

# Supporting a pupil with social and emotional needs

**By Claire Sullivan**

I taught a pupil who was diagnosed with an attachment disorder and hypervigilance. The pupil also presented with some very challenging behaviour. They were impulsive and at times aggressive, and as the years went on they found it more difficult to retain close friendships because of this. The pupil lacked confidence in themselves and would often be low in mood and self-deprecating about their abilities. The levels of support around this pupil were highly personalised and the graduated approach was something I utilised to monitor progress carefully and support us in our judgements as to whether our strategies were having an impact.

## **Assess**

Before this pupil entered my class, and to support with my initial assessments, they actually visited my classroom several times with their then current teacher. They took part in some of my lessons, got to know where things were in the room, where their peg and draw would be, and I took this opportunity to chat with them and find out more about them. I found out that they loved maths, football, and wrote rap songs. I knew that this pupil had a great relationship with their current teacher, so their teacher and I spoke a lot about how they had developed this and general strategies that were working well. This pupil had been working with the CAMHS team, including an educational psychologist, so I made sure I read the reports from them and knew what recommendations had been given for supporting with learning and behaviour. I had taught this child's sibling the previous year, so I did already have a relationship with the family. If I didn't have this relationship already established, I would have spoken to them very early in the year about what they have found effective and established some norms around how were going to communicate. Attachment disorder or hypervigilance weren't things I knew too much about at the time, so I also did a lot of reading and finding of strategies on my own, as well as talking to the SENCo about what was working well in school.

## **Plan**

The first question we would ask ourselves as we planned out any strategy or intervention was always 'will this pupil feel safe in this situation?' This didn't mean that I as a teacher, or we as a school, were putting them in a dangerous situation, more that if the pupil perceived something to be out of the normal routine without prior warning, they would have a heightened sense of awareness that would make them feel very anxious. Other situations that would lead to them feel anxious or unsafe were if the corridor was too busy, or if there was a supply teacher needed, or if we did maths before breaktime – anything that was unexpected could lead to heightened anxiety levels. If this happened, it was unlikely that they would be calm enough to participate fully in their learning, and there was also a risk that these feelings of fear and uncertainty would manifest into challenging behaviours. So to counteract this we planned strategies that would allow them to be as prepared as possible about what was happening, or what they needed to do. Strategies in the plan were things like visual timetables, me giving clear explanations, writing instructions down for them, support with transitioning between the classroom and the playground from a TA, class countdown timers to support focus, and reward charts to praise good behaviour

## **Do**

Along with the strategies that I planned, I stuck to my routines for the day very tightly, I would share what was happening in the day using a visual timetable and if anything was going to deviate from that I would speak to this pupil to prepare them so that it didn't leave them feeling uncertain. I also had to be very consistent with my expectations around behaviour and I had to follow through on any consequences. Me

being very consistent meant that I was predictable in my behaviour and this pupil felt a level of comfort and trust around that. Having clear behavioural boundaries meant that if they were ever crossed, they knew what consequences to expect, so this stopped the pupil from entering 'fight or flight' mode and any challenging behaviour escalating. Genuine and specific praise was also something that was very important for supporting with their self-image, which is something we worked hard to improve. They liked to know specifically what they had done that was good, and they thrived on being able to show other teachers good work or me calling home with positive news. We also set up a routine whereby once a week the pupil would support children in the younger year groups in their maths lesson. This was to try and encourage self-confidence, but also to promote and reward calm and patient behaviour, which they needed to exhibit when working with the younger pupils. They were also very into comedy, and we would have 'joke of the week', which they would tell to the class and then the staffroom over lunch. Feeling like others didn't like them or feeling frustration from their peers was something that upset them very much, so this appreciation of their talents and making their peers laugh was something they really enjoyed and made them feel good.

### **Review**

The strategies we put in place to support the pupil's self-image and behaviour were generally effective. If they ever weren't, it was quick to identify, and their behaviour would become challenging. It meant that I was very responsive as a teacher. The work the pupil did with the younger children in maths was particularly effective at improving their self-image, and they took a great deal of pride in preparing resources to take with them to classroom to help demonstrate something. They also loved being someone the younger children could come and talk to on the playground.

We had termly reviews with the Ed psych, and we would discuss progress towards the emotional and behavioural goals we had set. Although their parents were at times difficult to engage, I would call home or grab them at the end of the day to give positive news. With the support of the Ed psych, we also adapted the reward chart so that it could also be utilised at home.

I taught this pupil for two years and learnt a lot about them and also my own practice. My biggest learning was around the importance of getting to know the pupil and understanding their needs and what lies behind their challenging behaviour. If a child has a social, emotional, and mental health need, they may need their self-confidence and self-image boosted in order to support academic progress.