The role of schools in supporting vulnerable children and families

Dr Kelly Stone
October 2013
Introduction

Practitioners who participated in the SCCPN/MARS research study reported on in *What Can Research Do For You?* identified the role of schools in supporting vulnerable children and families as a priority for a research briefing.

A subsequent review of the existing literature focused on theoretical models, frameworks and evidence-based school programmes and policies which support vulnerable children and families. Such programmes include those which:

- entail families and children participating together
- include wider family support (although primarily for children)
- have taken into account the parental views on their child’s development as a result of participating in the programme.

Schools often support vulnerable children and families in ways which do not appear in the literature; it is recognised that these supports are part of very effective practice with children and families, even if they are not part of ‘official’ evidence.

Why is this issue important?

Providing the best educational opportunities to children from vulnerable families is seen as a key way to disrupt the cycle of poverty. A recent report by three children’s charities (the NSPCC, Action for Children and the Children’s Society) highlighted a significant increase in the number of children living in vulnerable families. There is no single accepted definition of vulnerability, although the report identified vulnerable families as having at least five of the following seven key vulnerability indicators:

- worklessness
- poor quality housing
- no qualifications
- maternal mental health problems
- long term illness or disability
- low income
- material deprivation.

The Christie Commission report estimated that, in Scotland, up to 40% of public spending goes toward covering the costs of failing to intervene early. The Scottish Government is promoting an agenda of early years’ preventive spending and in a recent publication identified that vulnerability can stem from socioeconomic disadvantage as well as social factors such as parental substance misuse, and stated that it is committed to strengthening support for vulnerable children and families. It recommended that agencies adopt common frameworks for assessment, planning and action to address them, through universal provision (or the universal pathway) wherever possible, with targeted support when needed.

Positive parenting plays a key role in the healthy development of the child, even if certain risk factors identified above are present, according to recent studies. Stressful conditions, such as poverty, social isolation and exclusion, lack of support networks and health problems can have a negative impact on parenting, with resulting difficulties for the child’s development.
Schools can provide, facilitate and sustain support networks for vulnerable parents, thereby reducing risk factors identified above; however, it is important to bear in mind that:

*School-based education alone is insufficient unless policies are developed that support children’s learning before they start school.*

This section has shown the importance of early intervention and multi-agency approaches to identification, assessment and intervention with vulnerable children and families. As a universal service experienced by most children, schools have a key role to play in identifying vulnerable children and families, offering relevant supports, and engaging other services and agencies when needed.

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### What does the research tell us?

Schools play a key role in the educational, social and emotional development of all children. Scotland’s Curriculum for Excellence aims to enable all children to become responsible citizens, confident individuals, successful learners and effective contributors. Children’s wellbeing is essential in developing these four capacities, and school staff support the wellbeing of children in many ways, which will be considered in this section.

**Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC)**

In Scotland, GIRFEC offers a framework to meet the needs of all children, and is an evidence-based model for multi-agency working to address unmet needs. The wellbeing indicators inform practitioners that each child needs to be:

- safe, healthy, achieving, nurtured, active, respected, responsible and included.

One useful child-centred model proposes that practitioners ask the following key questions from a child’s perspective:

- What do I need?
- What do I need you to think about?
- What do I need you to do?

The second question relates to assessment and analysis of a child’s needs. The **My World Triangle** enables assessment and identification of risks and strengths in the child’s world, which includes but is not limited to their educational experiences. It supports the participation of the child or young person in the process, as well as that of other family members and professionals who have insight into the child’s world.

The **Resilience and Vulnerability Matrix** is an assessment tool recommended for more complex issues relating to a child’s vulnerability. It can be used to record risk factors (adversity) and protective factors (the protective environment) for children who might be at risk. Once the process of assessment and analysis of a child’s risk and protective factors has been completed, this information can be used to plan next steps towards desired outcomes for the child’s wellbeing.
Assessing and analysing the child’s needs then leads to multi-agency planning to address unmet needs. Intervention should:

- Comprise comprehensive packages of support
- Provide direct support for children
- Be long-term, not episodic
- Be based on a working relationship with the parent and child
- Be authoritative.

GIRFEC enables children to be supported in every domain and builds on the belief that it is everyone’s job – in schools and in other services – to make sure that children are safe, healthy, achieving, nurtured, active, respected, responsible and included.

Positive school ethos and caring cultures

Caring school communities support the social and emotional development of children as well as their educational attainment\(^\text{12}\). In such school cultures, additional support, pupil support and pastoral care are evident throughout the school and are part of an inclusive approach to meeting children’s needs. Promoting positive relationships and behaviour is key to not just helping children develop the four capacities (a successful learner, a confident individual, a responsible citizen and an effective contributor), but to enabling the most vulnerable children to benefit from as full an educational experience as possible\(^\text{13}\). In Scotland, schools use a range of approaches to support this, including restorative approaches, solution oriented approaches and nurture groups\(^\text{14}\).

Schools can play an important part in helping children develop the three building blocks of resilience:

- A secure base whereby the child feels a sense of belonging and security (expressed in statements such as ‘I have’)
- Good self-esteem (‘I am’)
- A sense of self-efficacy, with an accurate understanding of personal strengths and limitations (‘I can’).\(^\text{15}\)

Teachers and other school staff who use a resilience-focused approach (such as GIRFEC) help children by building a protective framework around them, thereby improving longer-term outcomes for children\(^\text{15}\).

Schools with a protective ethos support all children, including the most vulnerable, and crucially they also support teachers who need to feel confident enough to recognise, respond to and help those children\(^\text{11}\). Schools can be “island[s] of safety”\(^\text{16}\) for children at risk of abuse and neglect, highlighting their importance in fostering wellbeing and confidence and developing self-control and self-worth\(^\text{11}\).

Difficult, concerning or challenging behaviour in schools

Non-compliant, defiant or seemingly out of control behaviour can be a child or young person’s way of communicating to adults that s/he needs help. Understanding (rather than controlling) the possible underlying reason(s) for a child’s behaviour is key. Many children or young people who are abused and neglected lack secure attachments with caring adults, and carry strong negative feelings inside; their attempts to understand, cope and deal with such feelings can result in ‘out of control’ behaviour\(^\text{17}\). Not trusting adults or authority figures, combined with the child’s unmet need to feel safe, can result in confusing and contradictory feelings of uncertainty, anger, frustration and confusion. Children who experience abuse or neglect might be in a constant state of hyperarousal (sometimes also called fight or flight mode)\(^\text{18}\), as they are used to being on high alert in unpredictable, stressful home environments. The difficult behaviour they display at school can be understood as their attempt to recreate the environment which they see as ‘normal’ in the classroom. For many children and young people who
have not had appropriate models of ‘good’ behaviour, being told to ‘behave yourself’ will be a confusing command; in such cases, teachers can help by giving specific guidance about expected behaviours.

**Nurture groups**

The ‘classic’ nurture group is based on attachment theory and is comprised of a teacher and an assistant who model positive behaviour and social skills in a nurturing environment which is safe, predictable and at the appropriate development stage for each child. Nurture groups address ‘impoverished early nurturing’ by supporting children’s emotional needs as a foundation on which to develop their learning. A national research study found that children who had been in nurture groups showed significant improvements in social and emotional behaviours compared to children with similar needs in schools without nurture groups, gains which are maintained in the long term.

A Scottish study evaluated part-time nurture groups in primary schools in West Lothian over an eight month period in the school session 2006-2007 and found that:

- Parents reported significant improvements in their child’s emotional and behavioural development
- School staff reported significant improvements in the social and emotional behaviours and self-esteem of children who attended
- Head Teachers reported a positive impact on the children who attended and their families, as well as other children and staff in the school.

The children attended the nurture group for half of the school day and were integrated into their mainstream class for the other half. The study’s authors argued that this model is more inclusive than a whole-day nurture group model, yet is just as effective. They also claimed that conceptualising nurturing *schools* rather than *groups* places this model in the mainstream and makes it possible to implement more widely. They also found that multi-agency working and support for the intervention was critical to its success.

A large-scale study of 32 schools in Glasgow similarly found that nurture groups are effective in improving emotional and behavioural functioning, showing significant gains on nearly every measure used, as well as quantitative gains in academic attainments.

An increasing number of secondary schools are setting up nurture groups, to help young people develop trust, communication skills and improve self-esteem. Nurture support in secondary schools can be very effective when young people have experienced sudden and/or severe trauma; when they are or on the verge of becoming school refusers; and as a support to parents, as well as a way to develop and improve relationships with them. The study concluded that, when viewed by secondary staff as ‘an integral support structure for the whole school’, such schools become nurturing.

**Building social capital – Families and Schools Together (FAST)**

A universal prevention programme, *Families and Schools Together* (FAST) is an after-school, multi-family programme which runs for 8 weeks, with a peer-support network (FASTWORKS) for at least 2 subsequent years. Underpinned by attachment theory, family stress theory, social ecological theory and group dynamics theory, FAST aims to enhance the functioning of families by:

- strengthening the parent-child relationship
- preventing failure at school by improving the child’s behaviour and the family’s relationship with the school
- preventing family substance misuse by increasing awareness and access to resources
- reducing family stress by developing ongoing support networks.
An evaluation of the FAST model in Canada concluded that it provided ‘a remarkably hopeful outlook for vulnerable families’ by enabling them to build social capital and thereby providing protective factors to mitigate risks associated with low income, stress, and isolation. Social capital was developed across all three dimensions:

- **bonding** – participants reported a greater sense of familial cohesiveness and connection
- **bridging** – participants (parents and children) formed relationships with one another, developed support networks and shared resources (such as babysitting)
- **linking** – participants developed supportive networks amongst themselves and importantly with people who could offer information and resources not available to them (such as teachers, social workers, librarians, church leaders and other professionals who volunteered with the program).

In the United Kingdom, Save the Children works in partnership with FAST, aiming to establish more than 400 groups across the country, which they claim will improve the life chances of 50,000 children. Their ultimate aim is to break the cycle of poverty by enabling disadvantaged children to succeed at school and enter well-paid employment, stating that they will develop a wider evidence base to demonstrate to UK governments ‘how it is possible to implement a cost-effective, inclusive and scalable parental engagement programme for children living in poverty and their parents’.

**Emotional literacy and resilience – Seasons for Growth and Bounce Back**

Goleman identified five domains of emotional literacy:

- knowing one’s emotions
- managing one’s emotions
- motivating oneself
- recognising emotions in others
- handling relationships.

**Seasons for Growth (SfG)**, developed in Australia, is a program to enhance the social and emotional wellbeing of children (aged 6-18) who have experienced significant change (most commonly through bereavement, divorce, or separation), by teaching them the effects of loss and change and emphasising the language of resilience (‘I am’, ‘I have’, ‘I can’). A recent Australian evaluation of SfG showed that it is well-received and valued by the children who participate, their parents and those who lead SfG groups. Specifically, the program was found to:

- enhance participants’ emotional wellbeing
- enable them to express their views, thoughts and feelings
- strengthen their social and support networks
- build participants’ understanding and skills.

The research also found that SfG was more popular with younger children than older young people, suggesting that it might be more suited to the needs of that age group.

The **Bounce Back Resiliency Program** was similarly developed in Australia and aims to foster positive mental health and wellbeing in children and young people. A whole-school programme, Bounce Back is delivered from the early years of schooling, is integrated with academic learning and delivered by teachers. Its key aims are to help create positive, resilient schools; and to provide teachers with resources to enable children to develop resilient attitudes and behaviour. A recent evaluation of Bounce Back in Perth and Kinross concluded that there has been a ‘clear impact … on the connectedness and resilience of pupils, as well as the resilience and wellbeing of teaching staff’ which suggests potential for Scottish education, particularly given the importance of health and wellbeing in the Curriculum for Excellence.
**Place2Be**

Place2Be is a school-based counselling service supporting the emotional and mental health needs of vulnerable children in over 170 schools in the UK, including some Scottish local authorities. Children and their parents or carers can explore issues and problems with a trained counsellor. Place2Be also supports teachers to understand better and cope with the social, emotional and behavioural needs of children and young people. Based on attachment theory, Place2Be aims to provide a secure base through the provision of therapeutic services, within which children can explore their problems and develop feelings of self-worth and self-efficacy. Following input and support from Place2Be, teachers and parents report improvements in children’s social skills, confidence and academic learning.

**Further reading and resources**

More information about the Families and Schools Together programme:  
www.familiesandschools.org

Information on attachment issues, behaviour and how schools can help:  
www.postadoptioncentralsupport.org/what_sort_of_behaviours.htm

The National Children’s Bureau has a range of resources for practitioners:  
www.ncb.org.uk

Place 2 Be’s leaflet for schools on mental health issues:  
http://place2be.org.uk/media/2168/P2B head teachers guide.pdf

Education Scotland information about emotional intelligence:  
www.journeytoexcellence.org.uk/resourcesandcpd/research/summaries/rsemotionalintelligence.asp

WithScotland training resource for primary and secondary schools on child abuse and neglect:  
http://withscotland.org/exchanging-withscotland-resources

WithScotland research briefing ‘Behaviour as communication: understanding the needs of neglected and abused adolescents’:  
http://withscotland.org/exchanging-withscotland-briefings

Attachment and therapeutic interventions, international and Scottish context:  
References


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31 Accessed at www.place2be.org.uk/impact-evidence/impact-summary/
About this briefing

This briefing was written by Dr Kelly Stone in October 2013 on behalf of WithScotland and focuses on one of the topics which practitioners named as a priority following the 2010 survey.

What can research do for you?

Views obtained from over 386 participants who took part in the survey were asked to state their needs for research and information; their experiences of accessing research findings; their views on what resources were useful to access, alongside their experiences of applying these to practice.

Under the category of Education, respondents stated that they wanted to know more about ‘The role of schools in supporting vulnerable children and families’. This briefing has been produced in direct response to this.

For further information, visit www.withscotland.org or email withscotland@stir.ac.uk