

Putting relationships at the core of the school community



Factfile

organisation

Wood Farm Primary School

Activity

Package of joined-up activities, including staff training, teaching approach, and culture change, through a whole-school approach

Age range

Primary (5–11)

Number

418 pupils, with a capacity of 420

Wood Farm primary school takes a whole-school approach to building strong relationships that supports children, parents and teachers, resulting in high staff retention and above-average pupil improvement.

When a school has a high proportion of children experiencing chaotic lives, this places higher demands on everyone in the school community. That's why Wood Farm Primary School, set in a 1950s housing estate on the outskirts of Oxford, works hard to make sure everyone – students, parents and staff – gets the support they need.

Many pupils start well below age-typical levels, yet improvements are significantly above the national average. Staff morale and retention are unusually high too, in a region with high levels of staff turnover.

'Working in a school where there's a lot of challenging needs and behaviour can be very overwhelming,' says Assistant Headteacher and SENCO Hannah Barton. 'But here, staff feel they're doing a good job and that they're part of something bigger. They feel supported.'

To support its approach, the school uses the Family Links Nurturing Programme, which comprises two elements: individual training, in the form of a two-day course for new teachers as part of the induction programme, and twice-yearly whole-



Once you build relationships with the children, and with their families, sharing knowledge and working together – well, then you can make a real difference.

school sessions on inset days for all staff who have contact with children.

The training draws on neuroscience to emphasise the importance of emotions on physical health, thinking and learning. It divides into five areas of emotional literacy: knowing our emotions, managing our emotions, motivating ourselves, recognising emotions in others, and handling relationships.

At Wood Farm, a relational approach runs through school life, from policies to staff supervision, with an emphasis on empathy, appropriate expectation and positive discipline. All class groups have weekly circle-time sessions, focusing on a topic such as ‘the power to choose’ or ‘managing difficult feelings’.

For staff, the starting point is self-awareness, says Headteacher David Lewin, ‘All the staff in the school need to be very skilled in how they relate to children, how children relate to them, so that school is a safe and comfortable place for children who are often experiencing lots of disruptions outside of school life.’

Instead of a behaviour and discipline policy, the school has a relationships policy. This means there is no place for a zero-tolerance approach, explains Hannah. ‘If a child gets very, very distressed and throws a chair across the room, we’re looking at the distress as much as the

behaviour.’ If a child is not yet able to manage their distress, a sanctions-only approach that places inappropriate expectations on them may lead to problems escalating in future. So, the school uses reflection tools to help the child understand their actions and reduce the risk of it happening again.

This approach also helps the school to reach parents. ‘Parents can feel very vulnerable, and that schools and medical professionals are going to pass judgement on them,’ says David. The school welcomes parents, proactively inviting them in to see what their children are doing, and supports this with parent groups. ‘That provides a really good bridge, emphasising that we’re in this together,’ David adds.

It is important to start focusing on relationships at primary age, says David, ‘One point of school is to help children learn about how you get on with people. Many of our children have witnessed things like domestic violence, and it’s easy to feel powerless – to say, “All we can do is get things right for children within the window of school life.” But if you can’t go beyond that, you’ll never really help them be as successful as they could be. Once you build relationships with the children, and with their families, sharing knowledge and working together – well, then you can make a real difference.’

Learning points

Relationships education needs to start as early as possible, to build a strong foundation for the teenage years.

Wood Farm School report that connecting with family and community life, and involving staff across the school, has increased the impact of relationships education

Building a long term relationship with an outside provider can help embed a culture across the school and ensure support is available when needed.