



Rees Centre



School Factsheet 1

Impact of attachment and trauma awareness on schools

The Alex Timpson Programme began in 2017 and will be evaluating the implementation of attachment and trauma awareness (ATA) in 300 schools across England over a five-year period.

This document draws primarily on three earlier projects evaluated by the University of Oxford between 2015 and 2018 in **Bath and North East Somerset**, **Stoke-on-Trent** and **Leicestershire**. These evaluations took a mixed methods approach, including surveys and interviews with senior leaders, teachers and other school staff about their experiences of introducing ATA approaches in their setting. Young people were also involved in focus groups and administrative data were analysed for the periods before, during and after implementation.

This document aims to summarise the findings of these three projects, focusing on the specific impact of schools adopting an ATA approach both in terms of trends in attendance and attainment, as well as the 'soft' measures of attitudes among staff and pupils. It is important to stress that schools elected to participate and this limits the ability to causally attribute changes to the implementation of an ATA approach.

Attachment and trauma awareness

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

This document, and the reports that it summarises, does not endorse a specific theoretical perspective and the precise form of ATA adopted was a choice for schools and the local authorities co-ordinating the projects.

In the three projects, schools were offered training in ATA. In two local authorities, a 'whole school' approach was generally taken, whereas the third (Bath and North East Somerset) used a cascading model under which a small group of staff were trained and then charged to implement the ideas back to their own school. The schools were responsible for the onward implementation of ATA in their own setting, leading to diversity in how this was pursued.

Summary of earlier findings 2015-2018

Trends in attainment

- During the period covered by the evaluations, the national figures for attainment at Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4 were subject to shifting definitions, which makes the analysis of trends difficult. In general, there were national improvements in attainment at Key Stage 2, while attainment at Key Stage 4 declined.
- Within the schools involved in the three ATA projects, 24 primary schools out of 33 saw an improvement in attainment that was at least in line with the national trend (and, in most instances, outpaced it). Eight secondary schools out of 14 also saw an improvement in attainment despite the national decline.
- Across the three local authorities, only seven schools out of 47 saw a fall in attainment.

- There is therefore no evidence for a negative impact on attainment as a result of the adoption of ATA and there is good evidence that most participating schools generally improved.
- In addition, although the numbers were generally small, there was some evidence from the Bath and North East Somerset evaluation for marked improvements in progress for children designated as ‘vulnerable’ learners; these were echoed in improvements in reported wellbeing.

Trends in attendance

- During the period covered by the evaluations, there was a national increase in both overall absences and persistent absences across all school types – this was, in part, due to changes in recording.
- In Bath and North East Somerset, there was a mixed picture in terms of attendance in participating schools, but schools often reported that persistent absence issues had improved since adopting an ATA approach.
- Leicestershire also had inconclusive data among its primary schools, but attendance markedly improved in three of the four secondary schools taking part.
- Stoke-on-Trent saw falling absences in five primary schools and two secondary schools, but rising figures in two primary schools and one secondary school.
- Given the rise in the national figures and the general variability in absence figures, this would suggest some positive impact from adopting ATA approaches, although this is not conclusive.
- Data on exclusions during the period were sought from schools, but these were not made available in sufficient coverage to make analysis possible.

Reported changes in the schools

- Staff generally reported having a much stronger understanding of the reasons underlying children’s behaviour, especially for children in need, children in care and other vulnerable groups. This refocusing had enabled them to develop new empathetic practices around attachment and trauma.
- One manifestation of this was a shift in the nature of the conversations between staff and children, with more emphasis on acknowledging emotions (e.g. ‘I can see you are angry...’), building trusting relationships and helping children to self-regulate their emotions more effectively.
- This was often accompanied by physical changes to the school environment, such as the use of ‘chill out’ spaces that gave children the opportunity to calm down and refocus when having difficult emotional responses.
- In particular, many young people acknowledged the importance of an adult in school who ‘looked out for them’ and who they knew they could trust and talk to when needed. This was sometimes coupled with ‘open door’ policies among senior staff.
- Young people also generally reported perceived improvements in their wellbeing and a calmer school atmosphere.

Staff reported a range of enabling and inhibiting factors that they felt contributed to whether the adoption of an ATA approach was successful in their school – **School Factsheet 2** has details of these ‘lessons learnt’.

Additional Resources

Full reports:

- [Attachment Aware Schools Evaluation Report – Leicestershire \(pdf\)](#)
- [Attachment Aware Schools Evaluation Report – Bath & North East Somerset \(pdf\)](#)
- [Attachment Aware Schools Evaluation Report – Stoke on Trent \(pdf\)](#)

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