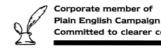# Supporting children with challenging behaviour through a nurture group approach
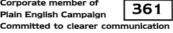
This survey examines the use of nurture groups and related provision in a small sample of 29 infant, first and primary schools. Nurture groups are small, structured teaching groups for pupils showing signs of behavioural, social or emotional difficulties, particularly those who are experiencing disruption or distress outside of school. The survey considers what makes nurture group provision successful and evaluates the impact on the pupils and their families.

Corporate member of
Plain English Campaign
Committed to clearer communication

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Executive summary

The aim of this survey was to analyse the elements of successful nurture group[1] provision and the difference that nurture groups make to the outcomes for pupils.[2] Nurture groups are small, structured teaching groups for pupils showing signs of behavioural, social or emotional difficulties, particularly those who are experiencing disruption or distress outside of school.[3] They aim to provide a predictable environment in which pupils can build trusting relationships with adults and gain the skills they need to learn in larger classes. There is an emphasis on the systematic teaching of behavioural and social skills, on learning through play, and on sharing 'family-type' experiences, such as eating food together. Over time, schools have taken and adapted this approach to meet their own requirements, though many across the country still base their work faithfully on the original nurture group model.[4]

Between November 2010 and March 2011, inspectors visited 29 schools[5] to explore their use of nurture group provision. In most of these schools, between five and 10 pupils attended the nurture group at any one time. Pupils spent at least half of each week with the group and the rest of their week with their mainstream class. It was common for pupils to spend two to three terms in the nurture group. All the groups visited had been established to cater for pupils whose behaviour was causing concern. The concerns fell into three main categories. The first concern was overt, 'acting out' behavioural difficulties, such as aggression, which led to disruption in lessons. The second was behaviour that was not particularly challenging but over time interfered with the pupil's learning and that of others, such as not being able to work independently or continual interruption. The third was very withdrawn behaviour and a reticence to interact with others.

Pupils who were selected for the groups visited had sometimes previously been excluded from school on a fixed-term basis, were in danger of permanent exclusion, or were being considered for a move to a special school. Many were poor attenders

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[1] 'Nurture groups vary in nature depending on the settings in which they take place... The main thing they all have in common is a grounding in attachment theory, an area of psychology which explains the need for any person to be able to form secure and happy relationships with others in the formative years of their lives. Most commonly, nurture groups are made up of 8–12 students with a teacher and teaching assistant' (The Nurture Group Network website www.nurturegroups.org/pages/what-are-nurture-groups.html).

[2] In 2009, Ofsted published a survey, 'The exclusion from school of children aged four to seven'. Data collected by the Department for Education (DfE) show that it is rare for schools to exclude children under seven. Nevertheless, some children of this age were, and still are, receiving fixed-period exclusions, occasionally leading to permanent exclusion. Ofsted's 2009 survey found that using nurture groups well was one of the ways in which some schools managed to avoid using exclusion.

[3] See Further information section.

[4] For example P Cooper and D Whitebread, 'The effectiveness of nurture groups on student progress: evidence from a national research study, *Emotional and behavioural difficulties*, vol. 12, no 3, 2007, pp 171–190; www.informaworld.com/smpp/content~content=a781324211~db=all~jumptype=rss.

[5] These schools were chosen for visits as their most recent inspection report identified that they featured nurture group provision. See Notes section for further details.

at school. Others had experienced severe trauma outside of school. Almost all the nurture group pupils in the schools surveyed were working below the academic level expected for their age, because they were not taking a full part in lessons. The most common aim for the nurture group provision was to give pupils the skills and strategies they needed to enable them to remain in mainstream education both in the short and long term.

The schools sought to provide a safe, comfortable, home-like environment, with clear routines and adults modelling positive relationships, in line with nurture group principles.[6] Leaders and staff of all the schools saw a core purpose of the group as supporting pupils to improve their behavioural, social and emotional skills. They set pupils personal targets and gave them a range of strategies to help them to improve their behaviour. In the best practice seen, these targets and strategies were used in the pupils' mainstream classes and at home by their parents and carers. This helped to ensure that the pupils experienced some consistency in the approach to their behaviour, and supported parents and carers to develop their own strategies. Typically, the pupils improved their behavioural, social and emotional skills as a result of the nurture group provision.

The amount of academic learning in the nurture groups varied from school to school. The best schools visited aimed from the outset to ensure that pupils made progress with their literacy, numeracy and other academic skills, so that they did not fall behind while they were in the nurture group. To make this work, these schools had to plan very carefully so that both the nurture group staff and the class teacher knew who was responsible for each aspect of the pupil's learning. Where this happened, the nurture group helped pupils to make good progress with their behaviour and with their academic learning at the same time. Where this did not happen, pupils sometimes missed out on important parts of the curriculum and did not make the progress that they should have done, for example with their reading and writing.

The 95 parents who met with inspectors during the survey were very positive about the difference that the nurture group had made to their children. Many spoke of their previous concerns and sometimes distress at their children's behaviour and their apparent failure in school. They emphasised the way in which the school, and in particular the nurture group staff, had worked supportively yet firmly with their children. Many said that they had seen their children's behaviour transform over time. They spoke of their children being calmer, happier and more confident, both at home and school, and of their own greater confidence in managing their children's behaviour. One parent summed it up for most of the parents spoken to when she said, 'The change in my child is amazing and unbelievable.'

Nurture group intervention involves a considerable investment from schools in terms of finance, time, planning, resources and staff training. However, the survey illustrates that, when successful, the impact on young children and their families can be highly significant and far-reaching.

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[6] See Further information section.

Key findings

■ When the nurture groups were working well they made a considerable difference to the behaviour and the social skills of the pupils who attended them. Through intensive, well-structured teaching and support, pupils learnt to manage their own behaviour, to build positive relationships with adults and with other pupils and to develop strategies to help them cope with their emotions.

■ At its best, the nurture group was part of a genuinely 'nurturing' school, where all members were valued, but where this value was imbued with a rigorous drive for pupils to achieve their very best.

■ The schools that were the most effective at 'nurturing' had a clearly defined, positive but firm approach to the way in which they spoke to pupils, gave them clear boundaries, praised them for their efforts and achievements, ensured that they made academic progress, and worked with their parents. They saw each pupil as an individual and planned and implemented additional support accordingly.

■ The nurture groups gave parents practical support, including strategies that they could use at home with their children. Parents felt more confident about being able to help their children and they valued the nurture groups highly.

■ All the schools visited judged the success of the group in terms of the pupils' successful reintegration to their main class. However, ensuring that the pupils made progress in their academic learning often did not have as high a profile as the development of their social, emotional and behavioural skills. Almost all the schools saw this as part of their purpose to some extent, but its prominence varied.

■ The effectiveness with which literacy, numeracy and other academic skills were taught varied. Occasionally, it was seen as acceptable to put academic learning 'on hold' while the pupils were in the nurture group. This led to them falling further behind.

■ Daily informal communication between the class teacher and the nurture group staff was common and helped staff to know how well the nurture group pupils were doing on a daily basis. However, communication about pupils' academic progress was not as strong as about their social and behavioural progress.

■ Where pupils in the nurture group were receiving a coherent and balanced curriculum, leaders, class teachers and nurture group staff had agreed where and by whom each element of the curriculum would be taught. Where curriculum planning was not clear, gaps emerged in the pupils' learning but were not always noticed.

■ All the nurture group pupils in the schools surveyed retained at least some contact with their mainstream classes and with the rest of the school. The extent to which a sense of 'belonging' was retained depended on the attitudes of the school and the systems for communication. If these elements were positive, the pupils remained a clear and visible part of their mainstream class even when they attended the nurture group for most of the time.

- The pupils' transition back to their mainstream class full time was planned particularly carefully in 14 of the schools. In the best practice, it was given a high priority and planned well in advance and included targeted support back in the class.

- Thirteen schools tracked the academic and the social, emotional and behavioural progress of the nurture group pupils thoroughly. These schools were able to demonstrate clear evidence about the progress made in each of these areas and knew where and why progress had not been made.

- The schools' evidence indicated that over a third of the 50 case study pupils who were attending the nurture groups at the time of the survey were making substantial progress with behavioural, social and emotional skills. Nearly all were making at least some progress.

- Academic progress was not as strong, though it was very good for some. For nine pupils, their progress in reading, writing and mathematics had accelerated since joining the nurture group. Twenty pupils had started to make at least some progress in reading, writing, and mathematics since joining the nurture group, having previously made none or very little.

- No school had evaluated thoroughly the progress of the former nurture group pupils as a separate cohort in order to analyse the long-term impact of this intensive intervention. However, all could provide case studies that showed considerable success.

- Almost all the schools recognised that the nurture group could not be the complete solution to the support that the pupils needed. They put in place a range of targeted support for these and other pupils, particularly when pupils left the group.

Recommendations

The Department for Education and local authorities should:

- take into account the substantial value of well-led and well-taught nurture groups when considering policies and guidance on early intervention and targeted support for pupils with behavioural, emotional and social needs.

Schools should:

- ensure that all intensive interventions enable pupils to make academic as well as social and emotional progress

- ensure that communication between senior leaders, nurture group staff and class teachers is frequent and systematic, and concentrates on the academic as well as the social progress that pupils are making

- systematically track and evaluate the social, emotional and academic progress of the pupils after they leave the nurture group or other intensive intervention in order to ascertain long-term impact and establish whether other support is needed.

Introduction

1. Nurture groups are small, structured teaching groups for pupils showing signs of behavioural, social or emotional difficulties, particularly those who are experiencing disruption or distress outside of school.[7] They aim to provide a predictable environment in which pupils can build trusting relationships with adults and gain the skills they need in order to learn in larger classes. There is an emphasis on systematic assessment of pupils' social, emotional and behavioural skills, on learning through play, and on sharing 'family-type' experiences, such as eating food together. Over time, schools have taken and adapted this approach to meet their own requirements, though many across the country still base their work faithfully on the original nurture group model, often referred to as a 'classic' nurture group.[8] This model consists of a class of eight to 12 children, staffed by two adults, normally a teacher and a teaching assistant. In a 'classic' nurture group, pupils remain a member of their main class, and spend at least some of each day with them. The group aims to provide a supportive context for children to experience and learn appropriate behaviours, while following a core curriculum of language, number, and personal and social development. There is an emphasis on systematic assessment of the pupils' personal and social development as well as their academic progress.

2. Across the 29 schools visited, 379 pupils were attending some nurture group provision at the time of the survey. In 2009/10, the nurture groups in the same schools had catered for 349 pupils. Twenty-four of the 29 schools visited had based their group on the classic nurture group model. Pupils in these schools spent at least half of each week in the nurture group, often more, and the rest of their time with their main class. Another two schools had taken the basic principles and adapted them to suit their own settings. This involved less time each week in the group, but teaching and organisation were still based on the same principles. These 26 groups involved between five and 10 pupils at any one time. Three schools were using some of the elements of nurture groups in a much-adapted way. One school ran sessions at lunchtimes, another for an hour a day for different pupils, and a third ran two sessions a week for eight children at a time. Through a series of groups for short periods of time, rather than one intensive group, these schools catered for much larger numbers of

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[7] See Further information section.

[8] For example P Cooper and D Whitebread, 'The effectiveness of nurture groups on student progress: evidence from a national research study, *Emotional and behavioural difficulties*, vol 12, no 3, 2007, pp 171–190; www.informaworld.com/smpp/content~content=a781324211~db=all~jumptype=rss.

pupils. One school involved up to 50 pupils at any one time in their nurture-based intervention.

3. Twenty of the schools' nurture groups included only Key Stage 1 pupils. Five schools had groups that included both Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 pupils, and the other four had a separate group for each key stage. Pupils generally belonged to the group for two to three terms, though there were examples of them spending longer or shorter periods of time as nurture group members.

4. All the schools visited had set their groups up to cater for pupils whose behaviour was causing concern. This included:

   ■ overt, 'acting out' behavioural difficulties which led to disruption in lessons – schools mentioned descriptors such as, 'behaving impulsively', 'aggressive' and 'challenging'

   ■ behaviour that was not particularly challenging but over time interfered with the pupil's learning and that of others; schools described this as 'restless', 'lacking concentration', 'unable to focus', 'constantly needing adult attention'

   ■ withdrawn behaviour of various degrees which led to a lack of social interaction – described as 'very introverted', 'unable to relate to others', 'passive', 'completely lacking in confidence', 'very reluctant to speak' and even 'electively mute'.

5. The schools generally tried to ensure that a variety of needs were catered for in the group. At the time of the survey visit, two of the groups included only pupils whose behaviour was overtly challenging. The others included pupils with a mixture of different needs. In four of the schools the nurture group provided short-term support for pupils whose circumstances made them particularly vulnerable. These schools responded to changes in pupils' home or community circumstances such as bereavements or pupils spending a short time in foster care due to a parent's illness, as well as supporting those with longer-term needs. On joining the nurture group, the pupils were often working at academic levels below those expected for their age.

6. Seventeen of the groups were staffed by a teacher and a teaching assistant. Five groups were led by a higher-level teaching assistant and supported by a second teaching assistant. Six groups were run by two or three teaching assistants. The final group, which consisted of short sessions for different groups of pupils, was staffed by a learning mentor.

7. Funding arrangements for the nurture groups were as follows.

   ■ Seventeen schools funded the nurture group provision solely through their own budget.

   ■ Three schools received a contribution from the local authority towards the cost of the group.

- Five schools received full or almost full funding from the local authority for the nurture group.

- Four schools had received funding to set up and run the group initially, but the funding had ceased and the school had taken over the costs.

Successful intervention – what did it look like?

8. At their best, the nurture groups had some clear outcomes. They:

- significantly modified pupils' behaviour

- improved pupils' social, emotional and behavioural skills

- gave parents and carers practical support, strategies and confidence

- accelerated academic progress or restarted it when it had stalled

- enabled the pupil to reintegrate into their mainstream class

- modified the practice of other staff, such as the class teacher

- influenced the rest of the school's practice

- improved pupils' attendance.

9. Comments made by parents and carers emphasised the changes that they had seen in their children after a successful period of time attending a nurture group. The following comments illustrate some of the typical points made by the parents.

'The nurture group has simply turned him around.'

'Without the group our children would be expelled or lost.'

'Her confidence has come on in leaps and bounds.'

'Attending the nurture group has made a lot of difference to my child. He is much calmer and there are no problems getting him to school. He is keen to come now.'

'...he has that sparkle back again.'

'The change in my daughter is amazing and unbelievable.'

'I don't know where I'd be if it wasn't for the nurture group.'

10. The most successful groups:

- aimed from the outset to promote both social and academic gains

- were built on joint accountability for achievement, academic and social, and planned not to let pupils 'slip between the gaps'

- were a clear part of the whole school – they were neither a 'precious island' that no one else could enter, nor an isolated hut at the outskirts of the playground
- included pupils who had been carefully identified and selected
- adapted to their population and were not 'off the shelf' models
- were not seen as the whole answer
- acted as a 'broker' for the other support that the pupil needed
- led to consistent practice and shared language across the school
- placed a strong focus on developing literacy and numeracy skills, seeing success in basic skills as a key factor in raising self-esteem
- were run by skilled and experienced staff who generated a positive, 'no excuses' culture
- were driven by strong commitment, enthusiasm and understanding from senior leaders
- worked within a whole-school understanding of good nurturing
- understood the importance of frequent communication, both informal and formal, between the class teacher and the nurture group staff about all aspects of the pupils' progress
- had rigorous systems to assess, gather information, track progress, and communicate
- ensured that the pupils remained a full part of the main school
- paid careful attention to reintegration, giving pupils practical support to use the skills they had gained
- ensured that the nurture group staff worked in the mainstream classrooms for at least some of the time so that they had opportunities to see the pupils in other contexts and keep sight of main school expectations
- enabled nurture group staff to carry out specific observations of pupils in mainstream classrooms to assess their progress, check that skills were being generalised and evaluate the consistency of strategies.

11. The survey found a great deal of positive practice. The example below encompassed all the elements outlined above.

> **A 'pot of gold'**
>
> The school was situated in an area where many families faced signficant challenges, such as unemployment and poor-quality housing, and there were frequent issues with the relationships between parents, including domestic violence. This had a considerable impact on some pupils and affected their emotional, social and behavioural development. The headteacher's view was was stong and clear: 'If we don't help these young children, who have experienced emotional trauma in their first

years of life, to become emotionally stable when they are young, they will not go on to develop quality life skills. They won't be able to learn effectively and make expected progress in school and then they're more likely to become disaffected and troublesome in later life.' Nurturing and including all pupils were at the heart of the school's vision and philosophy and the nurture group was at the centre of this vision in action.

The senior leaders had invested considerable energy and time in the development of the nurture group and had given top priority to ensuring that it was staffed by highly competent staff. The expertise of the nurture group teacher underpinned much of its success and this was not just recognised by staff at all levels, but also by parents and pupils. Substantive steps had been taken by the school to ensure that the nurture group was not a 'bolt on' and this was perhaps best reflected by its location in a room in the centre of the Early Years Foundation Stage base, with easy access to the playground and adjacent to a very impressive 'sensory room' which enabled pupils to learn in a stimulating yet soothing environment. The room was a cosy home-like environment and pupils saw the base as a safe haven; yet the rigour in the assessment, planning, organisation and teaching was evident.

The process of reintegration into the mainstream started from the moment the pupil entered the group. There was a close match between the curriculum being taught in mainstream classes and in the nurture group so that it was easy at any time for a pupil in the nurture group to attend their class and not be disadvantaged. Communication between class and nurture staff was very effective. Pupils remained a firm and visible part of their mainstream class throughout their time in the nurture group. All pupils attended their mainstream class for registration. They were then collected for the nurture group and ate breakfast together. This had the dual purpose of providing a calm start to the day and feeding children who may not have eaten since the previous evening.

The day then ran in a similar pattern to the class day, but with a strong emphasis on the personal and social elements of the curriculum. Visual and auditory cues helped pupils to understand the structure of their day and to become more independent. Some pupils joined their class for physical education or music. Pupils returned to their base class for the last half-hour of the day to prepare for home time and for story time. During this time, the nurture group was open for parents to drop in and meet with the nurture group staff to talk about anything to do with their child, including to ask for support with managing their behaviour or supporting their learning.

Throughout their time with the nurture group, pupils' personal, social and academic progress was closely assessed and monitored. Individual targets helped to keep their learning on track. Because of the good curriculum and teaching, pupils made accelerated progress with their literacy and

numeracy skills as well as with their social development. A wide-ranging portfolio of evidence helped staff to assess each pupil's readiness for full reintegration to their mainstream class. Reintegration was very carefully planned and well supported, which enabled pupils to make a smooth transition. Parents' views were overwhelmingly positive about the difference that the group had made to their children. It was, as one put it, a 'pot of gold'.

The elements of success

12. The following sections expand on and exemplify some of the most important aspects mentioned above.

A clearly defined purpose, understood by all

13. Where there was a clear purpose for the nurture group, this set the tone for the group and defined its place in the school. When the purpose of the nurture group was clear and positive:

- all staff understood the reasons for the nurture group's existence
- senior leaders had defined the way in which the nurture group could contribute to whole-school development
- the criteria for placing a pupil in the group were well defined
- the balance of the group was always considered
- baseline assessment provided a clear starting point from which to measure progress
- the nurture group staff and the class teacher each knew which aspects of the pupil's learning they were responsible for and what they were aiming for
- each knew how their work contributed to the pupil's overall development
- the nurture group was inclusive and not isolated
- parents were well informed.

This case study illustrates how this worked in practice in one school.

All-round improvement

The nurture group had a clearly articulated intention to improve pupils' behaviour, but also to improve their academic progress and attainment, their capacity to learn, their social and emotional development and their attendance. The nurture group philosophy was threaded throughout school improvement planning and the cycle of self-evaluation, with a strong emphasis on how the school measured the impact of its actions. There was also a clear expectation that the nurture group would make an impact on wider school improvement, and the evidence was positive regarding, for example, a reduction in exclusions, raising attainment, a

reduction in parental complaints and greater parental engagement. The school set challenging targets for all its pupils, including those in the nurture group, based on baseline data and their individual needs. All targets went beyond expected progress rates. The nurture group contributed to the 'managing behaviour' action plan for the whole school and timescales, expectations, resources, monitoring arrangements and evaluation methods were all rigorously identified and implemented.

14. The schools visited generally endeavoured to ensure that the purpose and operation of the nurture group were understood well by all staff and by parents and carers. For example, three schools produced well-written guidance booklets for staff as well as for parents, and two others encouraged mainstream staff to visit regularly. In another school, spending time in the group formed part of the induction process for teachers new to the school.

15. All the schools saw the core purpose of the group as supporting pupils to improve their behavioural, social and emotional skills. While social and emotional needs were typically emphasised, eight schools specifically included aims related to behaviour such as:

   ■ to reduce the incidence of poor behaviour

   ■ to help pupils develop strategies to know when their behaviour was escalating and give them strategies to manage

   ■ to learn to behave appropriately

   ■ to enable pupils to understand the consequences of their behaviour.

16. The longer-established groups tended to have reflected over time about the referral criteria and refined these accordingly. For example, one school had changed its focus from pupils with overt behavioural needs to those who 'do not engage and appear distant'. Another school focused primarily on behaviour which impeded learning rather than on pupils' social and emotional needs. Four schools were open about the group's function of providing 'respite' for the rest of the class and the teacher. One senior leader, for example, commented that 'a main aim of our group is to enable teaching and learning to take place without unnecessary disruption caused by the challenges presented by a minority of children'.

17. The overall aim most commonly articulated by the schools was to enable pupils to remain in mainstream education both in the short and long term. For this reason, the success of the group was often seen in terms of the pupil's successful reintegration to their main class. However, not all the schools visited gave pupils' academic learning as much prominence as their social, emotional and behavioural progress. Only eight schools mentioned this when asked about their aims. In practice, most saw this as part of their purpose to some extent, but its prominence varied. The schools generally saw the teaching of behavioural, social and emotional skills as naturally leading to academic improvements. Occasionally, though, it was seen as acceptable to put academic

learning 'on hold' while the pupils were in the nurture group. In one school, the aims were not clear and the provision was, at the time of the survey, undergoing major change.

18. The schools largely drew on nurture group principles to organise their provision. They sought to provide a safe, comfortable, home-like environment, with clear routines and adults modelling positive relationships. Staff placed an emphasis on helping pupils to explore their feelings, build positive relationships with adults and with other pupils, and develop strategies to help them cope with their emotions. Two schools particularly emphasised the need for the group to provide pupils with early learning experiences that they might have missed. Where the provision was for only a very short period of time, these aims were necessarily diluted. The school described below had clear aims and had structured its provision accordingly.

> The nurture group classroom was a bright, welcoming and carefully designed environment. There were chairs around a large table, next to a kitchen area, at which the pupils could sit together to have snacks and drinks, a carpet area, areas for child-initiated play and tables for more formal learning. Music was used to create a calm atmosphere. Visual cues, such as photographs, helped pupils to understand the structure of their day and how to behave. They also assisted pupils to express how they felt. A clearly structured reward system helped pupils to follow routines, such as coming in calmly from break time, and to concentrate on reaching their individual targets.
>
> The nurture group staff considered the needs of the pupils carefully and planned a range of appropriate tasks that met both their academic and social needs. Much of the day's structure drew on the Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum. The continual emphasis on language development was highly effective in extending pupils' ability to express themselves clearly and to increase both academic and social understanding.

19. A key challenge for the success of nurture group practice is defining who is responsible for each aspect of the pupil's education. In the best practice observed, the collective responsibility was overtly defined and underpinned by good systems and structures. In one school, nurture group staff spoke of 'borrowing' the pupils from their home class, and all staff saw the pupils as an important part of the whole school. Good planning ensured that the pupils received a balanced curriculum and a consistent approach to their behaviour. In contrast, in another school, class teachers were relatively uninvolved and the nurture group staff themselves promoted a degree of separateness.

20. In the strongest examples, there was an inextricable link between the inclusive policy and practice of the whole school and the operation of the nurture group. The ways in which pupils were supported to develop their social, emotional and behavioural skills were consistent across the school, including the nurture

group, but the group provided a smaller and more supportive environment in which to do so. In one school, for example, the nurture group provided strong models of trusting relationships which then supported the pupils when coping with their own year group.

21. In 26 of the schools the processes for referring and selecting a pupil for the group were clear and understood well by staff. In these schools there was a staged approach which commonly involved class teachers, the special educational needs coordinator, senior leaders and nurture group staff. The schools used a range of information during the referral and review process including pupils' academic progress and attendance, and information about emotional, social and behavioural needs. Teachers' professional knowledge was commonly supplemented by assessment tools such as the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire and the Boxall Profile, and by observations of the pupil in class.[9] This information formed the basis for discussions between the relevant staff, often led by the special educational needs coordinator or the inclusion coordinator. Clear baseline assessment at this point enabled progress to be measured over time. Seventeen of the schools involved parents and carers in the referral process, consulting with them, providing them with information about the provision and gaining their consent, understanding and support.

22. In three schools the criteria for selection were unclear and, as a result, there was some confusion about what the group had to offer and why pupils had been referred. Where the group's purpose was unclear, this tended to cause tension between staff. For example, in one school where a small group spent most of their time out of their mainstream class, there was disagreement among the staff about whether academic learning was being given sufficiently high focus.

23. Considering the balance of the group was generally seen as important by the schools. The groups surveyed tended to cater both for pupils with overt 'acting out' behavioural difficulties and for those who were withdrawn – as one teacher put it, those who 'do not engage, appear distant and can almost disappear'. Seven schools placed great emphasis on considering the needs of the individual being referred alongside the likely impact of their attendance on the group dynamics. Overall, however, the most effective nurture groups managed the behaviour and learning of all the pupils well, whatever form their needs or difficulties took.

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[9] The Boxall Profile and the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire are ways of assessing aspects of a child's behaviour, including learning behaviour, self-control and social interactions. See Further information section.

Good communication

24. Good communication was characterised by:

- informal daily communication coupled with a systematic approach that tracked progress and ensured that pupils did not 'slip between the gaps'

- each member of staff being clear about their responsibilities

- joint accountability for academic and social outcomes

- nurture group and mainstream staff being able to observe what went on in each other's classrooms

- the involvement of members of the wider school community, such as lunchtime supervisors.

25. Twenty-one of the schools visited recognised the importance of frequent, often daily, communication between mainstream and nurture staff and planned for this accordingly. Informal communication took the form of discussions between staff at the end of the day, or sharing information in daily briefings. This often led to a range of staff knowing how well the nurture group pupils were doing on a daily basis. However, communication about pupils' academic progress was not as strong as about their social and behavioural progress. Unless the communication methods were systematic and went beyond the informal, gaps in the pupils' progress could be missed. In one school, for example, the pupils' learning in the nurture group was not clearly recorded. This meant that the class teacher could not build on their learning, or plan to work on the priorities for those pupils' development – a significant weakness.

26. The most effective communication was both formal and informal and rooted in a philosophy of shared responsibility and accountability, and a belief in the importance of consistency. In one school, for example, communication about the nurture group pupils and their progress involved not only the class teachers and teaching assistants, but also the midday supervisors, who often saw the pupils at a time when they were at their most vulnerable. In another school, 'learning passports' were used by class teachers and nurture group staff alike. These gave details of the pupils' targets and the strategies being used to support them, and could be used to record achievements in each lesson. This meant that significant moments were not lost and a consistent approach to encouragement, praise and rewards was maintained. The three schools below had different, but equally effective, ways of ensuring that staff communicated well and that practice was consistent.

> All relevant staff had access to the full range of information relating to the personal, social and emotional development of each child who attended the nurture group. Nurture group staff carried out observations in the mainstream class and completed the Boxall Profiles with class teachers. They also carried out the 'readiness to return' assessments – regular detailed observations – both in the main class and in the group. The

special educational needs coordinator completed the lesson planning and linked the content with the home class curriculum. The nurture group was seen as a class and was subject to the same systems and approaches for behaviour management, support and rewards as the rest of the school. This ensured consistency for the pupils across the group and their home class.

In addition to informal contacts and discussions between staff, the nurture group was a standing item in the weekly staff meetings and termly learning support team meetings. There were also half-termly pupil progress meetings. Communication with parents was regular with opportunties to come in and learn alongside their children as well as more formal regular meetings or home visits. Nurture group staff and class teachers and assistants all contributed to the tracking of the pupils' academic and social skills development, so that the school had a rounded picture and could work on any areas of underachievement.

All staff spent time in the nurture group and visits to the group formed part of the induction programme for newly qualified teachers. There was good ongoing regular communication as well as half-termly formal meetings. The use of 'passports' for each pupil, based on evidence gathered in class and the nurture group about the development of specific skills and behaviours supported communication, as did the consistency of systems across the school. Class teachers felt that they remained responsible for the pupils. As pupils reintegrated, the learning mentor played a key role in liaising with the nurture group staff and the class teacher. She mentored pupils during one session a week and during lunchtimes when appropriate, to ease the transition.

27. In 13 of the schools, the nurture group staff also worked for part of the week as teaching assistants in mainstream classes or had opportunities to observe pupils in the mainstream, and this enabled them to know the pupils well. This sometimes involved nurture group staff, or the leaders involved with the nurture group, in carrying out specific observations of the pupils in their mainstream class, to see how well they were generalising their learning from the group. This allowed them to refine their own planning and methods and to advise the class teacher and assistant about ways in which they could better support the nurture group pupils. In three schools, the nurture group and class staff planned together to ensure that there was a match between the provision and experiences for pupils in the nurture group and their main class. Good communication aided effective working with parents because they felt that they could talk to the class teachers and nurture group staff interchangeably.

28. In seven of the schools visited there were some weaknesses in planning and target-setting. For example, nurture group staff were not always aware of the pupils' class targets; there were tracking procedures which appeared strong on paper but were not actually being carried out in practice; or there was variability between targets in nurture group plans and in documents such as individual education plans. In another school, no information was shared, and the nurture group staff assumed that all their pupils had low academic ability. Weaker communication was often linked to a blurring of lines of accountability. In one school, for example, the class teachers were meant to be responsible for academic progress but in practice they only saw the pupils for half a day a week, so struggled to be effective in this role. In another school, the class teachers were concerned about the amount of literacy and numeracy teaching that the nurture group pupils missed when they went out to the group, but weaknesses in communication meant that this had never been resolved.

A coherent curriculum

29. Where pupils in the nurture group were receiving a coherent curriculum:

   ■ it was based on clear aims for the nurture group

   ■ it balanced the need to improve the pupils' behavioural, social and emotional skills with the need to ensure that they made progress with their academic skills

   ■ senior leaders, class teachers and nurture group staff had agreed where each element of the curriculum would be taught

   ■ they had mapped the pupils' experiences to check whether the curriculum was broad, rich and appropriate

   ■ literacy and numeracy coverage was systematic and it was clear who was teaching which elements and when

30. The curricula in the nurture groups all focused, to a greater or lesser extent, on teaching pupils the social and behavioural skills they needed to cope and succeed in school and life. Where the nurture group had clearly stated aims, these were used to shape the curriculum. For example, one group's written aims emphasised the social and behavioural aspects.

> In the small, secure group pupils practise listening, responding, cooperating and sharing. They experience success and reflect on how to achieve it. The sessions are structured and predictable. Pupils are expected to think carefully about their behaviour. At the end of each session, they use self- and peer-assessment to award themselves a score in relation to their own targets.

31. These aims led to a curriculum that included drama, music, social and physical activities such as gardening, and a session where food and drinks were shared around a table, as well as some literacy and numeracy.

32. The breadth and richness or otherwise of the curriculum varied from group to group and was to some extent affected by the amount of time the pupils spent in the group. Where pupils spent only about half their week or less in the group, staff could afford to focus on specific areas, as long as other areas were covered in the main class. Where the pupils spent most of their week in the nurture group, however, it became essential to ensure that the teaching of behavioural, social and emotional skills was done within a context of broad experiences and appropriate curriculum coverage, to ensure that pupils were not disadvantaged and were able to reintegrate with ease in due course. One school had thought this through particularly well.

> In this school, curriculum planning was a particular strength. Nurture group staff planned closely with the Year 1 teachers to ensure that pupils did not miss out on any experiences. They started with the pupil's needs and then looked for links to the Year 1 curriculum. Nurture group planning consisted of half-termly and weekly plans. Each half-term had a particular social focus, for example a recent focus was learning and modelling good attention skills. The next half-term the focus was on friendship, specifically playing together, sharing, communicating, turn-taking and giving and receiving compliments. The planning included a strong emphasis on speaking and listening games, role-play and discussion. It also included art – painting, making, modelling – music, movement, sensory activities, cooking, and some literacy and numeracy. It focused on developing gross and fine motor skills. Weekly plans linked closely to Year 1 plans, for example in work on castles and knights and a visit to a nearby castle, and in a science exploration of the senses. The same rhymes and stories were used by the nurture group and Year 1 staff, for example 'The Three Billy Goats Gruff' had been a recent focus. This story was linked to the year group's visit to a country park and the nurture group pupils made models of park equipment, as did their peers in class. Pupils attended literacy and numeracy lessons in their classes in the morning and physical education (PE) on Friday afternoons.

33. In 18 of the nurture groups, there was at least some focus on teaching literacy and numeracy. This varied from systematic literacy and numeracy sessions to literacy and numeracy being planned and taught across the curriculum. When carried out in the nurture group, the quality of teaching the sounds that letters make (phonics) was variable. Regular phonics lessons took place in seven of the groups but the subject was not always taught systematically. Of the groups where literacy and numeracy were not taught, three were, understandably, the groups in which the pupils spent little time, such as the lunchtime sessions. Here, the focus was solely on personal, social and behavioural skills development. In the remainder, pupils mainly joined their mainstream class for literacy and numeracy lessons. In one group, there was a view that the pupils

needed to 'learn to socialise' before they could take part in any formal learning. Although there was some informal development of pupils' literacy skills, this was not systematic and this approach led to the pupils falling further behind with the development of their basic skills.

> The nurture group curriculum focused on socialising through play. The school believed passionately that the pupils needed to learn to socialise before they could cope with formal literacy and numeracy lessons. This meant, however, that pupils missed out on most of these lessons when they attended the nurture group and fell further behind. The class teacher remained responsible for numeracy and literacy, including phonics, and the school planned for the mixed-age classes in a two-year cycle so that the pupils could catch up on areas missed while attending the nurture group. Pupils were also given one-to-one tuition where necessary, for example in mathematics, and guided reading lessons were often held in the afternoon. Nonetheless, particularly for pupils who were in the nurture group for more than three terms, the school's data indicated that they made limited progress in reading, writing and mathematics.

34. The lessons from which pupils were extracted to attend the nurture group varied, as did those in which they learnt with their mainstream class. Physical education was a popular choice for schools to include the nurture group pupils with their main class, whereas in one school it was the subject that such pupils missed by going to the nurture group sessions. Some schools started planning when the nurture group sessions should take place by asking themselves what the pupils needed to attend in their main classes, and timetabling accordingly. These 'musts' ranged from literacy and numeracy to physical education, trips out of school, assemblies, lunchtimes and, as one school put it, 'things they are good at', depending on the school's philosophy and its aims for the group.

35. Where there was no prior agreement about who was responsible for each part of a pupil's curriculum, this inevitably caused tension and led to pupils missing key elements of their learning. This was particularly the case where pupils spent the majority of their week in the nurture group. In one school, for example, the class teachers were meant to be responsible for academic progress, but in practice they only saw the pupils for half a day a week, so struggled to be effective in this role. In another school, the class teachers were concerned about the amount of literacy and numeracy teaching that the nurture group pupils missed when they went to the group. Focusing on social skills occasionally led to over-focusing on activities rather than on what the pupils were learning, or on the small steps needed to move them to the next stage. Although the curriculum was often organised in an integrated way, surprisingly few nurture groups drew on the methods and principles of the Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum, particularly when it came to assessment.

> In one school the intention was that between them, the inclusion leader and phase leader should ensure that the nurture group pupils received a broad and balanced curriculum, but this did not work well in practice. The

curriculum planning showed a focus on literacy with a phonics programme that was tailored to each pupil but which did not follow a particular programme in a systematic way. Although the pupils were working at Early Years Foundation Stage level, the curriculum planning did not reflect this, neither did it reflect what was provided for Years 1 and 2 in mainstream classes. There was little planning for role-play or for creative elements such as art and music. The nurture group classroom had no outdoor provision and the physical learning was mainly focused on fine motor skills although pupils did go to their own classes for physical education lessons. Overall, the curriculum did not cater well for the academic needs of the pupils so that when they returned to mainstream the gap between them and their peers tended to have widened.

In contrast, in another school, the nurture group curriculum covered literacy, including phonics; numeracy; personal, social and health education (PSHE); specific 'emotional literacy' activities; practical activities such as gardening, art and craft; and PE. There were plenty of opportunities for child-initiated play and role-play and the group had an outdoor classroom and an allotment. They continued to cover large parts of the curriculum with their own class. The school curriculum was imaginative and cross-curricular links were embedded: it was skills-based and closely monitored by senior leaders. There were good examples in classes and corridors of pupils being inspired by learning, and nurture group pupils were fully involved in this work. The Early Years Foundation Stage assessment methods were used well to capture the small steps in pupils' learning. Class teachers were responsible for academic tracking and progress and coordinators across all subjects monitored and tracked pupils' progress, including that of the nurture group pupils.

Continuing to belong

36. Nurture group pupils continued to 'belong' to their mainstream class where:

- all staff saw them as part of the whole school
- they attended whole-school activities such as assemblies, thereby remaining visible
- their timetable allowed them to attend their class for a specific purpose
- activities were planned to enable them to take a full part when they were in the main class
- they were able to share their nurture group experiences with their friends.

37. All the nurture group pupils retained at least some contact with their mainstream classes and with the rest of the school. The amount of time they spent with their peers depended inevitably on the type of nurture group they belonged to. However, the success with which a sense of 'belonging' was

retained did not necessarily depend on the amount of time; rather, it depended on the attitudes of the school and the systems for communication. It was possible for pupils to remain a clear and visible part of their mainstream class even when they attended the nurture group for most of the time, if these elements were positive.

38. Pupils almost always attended assemblies with their mainstream peers. In six of the schools the pupils were seen as full members of their mainstream classes and played a full part in activities such as lunchtimes, break times, assemblies and trips alongside their mainstream peers, as well as attending a range of lessons in their main classes. Pupils typically registered with their class at the start of the morning and often returned at the end of the morning and afternoon. In the best examples, this time was used well to celebrate the pupils' successes alongside their peers and to ensure that they kept up to date with important class news and events. However, occasionally this time was not used well. In one school, for example, the pupils returned to their mainstream class for the last half an hour of each day, but staff were unclear about the purpose or benefits of this arrangement. In another school, where pupils attended the nurture group for all sessions except for one afternoon a week, the afternoon in their main class was seldom a success – staff did not see them as part of the class and appeared to be uncertain as to 'what they should be doing with them'.

39. In 12 of the schools, pupils other than the regular nurture group members took part in nurture group activities. This ranged from sessions being so flexible that they could be extended to others who might need them, to nurture group pupils inviting their friends to take part in particular experiences such as sharing a meal, 'golden time', birthday celebrations or 'graduation' ceremonies. In one school, curriculum enrichment days meant that all the pupils in the school were mixed up and given a choice of sessions, and the nurture group was a popular option.

40. In eight schools the nurture group provision was not fully integrated into the rest of the school, for varying reasons. In one school, for example, the perception of the nurture group pupils as part of their mainstream class was not strong and there were separate eating and playtime arrangements. At another school the distinction was more subtle: while the nurture group itself was nurturing, it did not sit within an inclusive school. Class teachers were relatively uninvolved and the nurture group staff themselves perpetuated a sense of 'separateness'. In one school the nurture group leader was reluctant to consider giving the pupils an increased amount of time in the classroom with support, preferring a small group approach at all times. In another, the pupils seldom returned to their mainstream classes so they lacked the opportunity to practise their new skills in larger groups or to see models of a range of positive behaviour.

Relevant target-setting

41. Target-setting was effective where:

   - the pupils only had one set of targets which all staff used

   - targets included personal, social, behavioural and academic elements

   - targets were personalised and specific to the pupil's needs

   - the pupils and their parents and carers knew what the targets were and understood them

   - the targets were suitably ambitious and reviewed frequently.

42. Twenty-six of the schools set personal targets for the nurture group pupils. In most cases these were decided on by the nurture group staff. These then became a key focus for the pupils while they were in the group. Occasionally, the targets arose from a whole-school process of setting personal and social targets, and were also used in the nurture group. The targets largely related to the aspect of pupils' behaviour that staff thought needed the most attention. For example in one group, targets being used at the time of the survey visit included:

   - to try to put up my hand when I want to say something

   - to be ready for work and to use my voice

   - to listen when other children are chosen

   - to be able to concentrate on my work when there isn't a grown-up with me.

43. These were fairly typical of the style of targets used – they were written in 'pupil-speak' – and of the types of areas on which the targets focused. Sometimes the targets focused specifically on an action a pupil would take in a particular situation, for example, 'I will take time out to calm down and later explain to staff why I have become angry.' In eight of the schools surveyed, staff used their Boxall Profile assessments of pupils' needs to help them to set appropriate targets. In the best practice, these personal and social targets were extended to home, by agreement with parents and carers; for example, 'My mum and dad will follow the 1, 2, 3 strategy and give me time to explain my anger if needed'. This helped to ensure that the pupils experienced some consistency in the approach to their behaviour, and supported parents and carers to develop their own strategies.

44. Only occasionally were the personal and social targets fully used during the pupils' time in their mainstream class. Where this did occur it was effective in helping pupils to be responsible for their own behaviour and led to a greater continuity of approach from staff.

> In one nurture group, the targets were clearly understood by the pupils who were encouraged to take ownership of them. Part of the nurture group's aim was for pupils to understand their targets and to discuss them regularly. Pupils wrote their most important targets on a strip of card and brought them to their mainstream class as well as using them in the nurture group.

Twelve schools set pupils academic targets alongside their personal and social targets. These were often related to the whole-school target-setting process, rather than the nurture group. It was rare for schools to aim for pupils to make accelerated academic progress while in the nurture group, and occasionally leaders and staff thought it was acceptable if academic progress stalled as long as pupils were making good personal progress.

45. In six schools, targets were set in different ways, for example through whole-school target-setting, individual education plans, behaviour plans, pastoral support plans and the nurture group target-setting process, but were not brought together into a coherent whole. As a result, pupils sometimes had different targets for the same aspects of their development, stored in different places and used by different people and in different contexts. This inevitably led to confusion for staff, parents and carers, and for the pupils themselves. In these cases, targets were not sufficiently sharp and lacked time limits.

Thorough tracking, monitoring and evaluation

46. The best tracking:

- included the progress that pupils were making in the nurture group and the main class

- brought together social, emotional and behavioural progress with academic progress

- gave teachers and senior leaders the information they needed to identify gaps or underachievement

- led to appropriate action being taken to tackle any issues.

47. The best monitoring and evaluation:

- were led by a member of the senior leadership team

- were based on a good understanding of the success criteria for the group

- analysed the impact of the nurture group on academic progress as well as social, emotional and behavioural progress

- led to changes being made to strengthen the provision

- took parents' and carers' views into account

- gave governors the information they needed to support and challenge and to make a judgement on value for money.

48. The schools could be divided into three main groups according to the method and quality of their monitoring and evaluation of the nurture group.

Group one

49. Thirteen schools tracked the academic and the behavioural, social and emotional progress of the nurture group pupils thoroughly. These schools were able to show clear evidence of the progress made in each of these areas and knew where and why progress had not been made.

> One school's tracking of academic progress was rigorous and quickly picked up any signs of potential underachievement. The same strong systems applied to the nurture group. Assessment of academic progress was very regular and closely linked to the challenging targets that were set for each year group. Teachers had a strong understanding of how to use data. Interventions were swift and targeted. The nurture group staff carried out a Boxall Profile assessment at the beginning of each term. At half term a 'reintegration readiness' assessment was carried out. This was supplemented by half-termly observations in the classroom and daily records of pupils' academic and social progress.

> Another school tracked both the academic and social, emotional and behavioural progress of the nurture group children very thoroughly. Tracking information included the Foundation Stage Profile, National Curriculum levels, completion of the Boxall Profile each term and staff's written observations. This information was used carefully to set individual academic and personal and social targets, and in turn to review the pupil's progress against them. In addition, the school tracked themes through the social and emotional aspects of learning (SEAL) programme, and pupils' attendance was closely monitored. Through evaluation of all the information, the school was able to show clear evidence of the progress made in each of the areas. Leaders knew where and why progress had not been made and adjusted the provision accordingly.

Group two

50. Eleven schools tracked the nurture group pupils' social, emotional and behavioural progress reasonably well but did not track their academic progress as thoroughly, or they had academic information available for all pupils in the school, but did not extrapolate or analyse this specifically for the nurture group pupils.

> One school tracked the nurture group pupils' social, emotional and behavioural progress well through the Boxall Profile, emotional literacy checklists, and individual education plans for pupils with special educational needs. The school also carried out and monitored SEAL assessments. The school had academic information available for all pupils in the school but did not extrapolate or analyse this specifically for the nurture group pupils. Social, emotional and behavioural development was therefore never considered alongside academic progress, so the picture of the 'whole child' was missing and it was difficult for staff to see when pupils were not making progress in certain areas of their learning. The school was therefore also unable to evaluate whether the nurture group was really being effective.

Group three

51. Four schools had no clear tracking or evaluation of either the social, emotional and behavioural progress or the academic progress of the nurture group pupils.

> One school had some data on both academic and social development using National Curriculum sub-levels and a social and behavioural assessment tool. However, this was not analysed in order to evaluate the impact of the provision or to decide whether a pupil should continue attending. Only anecdotal evidence was used to decide on whether a pupil should be reintegrated. Other available information, such as exclusions, sending out of class, playground incidents, or progress made in literacy 'booster classes' was not considered.

Surprisingly, one school tracked and evaluated the pupils' academic progress but did not track their social, emotional or behavioural development.

52. Even the schools that used information about individual pupils' social, emotional, behavioural and academic progress very well to adjust the provision to their particular needs did not always bring this together to evaluate the progress of a cohort of pupils or to evaluate the overall impact of the nurture group. One school's evidence, for example, showed that individual pupils made good and often highly accelerated academic and social progress. However, the extensive data had not been analysed in terms of trends or particular strengths and weaknesses for the whole group.

53. At its best, tracking information was analysed for two purposes:

■ to find out how well each pupil was progressing and therefore be able to adjust the provision accordingly, day by day and week by week

■ to enable senior leaders and the governing body to evaluate the overall effectiveness of the nurture group provision.

54. One school understood this particularly well and used all its information to good effect:

> The school tracked emotional, social and behavioural development as well as academic progress thoroughly and frequently while pupils were part of the nurture group. The Boxall Profile was used particularly well to bring together targets and curriculum planning, with the most important areas identified for the pupil to work on. The school's use of data was simple but effective and took into account the progress of individuals and of the group as a whole. This lent itself to careful analysis and robust evaluation. When the headteacher's analysis of the data showed that pupils were making slower progress in their academic work than their social and emotional development, she quickly changed the timetabling of the group to enable pupils to be in class and taught by a teacher for literacy, including phonics, and numeracy. The governors were regularly given the school's information on the nurture group and they used this thoroughly and conscientiously to determine value for money and to support and challenge the school to improve the provision further.

Careful reintegration

55. Where reintegration was carefully planned:

   ■ the nurture group staff thought about this from the outset

   ■ there was close liaison between the class teacher, the teaching assistant and the nurture group staff

   ■ strategies to support the pupil's reintegration were agreed and used

   ■ there was some form of ceremony or ritual to mark the successful end to the pupil's time in the nurture group

   ■ once the pupil was back in class full time, additional support was provided for the development of specific academic or social skills, as necessary

   ■ pupils' contact with the group was not severed and they could return and visit the group when invited.

56. The length of the pupil's placement in the nurture group was not normally decided at the start but was the subject of regular review. In 11 schools, the Boxall Profile was used termly to reassess pupils' development and help to decide how ready they were to reintegrate. Almost all the schools visited held regular review meetings which included class teachers, nurture group staff, the special educational needs coordinator and senior leaders.

57. Transition was planned particularly carefully in 14 of the schools. In the best practice, it was given a high priority, planned well in advance and included targeted support back in the class. In one school, nurture group staff began to plan for successful reintegration when the pupils started in the nurture group, believing it to be the ultimate goal, while recognising that 'it is very traumatic

for some'. Transition was usually phased, with the pupil gradually attending more sessions in class and fewer in the nurture group over a period of time.

> After two to three terms, pupils graduated from the nurture group. Ongoing assessment against reintegration assessment criteria was used effectively to establish how ready the pupil was to return full time to their mainstream class. The nurture group staff used a reintegration readiness scale. When pupils reached 80% on the scale the process of returning to the mainstream class began.

58. A 'graduation' ceremony provided a significant leaving ritual for five of the schools. In one school, an 'exit party' was held to signify the end of the need for nurture group provision. In another school, the previous academic year's nurture group pupils attended a few nurture group sessions in early September, 'mentored' the new pupils, 'handed over' the nurture group room to them and passed on some of their skills. The last session was a party celebration with certificates, a 'sparkle book' documenting some of their successes, and a small gift. In another school, pupils compiled notebooks with hints and tips to help them to cope with 'life outside the nurture group'.

59. In 16 of the schools, pupils were given specific support on their return to mainstream, usually by class support staff but sometimes by the nurture group staff. This personalised support was provided either individually or in a small group and was usually to help with literacy and/or numeracy. In the best practice, the support staff were trained by the nurture group staff and this provided continuity of practice. In one school, support staff were used to track nurture group pupils' progress in the mainstream class. However, such detailed, individual tracking was not common practice. In fact, pupils continued to work on targets from the nurture group when they returned to the mainstream class in only two of the schools surveyed.

Only part of the answer

60. Where the nurture group was seen as a key part of a range of support:

- it was part of a spectrum of integrated support rather than an isolated intervention
- the school worked with and supported families
- the school itself was a 'nurturing' environment
- some of the best practice in the nurture group was extended to other aspects of the school's work.

61. Almost all the schools recognised that the nurture group could not be the complete solution to the support that the pupils who were vulnerable due to circumstance needed. One nurture group leader summed this up when she reflected on the initial introduction of the nurture group 10 years previously:

'We had an idea when we started that we could "turn them round" within two terms or so, but that's not always possible – the home situation or other challenges in their life endure and the children continue to need that intensive support.'

62. The schools where pupils who were vulnerable due to circumstance continued to succeed after they left the nurture group had put in place a range of targeted support for these and other pupils. At its best, the nurture group was part of a genuinely 'nurturing' school, where all members were valued, but where this value was imbued with a rigorous drive for pupils to achieve their very best.

> In one school, the staff believed that the start to the day was crucial if pupils were to be able to learn. They took the 'meet and greet' part of the nurture group's practice and extended it to a far greater number of pupils – any they thought needed intensive adult attention to make the transition from home to school. Each of these pupils was greeted by the same adult each morning. They spent 15 minutes talking together, having breakfast and preparing for the day ahead. All looked after children at the school were included in this strategy. This simple but imaginative intervention led to pupils being settled in their classes from the outset. As a result, their academic achievement, as well as their behaviour, had improved.

63. The most 'nurturing' schools had a clearly defined, positive but firm approach to the way in which they spoke to pupils, gave them clear boundaries, praised them for their efforts and achievements, ensured that they made academic progress, and worked with their parents. They saw each pupil as an individual and planned and implemented additional support accordingly.

64. The nurture group in some settings also acted as a 'broker' for a wider range of support. This was particularly important when pupils were eligible for a range of support. One school, for example, involved a speech and language assistant, family liaison worker and learning mentor with the nurture group. These support staff understood the nature of the provision and integrated their support with the group and its aims, for example when they were carrying out home visits and supporting reintegration. The headteacher of another school maintained that 'you can't have a nurture group without the other stuff, it just doesn't work'. In 14 schools there were clear links between the nurture group and family support. In one, the range of support extended beyond the school boundaries. The nurture group ran almost like a children's centre: families were 'signposted' to other support agencies when necessary and were helped to gain the advice they needed. Others had a family support worker linked to the group.

The impact on individuals

65. Inspectors looked at the impact of the nurture group provision on 50 pupils who were still attending the groups, and another 46 who had attended in 2009/10. They looked at the school's tracking information and the pupils' work, discussed other evidence with senior staff, and where possible observed the pupils in the nurture group and in their main classroom. [10]

In the nurture group

66. The schools' evidence indicated that the case study pupils who were attending the nurture group at the time of the survey were making behavioural, social and emotional progress as detailed below.

   ■ Nineteen pupils were making substantial progress with their behavioural, social and emotional skills.

   ■ Twenty-four pupils were making at least some progress with their behavioural, social and emotional skills.

   ■ Five pupils were making very little progress with their behavioural, social and emotional skills.

   ■ For two pupils the school did not have enough evidence for inspectors to make a judgement.

   For academic progress, the figures were not as strong.

   ■ For nine pupils their progress in reading, writing and mathematics had accelerated since joining the nurture group.

   ■ Twenty pupils had started to make at least some progress in reading, writing, and mathematics since joining the nurture group, having previously made none or very little.

   ■ Fourteen had made little progress in reading, writing and mathematics since joining the nurture group.

   ■ For seven pupils there was insufficient evidence to make a judgement.

67. The figures for academic progress reflect a number of factors that have already been highlighted earlier in this report. These include the complex issues experienced by some pupils, but particularly reflect the lack of curriculum balance in some groups, and some schools' low expectations of the progress that the nurture group pupils would make. The following case studies, however, illustrate the highly positive impact that the nurture groups had on the outcomes for many pupils.

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[10] See Notes section for further information.

When this pupil joined the school at the beginning of Year 3, his previous school described him as being 'close to permanent exclusion'. The local authority's special needs team had already been involved with him, and he had an individual behaviour plan that the school immediately implemented. Nevertheless, he struggled to settle. He was very restless, constantly yawning and trying to catch other pupils' attention with prods and pokes. He found it impossible to sit on the carpet for more than two minutes. He would start to fidget and make inappropriate noises and movements, distracting the children around him. He seemed unable to conform to any class rules and could not be kept on task even with a teaching assistant's help. Overall, it was clear that he found school to be a negative experience. A range of observation and assessment confirmed that he had little confidence in himself as a learner and found it particularly difficult to follow even simple instructions, intruding unduly and taking over the class at the expense of others. He was quickly referred to the nurture group and started to attend for four mornings each week.

The nurture group staff worked supportively yet firmly with him on a range of behaviour priorities, woven in with literacy, numeracy and other lessons. He was given careful guidance to help him to succeed, and praise when he did. After a term, he had grown significantly in confidence and his behaviour had changed considerably. He was able to sit on the carpet with an adult close by and needed only very gentle reminders to keep on task. He could put his hand up appropriately and wait for his turn to respond. He made relevant contributions to the whole-class discussion. He consistently followed instructions and was able to work alongside other pupils on set tasks. Previously his learning skills were poor. After a term he confidently and with a big smile declared himself to be an 'expert' in maths. His listening skills had improved considerably and he was making good progress in early writing and number work. His greater engagement in class was extending his understanding of all subjects. And after being seen as 'a bit of pest' for a long time, he finally started to make friends.

This pupil arrived at the school when his mother went into a local women's refuge as a result of domestic violence. He had also experienced the deaths of close family members and was receiving counselling. The school immediately decided to place him in the nurture group. When he arrived, he was very insecure and found it difficult to trust any adults, even for short periods of time. He was claustrophobic, having panic attacks, and threatened to kill himself. Initially, even in the nurture group he was introverted and hardly spoke. He refused to do any work and would not engage with anything or anyone. He had poor communication skills and spoke to adults and other pupils inappropriately. When he spent time in his main class, he would goad and tease other pupils, which was disruptive. The other pupils rejected him.

After a few weeks in the nurture group, he began to form relationships with the nurture group adults and began to settle to activities for short periods of time. After two terms, he was making good progress with his personal, social and emotional development. He had built relationships with the other nurture group pupils and was often very kind. He played cooperatively, was beginning to trust other adults in school, smiled more and did not worry as much about the door having to be open. He would settle to work, although he still needed one-to-one support to have the confidence to tackle some tasks. Academic assessments indicated that although still behind in all aspects, he had made good progress in reading, and satisfactory progress in writing and mathematics, and was beginning to catch up. He was still finding it difficult to relate to the other pupils in the mainstream class, but this was improving week by week.

After the nurture group

68. When the schools were asked to provide case studies of pupils who had been in the nurture group during the previous academic year, they were largely able to do so, and the data and other evidence often told a positive story. However, it was noticeable that once pupils had left the nurture group, no school had evaluated thoroughly the progress of that group of pupils as a separate cohort, to evaluate the long-term impact of this intensive intervention. The schools' evidence showed that:

   ■ Sixteen pupils had continued to make substantial progress with their social, emotional and behavioural skills since leaving the nurture group.[11] They were coping well with being in the main class, with or without support.

   ■ Twenty-one pupils had retained the new skills gained during their time with the nurture group, even if their progress in developing these further had slowed. They were coping reasonably well with being in the main class, with or without support.

   ■ One pupil's social, emotional and behavioural skills had regressed since leaving the nurture group. They were not coping well in the main class.

   There was insufficient evidence about this aspect for eight pupils. Largely, schools said that this was because the pupil had left the infant school to go to junior school and they had not gathered any further information.

69. An evaluation of the pupils' academic progress since they had left the nurture group was as follows.

   ■ Nine pupils had continued to make substantial progress with their reading, writing and mathematics since leaving the nurture group.

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[11] See Notes section for further information.

- For 18 pupils, the school's data and other evidence indicated that they were making reasonable progress with their reading, writing and mathematics, though progress was not always consistent in all areas.

- Four pupils were making slow or little progress with their reading, writing and mathematics.

70. For 15 pupils, schools were unable to give inspectors enough evidence about the pupils' progress over time for them to be able to make a judgement. As above, this was sometimes because pupils had left the school, and in some cases the area. However, this also highlighted weaknesses in some of the schools' tracking processes. In some cases the information was in the school, but not in a form that the school could easily produce to show progress over time in any detail, or the school had not carried out any assessments since the pupil had left the nurture group and did not have a clear idea of how well they were doing.

71. Again, in-depth case studies of pupils who had left the nurture group illustrated the highly positive impact that the nurture groups had on the outcomes for many pupils.

> This pupil became a looked after child when she was in Reception. She had been exposed to very difficult and traumatic home circumstances. Since becoming looked after she had had a number of changes of placement and social worker. As a consequence, she had struggled to cope with change, friendships and confidence. She expressed this in many ways including emotional outbursts, defiance and an inability or refusal to engage in activities or learning. She spent more time in the nurture group than most of her peers because changes in her life were often unpredictable. The staff were successful in this setting, where she felt safe and secure, in helping her to cope with her emotions and focus more on her learning. In doing so, her more creative skills came to the fore, for example, in writing, dance and drama. She responded very well to praise and encouragement, and to the targeted support she had to help her cope with trauma, relationships and change. In periods when her placement stability coincided with the support of the nurture group, where she had periods of emotional calm, she made particularly strong progress in her learning and excelled in most areas. By the time she left the school she had achieved above-average levels of attainment in reading, writing and mathematics. She showed a particular talent for creative writing.

> This pupil attended the nurture group for four afternoons a week for the whole of Year 1. She was very reluctant to communicate verbally and her disinclination to participate had led to her falling behind in lessons. After a few weeks attending the group, she started to whisper a few words to her teacher. She played with other pupils but still did not communicate verbally. Boxall Profile assessments, completed each term over an academic year, indicated that she made substantial progress in her social,

emotional and behavioural skills during her time at the nurture group. During this year, she gradually began to speak, initially in a quiet voice and in response to direct questions. At first, she tended to engage in repetitive play where she continually focused on one particular game. Over time, she became more adventurous and was willing to try new things. These behaviours were transferred to the classroom, where she started to make friends. She consistently achieved her individual targets, such as using a louder voice when communicating with adults. Her progress in reading, writing and mathematics accelerated. On leaving the nurture group, her social, emotional and behavioural progress continued to accelerate. In Year 2, she would volunteer information and put up her hand to answer questions. Although still a quiet child, she used a clear speaking voice and participated well in school life. On leaving the nurture group she continued to make good academic progress, and during Year 2 her National Curriculum levels for reading, writing and mathematics came in line with age-related expectations.

Parents' experiences

72. Of the 95 parents and carers interviewed, the vast majority expressed their appreciation of how the nurture group intervention had helped their children. One parent stated, 'Without it my child would have been suspended.' Others described the nurture group as 'a bolt hole' and a 'lifeline'.

73. The schools visited often gave the nurture group a distinctive name to be used by parents, carers and pupils, such as the Mercury Group, the Tree House, Oasis, Rainbow Class and the Bears. Some parents and carers said they had initial concerns about their child being in an intensive intervention group. Often this was a fear of the child being stigmatised because, as one mother put it, 'I thought it was a naughty group.' Some thought their child would miss out on mainstream activities. In fact, most parent and carers who were originally sceptical or fearful about a nurture group quickly became 'converts'. Once their child attended, positive links were developed and any initial concerns were soon dispelled. As one parent put it, 'I'd advise any parent to say "yes" straight away now if their child was offered the group.'

74. Some parents and carers commented on how helpful the school's booklet had been to them. Such booklets often described the purpose of the group and explained the daily activities their child could expect. Other parents had been invited to an initial meeting with the nurture group staff and this provided an opportunity to ask questions and look around the setting. In one school, parents had a leaflet sent to them at home describing the 'Caterpillar Room'. They had attended a meeting and it was explained that the group was designed to help children with different difficulties and was not targeted at any specific behaviours.

75. In 10 of the schools visited, parents and carers said they were kept well informed of their children's progress. These parents commented how pleased

they were with the regular dialogue with staff. In one school, parents said they could talk easily to both class teachers and nurture group staff and there was no distinction between them. Nevertheless, in a few schools parents and carers expressed reservations about the quality of communication between them and the nurture group staff. Occasionally, parents felt that the nurture group staff were often unavailable and were overreliant on messages being passed to them by other staff or their children.

76. In the better nurture groups seen, parents felt well informed and were always welcome to 'pop in' to learn about their child's progress. As one said, 'The nurture group is very open and parents can talk about concerns or progress at any time.' A carer reported: 'We feel fully involved in his schooling and informed about his progress through the termly progress review meetings.' These parents and carers praised the accessibility of the staff and appreciated how they were encouraged to be actively involved in supporting their child. In one school, parents were very positive about the courses provided for them to help manage their children's behaviour. These courses provided parents with strategies to support their children at home. For example, parents and carers appreciated help such as a list of behaviour prompts to be used at home as well as in class. These parents and carers also mentioned that they had been given specific strategies that they could use with their children at home, such as one child who used an egg-timer when he became agitated so that he was aware of the specific time he had to calm down and rejoin his activities.

77. Regular communication with staff was crucial to the parents and carers interviewed and, where it was available, the opportunity to meet was also valued. In one school, pupils returned to their base class before home time, which allowed for a parents' 'drop-in session' to discuss any issues with the nurture group staff. This half-hour session at the end of each day was perceived by the parents and carers spoken to as a 'haven' because it was a place where concerns, difficulties and achievements were shared and parents could receive support or advice. One parent said she valued the fact that she was welcomed into school every day to talk to staff and that there was also a daily book in which she and the staff could write and share comments. Another felt pleased to be able to go into school on Fridays for a drink and a chat with staff and learn how well her child was doing. In another school, the nurture group staff ran weekly sessions for parents to come in and work alongside their children. This fulfilled the dual purpose of allowing parents and staff to talk and building the relationship between the parent and the child in a calm setting.

78. An area for concern for parents and carers in five of the schools related to transition. Several parents stated that they were particularly concerned about their child's move on to the next school. They were worried that there may be a lack of knowledge and understanding of nurture group strategies in the next school. One remarked, 'I wish he could say here for ever.'

79. In discussion with inspectors, parents commonly mentioned the following differences that the nurture group had made to their children:

- an improvement in children's performance and behaviour
- children more receptive to learning
- improved listening and concentration and a readiness to learn
- children calmer, for example 'less screaming and head banging'
- developing language and communication
- more socialising, children more confident and with higher self-esteem
- attendance improved from low to 100%
- children now have 'tools' to deal with their feelings
- children feeling more secure
- children display more appropriate behaviour and are willing to cooperate
- children had a more secure routine and environment
- children much happier to go to school
- a difference made to learning because of improved concentration and a practical approach which keeps children busy and interested
- better progress with 'academic' work
- effective strategies used to control behaviour.

80. Parents made many comments that emphasised the extent to which they appreciated the changes in their children as a result of the nurture group.

- 'Bears turned him around.'
- 'Both boys are less upset and settle better at school.'
- 'Her confidence has come on in leaps and bounds.'
- 'Attending the nurture group has made a lot of difference to my child. He is much calmer and there are no problems getting him to school. He is keen to come now.'
- 'Without the group our children would be expelled or lost.'
- 'Every child should have the opportunity to be in a nurture group.'
- '...he has that sparkle back again.'
- 'The change in my daughter is amazing and unbelievable.'
- 'My reservations were soon proved wrong. I was invited to the look around the Tree House and as soon as I got to the top of the stairs, I sensed a very special place.'
- 'There is no stigma in the school with regard to the nurture group.'
- 'They do a brilliant job.'

- 'I don't know where I'd be if it wasn't for the nurture group.'
- 'It has enabled my child to have some time out, space away from large groups and to be himself. He has started making friends and playing the piano. His academic work is getting better too.'
- 'He hates Fridays because there is no nurture group.'
- 'His behaviour has improved at home.'

Notes

In the autumn term 2010, inspectors carried out three pilot inspections to test and refine their methodology. They also spoke with two leaders of the Nurture Group Network. In the spring term 2011, inspectors visited a further 26 infant, first, and primary schools. The schools were located in both urban and rural areas and varied in size and composition. Twenty-two of the schools had an above- average proportion of pupils who were known to be eligible for free school meals. These schools were chosen for visits because their most recent inspection report had identified that they featured nurture group provision. The schools' overall effectiveness grades in their most recent inspection reports ranged from outstanding to satisfactory. Reports typically commented that the group made a positive contribution to pupils' personal development or to their well-being.

Inspectors held discussions with school leaders, nurture group staff and class teachers about their use of nurture group provision. Some local authority officers also offered to have discussions with the survey team. Inspectors scrutinised a range of data and documents about the provision and outcomes for the pupils receiving nurture group support, and for those who had attended in the past. They spent time observing the nurture group, talking to the pupils involved and observing these pupils in their mainstream classes.

Inspectors also carried out a small number of case studies of pupils at each school, both those attending the nurture group and those who had attended in 2009/10. They looked at the pupils' behavioural, emotional, social and academic progress, taking into account a range of information over time such as:

- Boxall Profile scores and Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaires
- gaining of rewards and/or awards such as any charts, of the absence points systems, stars, stickers, positive letters home
- records of the times that the pupil had been removed from lessons
- use and frequency of sanctions
- need for the school to contact parents for behaviour-related reasons
- number, length and rate of fixed-term exclusions
- evidence about the pupil's skills of collaboration, confidence, self-assurance, resilience, independence, concentration and focus, and any other aspects relevant to the child
- pupils' test and assessment scores for English, mathematics and science, and other tracking data as available
- pupils' books and other work.

Altogether inspectors carried out 96 case studies: 50 of pupils who were attending nurture groups at the time of the survey and 46 of those who had attended during 2009/10. Inspectors also met with parents and carers of pupils receiving nurture group support at each of the schools, 95 in total. They asked the parents and carers about their children's experiences of the provision and subsequent progress.

Further information

The exclusion from school of children aged four to seven (090012), Ofsted, 2009; www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/090012.

M Bennathan and M Boxall, *Effective intervention in primary schools: nurture groups,* David Fulton,1996.

M Boxall (2nd edition, revised S Lucas), *Nurture groups in schools: principles and practice*, Sage, 2002.

M Boxall and M Bennathan, *The Boxall Profile: handbook for teachers,* Nurture Group Publications, 2002.

Permanent and fixed period exclusions from schools and exclusion appeals in England 2008/09, SFR 22/2010; www.education.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000942/index.shtml

Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, Department of Health, 2000; www.dh.gov.uk/prod_consum_dh/groups/dh_digitalassets/@dh/@en/documents/digitalasset/dh_4079487.pdf.

The Nurture Group Network; www.nurturegroups.org/.

Annex: Schools visited

School	Local authority
Beeston Fields Primary School and Nursery	Nottinghamshire
Belmont Primary School	Derbyshire
Bournville Infant School	Birmingham
Columbia Primary School	Tower Hamlets
Curwen Primary and Nursery School	Newham
Front Lawn Infant School	Hampshire
Hayesdown First School	Somerset
Houndsfield Primary School	Enfield
Kinson Primary School	Bournemouth
Oakwood Avenue Community Primary School	Warrington
Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Primary School (NC)	Birmingham
Our Lady of Mount Carmel Catholic Primary School, Wincanton	Somerset
Perry Beeches Infant School	Birmingham
Pirton Hill Primary School	Luton
Putnoe Lower School	Bedford
Ruskin Infant School	Northamptonshire
Sharps Copse Primary and Nursery School	Hampshire
Shortstown Lower School	Bedford
Southbury Primary School	Enfield
St George's Infant and Nursery School, Great Yarmouth	Norfolk
Stourfield Infant School	Bournemouth
The Fairfield Community Primary School	Worcestershire
Tottenhall Infant School	Enfield
Victoria Primary School	Northamptonshire
Westlands First School	Worcestershire
Westwood Park Community Primary School	Salford
Windhill Primary and Nursery School	Hertfordshire
Wroughton First School, Gorleston	Norfolk
Yew Tree Primary School	Sandwell