

Snacks and chats ... how a pioneering school helps excluded children control their rage

Their behaviour has seen many taken out of mainstream primaries. Now a revolutionary project is giving 42 children another chance, reports [Rachel Ellis](#)

For most schoolchildren, misbehaviour ends with some kind of punishment; the naughty step, detention, suspension or exclusion. However, in Hertfordshire a pioneering school for vulnerable young children is turning that approach on its head. Instead of dishing out punishments, Haywood Grove school in Hemel Hempstead is encouraging pupils to regulate their own behaviour and sort out their own problems.

All 42 pupils, aged four to 11, have social, emotional and mental health difficulties. All have been excluded (or were on the verge of being excluded) from mainstream primary schools for their “challenging” behaviour (up to 50% were excluded from three or four schools before going to Haywood).

Some are autistic, others have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or anger issues, and many have experienced developmental trauma caused by problems at home, parental breakups and bereavement. Most have only limited social and communication skills, often resorting to anger and violence. The traditional response – physical restraint and punishment – has dominated their school lives to date.

But Catherine Smith, headteacher at Haywood Grove, says this approach is ineffective and, most importantly, does not allow the children to understand their behaviour and modify it. “The traditional approach is control through rules, punishment and exclusion, but children with problems have a greater need for a non-punitive approach,” she says. “Most of their ‘naughty’ behaviour is the result of being anxious and stressed. We believe we can help these children by reducing their anxiety and providing a secure base.

“Our relationship with the children is paramount, as it provides a blueprint for their relationships in future. We give them more freedom to explore their emotions and behaviour so that it can be unlearned or adapted, but we’re not soft.

“This is a unique approach to managing and modifying behaviour and, at times, counterintuitive – we are perceived to be unusual and different. However, with younger and younger children attending our school, we believe there is a real opportunity to change behaviour in the developing brain.”

Since joining the local authority-maintained special school in April 2013, Smith and deputy headteacher Paul Clair, head of strategic development, policy and provision, have transformed its ethos. “It has been and continues to be a process getting both pupils and staff on board, but we are getting there,” says Smith. Key to the new approach is the



Haywood Grove headteacher Catherine Smith at the school's specially designed pond with pupils Rosey, 10, left, and Skye, nine. Photographs by Paul Whiteman for the Observer

Just Right State programme, devised by occupational therapist Éadaoin Bhreathnach, which uses activities and foods to help children learn how to self-regulate their emotional state. The school is the first in Britain to fully integrate the programme into its curriculum.

Every child takes part in a 40-minute session at 9am each school day, during which they pat or stroke their body as if they have just got out of the shower, roll on gym balls, climb, and eat crunchy foods or sticky sweets. “The idea is that physical activities get them to a place where they are in an alert state for learning,” says Clair. “For some children, this will mean calming down, for others waking up. Climbing is good for children who feel angry as it is hard to be angry while climbing, while the deep pressure feeling of rolling a gym ball on the body is similar to being hugged, which is reassuring for some children.

“Ultimately, the idea is that the children will know which activity makes them personally feel better. We also do a snack and chat session once a week as part of the programme. Food also has regulating properties and so different foods are provided in order to help the children regulate themselves. The principles are that sweet, salty foods and warm spices provide comfort, and citrus foods are alerting. Sucking actions are comforting and nurturing, and crunching has the capacity to calm aggression.

‘Anger is the reason why I came to the school. Now I send sorry cards to people I’ve been angry with’

Caleb, nine



Haywood Grove pupil Melissa, 10, reads her book in front of the Scared Gang wall.

Chewing has a similar impact. During these sessions, children can talk about how they feel and their ability to control their emotions is something we praise.”

The programme also uses a series of nine characters from Bhreathnach’s children’s book, *The Scared Gang*, to help children recognise their own approaches to stress – and offer alternative ways to deal with those feelings. Wary Wanda is hypervigilant and constantly on the alert for danger, while Frightened Fred represents behaviours associated with fear such as being startled, crying out and clinging. According to Smith, the most popular character is Run-Away Ronnie, who runs away in the hope adults will become more protective towards him. “When children run away they are often seen as naughty and absconding, when what they really want is for an adult to find them and care for them,” she says.

Bhreathnach’s programme is also used by social workers, play therapists and occupational therapists in England, Ireland and Australia. She has now extended it to adolescent and adult mental health units and prisons. She told the *Observer*: “The same principle applies – people who are highly anxious need to feel safe and regulated before they can talk about their trauma; people need to feel safe and secure and regulate their emotions.”

Haywood Grove also uses the Forest School programme, where children

learn through play outdoors, as well as play therapy and Lego therapy, and it has redesigned its grounds to incorporate a pond with a small boat to provide a calming environment for pupils.

As the end of the first full year of the Just Right State programme approaches, Smith says it is paying off. While children’s behaviour tends to dip when they first start at the school, because they are given extra freedom, it then improves dramatically. The school has also seen a reduction in harmful behaviour and an improvement in parental engagement and academic achievement. “It is a longer game to do it this way,” she says. “But in terms of future life chances, these children will be able to help themselves when they get older. At this point we are unusual, but there is a growing sense that what we are doing might be the way forward.”

Melissa, aged 10, who associates herself with Sleepy Sue, who falls asleep when things become too much, says: “After doing my five rolls forwards and backwards on the gym balls in the morning, I feel much more calm.”

Caleb, aged nine, says reading about Fired-Up Freda, who becomes angry with others when she is frightened, has helped him to understand his feelings. “Anger is the reason why I came to the school. I feel bad inside when I am angry and now I send sorry cards to people I have been angry with afterwards.”