

HOW DO NURTURE GROUPS WORK?

ATTACHMENT THEORY

The fundamental theoretical model that underpins the effectiveness of nurture groups is John Bowlby's attachment theory which argues that children acquire age-appropriate behaviour through interactions with significant others (Bowlby 1969). If a child's early experiences were characterised by missing or distorted nurturing, it can lead to stunted social, emotional and cognitive development. Yet nurture is not a once-and-for-all event that must take place in a critical period, and missing or distorted early experiences can be overcome with the help of nurturing adults. Teachers, youth workers and significant adults in a child's life can provide important attachments for children.

“The roots of a child or young person's social-emotional wellbeing are found in their first attachment to their primary care-giver. The nature of that attachment determines not just their ability to form relationships but their capacity to learn. Educators must establish attachment-like relationships with their students, particularly with challenging and vulnerable children and young people, in order to improve their chances of learning and achieving.”

Attachment Aware Schools 2017

“Classroom learning cannot occur if the child is in either a persistent state of arousal or anxiety [...]. When in this state, the key parts of the cortex are not receptive to cognitive information that is not relevant to survival. The traumatized child's brain is essentially unavailable to process efficiently the complex cognitive information being conveyed by the teacher.”

Perry 2002

THE NEUROSCIENCE BEHIND NURTURE GROUPS

Many children and young people in nurture groups have experienced significant trauma in their young lives, including bereavement, neglect and abuse, or witnessing parents experiencing mental health issues, incarceration, or substance abuse.

Though a few stressors can be manageable for young children, there is a point where prolonged stress becomes toxic and neurobiological factors are affected. If levels of glucocorticoids, particularly the stress hormone cortisol, remain high for prolonged periods of time, **stress can impact the developing brain** and alter the structure and function of key brain areas. As a consequence **children may become hypervigilant, highly irritable and may have a short temper**. They will have difficulties with attention, learning and emotional control. In turn these difficulties may translate into anger outbursts, aggression and challenging behaviours.

Effects of stress on the brain and behaviour of children and young people

Prefrontal Cortex

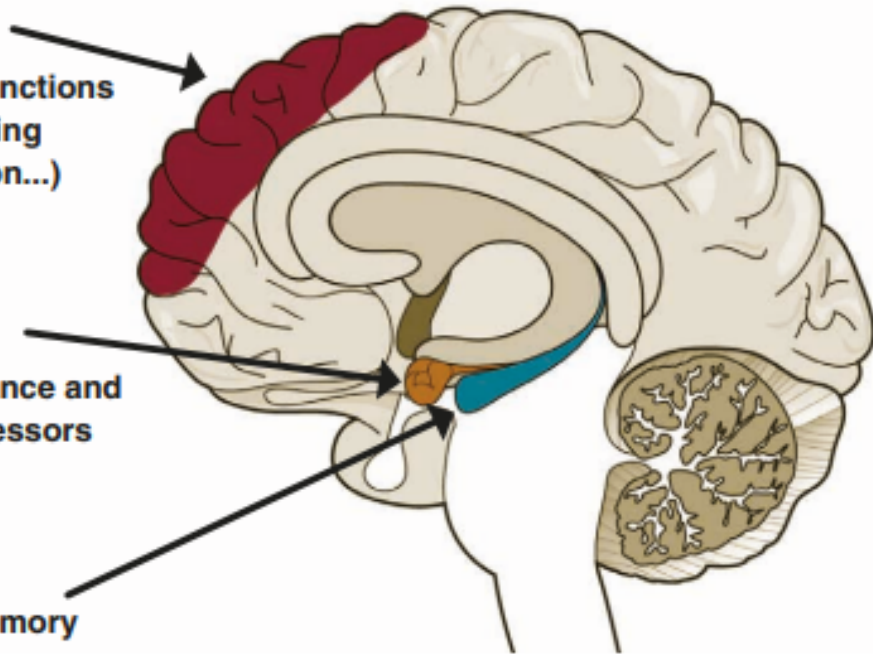
Reduced executive functions
(self-regulation, working
memory, concentration...)

Amygdala

Increased hypervigilance and
hyper-reactivity to stressors

Hippocampus

Poor learning and memory



The good news is that with sufficient nurture and support from adults, children can develop the skills and resilience they need to cope with stressful experiences and return to manageable levels of stress, in turn allowing them to become ready to learn (Shonkoff et al. 2015).

Nurture groups help students return to healthy levels of stress by:

- 1) Providing a consistent, predictable pattern to the day;
- 2) Having nurturing, comforting and affectionate nurture practitioners trained in attachment theory;
- 3) Having expectations of behaviour clearly discussed with the child/young person;
- 4) By providing a safe space where the pupil feels protected, is given choices and some sense of control.

SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Using the Boxall Profile, the social and emotional needs of individual children/young people are identified and targeted support is provided to encourage social emotional learning.

The relationship between the two nurture practitioners, always nurturing and supportive, provides a role model that children observe and begin to copy. Pupils are given ample opportunities to understand and manage their emotions, reflect on their behaviours in a non-judgmental way, and develop positive friendships. Food is shared at 'breakfast' or 'snack time' with much opportunity for social learning, helping pupils to attend to the needs of others, with time to listen and be listened to.

As the children learn academically and socially they develop confidence, become responsive to others, learn self-respect and take pride in behaving well and in achieving.