

Association of Scottish Principal Educational Psychologists (ASPEP) Position Paper

How Can Educational Psychologists in Scotland Support School Improvement in Relationships and Behaviour – January 2026

The Current Context

There has always been a great deal of debate and discussion about relationships and behaviour in Scottish schools. Post-pandemic, this has intensified at both a national and a local level. Evidence from the most recent Behaviour in Scottish Schools Research (2023) indicates that whilst the behaviour of most children and young children (CYP) in schools continues to be perceived as good, there has been an increase in teachers and support staff reporting significantly dysregulated behaviours. This is most likely to be reported by staff who work in the P1 – P3 age range. The causes of this increase are likely to be due to multiple factors, including the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on children, families, schools and multi-agency supports, as well as the cost of living crisis.

It is the view of ASPEP, which triangulates with the research undertaken via the Behaviour in Scottish Schools Research (BISSR) 2003, that there are several areas where Educational Psychologists (EPs) can support improvement in relationships & behaviour by applying psychology to complex problems and supporting school teams to:

1. Increase the emotional and physical safety of all
2. Reduce low level disruption and increase engagement in learning
3. Reduce the frequency and intensity of children presenting as significantly dysregulated
4. Reduce the exclusion of groups of children most likely not to be present, participating, supported & achieving in our education system.
 - This would likely result in a focus upon, but not exclusively, learners living in poverty, with social, emotional and/or behavioural needs and learners with neurodevelopmental needs, with conditions such as Autism and ADHD.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to set out the agreed position, for the Educational Psychology profession in Scotland, and the role that local authority Educational Psychology Services can take in supporting this area of work. This will include the use of evidence-based practices, early intervention and collaborative approaches to developing and promoting effective learning environments for all children and young people. Central to this, is the role of effective implementation of interventions at the level of the individual, the school and the Education Service at local authority level.

HCPC Standards

EPs in the UK are registered with The Health Care & Professionals Council in order to practice. The Professional Standards for [Practitioner Psychologists](#) in relation to the protected title of EPs, outline a number of specific standards that are clearly relevant to our professional practice with regards to relationships and behaviour in Scottish schools and Early Years settings

12.32 Understand psychological models related to the influence of school ethos and culture, educational curricula, communication systems, management and leadership styles on the cognitive, behavioural, emotional and social development of children, adolescents and young adults

11.1 engage in evidence-based practice & 11.3 monitor and systematically evaluate the quality of practice, and maintain an effective quality management and quality assurance process working towards continual improvement

13.57 Develop and apply effective interventions to promote psychological wellbeing, social, emotional and behavioural development and to raise educational standards

2.14 Understand the organisational context for their practice as a practitioner psychologist

12.35 Understand psychological models related to the influence on development of children, adolescents and young adults from:

- family structures and processes;*
- cultural and community contexts; and*
- organisations and systems*

12.33 Understand psychological models of the factors that lead to underachievement, disaffection and social exclusion amongst vulnerable groups

13.56 Formulate evidence-based interventions that focus on applying knowledge, skills and expertise to support local and national initiatives

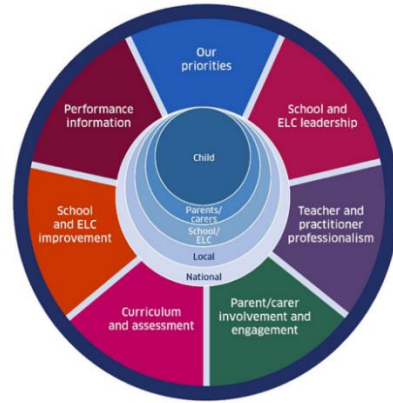
12.40 Understand psychological models related to service users:

- from a range of social and cultural backgrounds;*
- of all ages...*
- with significant levels of challenging behaviour...*

13.59 Adopt a proactive and preventative approach in order to promote the psychological wellbeing of service users

As can be seen from the above, there is a clear expectation from our regulatory body, that EPs in Scotland will demonstrate competence in supporting improvement with regards to relationships and behaviour. Effective and impactful interventions can be implemented by collaborating with education colleagues across the system.

The role of Educational Psychology Services in supporting positive relationships and behaviour in schools



The Review of Provision of Educational Psychology Services in Scotland, known as The Currie Review, (Scottish Executive 2002) also situates Educational Psychologists within the context of the Standards in Scotland’s Schools etc. Act 2000 and The Education (National Priorities) (Scotland) Order 2000. It explains that EPs should work at the level of the child, class, school, family & local authority. It states

As such, Educational Psychologists in Scotland have a clear role in supporting school and Local Authority Improvement. We do this by applying evidence-based psychological theory to problem situations to support improvement.

The Currie Review (2002) states:

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| <p><i>The changes envisaged in this report affirm the key role of psychological services as an integral and vital element in the local authority structure.</i></p> <p><i>At the same time the need for services to provide, and to be seen to be providing, independent professional assessment and advice based on the needs of children and young people is recognised.</i></p> <p><i>...ensure that their unique professional contribution to the learning process can be promoted and to ensure that they contribute to the achievement of the national priorities for education.</i></p> | <p><i>‘the task of enhancing school environments has been supported by psychological services in a number of ways.</i></p> <p><i>The consultative role has created opportunities for psychologists to discuss with head teachers and school management aspects of policy development, for example, in relation to school discipline, positive behaviour approaches, anti-bullying strategies...</i></p> <p><i>As a result, schools have undertaken projects and initiated policy changes which have improved school ethos, attendance and discipline.’</i></p> |
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Therefore, EPs in Scotland have two roles

1. Supporting local authority and school improvement
2. Offering independent assessment & advice regarding the needs of individual children

The Currie Review states EP teams should support improvement through enacting our 5 Core Functions. These are briefly outlined below:

Consultation

- Psychological advice and/or joint problem analysis & solution finding
- e.g. Advice & guidance re a child's needs or a specific problem situation such as children out of class or hurting others

Assessment

- Psychological assessment triangulated from a number of sources
- This may be relevant to an individual child with a view to reducing significant dysregulation or it may be supporting establishment self-evaluation in relationships & behaviour with regards to SIP planning, for example

Intervention

- Interventions based on psychological, evidence based &/or best fit theory, supported by an implementation model
- Intervention may be at an individual child level, it may be parent support it may be with an individual teacher all with the aim of reducing dysregulation
- It may be, for example, an intervention via ongoing support & guidance to make systemic changes in order to reduce the use of restraint

Training

- Now understood as coaching, modelling and career long professional learning, in keeping with the National Model of Professional Learning*
- EPs can deliver professional learning experiences tailored to the local context. Ideally this is linked to local self-evaluation. It may be specific to children's needs or patterns identified across an establishment, such as transition planning, since data shows an increase in dysregulation at these points.

Research, Evaluation and Policy Development

- Including self-evaluation and supporting school and local authority level self-evaluation
- EPs may support establishments to undertake research and self-evaluation re children's experience of learning; they may support establishments to examine a problem situation such as a group of children who are out of class disrupting the learning of others. EPs may help identify the strands of the problem and identify interventions specifically linked to this.

[*The national model of professional learning | National approach to professional learning | Professional Learning | Education Scotland](#)

It is now necessary for Educational Psychologists to review their practices to ensure their unique professional contribution to the learning process can be promoted and **that they contribute to the achievement of the national priorities for education.**

Given the high-profile focus both nationally and locally on relationships and behaviour in schools, there is now an opportunity for Educational Psychology Services to highlight our potential role in this area. This would have the benefits of demonstrating our profession's areas of expertise, while also visibly contributing to the national priorities for education.

This could include:

- Continuing to contribute nationally to the collaborative development of evidence-based policy and guidance
- Supporting the effective implementation of national guidance at an education authority level
- Playing a key role alongside schools to develop and implement school level policy, using our skills in effective implementation to support engagement of school staff, young people and parents as well as other stakeholders
- Advising on structures and mechanisms to support schools to evaluate the impact of their school level approaches
- Using our skills in consultation, assessment and intervention to support effective individual planning and risk management where necessary

It is expected that the approach that Educational Psychology Services take to this work will vary due to a range of factors, including:

- The relative size of EP services in each local authority
- The local service delivery model agreed between the EPS and the Education Service
- The level of involvement of the EPS in strategic planning with the Education Service
- Local improvement planning priorities

It is also acknowledged that the increasing numbers of children and young people with identified additional support needs, while the number of EPs has remained relatively static, has led to a steep decline in ratios of EPs to children with ASN. In 2008 this ratio stood at 85.8 children with ASN per EP, and in 2023 this figure had increased to 696.9 children per EP.

Outlined below are some detailed examples of current improvement work that Educational Psychologists in Scotland are undertaking to support positive relationships and behaviour in schools.

National Level – Provision of the evidence base that informs approaches that are most likely to lead to pro-social behaviour in a school setting

Presenting Issue:

The aim of the SAGRABIS Consequences subgroup is to provide national guidance on the effective use of consequences in schools in alignment with national relationships and behaviour policies. Group members were seeking clarity on the evidence base underpinning the use of consequences.

Goal

Support shaping of evidence based national guidance on consequences by sharing the evidence base behind environments most conducive to helping children learn and behave well.

Present the evidence base behind consequences, with the emphasis on approaches that reduce the frequency and intensity of unwanted behaviour over time and promote the child's wellbeing.

Psychology Applied for Improvement

- Provision of a summary of important factors to consider in terms of child development, models that explain the current stresses on education systems.
- Highlighting of key messages from meta-analysis of behavioural approaches and relational practice e.g. importance of structure and support, consistent teaching of learning behaviours.
- Consequences research - examples of studies that highlight need for whole system approach to developing learner regulation, non-punitive behaviour management.
- Paucity of evidence around effectiveness of exclusionary approaches contrasted with the high impact on approaches which assess the function and purpose of the behaviour for the individual and use this information to collaboratively identify supports to reduce problem behaviours.

Impact

One-off presentation intended to support reflection and discussion. Consequences group, including the Headteacher Taskforce, reported deeper understanding of consequences and feeling galvanised and hopeful about their work. Informed direction of the Consequences group and subsequent national policy guidance to schools.

Local Authority, School and Individual Child level – Assessment of the Function and purpose of Children’s Dysregulated Behaviour in School

Presenting Issue:

An increase in the number of children presenting as significantly dysregulated in primary Schools and ASN Provisions. Test of Change across early adopter establishments to implement a two staged assessment process specific to tracking and assessing behaviour in a school context. There was a need to systemise this approach, to allow it to be easily scaled for teaching and support staff.

Goal – to reduce significantly dysregulated behaviours, to identify Continuing Life Long Professional Development (CLPL) needs and changes that can be made in school environment to reduce the frequency and intensity of the behaviour occurring, through using a psychological lens, including both a neurodevelopmental and trauma informed lens.

Psychology Applied for Improvement

Understanding of good practice in Assessment.

A solid understanding of assessing behaviour, setting events, the human stress response, pattern spotting and identifying immediate and broader situations that give rise to the behaviour in question occurring

Psychological content knowledge in analysing presenting behaviours and being able to generate hypotheses about what might be driving these behaviours in the school context.

Developed both a Regulation Tracker (RT) and a Dysregulation Analysis Tool (DAT) which includes both a tracker for staff to use to monitor the examples and frequency of specific behaviours and an assessment tool to support staff in identifying the potential purpose or function of this behaviour for the child in conjunction with our data and Intelligence Officer to systemise the assessment tool.

In the RT the adult evaluates behaviours as Red, Amber or Green across the day. This creates a weekly pie chart to measure improvement. If a behaviour is viewed as Red, relative to the child, the adult completes a DAT – this is an online Functional Behaviour Analysis. It records what happened before, during and after the behaviour. It records if seclusion or restraint were implemented.

The school EP liaises with the school and supports analysis of the patterns and themes within the DAT. This leads to identifying areas of improvement to support the child and patterns and areas of improvement with regards to school improvement and staff CLPL. Targeted interventions are then collaboratively agreed as part of this. EP support to the school then becomes much more tailored to their specific context and the needs of children and staff. This often involves coaching in situ with the school EP, where behaviour is creating a risk to others.

This has involved interventions such as:

- Improving transitions generally across a school context
- Reconfiguring targeted interventions across the school
- Refocussing Nurture support
- Providing ideas as to the function of the behaviour for individual children, leading to more effective individual plans
- Providing evidence of patterns for multi-agency assessment and planning where there are concerns around the family

- Supporting reframing of language used with children to reduce risk

Impact

- Reduction in Health and Safety Incident reports for three quarters in a row.
- Improvement as measured by the RT and DAT for individual children
- Improved educational experiences and staff skill, for example in extremely well managed transitions, which in turn reduce dysregulation

School & ECC level – Supporting Children’s ability to Self-Regulate

Presenting issue

Request from early years due to an increased number of children presenting as dysregulated or distressed in the early childhood environment. Previously, the EPS had worked with nurseries using an inquiry approach to solution finding.

An increase in service requests and ASN data across all sectors relating to social and emotional needs.

Growing numbers of children and young people being referred to CAMHS for mental health needs and high levels of distress.

Goal

Develop a shared model of Self-Regulation that was seen as relevant and applicable in school and Early Childhood settings.

Shift from a focus on self-control to self-regulation

Increase adult awareness of potential stressors (their own and CYP) and how these can be reduced.

An approach that is person-centred and focused on long term psychological wellness rather than a previous approach which emphasised short term self-control approaches.

Increasing self-awareness and working with the child to identify and develop their response to stress.

To further develop our inclusive standard as a tool to consider how the environment support stress reduction and promotes regulation for learning.

To consider how the curriculum can provide learning experiences which promote self-awareness and develop skills which support regulation for learning.

Reduce dysregulated episodes.

Psychology for improvement

Psycho-physiological – support deeper understanding of how we as human’s manage stress.

Critically reviewed Stuart Shanker’s model of Self-Regulation compared to other models e.g. trauma based and executive function to support practical applied psychology in schools and early childhood settings

Developed a consultation approach with schools and early childhood centres, using Shanker’s Five Domains and Self-Regulation framework. This included

- Reframing the behaviour as possible stress response
- Identifying and reducing the stressors
- Identifying and increasing “bucket fillers”
- Enhancing self-awareness and
- Developing personal strategies to promote restoration and resilience.
- Reinforcing the Importance of co-regulation and including the emotional state of the adults.
- Providing strategies which recognise that personalisation and developmental stage is key.

Research on inclusive environments to inform the standard and audit tool supporting the approach.

Impact

Framework found to be helpful for consultation around problem situations.

Tested this out across EY, Primary and Secondary settings.

Positive feedback from school staff and parents – thought differently, considered factors they wouldn't have thought about before, provided a lens to think more deeply and evaluate interventions.

Allowed for personalised interventions for children – what helps them feel calm rather than standard strategies around behaviour management

Created a tool for nurseries to audit their environment for potential stressors. Staff found the tool to be useful.

Increased recognition of stressors in the environment by staff, including the 5 domains of stress in Shanker's model and they make links between self-regulation and learning experiences and capacity.

This current debate about violence in schools seems to be becoming polarised between behaviour and relational approaches.

The self-regulation approach allowed for a structure approach to explore issues that can lead to dysregulation or violence in educational setting and support intervention such as a lack of structure, permissive or authoritarian approaches which were inhibiting regulation for learning and contributing to dysregulation on the educational environment.

Family Level – Building Positive Relationships through Non-Violent Resistance (NVR) Approach

Please note that not all Educational Psychology Services are staffed in a way which allows group work with families to take place.

Presenting Issue

A recognition that both education staff and families were experiencing much more distressed and distressing behaviours from children and young people. This was leading to an increase in child to adult violence, exclusions and breakdowns in relationships in both educational settings and family homes.

Goal

To reduce child to adult violence across both the home and school, through increasing parental and professional self-efficacy, that is belief in their own ability, when managing distressed and distressing behaviours. This in turn would also reduce breakdowns in relationships.

Psychology Applied for Improvement

The Non-Violent Resistance (NVR) approach was developed in Israel in 2004, by Haim Omer. It is currently used in health and education internationally. It is an approach that can be used with parents and professionals, based on nonviolent resistance principles, focussing on supporting the needs of the adult to support the child's needs. NVR offers practical strategies to increase parental &/or professional presence, confidence and rebuild relationships with the child or young person.

NVR is a psychological model that fits within an attachment model and aims to support parents &/or professionals to build their presence through understanding a child's unmet needs. NVR therefore fits within the knowledge base and theory behind a whole-school nurturing approach.

The Educational Psychology Service used the NVR approach to support families where distressed/distressing behaviours were presenting as a barrier to learning and family relationships. It was also important that the approach used a familiar language to our school communities, so NVR became an extension of the LA's nurturing relationships approach already embedded across the authority.

Implementation

- 8-week parent support programme offered centrally through a small team of accredited NVR practitioners
- Over time parent support programme was developed further to specifically support families with ASD, anxiety & emotionally based school avoidance.
- Staff across education, social work & health were offered NVR training both centrally and within their establishment through EPS NVR team.

Impact

- Significant reductions in the frequency and duration of distressed/distressing behaviours at home.
- Significant increase in parental self-efficacy in managing distressed/distressing behaviours at home.

- Evaluation data from the CLPL for staff illustrates a similar impact with regards to a significant increase in staff confidence in managing distressed/distressing behaviours in educational settings.

Please note that for any school community also implementing NVR alongside a family it is essential the staff have a solid understanding of the importance of a relational approach when supporting distressed/distressing behaviour.

Child Level – Individual Intervention

Presenting Issue

Primary School children in an ASN provision exhibiting extremely dysregulated behaviour within the school community, including adults and children being hurt. High levels of Health & Safety Incident reports and time in school reduced through part-time timetables, as part of a Risk Assessment & Safety Plan.

Goal

To reduce significant dysregulation, increase safety of all.

Psychology Applied for Improvement

1. CLPL to key school staff. Individual support can only be effective if culture of the school team is conducive to the therapeutic approach being used
2. 12-week trauma informed intervention with child and a member of the school Leadership Team who is involved with supporting the child daily.

Understanding of therapeutic approaches appropriate to children who have experienced trauma and adversity, neurodivergence and child development. Supervision in place for Educational Psychologists undertaking this work to ensure the safety of all involved.

Phase 1 – assessment, including developmental history with family. In sessions see the child as more than their behaviour, curious about what's driving the behaviour, build safety and trust with school staff member. Take a trauma informed and neuro-developmental lens to the situation.

Phase 2 – explore child's ASN and developmental history and how these relate to the behaviours being exhibited. Use the safety of the relationship to be able to tolerate the curiosity and linkage of behaviours to thoughts and feelings. Go slowly and gently at the child's pace, 'wondering aloud,' 'talking about' to the teacher so child can listen indirectly. Limit set the behaviours, all feelings are ok, but we can't act that out on to other people. Explore unsafe behaviours in a non-shaming way that allows the problems to be discussed without being re-enacted unsafely

Phase 3 – Notice the changes, feed these back, enjoy the child, let the child experience the success, become aware of new strategies they have been seen to be using instead. Begin a phased, slow ending. Child knows they no longer need the support, can do this inside their own head and with adult support in context

Impact

- Adult in school acquires therapeutic skill that can be used in the moment
- Adult in school can model this through their interactions with the child
- Child feels supported, seen and understood. Less stress, less dysregulation exhibited
- Child accepts adult support in the moment – allowing for diffusion of potentially unsafe situations in advance
- Adult in school now understands triggers and can prepare child in advance
- Child feels less shame about previous behaviours.
- Child has more insight as to why they have coped or behaved in particular ways
- Child can now accept challenge from key member of staff, results in less stress and less significant dysregulation and unsafe behaviours

- Adult feels more skilled and is more able to intervene in advance and during episodes of significant dysregulation for the child and now for other children

Data

- Reduction and in some cases complete elimination of Health & Safety Incident reports re hurting others
- Increase in time in school, in some instances back in full time in a group setting

Please note the ability of a Educational Psychology Services to undertake this time-consuming work depends on local factors such as the skill level of the EP, the additional training they have experienced and local staffing levels.

Please also note, if the child is experiencing exceptionally difficult circumstances in the home environment and there is not an appropriate multi-agency plan in place, the child will not be able to benefit from such an intervention.

Future Direction & Next Steps

Educational Psychologists have much to offer when they identify and implement collaborative approaches to problem solving at the level of the child, the school or ELC and at an education service level, to apply psychology to improve relationships and behaviour in schools, early learning and childcare centres and homes.

The following points are key future directions for the profession.

1. Systematically gather evidence of the impact of casework and strategic development work on improved outcomes for children for example via a reduction in the number of children out of class but in school, reducing workplace health & safety referrals, a reduction in SEEMiS referrals, improved children's perception of belonging and safety as measured by the Glasgow Motivational Wellbeing Profile or Belonging Survey, for example
2. Continue to collaborate with Schools and Early Learning and Childcare Centres via their School or Establishment Improvement Planning processes to evidence improvement through self-evaluation at an establishment level, including tracking small tests of change
3. Be clear on how EP impact can be seen in a local authority data set
4. Ensure Educational Psychology Services continue to be embedded at a local authority level with regards to relationships and behaviour
5. Support further collegiate working and build local and national networks to support improvement with teachers and other professions
6. Evidence impact on relationships and behaviour via the EPS Collaborative Self-Evaluation Quads
7. Communicate good practice and success more broadly between EP services and across the Scottish Education community