

Midlothian Council Children's Services



*Building Positive Relationships with
Children and Young People Living in
Foster Care or our Young People's
Houses*

Document Control Information

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1. Introduction

- 1.1** The purpose of this guidance is to communicate the Children's Services vision and underpinning philosophy in caring for looked-after children and young people. Our philosophy starts from a value base which believes that those caring for children and young people who have experienced trauma and abuse need to have an understanding of how this impacts on their behaviours. Through having this understanding we are then able to use every opportunity to praise, encourage and support children and young people to learn and repeat positive behaviours, no matter how small.
- 1.2** The guidance needs to be read in conjunction other important pieces of legislation and policy which include the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, or UNCRC¹ and the findings of the Independent Care Review². The Independent Care Review and its ensuing document, The Promise³, highlighted that children and young people considered safety as being relationships that are real, loving and consistent. Furthermore, the same children and young people believed such relationships could help them heal from trauma and abuse.

2. Aims and Objectives

2.1 Our aims and objectives are to ensure:

- staff and carers understand our vision, its commitments and what they means for them and their service,
- staff and carers understand and recognise the importance of positive, nurturing strategies and relationships when working with children and young people, and,
- that these principles form part of the child or young person's daily routines and wider care plan.

2.2 Our expectation is that through using the above approaches children and young people will develop trusting adult relationships founded on:

- respect and kindness,
- fairness and consistency shown by the adults in their lives,
- positive messages and positive reinforcement

We firmly believe that positive relationships between children, young people and those caring for them offer the security and stability from which children and young people grow and develop into adulthood.

¹ <https://www.gov.scot/policies/human-rights/childrens-rights/>

² <https://www.carereview.scot/>

³ <https://thepromise.scot/>

3. Vision and Values

3.1 Midlothian Council's, Children, Young People & Partnerships Directorate is committed to developing and embedding a nurturing approach across the local authority which is supported by trauma informed practice (see [Appendix 2](#)). With this in mind the whole of the directorate has agreed the following vision:

All children, young people, adults and communities in Midlothian are supported to be the best they can be. This will be achieved through a nurturing, respectful and collaborative approach that promotes wellbeing, equity, inclusion and lifelong learning.

3.2 The above vision clearly articulates what we want for our children, young people, families and communities in Midlothian. Likewise, we also believe the vision communicates what those using our services should expect. Underpinning the vision are a number of commitments, as follows:

- Midlothian is a great place to support children, young people, adults and families to grow and develop. We will strive to support children, young people, adults and families through high quality local resources, including accessible and inclusive environments.
- A trauma informed system that focuses on safety, trust, choice, empowerment and collaboration.
- A Nurture approach that is based on a culture of warmth, kindness and positive relationships – for our children, young people, adults and staff.
- A Person centred approach – which acknowledges children, young people and adults are part of a system, a family and a community. We will view a child, young person or adult and their needs in context.
- Acknowledge that basic needs must be met before we expect a child, young person or adult to be ready to engage, or learn.
- Focus on supporting children, young people and adults to achieve and develop skills for learning, life and work – acknowledging that learning is lifelong and achievement is about more than formal qualifications.
- Have decision making that is compassionate and needs-led, acknowledging every child, young person, parent and carer as an individual.
- Respectfully listen to each child, young person and adult acknowledging their views and what they feel they need.
- Transparent communication, engagement and co-creation with stakeholders to ensure the views of children, young people, parents and carers are an active part of the decision making process.
- Improve access to support and services by streamlining the processes to engage children, young people and adults.
- Effective collaboration that recognises and respects each other's skills, knowledge and experience to support a shared focus on positive outcomes for children, young people, adults and families. Including actively partnering with our communities and third sector supports.
- Invest in our staff by providing support, development and training.

- Strong value based leadership that models the values and evidences commitment to the vision.

4. Philosophy and Ethos

- 4.1** In addition to the national and local drivers already mentioned staff and carers do need to have an understanding of the importance of some theoretical concepts that underpin working with children, young people and families. Equally important is the ability to place these theoretical models within a relationship-based and trauma informed framework.
- 4.2** In exploring relationships the overwhelming research demonstrates that a “high warmth - low criticism” relationship between adults, children and young people, promotes positive social interactions⁴. Key to adopting this approach is a sound understanding of nurture, trauma, ⁵attachment theory⁶ and understanding brain development⁷. Staff and carers are expected to have a working knowledge of these areas and will be provided with opportunities to learn and reflect on them both formally and informally.
- 4.3** An awareness of these models in itself is not enough and key to any success is the ability to be able to form good attachments and rewarding relationships based on integrity, respect and trust. Midlothian Council is committed to making sure that those working with our most vulnerable children and young people understand the approach and view them as significant drivers in supporting children and young people to heal. In essence, these are the main requirements for staff and carers in Midlothian.
- 4.5** As important is the recognition of the positive effects of praise, encouragement and positive reinforcement. Opportunities for children and young people we work with to experience success and to receive praise and encouragement for their achievements, however small, is important in forming purposeful trusting relationships.

5. Relationships with Vulnerable and Looked after Children

- 5.1** Many vulnerable or looked after children and young people find it difficult to develop relationships often because of their previous experience with early primary care givers. They may have encountered a high level of trauma, chronic neglect, abuse and loss which often manifests itself in poor attachments and low self-esteem. Children and young people may cope with their previous pain by not allowing themselves to enjoy or experience positive future relationships and can develop a range of behaviours that appear challenging and complex to those trying to get to know them. Some children

⁵ [The Differential Impact of Parental Warmth on Externalizing Problems among Triangulated Adolescents \(nih.gov\)](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/28111111/)

⁵ [Trauma-Informed Engagement, Part 2: The Effects of Trauma | by CHI KT Platform | KnowledgeNudge | Medium](https://medium.com/@chi-kt-platform/trauma-informed-engagement-part-2-the-effects-of-trauma-by-chi-kt-platform-knowledge-nudge-medium-1234567890)

⁶ <https://pathwaystofamilywellness.org/Parenting/attachment-and-the-development-of-resilience.html>

⁷ <https://www.unicef.org/northmacedonia/press-releases/social-and-emotional-learning-early-years-crucial-brain-development>

and young people are so traumatised they will resist forming any relationships with adults which can also be interpreted as withdrawn, standoffish, superficial and in some cases, unlikeable and distant.

5.2 Staff or carers should always seek to build relationships with children and young people that are positive and based on mutual respect. It is extremely important that we appreciate that adults need to take the initiative, demonstrate resilience and attempt to build relationships even when attempts are initially rejected. In the beginning of caring for a child or young person a good way to build a positive relationship is to offer clear boundaries and expectations. Staff or carers should:

- Appear welcoming, warm and caring and ensure that this is reflected in their body language, such as smiling and the use of positive language and speech;
- Show genuine interest and listen to what the child or young person has to say;
- Display a genuine commitment to make and sustain relationships with children and young people who display distressed, or distressing behaviour;
- Offer consistent care so that the child or young people can have confidence in building the relationship;
- Be clear about what to expect, what the staff or carers responsibilities are and how they will be discharged;
- Demonstrate an understanding of the child or young person's difficulties are and reassure them that we want them to succeed and will be there when things are difficult as well as when they are going well;
- Understand that mutual respect and confidence has to be earned, and always show respect for children or young people (although it may be some time before it is returned);
- Show integrity and always be consistent, truthful and reliable. Never tell untruths and always stick by their side of the deal even if the child or young person does not do likewise;
- Model appropriate behaviour and self-discipline, with each other in day-to-day communications as well as with children and young people.
- Express feelings and language appropriately, showing care and concern for the child or young person, not retaliating if provoked (remember who is the adult) and apologise if in the wrong;
- Talk to the child or young person about their behaviour, explaining the benefits of change and telling them that you care too much to allow their distressed behaviours to continue and, you can support them to change.
- Tools to support this can include emotional literacy, life story work, restorative approaches;
- Never succumb to negativity. Ensure that all interactions are positive and promote self-esteem.

5.3 It is however important that children and young people do know what the boundaries are with regard to acceptable behaviour, both of themselves and others. Therefore,

communicating boundaries is an integral part of caring and creating a safe living environment.

- 5.4** Maintaining our values, attitudes and skills is not always easy, especially when tired or having to face a challenging situation. It is imperative that staff and carers have the opportunity to regularly reflect on their value base and skills as well as regularly update their knowledge. This is particularly important when working with distressed and distressing behaviours. These traits are often part of a looked after child or young person's armour so we need to provide staff and carers with the appropriate learning and development opportunities.
- 5.5** It is important to stress that risk is an inherent part of human development, therefore children and young people need to be exposed to risk to help them grow into rounded, secure, healthy individuals. Risks can manifest in behaviours such as staying out late, adopting stylised forms of dress, language, behaviour, challenging adult figures and representations of authority. Many of these '*normal*' behaviours have been identified as a transitional stage of adolescence and should not become confused with serious control issues.
- 5.6** Behaviours such as experimenting and misusing substances, taking risks with sexual health or going missing for extended periods of time can all carry unplanned consequences and potential risks. These risks can often involve exploitation by others and unfortunately, some of the children and young people we care for, because of their vulnerabilities, can be more at risk than their peers. To support staff and carers identify and manage risks the East Lothian and Midlothian Public Protection Office and Midlothian partnership have developed useful guidance and tools on safeguarding; children and young people missing from local authority care; child sexual exploitation and sexual health. These are available on the East Lothian and Midlothian Public Protection Office and Midlothian partnership website⁸.
- 5.7** The Midlothian partnership produced useful local guidance for managing risk positively,⁹

6. Encouraging Positive Risk in Care Planning

- 6.1** Care plans are intended to specify the actions needed to progress the outcomes for individual children and young people. The care plan should be developed and written with the involvement of the child or young person (proportionate with her/his ability) and where appropriate, persons with parental responsibility. The care plan should be worded using positive and encouraging language to avoid them being interpreted as threats or rigid controls. Care plans should be SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time Limited).
- 6.2** Children and young people must be given the opportunity to read or understand their care plan and be encouraged to make any comment. This process must be

⁸ <https://emppc.org.uk/child/>

⁹ https://www.midlothian.gov.uk/downloads/file/4060/positive_approaches_to_risk

meaningful to the child or young person and should be completed at a level of understanding and pace to suit each individual. It must be acknowledged that on some occasions it will not be possible for the child or young person to fully read or understand what has been written so it is important the workers convey the information as clearly as possible.

- 6.3** There are many opportunities in the day to day routine of life to engage children and young people in this process of building relationships through supporting them to identify and interpret their feelings and opinions. When necessary, staff or carers act on what children and young people tell them and when appropriate, involve them in any recordings, drawings or other methods that reflect their wishes and feelings,
- 6.4** The care planning process should highlight concerns about any child or young person exhibiting distressed or distressing behaviours so that those caring for the child or young person can formulate the appropriate strategy using the approaches already mentioned. Importantly, the care/risk management plan needs to be a 'live' document which is used to support the child or young person manage and understand their behaviours and aid self-regulation rather than a 'list' of negative behaviours collated by the adults.

7. Staff and Carers behaviours

- 7.1** An aspiration of the Independent Care Review is that 'Scotland is a Country that does not restrain its children'. This is a brave ambition. In order to work towards the ambition we must constantly remind ourselves that many of the children and young people we support and care for will exhibit distressed and distressing behaviours. These behaviours are best supported by understanding them through a trauma-informed lens and through the promotion of positive behaviour reinforcement (see [Appendix1](#)).
- 7.2** To support the above, staff and carers need to maintain their understanding of nurture and trauma and how it impacts on themselves and others. All those working with children and young people need to know that a positive and nurturing experience can support looked after children address some of their early childhood gaps and aid their transition to adulthood.
- 7.3** It is just as important that staff and carers recognise their own behaviours and that their own personal and professional stresses can subconsciously affect the manner in which they respond to children and young people. This is not a criticism, merely a reminder that we as adults have behaviours that are linked to our own early childhood, trauma and stress. We need to be mindful of our own triggers and find an opportunity to reflect on them either through discussion with managers, peers, supervision, support groups and/or team discussions.
- 7.4** Staff and carers must bear in mind that while they may be required to make immediate decisions, they do not act alone. They are part of a wider team of caring professionals and must operate within an agreed consensus compatible with the

legislative framework, national standards¹⁰ and departmental guidance on professional practice.

- 7.5** All our staff and carers will receive the appropriate level of learning and development to provide them with an understanding of trauma, brain development and relationship based practice through formal and informal training sessions and supervision.
- 7.6** Incidents where there is an actual or perceived threat of physical / verbal violence must be recorded and reported as soon as possible after the event. Such incidents can be very distressing and it is important that the staff member, the carer, family and child or young person receive the support they need. Staff and carers must contact their line manager, supervising social worker or team leader as soon as possible to let him/her know what has happened. The line manager will guide staff through the reporting process and relevant policy.
- 7.7** If such an incident has occurred in foster care then the supervising social worker (or line manager) will support the carers to discuss next steps and make sure the child's worker is informed. The appropriate reporting must be completed as soon as possible and when it is safe to do so. The supervising social worker will arrange to meet with the carer to review the incident and guide the foster carer to complete the necessary paperwork. The supervising social worker (or line manager) will communicate with the child's social worker who should then arrange to meet with the child.
- 7.8** Our local young people's houses have similar policies and procedures for reporting. In all instances, the member of staff will insure they report the incident through the appropriate line manager who will offer advice and guide them through the relevant policy areas.
- 7.9** Where there is a violent incident or a young person is held the manager will arrange a meeting at the earliest opportunity. The debrief should include the manager of the service, the staff or carers and the young person/s involved so that everyone has an opportunity to reflect of what happened and agree any possible learning for the future.
- 7.10** Where a child or young person wishes to raise an issue or make a complaint the carers or staff should, in the first instance, try to resolve the matter through the relevant policy and make sure the supervising social worker or line manager is informed. Where the matter is more serious and a child or young person has alleged inappropriate treatment or abuse this must be communicated to the relevant supervising social worker and/or line manager and the relevant procedure followed. The relevant procedure can include child protection procedures, allegations of abuse of the local authority's disciplinary procedure

¹⁰ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/health-social-care-standards-support-life/y>

Appendix 1: Positive Reinforcement

As young people attempt to manage their behaviour they need encouragement and support both to reward their efforts and provide further change. When staff or carers get involved with young people because of their behaviour they should do so in a way that distinguishes dissatisfaction of the behaviour from condemnation of the child/young person him/herself.

There are a number of ways in which staff can promote change through positive reinforcement.

Verbal Praise – think about body language and never miss a chance to say something positive to a young person and always acknowledge their efforts whether or not they were successful in what they are doing. To reinforce this, praise the young person first, then tell them you are so pleased you are going to tell others and then praise the young person in front of the others who should also provide praise too. Always think about what you are trying to convey to the child and young person through your language.

Non-Verbal Feedback- Smile! You can convey positive attitudes towards young people and approval for their behaviour through facial expressions and gestures (exercise caution when using physical contact to ensure that the gesture is not viewed as invasive by the young person). Bear in mind that you can equally convey negative attitudes in your non-verbal responses around young people. How do you behave with other adults, what kind of language is used, can 'dry' humour be perceived as cruel?

Positive Reward/Incentives - young people should have opportunities to earn additional positive rewards or treats to reward their effort to change such as extra pocket money, extension to bedtimes at weekends etc. Again, be mindful that when incentives and rewards are used to reinforce improved behaviour, that the improved behaviour comes before the reward, otherwise it can be seen as bribery and colluding with the young person.

Team Teach - Young people are rarely spontaneously violent. Usually they go through a process of rising anger and aggression, which, if unchecked leads to a violent outburst. It is important therefore, that if staff are to avoid violent confrontations that they understand the "cycle of aggression" and are able to intervene appropriately in response to signs of mounting anxiety and agitation in children and young people. Team teach training is provided by Midlothian Council. It is important in the face of mounting anger and aggression, staff or carers do not lose control.

You should not:

- Shout (although it may be appropriate to raise the level of the voice and speak more assertively);
- Attempt to enforce compliance over trivial or unnecessary matters
- Take positions or issue warnings that cannot be maintained
- Attempt to continue to use reasoning in the face of mounting anger and aggression (when children and young people may have lost the ability to rationalise and negotiate);
- Threaten or intimidate children/young people;
- Make fun of, ridicule or humiliate children/young people;
- Confront challenging behaviour in front of an audience;
- Corner or closely confront a child/young person.



Appendix 2: Developing a Nurturing Authority

Leisa Randall Educational Psychology Service









Developing a Nurturing Authority: Vision

- Midlothian as a nurturing authority will support staff to become experts in **creating a culture of warmth, kindness and quality relationships** within their environments.
- Staff will have the knowledge and skills to nurture the emotional health and well-being needs of every child, young person, and family and of each other in the workplace **by placing relationships at the centre of their practice.**





Developing a Nurturing Authority: Aims

- **Establish a culture and mind set of a nurture as a central approach across Midlothian**
- Co-ordinate a coherent approach for nurturing practice across Midlothian schools and services
- Build knowledge and understanding of nurture as relational and trauma sensitive practice
- Support staff to feel confident in how they build strong and connected relationships through an evidence based approach
- Create a learning space to reflect and build on good practice
- **Share and celebrate positive relational work which is making a difference**
- Support self evaluation to measure impact





Next steps

1. For managers to nominate a **Nurture Lead**

in every service and school

2. For the strategy group to support an audit in services and schools, and

3. for Nurture to appear within every school and service SIP





What is a Nurture Lead?

- Point of contact to a nurture network and overall strategy
- Taking forward whole school nurture as an approach
- Inspiring and encouraging others, supporting and coaching
- Building on existing good practice
- Facilitating professional learning opportunities, building knowledge for staff, disseminating information and resources
- Supporting whole school or service audit, evaluation and action planning
- Measure impact and build evidence picture about why we should continue





Nurture in Midlothian

What it is

- Universal throughout services and schools
- Real and humane
- Ongoing commitment to a way of being
- Transformative within an organisation
- Consistent, contingent care giving

What it is not

- An event
- Only done in 'a base'
- Performed by experts
- Separate from ethos and culture of the organisation
- Separate from establishing firm boundaries

