

Building resilience

Annette Rawstrone reports on an initiative tracking children's resilience in order to help identify those who need more support

Resilience is the foundation of everything. If you haven't got the basics sorted for young children – have they had enough sleep? Have they had enough food? Do they feel loved? Do they feel safe? – then you can't build on all the other areas of learning,' says Ruth Coleman, head teacher at Highfield Nursery School in Ipswich, Suffolk.

She adds, 'You can keep doing the maths and the literacy work and sharing the stories. But if the child is not ready to learn, then they're not going to take any of that in. You also have to take parents on the journey with you.'

Coleman was a teacher at the Ipswich nursery school, which is based in an area of deprivation,

when she realised staff meetings around children's progress were increasingly focused on personal, social and emotional development. 'All of those conversations about the children were not to do with their maths or their understanding of the world, but they were about how the child presented at nursery,' she explains. 'We needed a way of easily capturing and assessing those intangible parts of the child.'

In response, she devised the Highfield Resilience Tracker in 2010 to measure the resilience of young children and their family network. Alongside it is a package of tips and advice for parents to help support behaviour and other common concerns.

The tracker now forms an integral part of the nursery school's annual assessment cycle and, earlier this

The Highfield Resilience Tracker measures the resilience of young children and their family network



year, secured a £20,000 Let Teachers SHINE award to roll it out to 66 nurseries that feed into Co-op Academies Trust primary schools in Greater Manchester, Stoke on Trent and Merseyside (see Case study).

The tracker aims to help staff to monitor, support and provide early interventions to nurture children's resilience and enable them to meet age-related expectations. It also monitors and collects data on specific groups – such as those from minority ethnic groups or who need speech and language support – to ensure their needs are being met.

RESEARCH-BASED

The work of psychologist Dr. Edith Grotberg, who conducted research

case study: Co-op Academies Trust

The Trust introduced the Highfield Resilience Tracker within its schools in 2024 following teaching staff continuing to see the impact of the pandemic on children's learning – including speech and language delay, emotional regulation, lack of social skills and a delay in toilet training.

Director of early years (Manchester, Stoke, Staffordshire and Merseyside) Sayeh Mariner observes these issues disproportionately affected some communities and says they wanted to be able to identify those children who were struggling more swiftly.

'Our schools already do a lot of work around the Characteristics of Effective Learning and some schools already track children's emotional wellbeing and

involvement with the Leuven Scale, which all helps to support resilience,' says director of early years (West Yorkshire) Carla Robinson. 'Those measures can co-exist with the tracker, but it can support staff to identify children who need of additional support in a timely manner and continue to review them across the year.'

The Trust is now rolling the tracker out to feeder PVI nurseries following its successful bid to the Let Teachers SHINE award. They are receiving training on the importance of secure attachments and how co-regulation can help children to learn to self-regulate, while being shown how to use the tracker. A further benefit will be developing deeper partnerships with

parents and strengthening community connections, including smoothing the transition to school. 'Sometimes valuable information gets lost during the transition,' says Robinson. 'The more we can strengthen that transition process and have information that's passed on, then the impact should be huge for the child.'

The feeder settings are also receiving support from Trust staff who have already worked with the tracker and have been recruited as 'resilience advocates' to support them in their local communities.

By supporting the development of resilience in children before they begin Reception, the idea is they should arrive at school more able to learn and thrive.



into adults who had experienced adversity in childhood but went on to gain success, chimed with Coleman. She used Grotberg's findings as a basis for the tracker so that a holistic approach can be adopted. Each child's development is assessed three times a year during staff meetings where everyone who works with the child jointly considers the tracker's three strands:

- 'I am...' refers to inner strengths, such as self-esteem, self-efficacy and a positive outlook on life.
 - 'I can...' refers to the skills and abilities an individual possesses in order to navigate challenges and adversity.
 - 'I have...' refers to the external supports, such as social networks, resources and materials, that help a child to cope with difficult situations.
- 'I was working with around 60 children over a week, so if I was going to be able to help them, I couldn't have lots of paperwork. So it's literally one spreadsheet,' explains Coleman. 'We discuss each child individually and everyone's views are taken into account. It's done on gut feeling because our practitioners know the children well.'

In response, each child is rated red, amber or green so staff can monitor and respond to children's individual needs. Green indicates the child is thriving, amber indicates there are potential issues and a need for caution, whereas red shows problems and that they are in need of extra support.

'Importantly, it's not shame-based. We don't tell a family if their child is scoring red, but we know we need to give them some extra nurture and support the family more – check in with them at the start of the day, have a cup of tea with mum once the child's gone in and just check if everything's alright,' explains Coleman.

'Staff know which families to keep an eye on and that it's not because they have done something wrong. It can be they are a bit vulnerable because they've just had a baby, or they've moved house or dad is working away.'

SUPPORTING PARENTS

The project also includes training for teachers to learn simple, effective techniques to support parents. 'Parents tell me they don't know how to build resilience in their children, so a significant part of the training supports practitioners to help parents,' says Coleman.

It is hoped that working alongside families will create strong, ongoing relationships between home and school. 'There is usually help we can offer when a parent says they are struggling with something,' she says. 'But the main advice is to stick with it, that it's not a quick fix. We reassure them we'll check in with them so they know we're in it together, which can mean so much to a parent.'



FURTHER INFORMATION

- www.highfield.suffolk.sch.uk

MEMORIES OF MY EARLY YEARS

In this column, David Goodger, chief executive of Early Years Wales, shares some memories from his childhood



I attended nursery in Newport, South Wales, in an imposing stone building – a former school, repurposed for nursery education. It had a large climbing frame in the concrete play area. Though I never climbed it, I wanted to many times. One powerful memory stays with me: marching through the setting with other children and adults, chanting marching songs. I felt secure, and loved the opportunity to play.

Growing up in the late 70s/early 80s, I was an energetic, busy child. In our riverside terrace housing, I played in the street under mum's watchful eye and those of other parents. This energy and love of activity have stayed with me throughout my education and career.

Aged seven, I was cast in a play about shipwrecks as 'First-mate to the captain' and felt very disappointed not to be a monkey. The monkeys had fewer speaking lines, but ran, jumped and performed forward rolls – it looked much more fun! The school also had a large plant hanging from the ceiling by a rope and tasselled knot. By seven, I could reach it from the top step near the toilets if I stretched. It was great for swinging on, taking me from the top step to the bottom in one swing – until it detached from the ceiling and I had to go to the head teacher to explain how it had 'fallen off.'

In later years, I loved dancing along to cassettes of radio education broadcasts. In Years 5 and 6, walking to the local park for Wednesday sports afternoons was my week's highlight, matched only by sneaking tennis balls into school to play football – balls were banned due to the large, costly-to-replace Victorian windows.

Two powerful influences have shaped me. The first is relationships and feeling important to your carer or educator. The names of some of my teachers will always stay with me. There is nothing more transformative than someone seeing potential in you that you did not recognise yourself, then scaffolding and harnessing the opportunities to help you develop.

The second is this: humans are movers. I was an outdoor-playing child with spaces and places to play.

Despite many pressures, practitioners today create fantastic environments, build incredible relationships, and open the possibilities of play, movement and exploration. Such environments form the foundations of children's academic lives and maturation.

My aspiration is for each professional to gain recognition for their work and the huge return on investment their role gives children and society. I want to inspire all in education and childcare to provide children with music, movement, song, play and exploration. Modern childhood differs vastly from mine over 40 years ago. Yet the ingredients children need remain unchanged: nurturing adults who ignite curiosity, and provide opportunities for play, daily movement, creativity, language, music and song, so every child reaches their potential.

