

BECKMEAD TRUST STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH & EMOTIONAL WELLBEING POLICY

Nurture, Sustain, Grow

Our students

Our young people experienced social, emotional and behavioural difficulties due to a number of factors that include:

- Experience of trauma such as abuse, neglect, exposure to domestic violence or street violence
- Experience of loss
- Insecure attachments to caregivers
- Ongoing family difficulties
- Societal and systemic factors such as poverty, social exclusion and experience of prejudice and oppression
- Neurodevelopmental conditions such as autism or ADHD

Many of our students have experienced trauma and insecure attachment. We know from research that trauma and insecure attachment have a profound effect on brain development. This neurological damage causes a range of psychological and behavioural difficulties including:

- Difficulties understanding, appropriately expressing and regulating emotions
- Over-use of the fight-flight or freeze responses
- Impulsive, poor ability to plan ahead or predict consequences
- Hypersensitivity to threat and constant state of anxiety
- Inability to empathise with others
- Acting out feelings they cannot cope with through behaviours – e.g. aggression, destructiveness, self-harm
- Self-medicating to reduce anxiety using drugs
- Low self-esteem
- Confusion about personal boundaries
- Anxiety about transitions and change

The difficult experiences our students have had lead to the development of patterns of thinking and behaviour that are ways of coping or ways of ensuring that at least some of their needs are met. They are survival strategies, largely unconscious but they cause obvious problems too. Survival strategies can include:

- Trying to rigidly control what they can to make up for the frightening experiences that they cannot control
- Difficulties trusting people
- Ambivalence about closeness – seeking attention and then rejecting it again
- Testing relationships with adults to see if the adult can cope with their worst

- Sabotaging relationships (often just as they become meaningful) for fear of rejection
- Splitting groups of people unrealistically into "good" and "bad" as a way of coping with the complexity of relationships
- Trying to sabotage other child-adult relationships to secure attention for themselves

Some young people have had such chaotic lives that they found no coping strategy, these young people are highly unpredictable with no pattern to their behaviours.

Our approach

At Beckmead we aim to support the underlying needs behind these survival strategies and so reduce the need for the challenging behaviours. We do not just provide academic and vocational education but we also help our young people to develop socially, emotionally and behaviourally. All of these aspects are interlinked and cannot be separated. Our students will not be able to learn unless their whole needs are supported.

Key elements of the approach are:

- An integrative approach that draws on elements of attachment, child development, psychodynamic theory, nurture and positive-focused behaviourism.
- A nurture element that recognises that many of our students are psychologically younger than their actual age in terms of social and emotional development and which tries to support the unmet needs of such students. In simple terms this means warmth, empathy, care, sensitivity, patience, curiosity and unconditional positive regard for the child as a person regardless of behaviours
- The provision of a warm, comfortable, safe and cared-for physical environment that supports such a nurturing approach. Provision of kitchen areas for the provision of food. Mealtimes are opportunities for concrete demonstration of nurture and practising social skills
- A high staff-student ratio, generally one staff to two students in each class
- Specific nurture time allocated during the day (minimum at the start of the day) in which the social and emotional needs of the students can be the primary focus. Proactive engagement of children in structured social activities during this time. That could be simply having a group conversation or could be more structured such as using games
- Consistent structures and routines to help our students feel safe. This however must be balanced with taking healthy risks and gradually allowing our students the opportunity to self-manage, preparing them for life after their time with us
- Particular support around transition times. This includes small transitions such as a change of lesson activity, medium transitions like the end of the day and large transitions like a staff member leaving. Particular attention paid to welcoming young people at the start of the day and helping them to leave at the end of the day in a way where they don't feel rejected
- The use of positive-focused behaviourism – a focus on acknowledging, praising, celebrating and rewarding positive behaviours rather than giving attention to and sanctioning negative behaviours. Our young people are often stuck in negative cycles. They behave badly and are noticed for this. Their bad behaviours become part of their identity and become something that they are "good" at. To break this

cycle it is important we focus more on positives than negatives and help them build more positive identities for themselves

- Being curious about our children and not assuming we understand them. Showing sensitivity in working out what their needs, worries, triggers and strengths are and supporting them
- Separating behaviours from child. Challenging the behaviour but never shaming the child as a person. Remembering that behaviours are a result of their experiences and linked to mental health, the child is not just being “bad”.
- Supporting good self-esteem in other ways – opportunities for students to demonstrate talents, supporting the identification and development of strengths, providing positive fun experiences (that aren't always dependant on good behaviour) to build a positive memory bank and change their self-narratives
- Supporting students to develop emotional literacy. Engaging them in conversations about feelings. Staff modelling talking about their own feelings. Naming what the child might be feeling when acting out behaviourally and empathising with that feeling
- Providing opportunities for play including physical play, imaginative story play using figures, sensory play, construction play, rough and tumble play and organised games play. Play is vital for children's development and many of our students have not had the opportunity for much adult-supported play. Using play-based learning where appropriate
- Many of our students literally cannot sit down and just listen for long periods of time. Teaching styles must reflect this. Chunking learning into manageable amounts, varying the pace and style of learning, using interactive learning wherever possible, getting students up and moving around where possible. Ignoring low-level fidgeting, moving around etc. Providing fidget toys where helpful
- Scaffolding and differentiating learning to suit the special needs of our students. Providing optimal challenge – enough for learning to take place but not so much that students are overwhelmed and thus discouraged
- Supporting students to develop practical emotional regulation skills - exploring what works for individual students e.g. physical activity, sensory tools, listening to music, talking to someone etc
- Supporting students to understand the complexities of social situations. Providing subtle and non-judgemental coaching in the moment in social situations. Reviewing what went wrong in a supportive non-judgemental way
- Being mindful that many of our students have experienced people using power over them in abusive and traumatic ways. Being sensitive to power in our relationships with young people and helping our students to become empowered and to use personal power in a healthy way
- Being mindful of how experience of prejudice can contribute to difficulties and poor mental health. Modelling tolerance and celebration of difference based on aspects such as race, gender, sexuality, class, ability, neurological difference, culture etc
- Being aware of our own stories and emotional reactions and how our behaviour plays a key role. Controlling our own emotions in challenging situations. Handing over to someone else when needed. Not taking students' behaviours personally.

Being the adult and taking proactive steps to repair a relationship with a student when it has broken down

- Ensuring that IBSPs and IEPs are meaningful documents that support the students' academic, social, emotional and behavioural learning and that they are used in a collaborative way with students
- Recognising that many of our students require specialist mental health support but are unable to access this through statutory services either because of lack of availability or difficulties in engaging with what is offered. Making available such support in-house using qualified therapists who work in flexible and holistic ways to support the complex needs of our students. Referring to external agencies where appropriate.

A tiered approach to mental health support

The support we offered is tiered depending on the need of individual students:

Tier 1: Universal nurture provided by all staff to all students. Staff are trained to support basic emotional wellbeing needs through using an approach that fosters the development of consistent emotionally attuned relationships within the context of a practice that focuses primarily on noticing, nurturing and rewarding positive aspects of students rather than paying attention to and sanctioning negative aspects.

Tier 2: A small number of staff at each site are trained as mental health first aiders. These MHFAs are able to provide day to day support for children in distress who need some additional support away from their class. MHFAs also have an additional role to promote awareness and a whole school mental health approach. With additional training, MHFAs may be able to provide a short-term anger management programme for students whose anger management difficulties do not need more specialist support. MHFAs do not provide long-term individual support for students.

Tier 3: Specialist in-house support provided by qualified psychological therapists and trainee psychological therapists. Therapeutic support for students who need more intensive work to help them with their SEMH needs, particularly where trauma and / or high-risk behaviours are involved. We use forms of therapy that are adapted to the complex needs of our students and therapy is also often necessarily long-term. Therapy also often involves work with families. Trainee therapists are intensively supervised by both our qualified therapists and their training providers.

Supporting staff

We recognise that the work with our students is challenging and often emotional. We aim to provide an environment that sees staff welfare as a priority and supports it. This is for the benefit of staff but also obviously indirectly benefits students too. There is a separate policy that details this.

Working with other agencies

We recognise the importance of working collaboratively with other agencies such as social care, CAMHS, youth offending and the local borough. We proactively seek support from other agencies where there are needs we cannot meet alone. We act as a good partner with such agencies and do everything we can to play a positive role in professional networks. We will also use our position of power to challenge other agencies respectfully on behalf of our students and their families when needed.

Supporting families

Good supportive relationships with families is a vital aspect of our work and all staff play a part in this. Often families are struggling with the same difficulties that have impacted on our students such as poverty, social exclusion and experience of trauma and insecure attachment. Parents and carers need the same nurturing, respectful and positive-focused approach that we use with our students. Elements of our approach to working with parents and carers include:

- Using a positive-focused approach to support the development of parental strengths and resources
- Working collaboratively with parents / carers. Respecting their expert knowledge of their children. Ensuring young people see school and home working together collaboratively
- Spending time to develop trust with parents / carers, many of whom may have had many negative experiences of other professionals and schools in particular. Being proactive in repairing relationships when they break down
- SLT and therapists proactively supporting parents / carers to seek external support from other agencies where needed. Supporting parental voice in professional networks
- Ensuring that the necessary good attachments between staff and students do not undermine parental attachments to their children. The parental attachment is the primary one, school staff provide important attachments but they are secondary