

HfL Hertfordshire SEND conference

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# Connection Comes First: Inclusive Strategies for Behaviour & SEND Support

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# ABOUT ME

Neurodiversity Champion



- Local Authority SEND, Leadership & Curriculum Inspector
- Education & SEND Adviser
- Anti-Racist Schools Coach
- Former advisory teacher (SEND/SLCN)
- Former Secondary Special Headteacher (Autism)
- NPQH
- MA Education
- NASENco
- Artist & Art Advocate - Art is for life!
- Advanced Diploma Art therapy
- MA Education & Social Justice & PHD pending!
- Author of Be an Ally, Not a Bystander
- IRSE Due out February 26



Where have you felt like you did belong?



Why?



What did this look like?



What did this feel like?



# School Belonging, sense of safety and enjoyment of school

Studies have regularly shown that children and young people with high levels of school belonging have better mental health and emotional wellbeing, and research shows that this may be particularly important for the health and wellbeing of vulnerable children and young people.

State of the Nation Report, 2023



# Impact on life chances



<https://up.org.uk/social-emotional-mental-health/>



Strong social, emotional and mental health is key to leading a happy, fulfilled and independent life.



Children with Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) needs are disproportionately impacted by systemic inequalities. They are more likely to:

- Experience economic disadvantage
- Be excluded from mainstream education
- Be labelled negatively or misunderstood
- Experience housing insecurity or homelessness
- Be targeted for sexual exploitation
- Leave education without formal qualifications
- Face barriers to employment and financial stability
- Be at increased risk of substance misuse
- Be at increased risk of substance misuse
- Be targeted for sexual exploitation and abuse

# Inclusion

Create a positive environment for all pupils without exception

NEU- Place & Belonging report

## The Belonging Challenge

- 1 in 4 young people feel they do not belong in school: a figure which is rising.
- Children from disadvantaged communities are twice as likely as their more advantaged peers to feel they don't belong and four times more likely to be excluded.
- Black Caribbean and special educational needs children are more likely to be excluded than their peers.
- Young people who experience a sense of exclusion from school or society seek 'belongingness' elsewhere.

## The Belonging Opportunity

A sense of belonging has been linked to:

- ✓ Increased student motivation.
- ✓ Increased staff well-being, motivation and retention.
- ✓ Reductions in student absenteeism.
- ✓ Other positive social outcomes e.g. health and well-being.
- ✓ Improved academic achievement.
- ✓ A growing sense of agency in students and staff: a belief that they can make a difference.

ENVIRONMENT  
VERSUS  
EXPERIENCE

[Creating a sense of place and belonging in schools | National Education Union](#)



# The Power of Connection and Belonging

When children feel truly connected:

- They feel safe to take risks in learning.
- They are more resilient in the face of challenges.
  - Their self-esteem and confidence grow.
- Incidents of challenging behaviour often decrease.





# Behaviour as Communication

## Reframing Behaviour

View behaviour as communication to understand children's unmet needs rather than just managing problems.

## Fostering Empathy

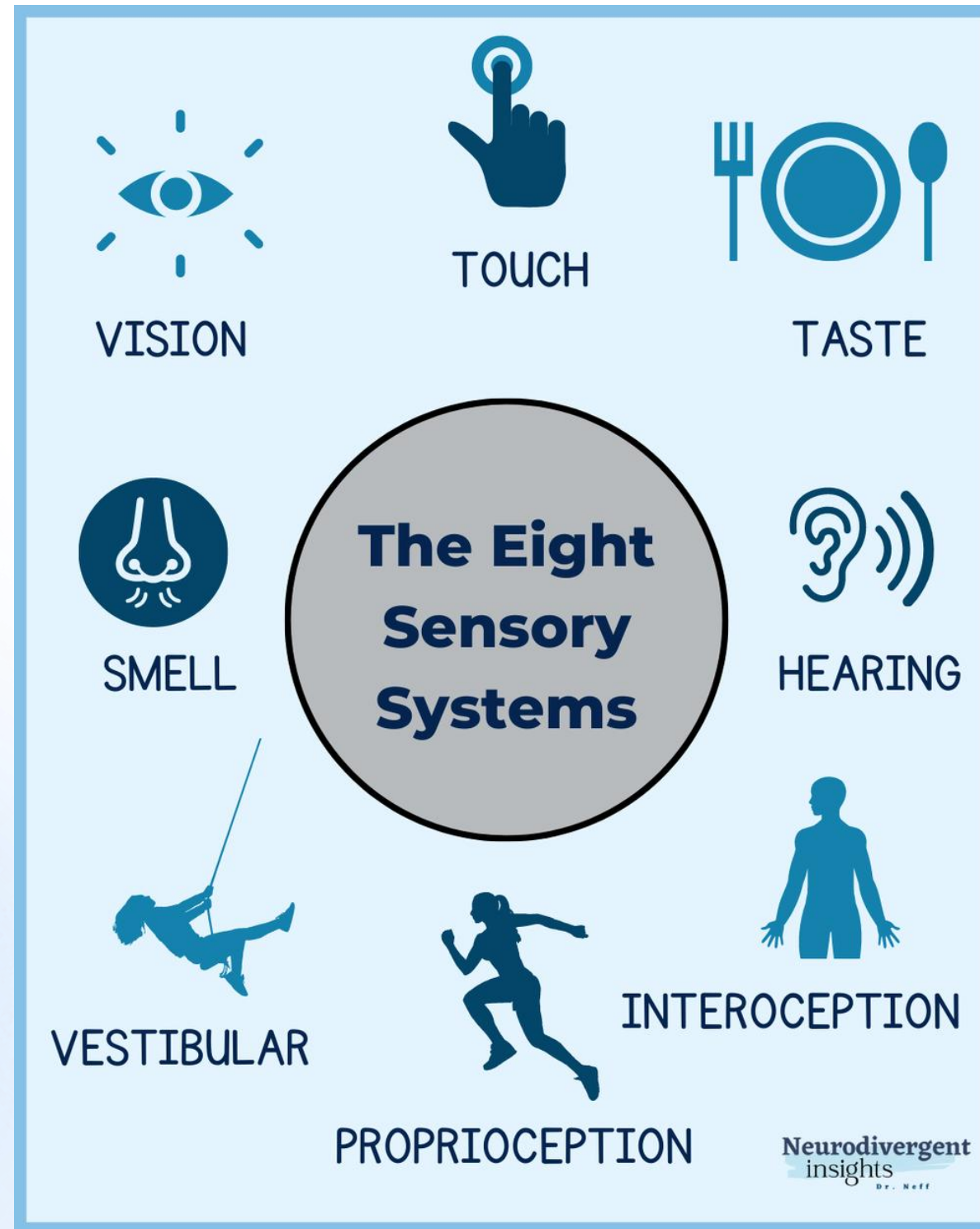
Encouraging curiosity and empathy helps educators support students more effectively and compassionately.

## Reflective Practice

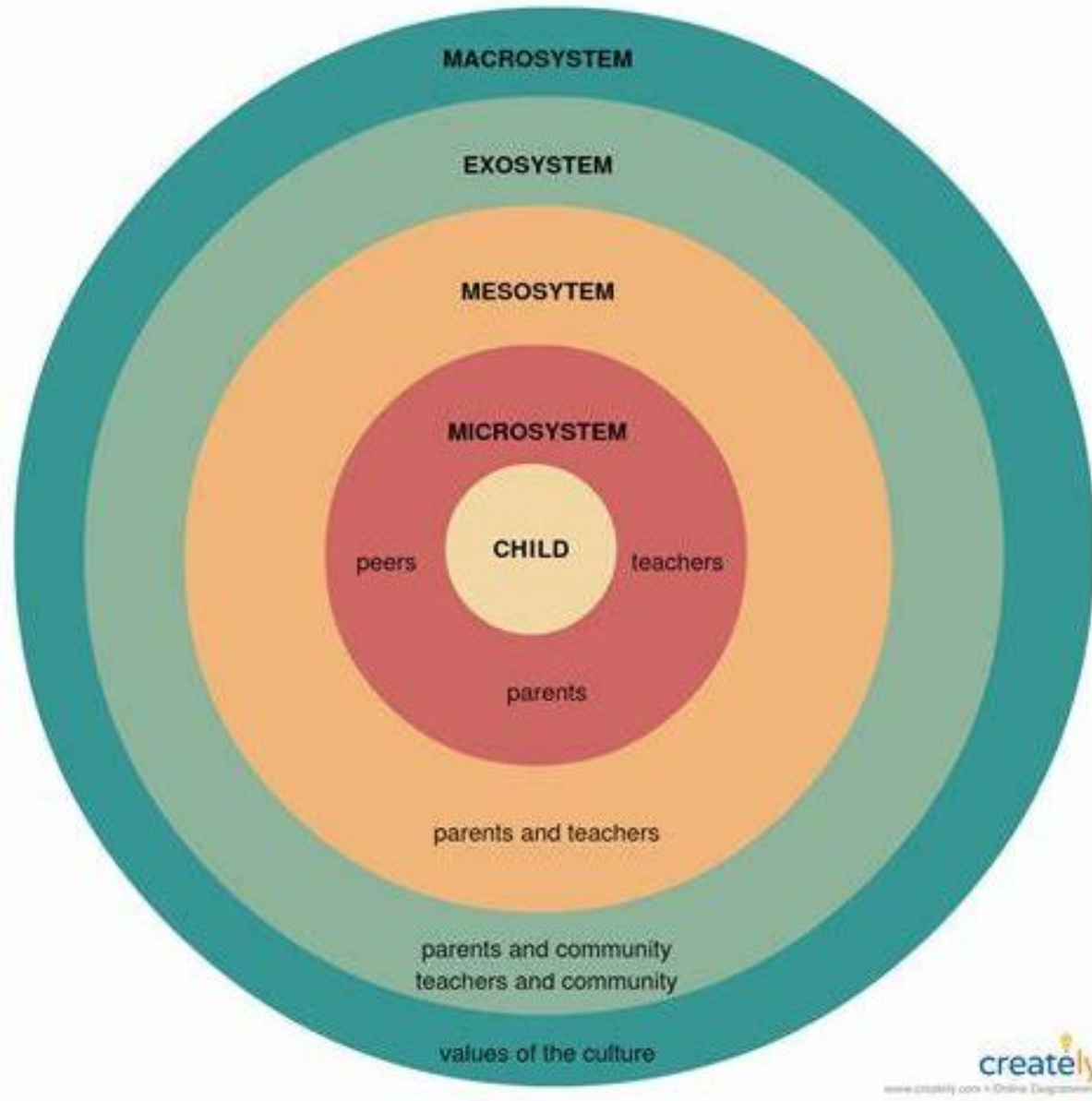
Listening, observation, and reflection are key to uncovering the messages behind students' behaviour.



# What do you need?



# Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Framework



Bronfenbrenner's theory emphasises the impact of the environment on a students' individual development.

**1. Microsystem:** Immediate environment

**2. Mesosystem:** Connections between different environments (parents, teachers) for cohesive support.

**3. Exosystem:** External environments (policies, resources) that indirectly influence students.

**4. Macrosystem:** Broader cultural and societal beliefs.

Student without SEND





# Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Framework

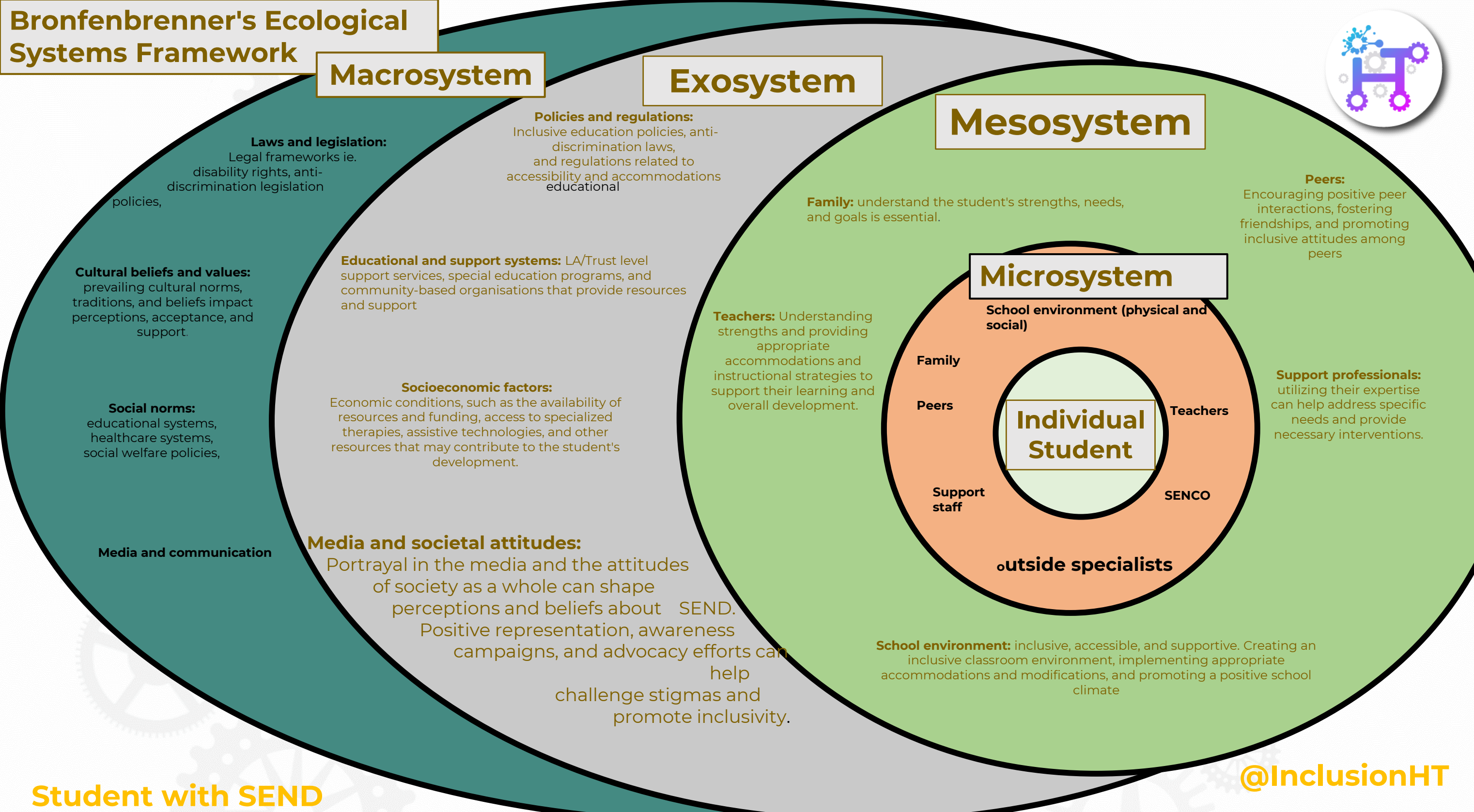
## Macrosystem

## Exosystem

## Mesosystem

## Microsystem

## Individual Student



**Laws and legislation:**  
Legal frameworks ie. disability rights, anti-discrimination legislation policies,

**Cultural beliefs and values:**  
prevailing cultural norms, traditions, and beliefs impact perceptions, acceptance, and support.

**Social norms:**  
educational systems, healthcare systems, social welfare policies,

**Media and communication**

**Policies and regulations:**  
Inclusive education policies, anti-discrimination laws, and regulations related to accessibility and accommodations educational

**Educational and support systems:** LA/Trust level support services, special education programs, and community-based organisations that provide resources and support

**Socioeconomic factors:**  
Economic conditions, such as the availability of resources and funding, access to specialized therapies, assistive technologies, and other resources that may contribute to the student's development.

**Media and societal attitudes:**  
Portrayal in the media and the attitudes of society as a whole can shape perceptions and beliefs about SEND. Positive representation, awareness campaigns, and advocacy efforts can help challenge stigmas and promote inclusivity.

**Family:** understand the student's strengths, needs, and goals is essential.

**Teachers:** Understanding strengths and providing appropriate accommodations and instructional strategies to support their learning and overall development.

**School environment (physical and social)**

Family

Peers

Support staff

Teachers

SENCO

outside specialists

**School environment:** inclusive, accessible, and supportive. Creating an inclusive classroom environment, implementing appropriate accommodations and modifications, and promoting a positive school climate

**Peers:**  
Encouraging positive peer interactions, fostering friendships, and promoting inclusive attitudes among peers

**Support professionals:**  
utilizing their expertise can help address specific needs and provide necessary interventions.

# GIRFEC principles and values

GIRFEC, as a strengths-based approach, seeks to realise children's rights on a day-to-day basis and is therefore underpinned by key values and principles. The following refreshed values and principles were developed together with stakeholders including children and young people from across Scotland:

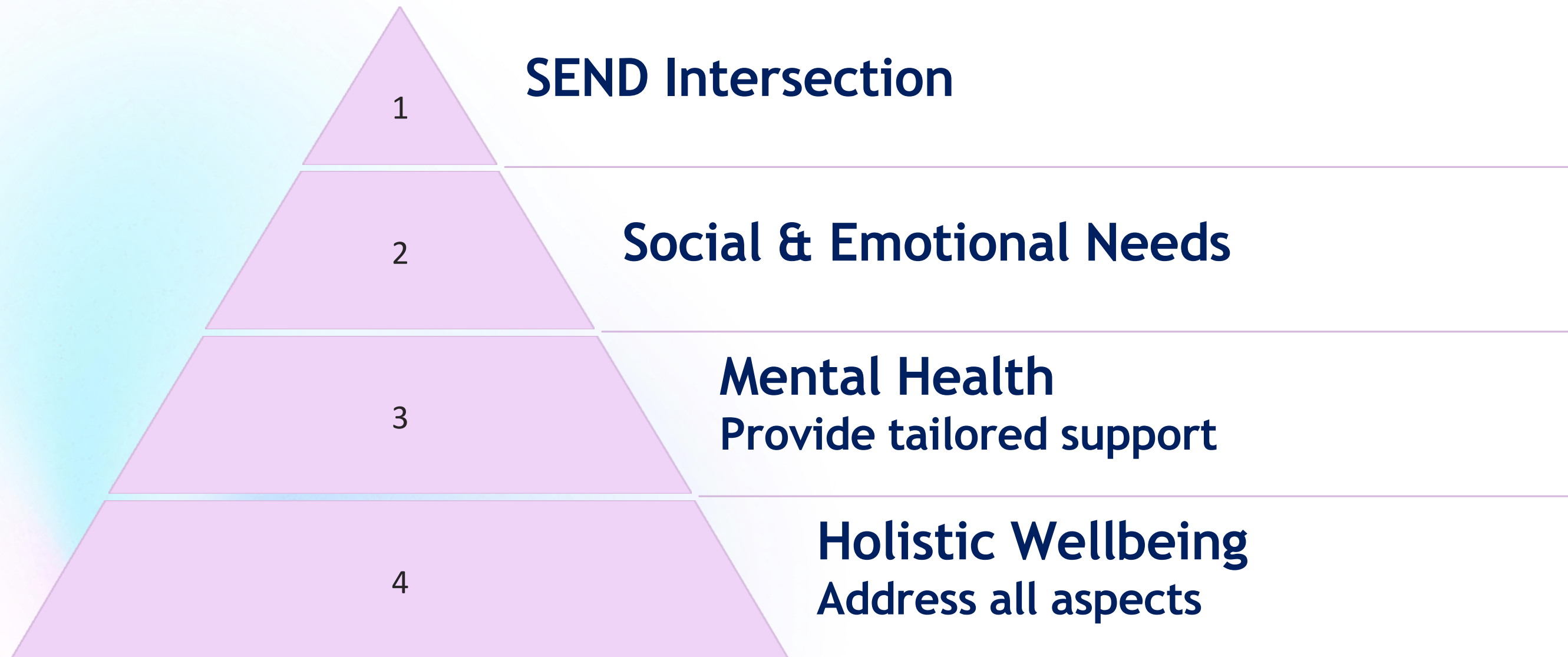
- Placing the child or young person and their family at the heart, and promoting choice, with full participation in decisions that affect them
- Working together with families to enable a rights respecting, strengths based, inclusive approach
- Understanding wellbeing as being about all areas of life including family, community and society
- Valuing difference and ensuring everyone is treated fairly
- considering and addressing inequalities
- Providing support for children, young people and families when they need it, until things get better, to help them to reach their full potential
- Everyone working together in local areas and across Scotland to improve outcomes for children, young people and their families

## Eight Wellbeing Indicators

GIRFEC uses eight wellbeing indicators to assess the wellbeing of a child. These wellbeing indicators are - Safe, Healthy, Achieving, Nurtured, Active, Respected, Responsible and Included. There are no specified levels in these areas that your child has to reach but professionals will use the indicators to assess if there are any challenges for your child. People working with your children will then focus on these areas to deliver a positive difference with the child at the centre.



# Supporting the Whole Child



Recognise the complex interplay of SEND and other factors that influence a child's wellbeing.



# Looking Beyond the labels

## Involve me, include my voice and my choices

Starting with the principle that-

People are experts in their own lives

SAMPLE I CAN PROFILE:

1. My strengths (skills and qualities):
2. My interests
3. The subjects I enjoy most are:
4. Short term goals/Long term aspirations
5. My challenges:
6. How to support me with these:

[AN "I CAN PROFILE": A STUDENT-DRIVEN, STRENGTHS-BASED TOOL – I CAN Network](#)

### SAMPLE I CAN PROFILE: Candace McCan (Year 7)

My strengths are:

- I am REALLY creative
- I am very funny once I feel comfortable
- I am great with computers and creative writing
- I am genuine

My top interests are:

- Animals (especially dogs, cats & narwhals)
- Gaming (especially Animal Crossing)
- Drawing
- Music (80s new wave)

The subjects I enjoy most so far:

- Science
- Art

Things I am looking forward to in high school:

- Anime Club
- Meeting other people who like the same things I do
- Getting a phone
- Learning Japanese

Things that stress me out at school:

- Homework and pop quizzes (MAJOR stress!)
- Having my camera on in Zoom
- Being called on in class when I am not prepared to answer
- Forced participation in competitions, especially sport
- Getting lost and losing things
- Being paired up with random people in group projects
- Being patronised

Things that make me feel more comfortable:

- Being able to take breaks to the bathroom when I need them
- Being able to take mental health days
- Drawing in my notebook
- Having very CLEAR written instructions (sent ONLINE) for assignments so I won't lose them
- Teachers who use humour (funny memes, YouTube videos) and are able to laugh at themselves
- Quietly asking if I need help with something rather than calling me out in front of the whole class. It's nice when teachers check that I'm okay.



Holistic

Person-centred

Supportive

Empowering



Strength





# The WOWW approach to Positive behaviour support

Previous research has suggested that a **Working On What Works (WOWW)** intervention can positively impact on behaviour and relationships in the classroom\* and increase teacher confidence\*\*

[www/ebi](http://www/ebi)

Dr David Lamb  
Director and Educational Psychologist at Applied Psychologies

\* (Brown et al, 2012; Fernie & Cubeddu, 2016)

\*\* (Lloyd et al, 2012; Fernie & Cubeddu 2016;)

WOWW

ap

## Working on What Works

WOWW is a whole class behaviour support approach, rooted in solution-focused psychology. It has been described as a practical tool to help solve everyday problems in the classroom by building positive relationships between the teacher and pupils through collaborative teamwork (Brown et al, 2012).

### PHASE 01

#### Planning & Goal Setting

- The class teacher tells the WOWW Coach what they want to achieve
- The WOWW Coach translates this into three positively framed targets
- The class teacher rates from 0 to 10 their current perception of the proportion of time the target was being met in class
- The class teacher then rates where they would like to be on completion of WOWW (expected rating)

### PHASE 02

#### General Observations Weeks 1, 2 & 3

- The WOWW class is observed once per week for approx. 45 minutes - one positive and specific observation is made per child
- Every child is given their feedback
- The whole class discusses the observations, encouraging children to reflect on the positive behaviours

### PHASE 03

#### Pupil Target Setting Week 4

- The WOWW Coach works with the whole class to develop three classroom goals
- These goals are scaled by each class member from 0 to 10
- An average class score is taken
- The children are then asked to generate ideas on how to move one point up the scale

### PHASE 04

#### Specific Observations Weeks 4, 5 & 6

- The targets set in Phase 3 become the focus of the remaining sessions
- Between sessions, the class teacher works with the children to reinforce behavioural expectations and praise WOWW behaviours in action
- At the end of week six the children are asked to rate each target to review progress

### PHASE 05

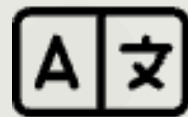
#### Review

- The class teacher and the WOWW Coach meet to evaluate the project
- The teacher is asked to reflect on the original targets set in Phase 1 and provide a current rating using the same 0 to 10 scale (actual rating)



# Understanding Behaviour as Communication

At the heart of inclusive practice is the fundamental belief that all behaviour is communication. When a child exhibits challenging behaviour, it's not always a defiance; it's often an unmet need, an unexpressed emotion, or a struggle they can't articulate.



## Unmet Needs

Seeking attention, comfort, or understanding.



## Unexpressed Emotions

Frustration, anxiety, fear, or sadness.

Shifting our perspective to interpret behaviour through this lens, moves us away from punitive responses and closer towards empathetic understanding and proactive support.



# Building Therapeutic School Environments

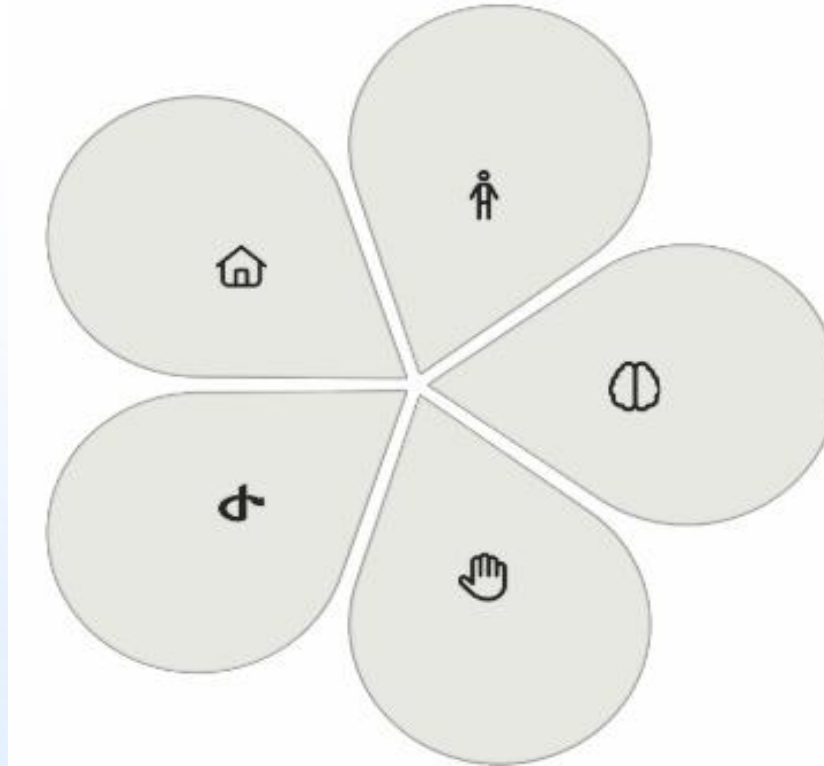
A therapeutic school environment is one that prioritises emotional well-being and provides consistent, predictable, and supportive interactions, we need to consciously design our spaces and our practices to heal, nurture, and empower.

## Safe Spaces

Designated calm areas, sensory corners.

## Individualised Learning

Meeting diverse academic needs.



## Relational Focus

Prioritising strong adult-child bonds.

## Emotional Literacy

Teaching and validating feelings.

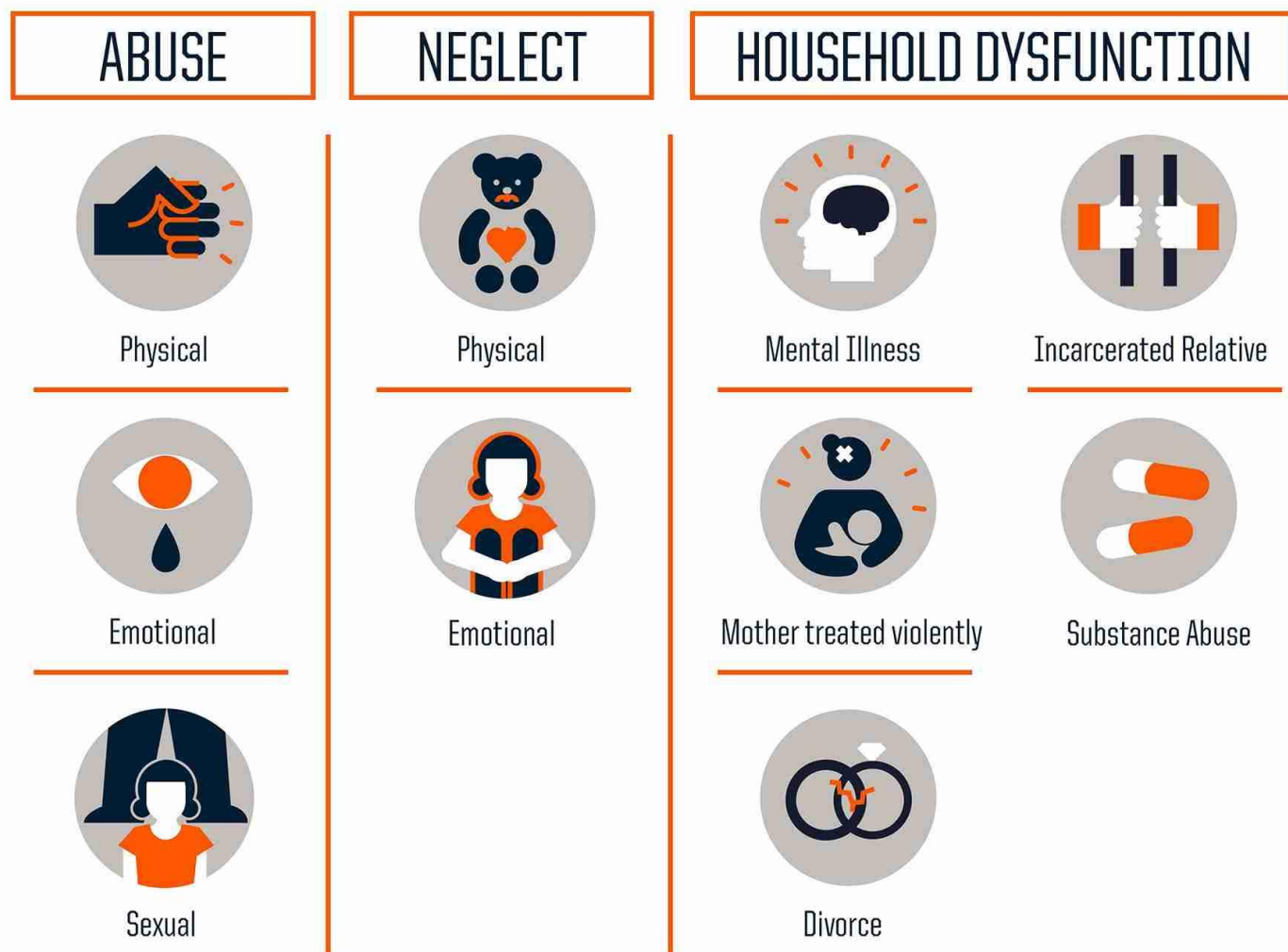
## Proactive Support

Early intervention, tailored strategies.

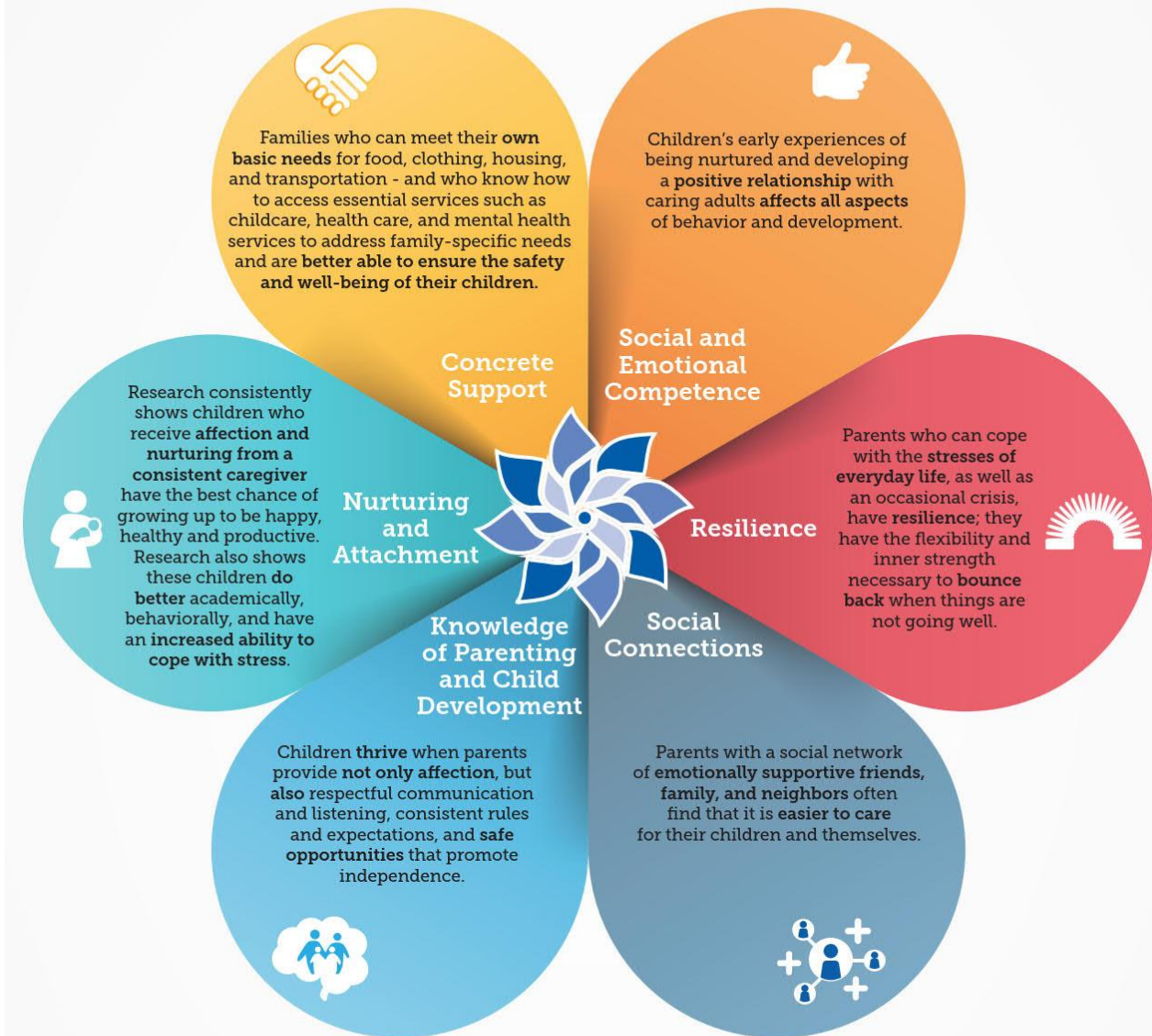
These environments are not about lowering expectations, but about providing the scaffolding necessary for every child to meet them.



# Aces versus protective factors



## SIX PROTECTIVE FACTORS



**ACEs can have devastating impacts on long-term health.** When a child experiences adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), it can have life-long consequences for physical and mental health. But, one caring adult can make a difference. That's why we know building protective factors in parents, communities and businesses is important.



# DISCUSSION: Transformative Impact

"Before we prioritised relational approaches, behaviour management felt like a constant battle. Now, our school feels calmer, happier, and our children are thriving because they know they are valued."

— *Headteacher, Hertfordshire School*

Share examples of your school and beyond, where you have seen first-hand how relational approaches lead to significant improvements not just in behaviour, but also in academic attainment, attendance, and overall well-being for all children.



# Building Relationships in Practice

## **Baseline Assessments**

Baseline assessments focus on understanding each child deeply to tailor support effectively.

## **Strengths-Based Profiles**

Using strengths-based profiles personalizes support based on each student's unique abilities.

## **Personalised Plans and Pupil Voice**

Personalised plans and capturing pupil voice ensure interventions are meaningful and student-centered.

## **In Loco Parentis Role**

Educators act as trusted adults providing care, guidance, trust, and consistency in schools.

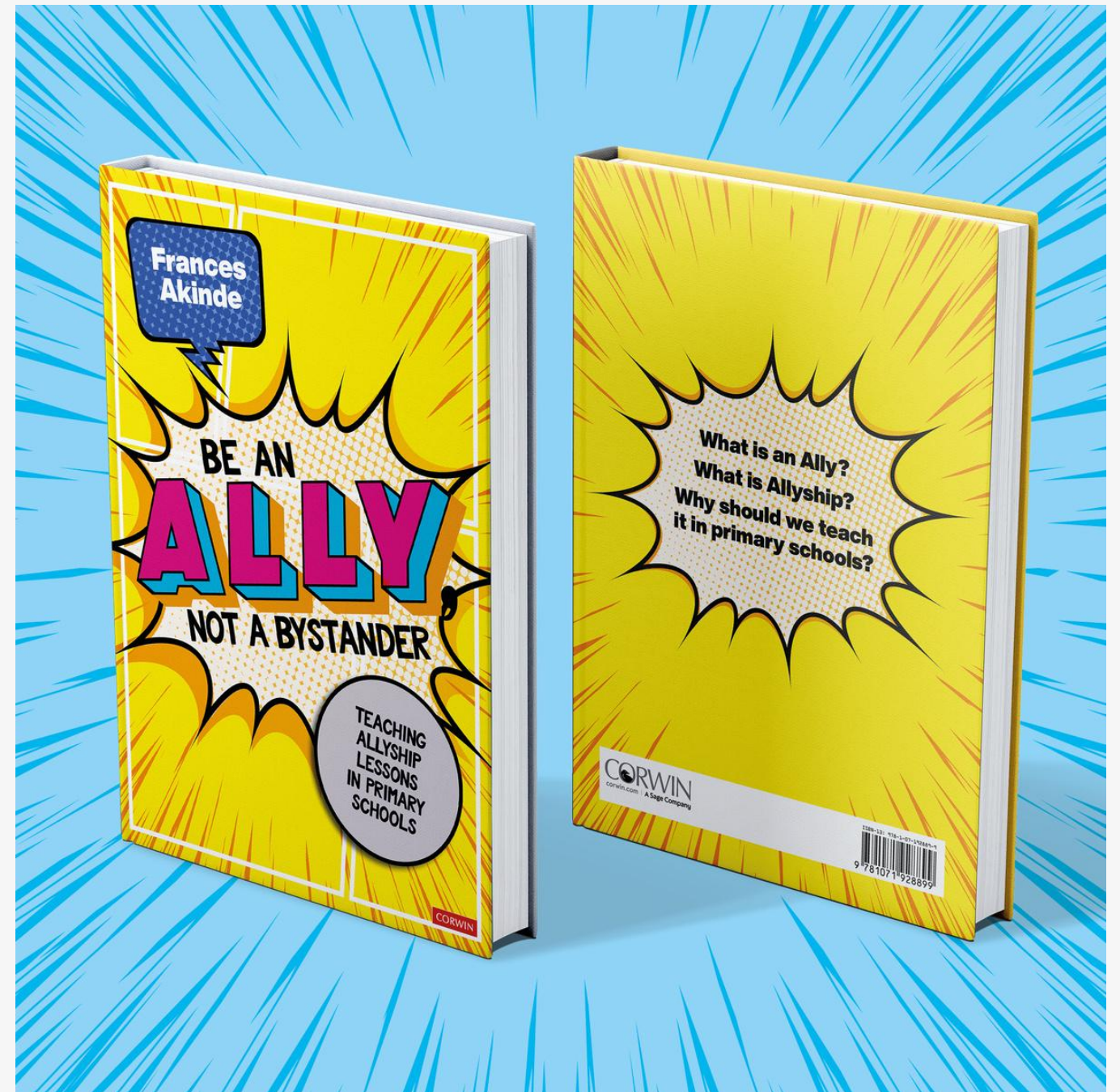


**BAANAB is a practical guide for primary school educators to promote allyship and inclusivity.**

**It emphasises the importance of teaching children aged 7-12 about diversity, empathy, and taking action against discrimination.**

**The book provides lesson ideas, activities, and resources to help teachers integrate these concepts into the classroom.**

**This book is a call to action, encouraging educators to foster a supportive, inclusive, and respectful school environment.**



**Available from Amazon, WHSmiths, Blackwells, Waterstones, Barnes & Noble**

# Contact Me



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# Changing Mindsets in Schools

## Leadership Role in Change

Headteachers and senior leaders are key in modelling and sustaining relational and inclusive school cultures.

## Overcoming Resistance

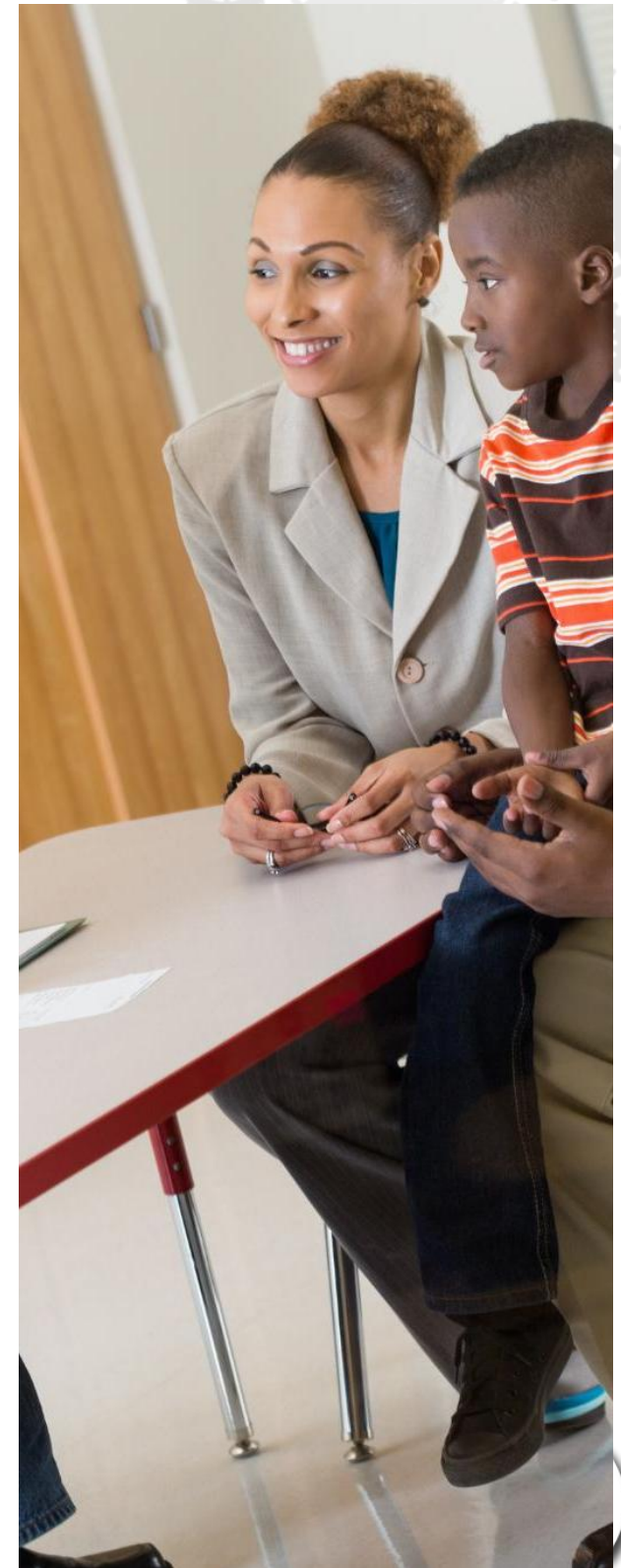
Changing mindsets faces challenges, especially in environments resistant to new educational approaches.

## Use of Data and Evidence

Data and evidence help persuade stakeholders and demonstrate the impact of relational strategies effectively.

## Culture of Reflection

Fostering openness and continuous improvement creates lasting transformation in school communities.



# Practical Strategies for Inclusion

## Child-Centred Approaches

Focus on child-centred teaching methods that cater to individual needs and learning styles.

## Pupil Voice Engagement

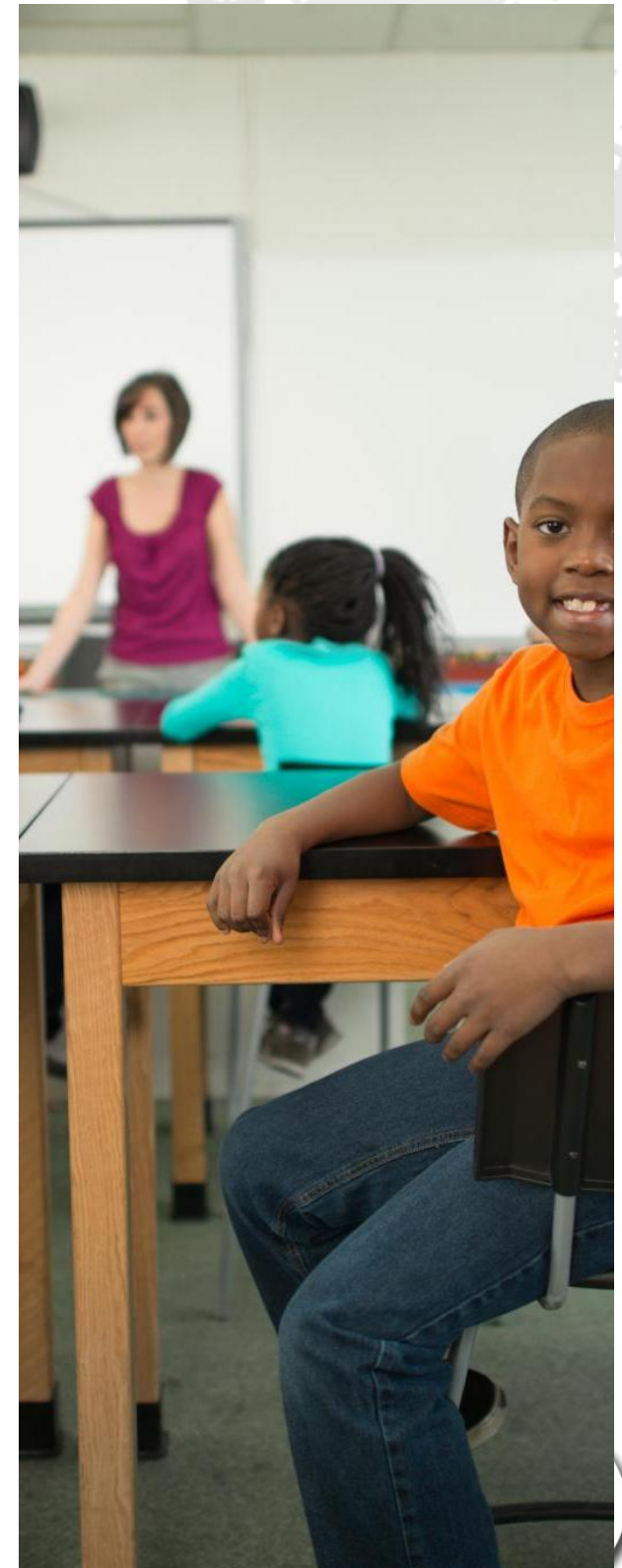
Capture and act on pupil feedback to improve inclusion and participation in schools.

## Utilising Provision Guidance

Apply Hertfordshire's 'Ordinarily Available Provision' to support inclusive education practices.

## Reflection and Adaptation

Continuously reflect and adapt strategies to meet evolving student needs successfully.



# Empowering and Celebrating TAs

## TA Contributions and Support

TAs play a crucial role in supporting children with complex needs and building strong relationships in schools.

## Reverse Mentoring Benefits

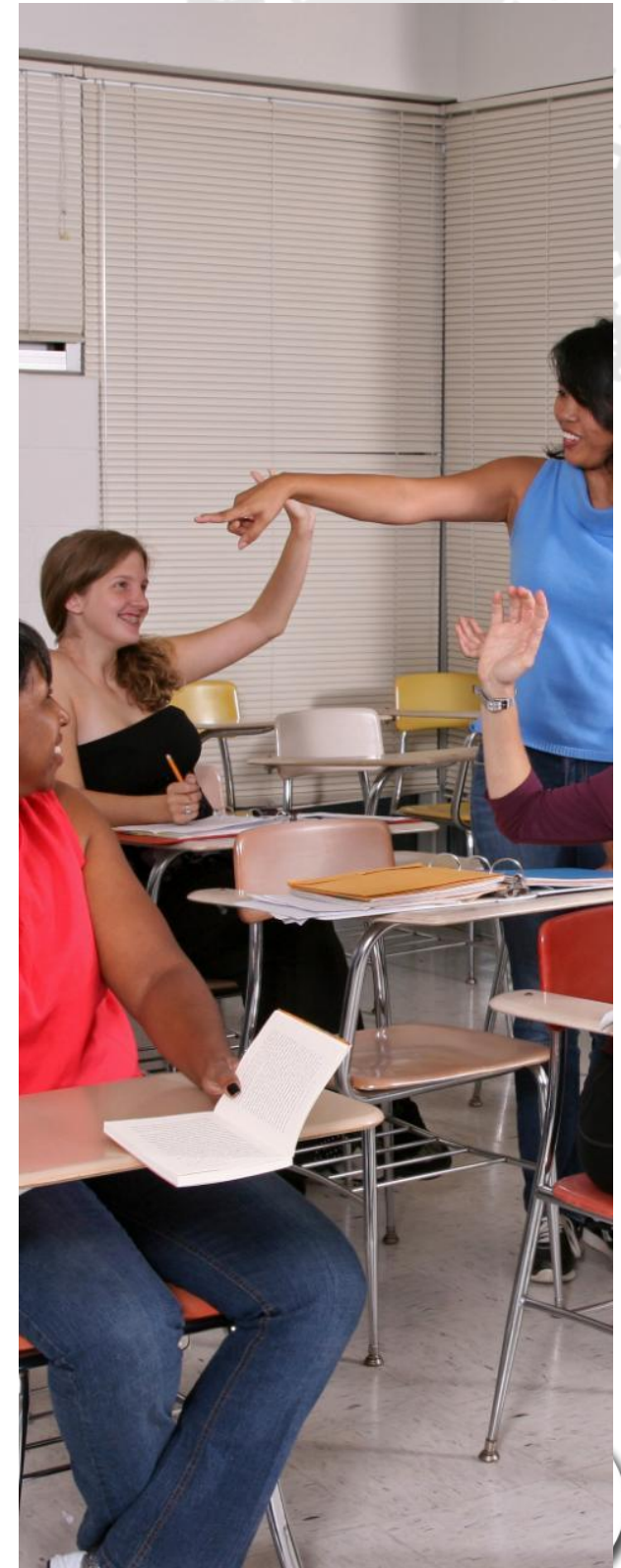
Reverse mentoring allows school leaders to learn from TAs' expertise and relational skills, fostering mutual growth.

## Empowering Through Recognition

Recognising and investing in TAs encourages professional development and enhances their role in promoting inclusion.

## Real-life Success Stories

Highlighting success stories demonstrates the transformative impact of well-supported teaching assistants in schools.



# Kindness, Allyship, and Belonging

## Kindness as Allyship

Kindness acts as a foundational tool for allyship, promoting empathy and support among peers in schools.

## Embedding Kindness in School Culture

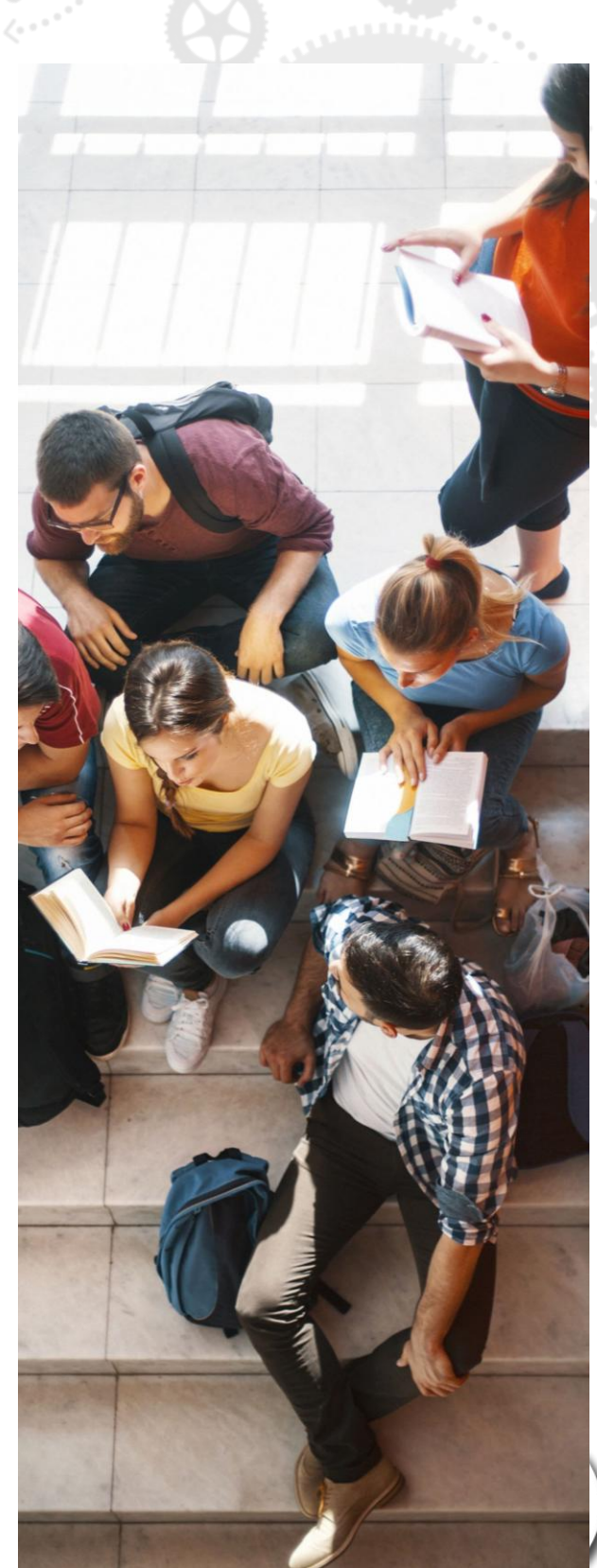
Embedding kindness creates inclusive school environments.

## Framework

Your framework should ensure trauma-informed practices that help students feel safe, recognised, and supported.

## Championing Kindness and Allyship

Encouraging educators and students to champion kindness breaks down barriers and creates equitable learning spaces.



# Key Takeaways: Cultivating Connection

3 core messages that underpin everything we've discussed today:



## Behaviour as Communication

Always look beneath the surface to understand the child's unmet need.



## Belonging is Fundamental

Prioritise relationships to create a foundation of safety and trust.



## Therapeutic Environments

Intentionally design spaces and interactions that nurture well-being.

Embedding these principles into our daily practice will create schools where every child feels they belong and has the opportunity to flourish.



# References

- [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1069687/Mental\\_health\\_and\\_behaviour\\_in\\_schools.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1069687/Mental_health_and_behaviour_in_schools.pdf)
- <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/state-of-the-nation-2022-children-and-young-peoples-wellbeing>
- <https://www.gov.scot/publications/trauma-informed-practice-toolkit-scotland/pages/2/>



# 8 reasons to adopt a strengths based support when supporting students with SEND

## A pastoral perspective

### Positive Self-Perception

Increased self-confidence. It helps to develop a sense of identity beyond the challenges and fosters a belief in ones own abilities.

### Motivation and Engagement

When individuals feel valued and supported, they are more likely to be actively involved in their education and pursue their goals.

### Resilience and Well-being

Nurturing a positive mindset and focusing on individual strengths. It helps individuals navigate challenges, build coping strategies, and maintain a positive outlook.

### Academic Achievement

By capitalising on strengths, educators can design personalised strategies that maximise learning potential and improve overall performance.

### Inclusion and Acceptance

Encourages a school-wide culture of respect and understanding, fostering a sense of belonging and reducing stigmatization.

### Social Justice

Promotes equality, inclusivity, and challenges discrimination. It values unique abilities and creates equal opportunities for success.

### Focus on 'What's strong, not what's wrong'

Creates a positive mindset for both students and staff. Fosters a sense of optimism and encourages a belief in potential.

### Holistic Development

Recognising the importance of well-rounded growth, not just in academic areas but also in social, emotional, and creative areas (DME)

