



Creating Cultures of Inclusion: From Principles to Practice

Kerry Lidgett – School Improvement Adviser

Session Aims

- Understand inclusion as a culture of belonging
 - Explore how leadership and adult behaviour shape inclusive schools
 - Develop adaptive teaching approaches for all learners
 - Recognise the impact of language and mindset on inclusion
 - Apply practical strategies to support behaviour, regulation and access
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Three key strands focused on Inclusion in the classroom

EEF evidence base

The 2020 'Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools' guidance — refreshed in 2025 with new Five-a-Day tools and the Feb 2026 'Check. Adapt.' practitioner resource — has shifted the profession from differentiation to adaptive teaching.

Schools White Paper 2026

'Every Child Achieving and Thriving' (23 Feb 2026) introduces a three-tier SEND support model — Universal, Targeted/Targeted Plus, Specialist — alongside National Inclusion Standards. Universal tier rests on adaptive teaching.

Ofsted EIF (Nov 2025)

New five-point scale and a standalone 'Inclusion' judgement. Toolkit explicitly looks at whether adaptations are 'well-targeted and effective' and prioritise 'keeping up rather than catching up'. Secure-fit replaces best-fit.

Introduction - Inclusion

What is inclusion?

What does it mean for you and your school?



What words come to mind when you think about inclusion? Write down the ones that resonate most with you.

Introduction - Inclusion

What is inclusion?

Inclusion means creating a school environment where every pupil feels safe, valued and able to participate fully, regardless of their needs, background or starting point. They have a sense of belonging.

What does it mean for you and your school?

Inclusion is realised through daily adult practices—how we speak, respond, adapt and build relationships—so that every child experiences **belonging** and has equitable access to learning.

Inclusion as Belonging



Definition of Belonging

Belonging means students feel welcome, accepted, respected, and supported within the school environment, fostering wellbeing and engagement. They feel they matter and can see themselves as belonging as part of the school community.

Core Principles

Safety, presence, voice, connectivity, and agency are key principles guiding inclusive policies that build belonging.

Addressing Marginalisation

Inclusive schools foster positive relationships and celebrate diversity to support marginalised young persons' sense of belonging.

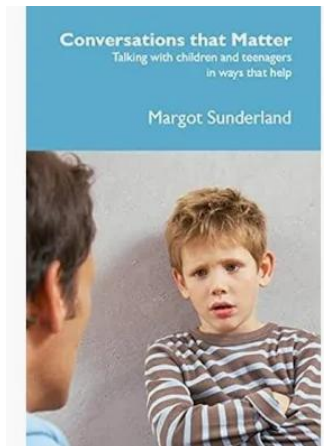
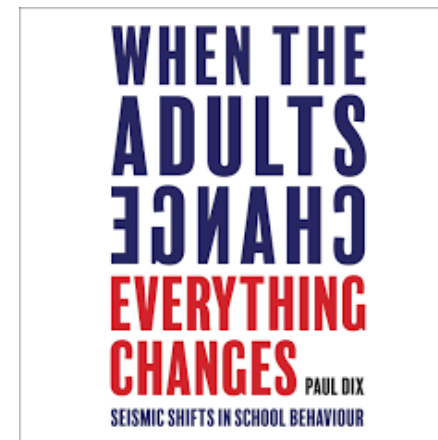
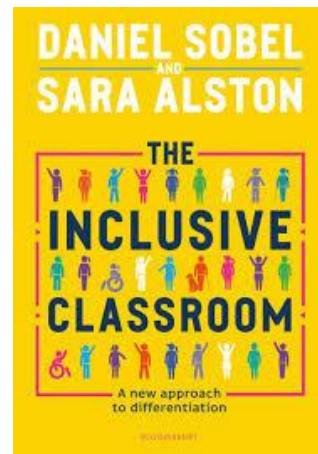
Impact of Belonging

Students who feel they belong show higher engagement, academic success, and resilience in school.

Introduction – Relational Culture

Relational Practice and Transforming School Culture

- Understanding why relationships sit at the heart of behaviour, wellbeing and learning
- Exploring how adult regulation shapes the emotional climate of a school
- Setting the foundations for a culture of safety, connection and belonging



Relational Culture

What relational practice looks like

A relational approach is not permissiveness, rather it seeks to address the root causes of observable behaviour through adopting and maintaining a **curious mindset**. The questions we ask change as a result:

BEHAVIOURIST APPROACH (JUDGEMENT)	RELATIONAL APPROACH (CURIOSITY)
"How do we stop that behaviour?" → Apply punishment	"What need is being met through this behaviour?" → Identify and meet need
"How do we get X to comply?" → Offer reward	"What danger is being avoided?" → Provide safety
"How do I encourage good choices?" → Apply reward/punishment	"What skills are missing?" → Teach/support

Relational Policy and Transforming Culture

What Do We Mean by Relational Culture?

‘A relational culture is created when adults consistently provide safety, predictability, and connection through their behaviour, especially in moments of stress’.

Schools are relational systems

Adults set the emotional climate

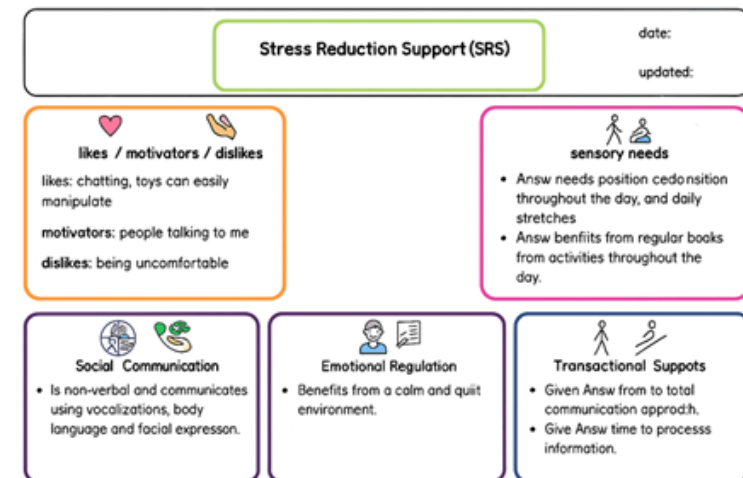
Culture is created through what adults do under pressure

Relational culture = safety, predictability & connection

Relational Policy and Transforming Culture

Why Start With Adults?

- Adults have greatest influence on climate & safety
- Dysregulated adults → reactive systems
- Regulated adults → calm, reflective systems
- Co-regulation before self-regulation




Relational Policy and Transforming Culture

Core Components of Relational Policy


- Behaviour as communication
- Connection + boundaries
- Repair after rupture
- Adult tone, language & conduct explicitly defined
- Body language
- Environment

Reflect and Reset

Name: _____
Date: _____
Time: _____

What happened? 

How are you feeling?



What was the impact of your actions?

POSTCARD

Something I want my teacher to know....

From.....



Relational Policy and Transforming Culture

Leadership as System Regulator

- Leaders set emotional tone
- Slow thinking > reactive thinking
- Psychological safety
- Reduce threat in systems



School Strategies

- **Adaptive teaching** – A shift from differentiation to adaptive teaching strategies.
 - **Words matter** - The language adults use shapes how children are perceived and supported, helping shift from deficit-focused narratives to relational, needs-led understanding.
 - **Interoception in the curriculum** - Teaching interoception helps pupils notice and understand their internal body signals so they can regulate emotions and behaviour more effectively, particularly supporting those with SEND.
 - **Adults as the agents of change** - Adults hold the greatest influence over school culture, meaning that calm, regulated and attuned adults create the conditions for children to feel safe, connect and learn.
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The shift from differentiation to adaptive teaching



Differentiation (legacy)

- Three separate worksheets per lesson
- Fixed 'ability' groups (red / blue / green tables)
- Tasks simplified for 'lower ability'
- Different learning objectives by group
- Heavy reliance on TA to 'sit with' SEND pupils



Adaptive teaching

- One ambitious lesson, scaffolded for access
- Same destination, different routes and supports
- Flexible grouping based on current need
- Responsive in the moment to formative evidence
- Pre-teaching, modelling and 'live' scaffolds



Within-class 'ability' grouping shows an EEF Toolkit effect of -0.01 months; between-class grouping -0.07 months. The evidence does not support fixed differentiation

What is adaptive teaching?

*Alex Quigley (EEF): "Adaptive teaching requires both **micro-adaptations** — small, in-the-moment decisions — and **significant adaptations** that are anticipated and planned in advance."*

It is:

- Being responsive to evidence of learning and adjusting teaching — e.g. adjusting explanation, pacing or scaffold
 - Anticipating likely barriers to learning before the lesson, especially for pupils with SEND and adapting planning prior to the lesson to overcome them.
 - Focussed on the class as a whole, maintaining high expectations and the same learning destination
 - Teacher decision-making informed by knowledge of the pupil
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What is adaptive teaching?

It is NOT

- Planning three different worksheets for three groups
- Reducing the cognitive demand for some pupils
- Outsourcing SEND pupils to a TA in the corner
- A one-off observable strategy ticked off in a lesson plan

Where will this pupil — with their working-memory limits, prior gaps, EAL stage or sensory profile — meet friction in this lesson?

1. Anticipate barriers

2. Plan to address them

Build in the scaffold, the worked example, the visual organiser, the pre-taught vocabulary. Plan the 'significant adaptations' in advance.

3. Adapt in the moment

4. Elicit evidence

Reteach, regroup, pause, re-model, or extend. The 'micro-adaptations' that distinguish responsive teaching.

Questions, whiteboards, cold-calling & VF to find what pupils actually know, not what you hope they know.

Inclusion

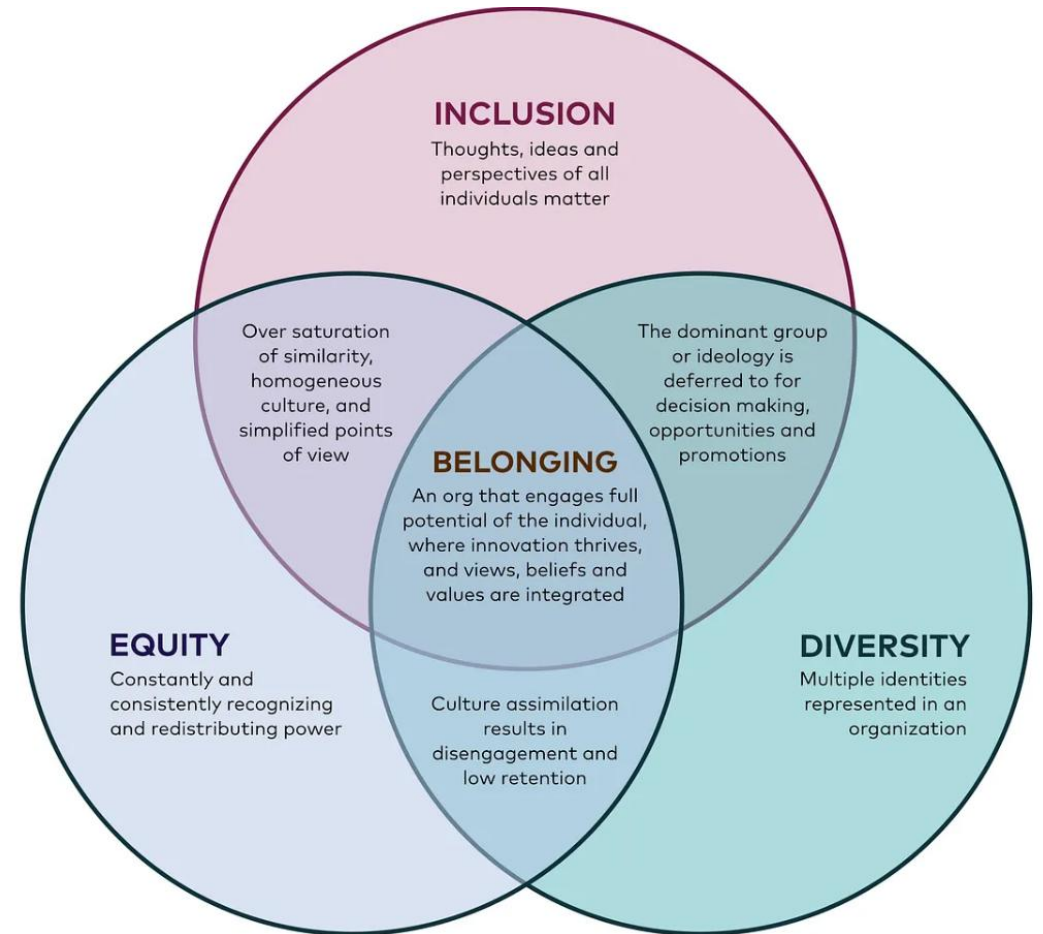
Inclusion is **not extra**.

It is part of teaching in 2026 and beyond.

In your school, if you hear this kind of talk...

- “we are not trained for this”
- “they’re inclusion/SEND/CO responsibility”
- “they shouldn’t be here”
- “they should be in special school”
- “they’ll be moving on soon, they won’t stay long”

The child hears → ‘I don’t belong here’



Why Words Matter

The language we use is rarely neutral; it sets the **tone** and **ethos**.

Words shape how we interpret **behaviour** and how children **experience** school.

Words that adults use can be the best tool to shift staff **mindset**.

Shifting language from **deficit-based to relational** creates belonging and strengthens inclusion.

From Deficit to Relational Mindsets

- Behaviour is NOT a problem to manage; it is **communication** to understand.
 - Language should describe needs, context, and strengths—not labels or deficit.
 - Small shifts in phrasing can transform how teams talk, plan, and support pupils.
 - If there is one thing you take away – do this!
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From Deficit to Relational Mindsets

- The most common question for teachers when told a child in their new class has SEN is “what do they find difficult?”
 - We rarely ask about their strengths and motivations.
 - Different people display their needs in different ways and there are strengths that come with most non-neurotypical development.
 - *What can you do well?*
 - *What do you bring to the classroom?*
 - *How lucky are we to be able to have you show us a different way of doing things?*
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From Deficit to Relational Mindsets

- **ASC:** Attention to detail and observational skills, logical, good long-term memory and recall of details, unswayed by peer pressure, reliable, loyal, honest, non-judgemental (takes others at face value), knowledge of routines and desire for accuracy and order, ability to hyper-focus, thinks outside the box (novel approaches to tasks), visual learning, vocabulary (though they do not always understand the words they use).
 - **ADHD:** Curious, highly engaged in the moment, energetic, creative, persistent, adventurous, big-picture thinking, thinking outside the box, copes well with unpredictability.
 - **Dyslexia:** Visual thinking, creative and interconnected thinking, navigation, big-picture thinking, pattern recognition (useful for prediction), spatial knowledge, sharper peripheral vision, narrative reasoning, verbal communication, good at reading people.
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Teach the Child NOT the Label

Quality First Teaching!



Our Words Matter Activity

Write down an alternative to the following:

Current Language	New Choice of Language
Challenging behaviour	
Behaviour issues	
Attention seeking	
Those children	
Their culture is very different to ours	
Boys will be boys	
Hard to engage family	

Language That Builds Inclusion

- Inclusive language affirms identity, reduces stigma, and promotes belonging.



- **Can you think of a time when the language used has made you feel unwelcome, anxious or in fight/flight/freeze?**
 - Avoid assumptions about culture, family, background, or capacity.
 - Use words that open doors: “our pupils,” “families we need to reach,” “connection-seeking.”
 - Much more inclusive than: “those children”, “unengaging families” or “they shouldn’t even be here”
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Interoception

What Is Interoception? | Interoception Resources & Activities by Kelly Mahler



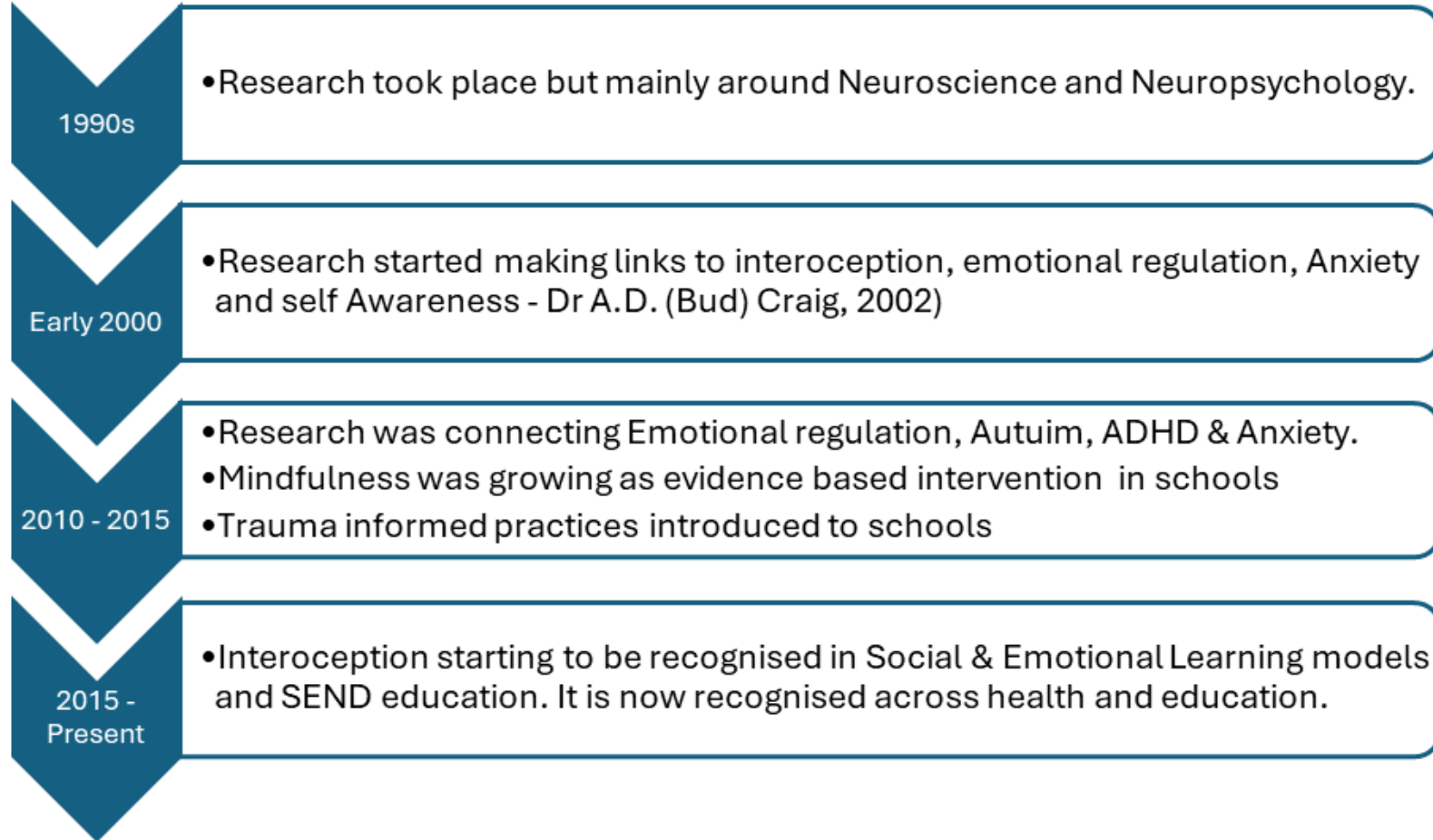
Interoception in the Curriculum



What Is Interoception?

- Interoception is our bodies powerful sensory system which enables the ability to notice, interpret and respond to internal body signals – e.g. heart rate, breath, thirst, hunger, pain, temperature, butterflies, etc...
 - Teaching interoception gives pupils language for body sensations and emotions.
 - It supports self-regulation, emotional literacy and wellbeing.
 - Interoception is our brain getting these signals & interpreting them to a felt experience. This guides behaviour, emotion & regulation.
 - Feeling & attaching meaning is relevant to make sense of body feelings.
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Interoception Research



Interoception in the Curriculum



All feelings are valid!

- There are no wrong interoception experiences.
 - There is no wrong way to describe body signals or emotions.
 - Learners may find it easier to accept physical descriptors rather than emotional labels – think ‘body first, emotions second’
 - Labelling emotions, we may mislabel body signals, learners disengage and we can encourage, without intention, masking and disguised compliance.
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Why Interoception Matters in Schools

Emotional regulation is IMPOSSIBLE without interoception	Self regulation vs co-regulation	Rooted in mindfulness but more accessible
Neuroaffirming practice	Supporting SEMH	Less focus on emotion first language
Supporting EBSNA	Supports curiosity in learners who have patterns of exclusion	Support sensory needs and regulation

- Helps pupils recognise internal states before reaching crisis.
 - Reduces anxiety-driven behaviours and supports emotional regulation.
 - Particularly beneficial for pupils with SEND, trauma history or sensory differences.
 - Supports the adults too!
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Building Interoception into the Curriculum

How to embed Interoception Awareness into your setting:

- Teach awareness of sensations, emotions and appropriate responses using **BODY → EMOTION → ACTION**
 - Embed interoception across routines, visuals, check-ins and regulation strategies.
 - Use consistent adult language to support co-regulation and reduce anxiety.
 - Body check ins and scans
 - Body maps or charts
 - IA on the fly
 - Feel good menus
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Building Interoception into the Curriculum

Language:

- No wrong words
- Try using 'COMFORTABLE' and 'UNCOMFORTABLE'



Interoception – further reading

SENCology Blog - [SENCology | Optimus Education Blog \(optimus-education.com\)](#)

Interoception OT - [www.Kelly-Mahler.com](#)

ERIC - [Interoception and toileting – ERIC](#)

National Autistic Society - [Interoception and mental wellbeing in autistic people](#)

Interoception Explained: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A0zbCiakjaA>

Interoception and Alexithymia Blog by Kelly Mahler (Video)

<https://www.kellymahler.com/resources/blog/interoception-and-alexithymia/>

Autism Level Up: Power Plan and Person in Context. Autism Level UP!

Twinkl: The Feeling Body Activity (teacher made) – Twinkl

[How Compliance-Based Approaches Damage Interoceptive Awareness & Self-Regulation - Autism Awareness](#)

Emotions – Think Michael Rosen



Sympathetic Nervous System

What the FIGHT stress response looks like in the classroom...



Sympathetic Nervous System in an Inclusive Setting

De-escalation Digest...

Sip & snack

Teach emotions

Check ins

Calm spaces



Scripts

Regulate to educate –
starts with YOU!

Calming tools

Behaviour is Communication



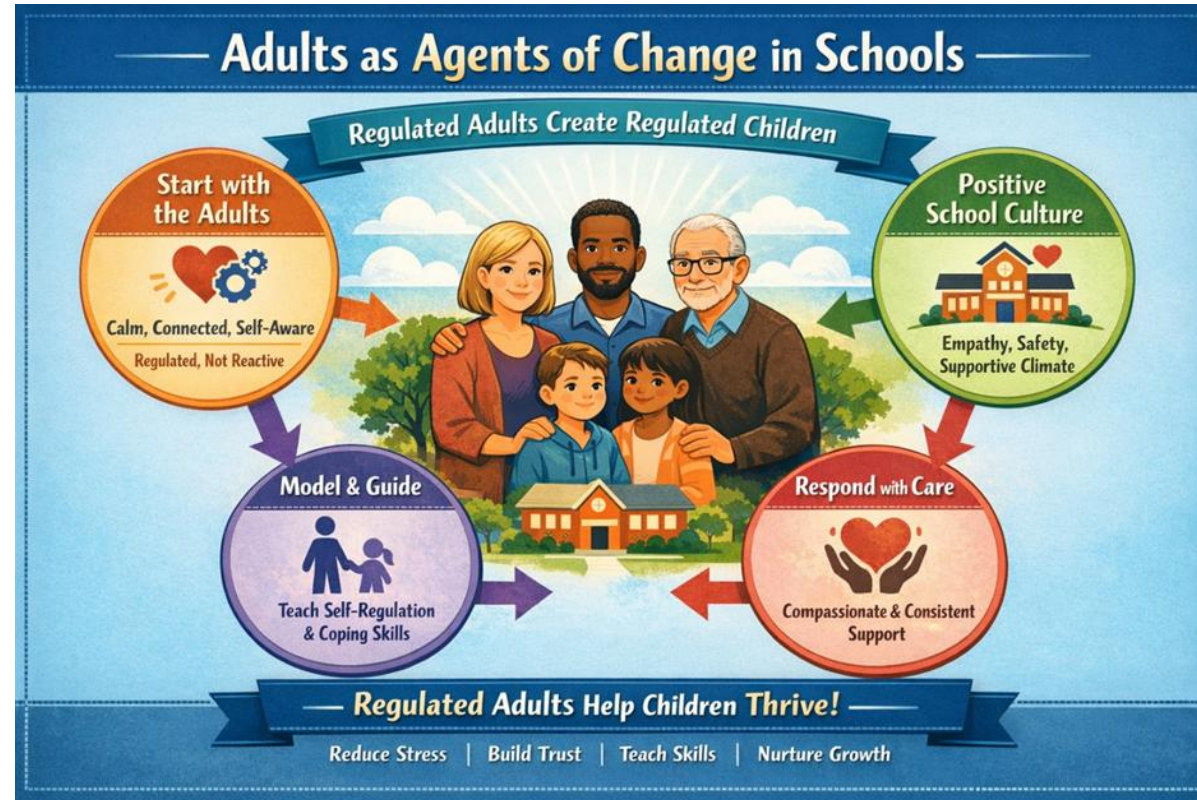
- The child at the centre
- Separate the behaviour from the child
- Risk assess – What harm can be done? Impact?
- Remember ‘Words Matter’ – rather than a child “kicking off” or in “meltdown”

Behaviour is Communication – Words Matter!



- “They’re having a difficult moment.”
- “They’re feeling overwhelmed and need support.”
- “They’re struggling to regulate right now.”
- “They’re communicating distress through their behaviour.”
- “They need some co-regulation.”
- “They need a safe space to settle.”
- “Something has triggered them — let’s work out what they need.”
- “Their behaviour is showing us they’re not okay yet.”
- “They’re finding this environment tricky right now.”
- “They need connection before correction.”
- “They’re showing us they need help to feel safe and connected.”
- “They need reassurance that they belong here.”

Adults as the Agents of Change



Adults as the Agents of Change

Why Adults Are the Agents of Change

- Adults hold the greatest influence over school culture and emotional climate.
- This starts with the leadership.
- Children learn regulation through attuned, consistent adult interactions.
- Regulated adults create the conditions for safety, belonging and learning.

What do you do at your school to ensure adults are regulated and stress reduced?

Regulation Before Intervention

- Adult regulation is foundation to trauma-informed and relational practice.
- Stress narrows empathy and leads to reactive responses.
- Regulated adults pause, stay curious and uphold boundaries with warmth.
- Strategies for adults to regulate.
- Stress reduction plans.



Shaping Culture Through Relational Practice

- Culture is revealed in adult behaviour, especially under pressure.
- Relational policy prioritises connection, repair and predictable responses.
- Adults model the values they want to see in pupils and colleagues.

Strategies:

- Support each other
 - Focus on language – ‘words matter’
 - Don’t be precious
 - Know your own triggers and limitations
 - Clear support plans for learners
-

Ofsted Quote

“It is often not what you see but what you don’t see that makes a school inclusive”



Ofsted Quote

Sir Martyn Oliver:

“If you get it right for the most disadvantaged and vulnerable, you get it right for everyone.”

“A school’s leadership cannot be of a high standard unless inclusion is ingrained into its culture.”

“Inclusion demands high standards... you can be both inclusive and high achieving.”

Inclusion and Specialist Teaching Team

Senior Specialist Teacher Team

Our SEND Service Ambition is striving to:

- achieve the **best outcomes** for our children and young people.
- put **wellbeing and care** at the centre of our service so we can deliver for our children and young people.
- **communicate** well with our children, young people, families and partners.
- be **creative** with our support for children and young people.
- **proactively** support our children, young people and families.
- be **aspirational** for what our children and young people can achieve.
- work in partnership with others to provide an **inclusive** Buckinghamshire offer for children and young people with SEND.



Reflection...

One key take away that you will take back to your school?

What will be your first step to implement it?

Questions and Answers

Thank you

