaches, which clearly wasn't sustainable.

The aspiration to support children through a whole school approach, brought Wittersham to consider taking part in the Nurturing Kent programme. The school did have some Initial reservations about the Kent programme. Being a small school with limited staff resources, Wittersham didn't have the number of staff expected to be involved in the implementation of the programme. Nevertheless, following constructive conversations with nurtureuk about how this could work in practice, the school felt reassured and signed up.

3.2.2 How they did it

Led by the assistant head for inclusion and supported by the head teacher, Wittersham acknowledged that they would be unable to do everything at once, and hence developed a three-year plan of what they wanted to achieve and in what order. Certain interventions,

such as a play therapist, forest school, ELSA support and worry boxes would benefit children immediately, but other changes would take longer to implement. One of the first items on the agenda was to develop a strong pastoral team using existing staff resources, and through training and expanding responsibilities the school has successfully upskilled existing teaching assistants. Part-time roles, delivered alongside TA's other work responsibilities, has enabled the school to offer support to children and their families through their ELSA worker, nurture lead and family liaison officer. Focusing on staff support more widely, the school has also introduced a staff wellbeing charter, additional days off in-lieu, wellbeing events and regular CPD training.

Alongside this, the school also carried out some physical changes to the school environment. The staff room was relocated to make room for a new school library, located off the school hall. The library now provides a quiet space for students to eat their lunch if they find the dinner hall too noisy. With funding from the Diocese, Wittersham also renovated and refurbished a small and cosy nurture room in the old school house. This well-resourced sensory room houses the lunch time nurture club, as well as other one-to-one support. To mark the opening of the new nurture room in September 2023, the school welcomed the Reverend Bishop of Dover to Wittersham, a visit that culminated with the official blessing of the nurture room.

Children's visits to the nurture room are recorded and monitored, and in the first six months 120 children accessed the nurturing facility during lunch time, primarily to share and talk about difficulties they face at home or at school. If children access the nurture room three times or more, a member of staff will contact their parents or carers to explore whether additional support may be needed.

Adopting a creative approach to fundraising has also helped the school raise funds from a range of sources, enabling Wittersham to offer equine and dog therapy, self-esteem building gymnastic lessons, forest school and fishing activities to students. Such enrichment activities benefit individual children, but are also offered more widely to all students. Other features introduced or reinforced as part of the nurturing programme, include worry boxes and 'worry monsters', quiet 'nurture nooks' within classrooms, sensory breaks of milk and biscuits for those that need it and the 'buddy bench'. As part of their nurture journey, Wittersham also wanted to strengthen their school council, who now meet weekly to discuss things that matter to pupils. Initially the school council has focused on changing the school menu and improving their outside area.

Over the past year, all reception children have been assessed using the Boxall Profile®, identifying a baseline for this group of students. Across the rest of the school, children accessing additional provision, such as play therapy are also being assessed using the Boxall Profile®. Findings feed into students' personalised plan, target setting and parents communication. In total, almost half of children have been 'Boxall'ed', and although senior leaders would have liked to Boxall the whole school at once, it felt more important to use scarce staff resources elsewhere. Instead, all students are assessed six times a year using the Leuven scale, as this is less time consuming to complete.

More recently, and following whole school staff training, Wittersham has started to roll out the zones of regulation to children and parents, using whole school worship, assemblies and SEN parent coffee mornings to do so. While it is early days, children seem to understand the concept and some are beginning to apply it when talking about their emotions.

3.3.3 What happened

The senior leadership team at Wittersham had devised a plan setting out what they wanted to achieve through the programme and in which order. With full support from their small senior leadership team, the school has been able to implement their strategy in stages so as to not overwhelm staff and other stakeholders.

The role of teaching assistants has been key to the Wittersham approach. Their TA's are clearly highly valued and resourceful members of the staff team, and by investing in their skills and specialism, Wittersham has been able to establish a new caring and passionate pastoral team.

As the nurture lead highlighted in conversations, just because you are a small school having a nurturing approach to children's needs is not a given, and the programme has helped Wittersham reframe children's behaviour. Instead of viewing children as rude or naughty, nurture has encouraged staff to consider and try to understand *why* children behave in a certain way. As an extension, this has also empowered staff to have more open discussions with children about differences, for example due to disabilities or health problems. This has reportedly encouraged children to show more empathy towards other children and their needs. Combined this has strengthened Wittersham's SEMH provision and its inclusive practice.

One example illustrates the nurture journey that school staff have been on over the past few years. Prior to the Nurturing Kent programme, the inclusion lead tried to introduce mindfulness and yoga in the school, but staff had politely declined to implement mindfulness in their classroom. Eighteen months later during a similar training session, staff welcomed the approach as they now understood the social and emotional benefits, and teachers now regularly deliver mindfulness and bubble breathing in their classroom. A specific focus on staff wellbeing has also reduced staff sickness and increased staff retention, and staff talk with pride and passion about their school and what they have been able to achieve for children and families through a nurturing approach.

The parents we spoke to felt that the school was very accessible now, and that staff were good at keeping in touch and had put things in place which allowed their child to take part and enjoy school. Parents and carers experienced this as very caring of them and their child.

In terms of individual children and their journey, one example stood out. At risk of exclusion last year, due to challenging behaviour and a tendency to go off-site when triggered, the school was able to support one child through the provision of a personalised non-mainstream curriculum of, among other activities, equine therapy and BMX cycling. This child has gone from 15 minutes a day of timetabled learning to being in school full time. By providing trauma informed support and a range of wellbeing activities the child is now

better able to cope with school. The school aims to give him a mainstream and inclusive school experience until the end of year six.

Going forward Wittersham intends to fully embed zones of regulations and to introduce restorative justice practice. There are also discussions about upskilling school staff in pre- and non-verbal conversation systems, such as Widget and Makaton. The school was recently awarded the National Nurturing School Award

3.4 Barton Manor Secondary School

Area: Kent East
School type: Multi Academy Trust
Size: 299 students (Year 7 & 8 only)
Pupils with identified SEND (SEND support and EHCP): 20%
Free School Meal: 38%

Theme: a new secondary school with nurture at its heart

3.4.1 Background

Barton Manor is a new comprehensive secondary school in Canterbury, which in September 2022 opened its doors to 150 Year 7 students.

As a school, Barton Manor has a high proportion of students who are eligible for Pupil Premium funding (42%). However, being part of an academy trust, the school also automatically offers a place to any siblings of students attending its partner school, a selective grammar school located nearby. Hence, many of its students come from further afield, meaning that Barton Manor has over 40 primary feeder schools. Despite being a new school with a small student body, Barton Manor has a substantial waiting list for all its year groups.

Building a new school from scratch was a unique opportunity for school leaders to shape the culture and ethos from the outset. As senior staff at Barton Manor have witnessed the growing needs among students and understand the impact of students falling through the net, there was a strong desire to situate students' social and emotional wellbeing at the heart of this new school, and to provide the pastoral and learning support needed in order for all students to thrive.

Being familiar with nurture and nurtureuk, the school signed up in June 2023 to the Nurturing Kent programme. Led by the school's Assistant Head for SEN provision and an Assistant Head of Year, the school has completed all the required training and reviews, and recently submitted their application for the National Nurturing School Award.

3.4.2 How they did it

Barton Manor's nurture journey, highlights how nurture can provide an overall framework, which brings together different approaches to inclusion and students' wellbeing. However, it

also highlights how multiple interventions and initiatives were introduced and implemented within a very short space of time.

For students with EHCP plans, the biggest change in the last year has been the establishment of a dedicated nurture group provision for 12 students in Year 7. Supported by one teacher and two TAs, the nurture group is taught an adapted curriculum, which includes additional literacy, forest school and social skills sessions, which aims to ensure that students' progress in their learning.

The school had initially intended to carry out Boxall Profile® assessment on all their students, but found it difficult to assess year 7 students in Term 1, as staff did not yet know enough about the students to accurately assess them. Instead, staff had focused on 'boxalling' those students where it was felt that more analysis would be beneficial to better understand students' gaps or in circumstances where they were making an EHCP referral.

As an expanding school welcoming a new cohort of students every year, the first nurture principle - the importance of transitions in children's lives – resonated particularly strongly with staff at Barton Manor. Since becoming involved with the Nurturing Kent programme, staff have focused on ways to better support students' transitions – from primary to secondary school, but also from home to school, and lesson to lesson – and has developed a range of strategies focusing on such transitions. This includes offering additional transitions days and opportunities to meet their form tutor, as well as other resources to help get primary students 'September ready'. Staff are now also routinely visiting all primary feeder schools to learn about the children before they start in Year 7. Personalised plans are purposely completed before the summer break to allow teachers time to familiarise themselves with their new students and their needs before the beginning of term.

Once they have started at Barton Manor, young people with attendance issues are offered 'case-by-case' support to better facilitate their transition between home and school and vice versa. This could, for example involve meeting staff in the carpark to overcome any worries about entering the school building, or just buying an alarm clock.

Members of the pastoral team, each have a number of students whom they meet with for daily check-ins and check-outs. In addition, some students have exit passes which allow them to leave the classroom, for example if they are beginning to feel overwhelmed or anxious, without having to explain themselves. Others wear a green/red wristband, which when turned to red subtly communicates to their teacher that help may be needed, so they know to ask the student how they are feeling.

Communicating with subject teachers, so that they are aware of any needs their students may have has also been crucial in developing a supportive learning environment. Each week, the SENCO distributes 'Barton Manor Weekly', an inclusion document that updates staff on any changes, provides a 'spotlight' on individual students and their needs, and focuses on different aspects of inclusion, including nurture. The school has also introduced red, yellow and green 'safeguarding hearts' next to students' photographs on the school register, which communicate any potential safeguarding concerns to teachers and staff, without breaking confidentiality. A red heart, for example, signals 'high risk', alerting teachers to be aware and

supportive of the student, as well as to communicate any concerns to the safeguarding team.

Barton Manor has a large pastoral team and an expanding range of targeted resources available to individual students. This includes the school counsellor, self-esteem and self-harming support groups, and there are plans to start a behaviour and anger management group. The school is also on the waiting list for ELSA training. Inspired by interventions that have worked well in primary schools, Barton Manor has also introduced a well-used sensory room and a new forest school – as staff highlighted the needs of Year 5 and Year 7 students differ less than often assumed.

The school has also implemented a restorative justice approach. This is used to resolve conflicts and prevent harm, as students are given the chance to give their side of the story. An ‘unkindness form’ completed by students will also trigger a restorative justice conversation if both students consent. While time consuming, this approach is described as very effective by staff, and as fair by students who have experienced it, as it allowed both sides to be heard.



[Click here: To hear students talk about the unkindness form and restorative justice approaches](#)

3.4.3 What happened

Since the school opened its doors in 2022, Barton Manor has worked tirelessly to implement a comprehensive, multi-faceted approach to establish a whole school nurturing culture, as well as supporting individual young people with their various needs.

The pastoral and SEN team work closely together to support young people and their families to provide the best support, which enables vulnerable students to attend school – and to enjoy, learn and experience good wellbeing while they are at school. A nurturing approach seems evident throughout the available interventions and the attitude of school staff.

Students are effectively being identified and supported to attend and positively engage with the school experience. This takes more than one intervention or one member of staff, and the approach of having a number of people around the young person – checking-in, giving them permission to leave the classroom, having a safe and calming space for them to go, providing fidget toys, counselling and lunch time clubs seems to support some of the most challenged students to enjoy school. By addressing issues, such as self-harm, domestic abuse and being a young carer in a nurturing manner, the school most likely prevents some young people from ‘falling through the gap.’



[Click here: To hear secondary school students talk about staff support and attendance](#)

Students at Barton Manor are actively supported to have friendships, and care is taken in teaming up young people with buddies who may share similar characteristics. Both the parents and students who we spoke to were extremely grateful for this. Through restorative justice interventions, young people described how staff helped them with their relationships, as well as putting in place sanctions for unacceptable behaviour. Overall, the students felt confident that there was staff that cared about them and who they could go to if there was an issue.

A nurturing approach is clearly at the heart of the school ethos, and there is an ongoing commitment to sustain the approach longer term.

4. Implementing a nurturing model in Kent schools

Using information from all school staff who engaged in the evaluation, either through the case studies, focus groups or surveys, this section focuses more generally on how (and why) participating schools engaged with the Nurturing Kent Programme and summarises the outcomes they are beginning to see as a result of this involvement.

4.1 Delivering nurture

- **Growing SEMH needs**

For many schools, their involvement with the Nurturing Kent programme had derived from a place of need, as schools recognised that they had 'to do something' in order to manage their students' growing social and emotional needs. All schools mentioned the impact of Covid, although many believed the trend had started before the pandemic.

In the programme survey, all respondents (n=19) said that they had seen a drop in students' resilience and an increase in SEMH needs since the Covid pandemic. Most (17 out of 19) also said they had experienced more challenging behaviour within their school, as well as an increase in poor attendance. Such growing needs often took the shape of school refusal, anxiety, violent behaviour and concerns about self-harming.

- **Space for sharing and learning**

Staff who had attended nurtureuk's training sessions highlighted the benefits of being able to share, learn and reflect together with other schools in Kent. Having ongoing and regular sessions has helped staff reflect on the SEMH needs within their school, and to feel inspired, to go away and implement the next step on their nurture journey.

- **A passion for nurture**

Staff leading on the nurture programme were often very passionate about nurture, and strongly believed in a nurturing approach to supporting students' SEMH needs. Small, but committed staff teams were instrumental in making nurture happen within their school context. As recognised by nurtureuk's programme requirements, having senior leadership team backing was also crucial to schools adopting a whole school approach to nurture. In schools where the headteacher fully supported a nurturing approach, schools often were

quicker to make things happen on the ground, as schools were committed to make funding, resources and staff available.

- **Investing in nurture**

Participating schools invested significant resources and staff time in implementing a nurturing approach. The Nurturing Kent programme required a meaningful commitment from schools, as its implementation required attention on many levels, with multiple stakeholders.

In the programme survey, respondents often mentioned that time and resources had been the biggest challenge to implementing a nurture approach in their school.

- **Welcomed by stakeholders**

Some schools had anticipated resistance from some stakeholders, such as parents, but in reality, stakeholders welcomed schools' plans to play a bigger role in addressing students' social and emotional wellbeing. Schools mentioned that perhaps due to societal changes, parents seemed more prepared to discuss mental health issues now than they had been in the past.

Occasionally, school staff mentioned a few resistant teachers within their school who were more hesitant about nurture, and needed its value to be demonstrated, but otherwise staff, students and parents spoke highly of their experiences of nurture approaches in their school.

- **Providing a framework**

Nurture provided a common framework for multiple 'nurturing' interventions and practices already in place within participating schools. A nurturing framework allowed schools to bring together such approaches, as it provided a shared language that was easy for stakeholders to understand, and helped staff work towards a common goal.

As one school in the survey highlighted:

'We are a small school, but we were following all sorts of different strategies. We needed a universal approach for all staff and early intervention for our children'
(Infant school)

- **A whole school approach to nurture**

While at different stages of their journey, three of the case study schools had adopted a whole school approach to nurture and were working with dedication to embed nurture across their school. This is a significant finding, as often schools believe they are implementing a whole school approach, however when the approach is scrutinised more closely, it is often a series of isolated interventions which are not joined up in a meaningful or lasting manner. The fourth case study school appeared still to be exploring the benefits of nurture, before committing to a whole school approach.

- **The Boxall Profile®**

The Boxall Profile® was described as a key feature of the nurturing programme. Although participating schools have used the Boxall Profile® in very different ways, most believed that it had helped them:

- Identify, and more importantly also quantify, SEMH needs within their school;
- Communicate with parents about their children's needs;
- Identify common gaps within their student population;
- Widening teachers understanding of students' needs;
- Generate specific targets for individual students;
- Assess and demonstrate progress.

Most schools highly valued the Boxall Profile® and the data it generated. However, schools often found it time consuming, which has prevented some schools assessing all their students as part of their whole school approach. A few school staff mentioned that they had found the assessment tool subjective, and one school mentioned that they believed the lack of student input was an issue.

- **Family support**

Overall, parents seemed receptive to the Boxall Profile® findings and the subsequent offers of support for their children, for example through the school's nurture provision. The way a whole school approach to nurture also supports families with their children has been an added benefit for school staff and children. This approach stands in great contrast to earlier approaches to family support, which have often been punitive and blaming, rather than nurturing.

- **An interplay of approaches**

The variety of whole school, group and individual strategies and interventions used to support students within schools, created a 'web of nurture' which reduced the potential of students falling through the net. This interplay of nurturing approaches ensured that schools identified and reached all students who would benefit from support, before they reached crisis point.

- **Using techniques to self-regulate**

Across the schools, staff and students talked about how students used the techniques that schools had offered them to self-regulate their emotions, without input from staff. Such self-regulating strategies, included zones of regulation, breathing techniques, having movement breaks and fidget toys. If students were unable to regulate themselves, they generally knew how to reach out for further staff support.

When students began to self-regulate more regularly and consistently, this was the point where schools began to see a reduction in challenging and chaotic behaviour.

- **Schools' roles in supporting peer relationships**

The importance of friendships came across strongly in the peer researchers' interviews. Having secure and positive friendships were fundamental to students' experience of school and ultimately their social and emotional wellbeing. It is therefore vital that schools

recognise their central role in supporting students' peer relations within school. Children and young people often need help with preventing conflicts, healing relationships and making new friends.

All students seemed to value the attention paid by adults who supported them with peer relationships and their relationships with staff. Through restorative justice conversations, students often felt able to describe their experiences and emotions to other people. It also taught them to expect to be heard and taken seriously. This went a long way in helping students learn how to overcome conflicts.

- **A dedicated nurture space**

Students in schools that had one or more dedicated nurture spaces that the students knew about and felt welcome to use, seemed to have a greater awareness and understanding of nurture. Having a physical space, may have helped staff better communicate the school's commitment to supporting students social and emotional wellbeing through a nurturing approach, but it also seemed to help students if they knew where to go for support or if they needed to talk to an adult.

- **Improvements to students' SEMH needs**

Most schools responding to the programme survey reported that they had seen an improvement in students' social and emotional wellbeing across their school (13 out of 19 respondents) and that students with SEND needs were engaging better in their learning (15 out of 19). A few disagreed. Those that were unsure, often explained that it was too early to see such changes for students.

Table 2. Outcomes for students

	Agree	Disagree	Not sure	Total
We have seen an improvement in students' social and emotional wellbeing across the whole school	13	1	5	19
Students with SEND needs engage better in their learning	15	2	2	19

When asked for specific examples of how a nurturing approach may have impacted individual students, schools mentioned a range of changes, such as better self-regulation, gaining confidence, fewer sanctions and better staff-student relationships. Schools also highlighted improved attendance among school refusers, as nurturing strategies had helped students gradually return to school full time.

'We have children who were emotional based school refusers now back in class full time, children and staff have a better understanding of behaviours and how to support each other, including with transitions. Attendance has increased again to above national average' (Primary school)

'Children who were missing a lot of school due to anxiety are coming into school as they know they have a safe place to come to in the morning. Children have more

strategies to manage their emotions and talk about how they are feeling.' (Primary school)

While the survey sample was small, these are nevertheless positive findings for schools involved in the programme.

- **Sustainability post-programme**

Case study schools were committed to nurture and believed in the model. They had seen a range of positive outcomes, at individual and at school level, and had consequently all applied for the National School Nurturing Award, as well as making commitments to further embed nurture within their school. While school initiatives always run the risk of fizzling out when key staff move on, the fact that case study schools have implemented nurture in their behaviour policies and included nurture in their school development plan, suggest that schools were committed to continuing their nurture journey.

In the programme survey, most schools said that they were likely to continue using the Boxall Profile® once the Nurturing Kent programme came to an end (16 out of 19 respondents), and three-quarters had already put plans in place to sustain a nurturing approach longer term (15 out of 19). Three schools had already applied for the National Nurturing Schools Award, while another 14 were looking to apply for the award soon. Only two were unsure at this stage. Again, while the sample is small, this is nevertheless an encouraging finding, which suggests that as the programme comes to an end, schools who have invested time and resources in programme participation have plans in place to continue.

4.2 Areas for development

- **Limited targeted support**

Although schools generally establish new nurture provisions or expand their targeted support for individual children, as part of their whole school approach to nurture, nurture provision is frequently limited. Consequently, demand is likely to exceed the availability of group and individual support, which may impact some students' social and emotional wellbeing.

- **Self-reporting SEMH needs**

If schools rely on children self-reporting their social and emotional needs by coming forward to use nurturing interventions, it is likely that some children will not be identified. Vulnerable students, for example those experiencing complex and difficult circumstances, due to domestic abuse or being a young carer, may mask or hide their difficulties, and may therefore not receive much needed support.

- **Streamlining the Boxall online platform**

As Boxall assessments are the most efficient way to identify students' needs, nurtureuk should therefore consider adapting the online platform to make whole school assessments more efficient.

- **Training for headteachers, alongside existing training offer**

Given the importance of SLT and headteacher buy-in to programme success, nurtureuk should consider introducing a short training session delivered by experienced nurtureuk staff, specifically targeting SLT and headteachers. This would ensure that headteachers fully understand the different elements of nurture and programme benefits, without relying on the communications skills of the lead school staff.

5. Conclusion

By recognising that mainstream schools in Kent operate in very different contexts from each other and have different starting points, this evaluation explored the nurture journeys of four case study schools. Peer-led research with children and young people in the four schools also provided an effective way to understand, with confidence, students' experiences of nurture within their school.

The case studies highlight the different steps schools have taken to become more inclusive and nurturing of their student's social and emotional needs through a whole school approach to nurture. They demonstrate how nurturing approaches have helped schools better identify and support their students' needs, and create a 'web of nurture'. Combined, this helped increase some students' attendance, reduce challenging behaviour, improve students' social and emotional wellbeing, and consequently improve the entire school's learning environment.

Appendix 1: Audio interviews

Summary

A series of eight interviews with staff and students in two Kent schools about their experience of 'living' the nurturing approach.

You will hear how an assistant headteacher of a large primary school bordering London has embedded a nurturing approach, as well as how some of the children have developed and grown, because of the nurturing interventions.

The primary school interviews are followed by stories from a Kent secondary school. Students talk, predominantly, about different ways the school has helped them overcome emotional, social and mental health challenges and what this has meant for them.

The final interview is the school's safeguarding manager describing how she uses the Boxall Profile® to support her work with students and parents.

Primary school reflections from an assistant headteacher

How do you achieve a whole school approach to nurture? Hear from an assistant head about her journey into making a Kent primary school a nurture school.

These first two interviews outline how a primary school embedded a whole school approach to nurture. The assistant head interviewed discusses the six principles of nurture, Boxall Profiling the school and how the school has teamed up the nurture approach with the zones of regulation and taught the students neuroscience to support children's understanding of their own emotions.



[Click here: to hear an Assistant Head talk about implementing a whole school of approach \(Appendix 1\)](#)

In the second part of her interview, she talks about the difficulties of transitions within the school day for many children and how using the nurture approach to transitions has improved children's ability to engage in lessons. We hear of the impact the nurturing approach has had on a class of children using the combination of Boxall Profiling, whole class approaches and a nurture room.



[Click here: to hear an Assistant Head talk about the impact of nurture on children \(Appendix 2\)](#)

Learning how the students experience a nurturing approach

Following the interview with the assistant head, students who have participated in many of the interventions, referred to in the previous interview, tell us about their experience of nurture. Two primary school girls talk together about their different emotional issues and

not wanting to come into school. They go on to discuss how they have learnt to self-regulate using the zones of regulation and other nurture interventions.



[Click here: to hear primary school children talk about nurturing interventions \(Appendix 3\)](#)

Secondary school reflections about a nurturing approach

Listen to how this student moved cities, left everything she knew behind and started from scratch in a different part of the country. The school used nurture tools to support her with this challenging transition and made it possible for her to enjoy school.



[Click here: to hear secondary student talk about nurture inventions \(Appendix 4\)](#)

Making sure students don't fall through the gaps

By taking this students social and emotional needs seriously, the school has enabled this student to attend when at times it looked like she would not come in at all.



[Click here: to hear secondary school students talk about staff support and attendance \(Appendix 5\)](#)

Restorative Justice Approaches

This secondary school uses restorative justice approaches to help students describe the difficulties they face and support them to see different perspectives. It all starts with an unkindness form...



[Click here: to hear students talk about the unkindness form and restorative justice approaches \(Appendix 6\)](#)

Primary to Secondary school transitions

A year 7 student talks about the difficulties he faced when transitioning from the culture of a primary school to that of a secondary school and how the school supported him.



[Click here: to hear a student talk about transition from primary to secondary school \(Appendix 7\)](#)

Using the Boxall Profile® to support constructive conversations with parents

A safeguarding manager talks about using the Boxall Profile® as a way of understanding a student further before talking to parents. The profile gives her a foundation to make suggestions for support that are based on a diagnostic assessment.



[Click here: to hear Safeguarding Manager talk about using the Boxall Profile to support parent \(Appendix 8\)](#)