



Baby Anna has the confidence to explore because her mother is nearby

Learning from mother and child

Educational psychotherapist **Alison Waterhouse** describes how her Circles for Learning project helps children to engage in their learning in an inclusive classroom

As baby Anna sat on the rug with her mother behind her, she looked around the circle of children. Her face was still.

One of the children waved to attract her attention. She caught the movement of his hand and turned her head. He smiled and said her name, and she lifted her arm as if to respond, and then turned to her mum, reaching out to touch her leg.

'He's saying hello. He's pleased to see you,' her mother said. 'Can you wave at him?' Anna turned back to the boy and watched him. One of the others asked: 'Why doesn't she wave back?'

I invited suggestions from the class. 'I think she's a little wary, she's only just got here,' proposed one child. 'I think she is thinking about who to go to, as there are so many of us,' another responded.

I wondered aloud why the baby had looked at her mum. 'She wanted to know if it was all right to come and see me,' ventured the boy who had waved. 'I think she's feeling a little worried; look, she's put her hand on her mum's leg.'

Circles for Learning

This episode shows how observant and

sensitive children can be when a skilled facilitator supports them to watch closely and reflect. These pupils were only in Year 2, but already they were able to see the link between how someone feels and how they behave. It was then easy to expand on this within the classroom to encourage them to think about their own behaviour and that of others.

“The children were able to see the link between how someone feels and how they behave”

They belonged to Dudley Infant School (now Dudley Infant Academy) in Hastings and were the pioneers for a project which I have subsequently expanded into other schools. Called Circles for Learning, it is designed to help children engage in their learning and give their teachers greater insight into learning dispositions and how these interrelate with emotional and social development.

Over the course of a year, the class

met Anna and her mother once a month, followed by weekly sessions, where they explored issues that arose from their observations and others identified by their teacher. Led by myself or the teacher, who had received training from me, these covered many different areas. Key themes to emerge included working together, managing emotions, inclusion, how we learn and transition.

Coping with sadness

On one occasion, Anna was tired and grizzly because she was teething. The children interpreted her behaviour as sadness, and although this was slightly wide of the mark, that was the theme we went on to explore because that was their perception.

As part of this work, they all drew a picture of a time when they had felt sad and what had happened to help them. One boy, who was new to the school and lived with his mum in a refuge, drew the house where he used to live and shared this with the others, telling them how much he missed his old home, his friends and his school.

Having been reluctant to welcome this

pupil into their group, the children began to understand him a little better and could see why his behaviour was sometimes challenging. They also learned to accept his sadness, rather than ignoring it or changing the conversation and thereby conveying the subliminal message that this was a 'bad' emotion to be avoided. As a result, he was able to face up to his feelings and work through them instead of running away from them as he had done before.

A secure base

Raising awareness of attachment and the importance of a secure base is a core part of the project. It constitutes a third of the training I provide for teachers and is fundamental to the work we then do with the children.

At Dudley Infant School, it was the focus of our very first session. Baby Anna was only six weeks old at the time and as the children watched her interact with her mother, I asked them to consider how she might be feeling, surrounded by strangers in an unfamiliar setting, and what might be helping her to cope.

They quickly concluded that because her mother's presence gave her a sense of security, she was able to be open to what was happening around her. Building on this understanding, we developed a list of what they needed in class if they were to be open to their learning.

Later in the week we explored how they felt when faced with new situations and the strategies they used when they were anxious or worried. From this, we created a New Situation Toolkit, which proved a really useful resource for working together over the year and enabled us to create a positive classroom learning space for all.

Multiple benefits

Other schools that have joined the project have found it equally rewarding. Teachers have watched their classes pull together as pupils become more tolerant and supportive of each other, more able to discuss their feelings and accept that others may feel differently.



The children interact with baby Rose and watch her responses to different situations

They have also seen an impact on the children's ability to talk about and manage their own learning. This has included learning to tolerate frustration, as well as becoming more aware of resilience and the importance of working together.

How a child manages frustration is crucial to their ability to learn and progress. When pupils find a task difficult, they often resort to a whole range of avoidance tactics, when actually it's not the work they are avoiding, but the emotion it elicits.

The key is to talk about this and model it in the classroom, helping the children to recognise these feelings when they arise and develop strategies to overcome them.

Self-belief

Frustration is just one of many blockages that stand in the way of progress. In the case of Toby, a Year 6 pupil with a statement for dyslexia, it was the conviction that he was stupid that was holding him back.

The breakthrough moment came when he watched the class baby push up on his knees for the very first time. Building on the baby's experience of learning something new, the teacher embarked on some work about how the brain works. After acting out role-plays to demonstrate neurons firing signals to each other, Toby asked: 'Is that what's wrong with me – my neurons aren't firing?'

His teacher explained that his neurons were fine, but that some neural pathways need lots of practice to become established, in much the same way that an overgrown path needs to be trodden many times before it is easy to follow. She then introduced the children to Howard Gardner's multiple intelligences, enabling Toby to understand that everyone learns in different ways and that he had his own unique talents.

He proudly announced to the class: 'I'm excellent at being nature smart and practice smart – I'm going to need these to work outside. I'd make a great gardener or farmer!'

The impact on his work was astonishing. Before learning about neurons and multiple intelligences, he would go out of his way to avoid writing. Afterwards, nothing could stop him.

Individual and whole-class impact

There have been countless other examples of individual breakthroughs as well as whole-class transformations.

For Joshua, a child on the autism spectrum, watching baby Rose sucking

on her dummy prompted the remark: 'I have a hypothesis: when baby Rose has her dummy she is happy, if she didn't, she would be sad and cry.' This led to work within the class on cause and affect. When you take someone's toy without asking, they get angry and push. When you smile and let them join in your game, they feel happy and included.

Meanwhile Joseph, a child with social communication difficulties, had his own eureka moment when he held the class baby in his arms and she smiled up at him. His face lit up as he turned to his teacher to say: 'I think she really likes me.' This moment stayed with him for the days and weeks that followed, enabling his teacher to use the memory to support him to interact with his classmates and other people around him.

From a whole-class perspective, some of the diverse benefits have stemmed from the teachers' and pupils' deeper understanding of attachment. To cite just one example, when discussing the type of environment the children needed for learning, a Year 3 boy explained that he found it harder to cope when his teacher wasn't there. This prompted her to spend time talking with the children about how they felt when someone else took the class and what she could do to make this more manageable for them.

Find out more

Teachers using Circles for Learning turn to a variety of resources to support children's exploration of the different themes that emerge. These include the following.

Emotional literacy: *The Huge Bag of Worries* by Virginia Ironside, Hodder Children's Books
Empathy: *Stand in My Shoes* by Bob Sornson, Love and Logic Press

Inclusion: *Dandyllion* by Lizzie Finlay, Red Fox Picture Books

Transition: *The Little Yellow Leaf* by Carin Berger, Greenwillow Books

Resilience: *Way Home* by Libby Hathorn, Andersen Press

Relationships: *Children of Winter* by Berlie Doherty, Catnip Publishing Ltd

Curiosity: *Six Men* by David McKee, North-South Books

- For more ideas and a full book list for key stages 1-3, see www.circlesforlearning.co.uk
- For insight into attachment, see *Attachment in the Classroom: the links between children's early experience, emotional well-being and performance in school: a practical guide for schools* by Heather Geddes, Worth Publishing
- See also *Attachment disorder, Special Children* 217.