

Relational and Resilient Schools

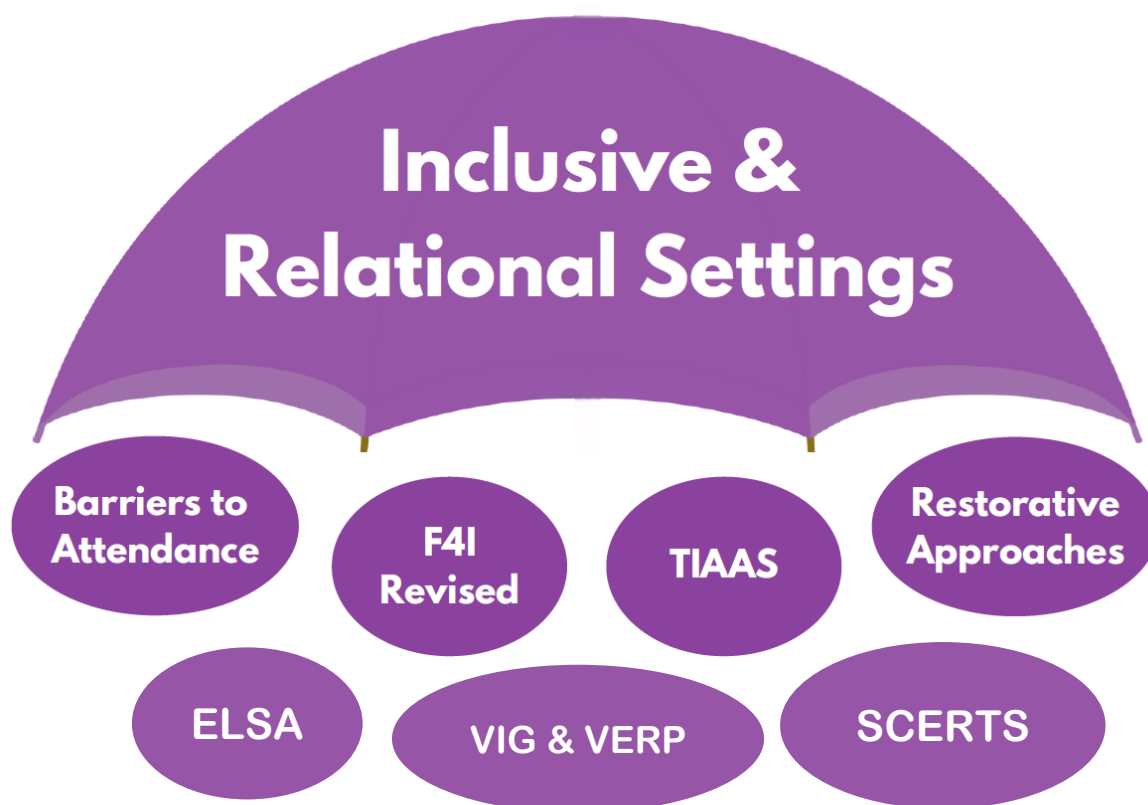
A Relational Practice Handbook

Introduction

This handbook has been developed for school leaders who are committed to driving meaningful, sustainable change for pupils with social, emotional and mental health needs, while also strengthening wellbeing provision for all pupils across the school community.

It is grounded in the belief that children's wellbeing, relationships and sense of safety are foundational to learning, inclusion and positive outcomes. Relational practice is a way of thinking and working that shapes culture, systems, adult responses and everyday interactions within school settings.

This handbook brings together the inclusive and relational approaches and programmes offered by the Educational Psychology Service in here in Birmingham. The handbook is intended to provide an overview of the programmes and to provide tools for reflection for school leaders interested in developing inclusive and relational practice in their settings.



The Underpinning Principles

All relational approaches and programmes delivered by the Educational Psychology Service are underpinned by a shared set of principles. The principles ensure a coherent language and direction across the work, supporting schools to build relational practice.

1

Prioritise proactive support at a universal level

Build systems that support the needs of all pupils. Focus on preventative rather than reactive approaches and adopt whole-school policies that create safety, consistency and predictability.



2

Empower through training and knowledge

Positive changes begin with adults. Invest in staff development so that everyone feels equipped, confident and empowered to respond to learners' needs.



3

Build supportive conditions

Recognise that behaviour is shaped by context. Make meaningful environmental adjustments to help learners succeed.



4

Adopt a holistic perspective

Move away from seeing the problem as existing within the child. Consider the whole picture and shift your perspective to consider strengths, protective factors and unmet needs.



5

Build relationships as the foundation for change

Safe, trusting, attuned relationships are the most powerful drivers of wellbeing, engagement and behaviour change.



6

Respond with curiosity, not judgement

Avoid blame and shame. Approach challenges with curiosity, compassion and understanding.



Reflection for School Leaders

- How far does your setting's ethos, policies and daily practice align with our underpinning principles and how visible is this alignment to stakeholders in your school community?
- If you were to align your setting more closely with the underpinning principles, what specific changes to policy, practice or culture would you prioritise, and why?



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What is Relational Practice?

Relational practice is an approach that prioritises safe, trusting relationships as the foundation for wellbeing, regulation, learning, and behaviour.

Key Features

Adults collaborate within the systems around the child to affect change

Behaviour is viewed as communication

Emotional safety and connection are prioritised

Adults respond with curiosity and empathy rather than judgement

Regulation is offered before reparation

Adults hold boundaries and clear expectations

What Relational Practice is not...

Relational practice can be misunderstood, this section sets out clearly what it is not, to avoid common myths and misapplications.

Relational practice is not an intervention used only by a few members of staff in school. It is a whole school approach.

Relational practice does not excuse harmful behaviour. It seeks to understand what behaviour is communicating and responds in ways that repair and restore.

Relational practice does not abandon consequences. Consequences are still used, however, they are proportionate, meaningful and developmentally informed.

Relational practice is not a discrete intervention. It is a whole school approach.

Relational practice is not just for children and young people with SEMH needs, it is for everyone in the school community!

Relational practice is not one-size-fits-all. It requires flexibility and attunement to individual children and young people

Reflection for School Leaders

- Where might these myths or misapplications be shaping staff's understanding, confidence or practice in your setting, and what is your role as leaders in actively challenging and reshaping these narratives?



Relational Practice in Action: Lindsworth School

Lindsworth School is a specialist provision for children and young people in KS2–KS4 who experience social, emotional and mental health needs. In recent years, the school has undergone a significant cultural and relational shift. This work has been recognised through the achievement of the Gold TIAAS Award, reflecting their commitment to becoming a trauma-informed, attachment-aware setting. Their approach now extends beyond these foundations, embedding relational practice throughout the school's ethos, culture, policies and everyday interactions.

What Prompted the Change

- A change in leadership brought a renewed vision and high expectations for both staff and pupils.
- Recognition that several staff members were already working relationally and instinctively modelling this approach and so there was a drive to make this more consistent.
- A desire to create a more connected, supportive and emotionally attuned school environment.

What Supported the Change

- Strong leadership direction, including challenging conversations to identify areas for development.
- Ongoing consultation with and training from the school's Educational Psychologist to shape thinking and practice.
- Key staff taking on the role of relational practitioners, who were individuals who were respected, credible and able to maintain momentum in school.
- Consistent modelling of relational approaches and responsive, in-the-moment teaching by SLT and relational practitioners.

How the Change Became Visible

- A full re-branding to help pupils feel part of a community and increase their sense of belonging.
- Revision to the behaviour policy, procedures and the wider culture to reflect relational principles.
- A shared understanding that behaviour is communication, often signalling unmet needs.
- A shift in language used between staff and pupils, creating a universal relational vocabulary.
- High expectations maintained, but with recognition that readiness for learning depends on regulation and connection. Lessons now begin with a 10-minute regulation period to support this in year groups who need this.
- Increased prioritisation of regulation through the introduction of an inclusion unit, where pupils can go to regulate before returning to learning.

Impact of the Change

- Improved pupil engagement.
- Strong, positive relationships between staff and pupils.
- Increased attendance.
- Significant reduction in exclusions.

Lindsworth's Reflective Questions for School Leaders

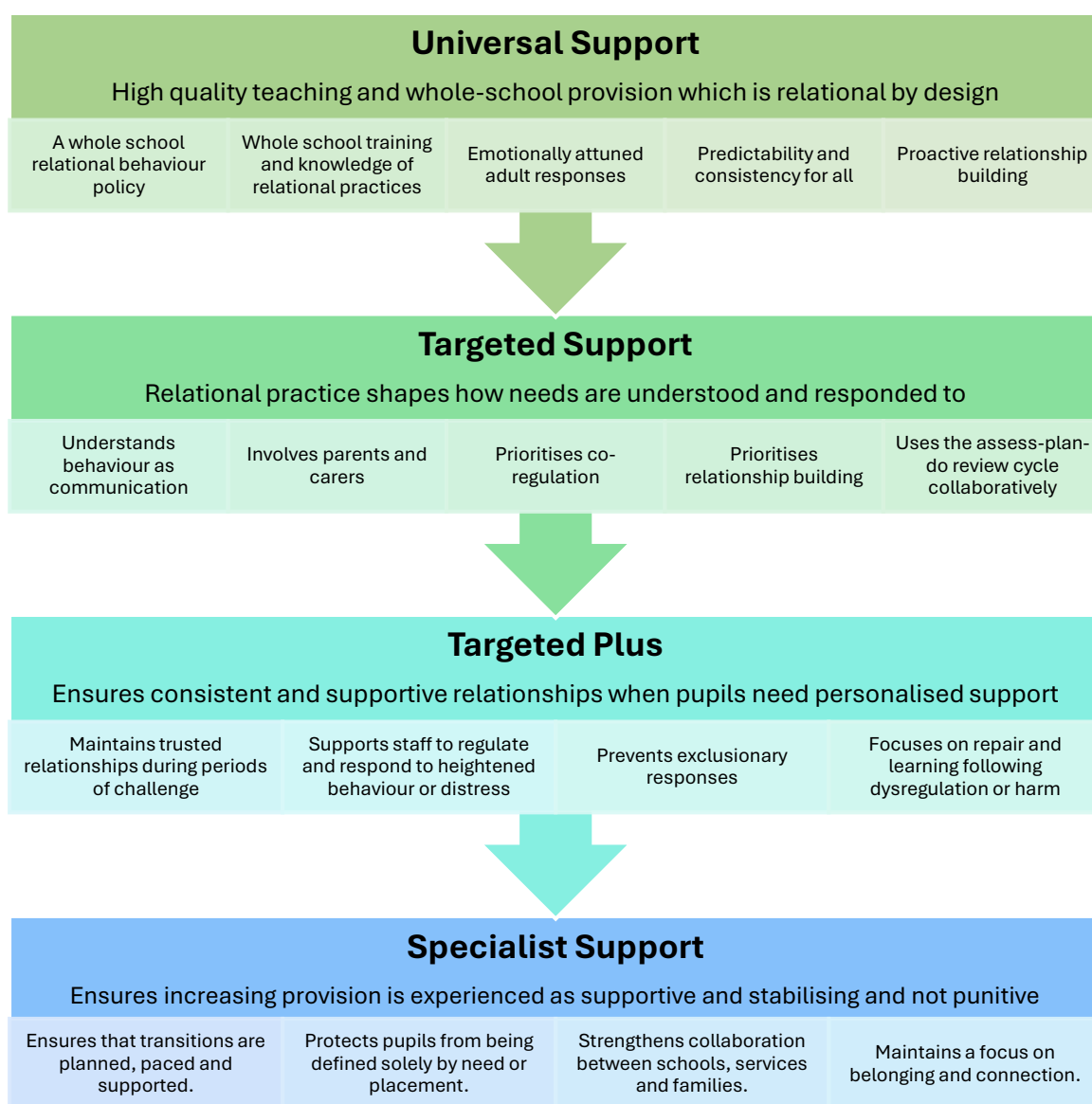
- What do you want this work to achieve?
- What does the ideal outcome look like?
- What barriers might arise, and how will you plan for them?
- When and how will you review progress?

Relational Practice and the Tiered System of Support

The graduated approach as outlined in the White Paper tells us what level of support is needed for our children and young people; relational practice determines how that support is experienced. The White Paper hopes to:

- Offer clear, national graduated approach for support.
- Emphasise inclusion as a core function of mainstream education.
- Emphasise early intervention to reduce escalation and unnecessary labelling of need.
- Improve staff confidence and capability.

The diagram below illustrates how a relational approach can work at each level of the tiered system of support:



Reflection for School Leaders

- How could you develop your relational practice across the tiered system of support?

An Overview of the Relational Approaches and Complementary Interventions Offered by Birmingham EPS to Support your Relational Journey



Psychological Consultation

A collaborative and relational process through which Educational Psychologists work alongside school staff, families and other professionals to develop a shared understanding of a child or young person's needs and identify effective ways to support them.



Framework 4 Intervention Revised

A graduated, relational framework that helps schools identify, understand and respond to social, emotional and mental health needs through structured assessment, intervention and review.



Trauma Informed Attachment Aware Schools

A whole-school development programme that supports schools to embed trauma-informed and attachment-aware practice to promote emotional wellbeing, belonging and positive relationships across the school community.



Barriers 2 Attendance

A needs-led approach that helps schools understand and address the emotional, social and environmental factors that may be impacting a child or young person's attendance at school.



Restorative Approaches

A relationship-centred approach that focuses on building, maintaining and repairing relationships by promoting understanding, accountability and the restoration of harm.



Emotional Literacy Support Assistant

An evidence-informed intervention delivered by trained school staff, with Educational Psychologist supervision, to support children's emotional wellbeing, resilience and emotional literacy.



SCERTS

A comprehensive framework that supports autistic children and young people, and others with social communication differences, by developing social communication, emotional regulation and transactional support across everyday environments.



VIG & VERP

Strengths-based approaches that use video reflection to enhance communication and relationships (VIG) and help staff develop attuned interactions and reflective practice (VERP).

Psychological Consultation

What is it?

Within Birmingham Educational Psychology Service (EPS), consultation is a core way of working and is understood as a collaborative and relational process. Educational Psychologists (EPs) work alongside school staff, families and other professionals to explore a concern. Rather than offering expert advice in isolation, EPs facilitate shared discussion and joint problem-solving. This approach values the knowledge and experiences of all participants and focuses on developing a shared understanding of needs and possible support strategies.

What does it hope to achieve?

Consultation aims to develop a clear, shared understanding of strengths and needs while promoting early intervention and inclusive practice. A key goal is to build the confidence, skills and capacity of the adults in school, enabling them to implement strategies effectively within everyday contexts. It focuses on improving outcomes related to learning, behaviour, communication and emotional wellbeing. Consultation also promotes sustainable change by strengthening the systems around children and young people, rather than relying solely on individual or short-term interventions.

How does it link with relational principles?

Consultation is closely aligned with Birmingham EPS relational principles, which highlight the importance of strong, respectful relationships. The process is collaborative, ensuring that all perspectives are heard and valued. It is underpinned by empathy and respect, recognising the experiences and expertise of families, school staff and children and young people. Consultation also prioritises inclusion and voice, keeping the child or young person at the centre of discussions.

What does it involve?

Consultation follows a structured but flexible process. It usually begins with identifying concerns and agreeing the focus of the discussion. Information is then shared to explore strengths, needs and contextual factors. Educational Psychologists support psychological formulation, helping school teams consider possible underlying factors and develop a shared understanding of the situation. Practical strategies are then co-produced to ensure they are relevant, achievable and sustainable.

How can you find more information?

For further information please speak to your visiting Educational Psychologist or visit <https://www.localofferbirmingham.co.uk/birmingham-educational-psychology-service/>



Framework 4 Intervention Revised

What is it?

Framework 4 Intervention Revised (F4I Revised) is a practical resource for school-based teams that supports decision-making for children and young people with social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs. It provides a graduated framework and a range of exploratory tools to support planning at universal, targeted and specialist levels. Designed to improve outcomes for children and young people experiencing SEMH difficulties, the framework also helps schools to record and evidence ordinarily available provision, targeted interventions and progress within the graduated approach.

What does it hope to achieve?

Framework 4 Intervention Revised aims to support the early identification of SEMH needs and ensure that children and young people receive the right support at the right time.

How does it link with relational principles?

Framework 4 Intervention Revised is underpinned by a number of key relational principles that recognise the importance of relationships, wellbeing and context in supporting SEMH needs. The framework promotes:

- Early identification and intervention.
- Person-centred and strengths-led practice.
- The understanding that learning begins with wellbeing.
- Recognition that behaviour communicates a need and tells a story.
- Whole-school commitment to supporting children and young people.
- Reflection on how adult actions and responses can influence outcomes.
- The importance of connection and relationships in supporting learning and development.

What does it involve?

Framework 4 Intervention Revised follows a graduated pathway. Schools work through each phase in sequence, implementing actions, reviewing progress and determining appropriate next steps.

How can you find more information?

For implementation support, access to resources or further guidance, please speak with your visiting Educational Psychologist.

Trauma Informed Attachment Aware Schools



What is it?

Trauma Informed Attachment Aware Schools (TIAAS) is a whole-school development programme that supports schools to develop universal approaches which promote the emotional development and wellbeing of all children, young people and staff. The TIAAS approach aims to support positive systemic change across a school, strengthening practice so that the emotional development and wellbeing of children and staff are considered.

What does it hope to achieve?

TIAAS aims to develop sustainable, whole-school approaches that promote emotional wellbeing, relationships and inclusion. The programme seeks to:

- Increase understanding of trauma-informed and attachment-aware practice.
- Support schools to develop consistent relational approaches.
- Promote the emotional development and wellbeing of children, young people and staff.
- Strengthen whole-school systems and policies.
- Build school capacity to respond effectively to the needs of their individual community.
- Create lasting and meaningful change across the whole setting.

How does it link with relational principles?

TIAAS is underpinned by six key principles and sits within a broader framework of relational practice. The programme aligns closely with the principles of:

- Connection and relationships.
- Curiosity and understanding.
- Emotional wellbeing.
- Psychological safety.
- Reflection and adult development.
- Whole-school responsibility for creating supportive environments.

What does it involve?

TIAAS begins with the school's Senior Leadership Team attending 1.5 days of SLT Engagement Workshops. These workshops support schools to consider their readiness for change and identify strengths and areas for development. Following acceptance onto the programme, schools participate in a self-evaluation process, action planning, whole school training and continued implementation support.

How can you find more information?

If your school is interested in TIAAS, please contact your Educational Psychologist to discuss your setting's readiness for the programme. For additional enquiries, please contact:

TIAAS@birmingham.gov.uk

Barriers 2 Attendance

What is it?

Barriers 2 Attendance, previously referred to as Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance, (EBSNA) describes situations where a child or young person is unable to attend school regularly due to underlying emotional, social or psychological factors. In Birmingham, this is understood as a needs-led framework rather than a label. It recognises that non-attendance is often a communication of unmet need rather than an act of defiance. The approach prioritises understanding the function of non-attendance and the factors that may be contributing to it, including anxiety, unmet SEND needs, social difficulties and environmental influences.

What does it hope to achieve?

Barriers 2 Attendance hopes to:

- Promote early identification and intervention before patterns of absence become established.
- Support safe, supported and sustainable reintegration into education.
- Reduce distress and improve emotional wellbeing for children and young people.
- Strengthen collaboration between schools, families and support services.
- Move practice away from punitive responses towards understanding, inclusion and support.

How does it link with relational principles?

Barriers 2 Attendance is grounded in relational and trauma-informed practice. By focusing on understanding rather than blame, the approach supports children and young people to feel heard, understood and supported.

What does it involve?

Support is individualised and tailored to the needs of the child or young person. This may include:

- A graduated response beginning with early intervention within school.
- The use of assessment tools to explore underlying barriers.
- Development of a collaborative support plan with clear and achievable next steps.
- Flexible or phased approaches to attendance that are responsive to individual needs.
- Environmental adjustments, such as reduced demands, access to safe spaces or key adult support.
- Ongoing review and adaptation to ensure that progress is meaningful, sustainable and responsive to changing needs.

How can you find more information?

Further information and guidance can be accessed through Birmingham Local Authority Inclusion and Attendance guidance. Please also contact your visiting Educational Psychologist if you are interested.



Restorative Approaches

What is it?

Restorative approaches are relational approaches to behaviour management that focus on building, maintaining and repairing relationships rather than managing behaviour through punishment. The approach seeks to shift the focus away from blame and towards understanding harm, accountability and relationship repair. It encourages reflection on questions such as who has been affected, what the impact has been and what needs to happen to make things right. Importantly, restorative approaches are not a stand-alone strategy. They are an ethos that underpins everyday interactions and supports a consistent, relationship-centred approach across the whole school community.

What does it hope to achieve?

Restorative approaches aim to create safe, inclusive and connected learning environments where relationships are prioritised and behaviour is understood in context.

How does it link with relational principles?

Restorative approaches closely align with relational practice by emphasising working with children and young people rather than doing things to them. The approach promotes:

- Empathy, respect and mutual understanding.
- Inclusion and participation.
- Opportunities for all voices to be heard and valued.
- Accountability while maintaining positive relationships.
- Co-regulation and emotional safety.
- A sense of belonging and connection within the school community.

What does it involve?

Restorative approaches include both proactive and responsive elements and are most effective when embedded across the whole school rather than used only in response to incidents. Training is available to schools from the EPS, to support the development of restorative approaches across whole school policy and practice.

How can you find more information?

If you are interested in learning more about restorative approaches, developing restorative practice within your setting, or exploring opportunities such as staff training and peer mediation, please speak with your visiting Educational Psychologist.

What is it?

Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) is an evidence-informed intervention delivered by trained school staff to support the emotional wellbeing of children and young people. ELSAs are typically teaching assistants who have received specialist training. The role of an ELSA is to provide structured, short-term support for pupils experiencing emotional, social or behavioural difficulties, helping them to better understand and manage their feelings within a safe and supportive environment.

What does it hope to achieve?

ELSA aims to promote emotional literacy, resilience and wellbeing in children and young people. The approach seeks to:

- Support pupils to recognise, understand and regulate their emotions.
- Develop self-esteem and confidence.
- Strengthen social and friendship skills.
- Help children and young people cope with experiences.
- Reduce emotional barriers to learning.
- Promote inclusion through early intervention and support.
- Prevent difficulties from escalating by responding to needs at an early stage.

How does it link with relational principles?

ELSA is closely aligned with Birmingham EPS relational principles, which emphasise the importance of trusting relationships in supporting wellbeing and development. The approach is underpinned by:

- Empathy, understanding and respect.
- Active listening and responsive support.
- Consistent and trusting relationships.
- A strengths-based and child-centred approach.

What does it involve?

ELSA begins with a member of school staff undertaking ELSA training delivered by Birmingham Educational Psychology Service. Following training, ELSAs run interventions in their schools and receive regular supervision from an Educational Psychologist. Supervision is a key component of the ELSA model, providing opportunities for reflection, guidance and professional support.

How can you find more information?

If you are interested in learning more about ELSA please speak with your visiting Educational Psychologist. For additional enquiries, please contact: elsa@birmingham.gov.uk

SCERTS



What is it?

SCERTS (Social Communication, Emotional Regulation and Transactional Support) is a framework designed to support autistic young people, as well as others with social communication differences. Rather than focusing solely on reducing behaviours or teaching isolated skills, SCERTS aims to promote meaningful development across everyday environments. It emphasises understanding how a young person communicates, regulates their emotions and engages with others, while adapting the environment and interactions around them.

What does it hope to achieve?

SCERTS aims to improve a child or young person's ability to communicate effectively, regulate emotions, engage socially and participate successfully across home, school and community environments.

How does it link with relational principles?

SCERTS closely aligns with Birmingham EPS relational principles through its emphasis on relationships, collaboration and understanding. The framework recognises that learning and development occur within the context of supportive relationships and highlights the importance of responsive interactions between children and the adults around them. SCERTS promotes:

- Strong, trusting relationships.
- Collaborative working between families and professionals.
- Strengths-based and respectful practice.
- Understanding behaviour within its wider context.
- Inclusion, participation and belonging.

What does it involve?

SCERTS provides a structured framework for understanding and supporting development across three interconnected domains: Social Communication (SC), Emotional Regulation (ER) and Transactional Support (TS). Within Birmingham EPS, SCERTS typically involves:

- Training programmes for whole staff
- Consultation with school staff and parents or carers.
- Structured observations
- Identification of strengths and priorities across the three SCERTS domains.
- Collaborative target setting and planning.

How can you find more information?

If you are interested in learning more about SCERTS please speak with your visiting Educational Psychologist.

VIG & VERP



What is it?

VIG (Video Interactive Guidance) is a strengths-based, evidence-informed approach that uses video clips of successful interactions to support adults in reflecting on and developing their communication and relationships with children and young people.

VERP (Video Enhanced Reflective Practice) is a strengths-based professional development approach that uses video reflection to enhance staff communication, interaction skills, and reflective practice.

What does it hope to achieve?

VIG aims to strengthen relationships, build confidence, and improve outcomes for children and young people by enhancing attuned communication and interaction.

VERP aims to improve the emotional and social wellbeing of pupils by supporting staff to develop more attuned and effective interactions.

How does it link with relational principles?

VIG is rooted in the belief that positive, attuned relationships are central to wellbeing, learning, and development, focusing on recognising and building upon strengths within interactions.

VERP promotes relational practice by helping staff notice, reflect on, and strengthen the interactions that foster connection, belonging, and positive relationships.

What does it involve?

A VIG practitioner records short videos of everyday interactions and supports participants to review and reflect on moments of successful communication and connection.

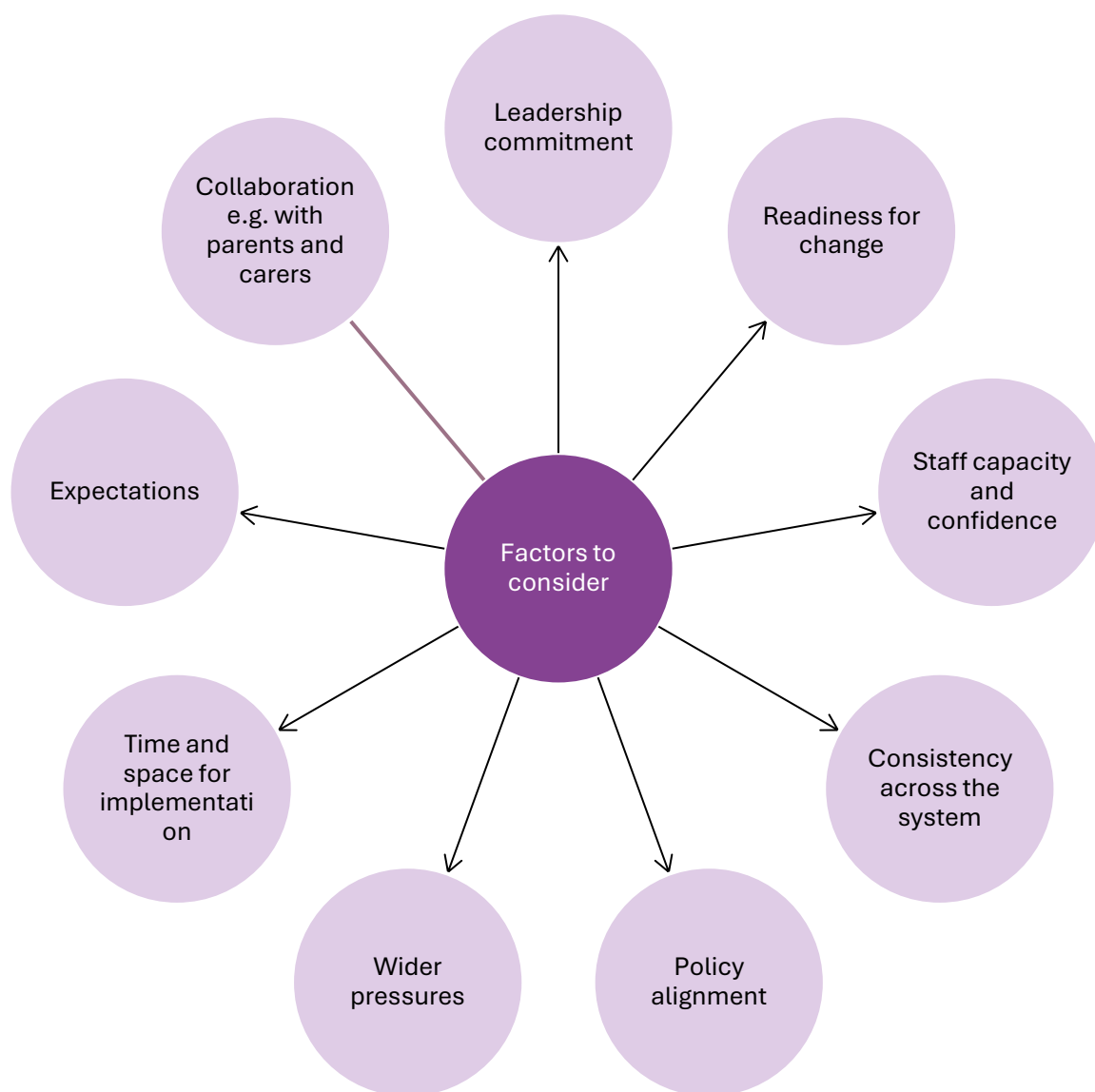
In VERP, staff receive training and use video recordings as a reflective tool to identify strengths, set goals, and learn from successful practice alongside colleagues.

How can you find more information?

If you are interested in finding out more about VIG or VERP speak to your visiting Educational Psychologist.

Implementation and Sustainability

While relational approaches are widely recognised as central to inclusion, wellbeing, and behaviour, their effective implementation and long-term sustainability are influenced by a range of factors. It is essential that school leaders actively consider these factors, as leadership decisions shape whether relational practice is embedded, sustained, and experienced consistently across a school. The illustration below sets out the key factors that can strengthen or hinder the successful implementation and sustainability of a relational approach for consideration.



Reflection for School Leaders

- Are there any approaches, interventions or programmes within this handbook that could complement and strengthen your current provision?
- Based on your current strengths, priorities and areas for development, what are the most important next steps for your setting?
- How will you support consistent implementation over time, ensuring that practice is embedded, monitored and sustained across the whole school community?