

Three boys at Beech Lodge School exhibit a zest for life that supports them in their learning

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# Development matters

**Annie Grant** visits Beech Lodge School in Berkshire where a developmental approach to learning for pupils with social and emotional difficulties has inspired a new resource for teachers

**‘To see your child fail is heartbreaking, a crushing thing,’ says Daniela Shanly, proprietor of Beech Lodge School.**

Ms Shanly opened Beech Lodge in 2013 when she was unable to find a suitable school for her adopted son, whose early experiences in an overseas orphanage left him with severe developmental, trauma and attachment issues and extremely challenging behaviour. ‘By the time he was seven he’d been in three different schools, but none was able to provide the empathetic and compassionate environment he needed to thrive,’ she explains. ‘So I became determined to set up a school for children who would otherwise fail in mainstream education.’

Three years down the line, Beech Lodge School has 22 pupils on roll with plans to expand significantly once it moves into a new building. Sixty per cent of its pupils are adopted or looked after, and all have social and emotional difficulties that make it hard for them to succeed in conventional school settings.

## *Development and nurture*

Beech Lodge offers an ‘alternative and nurturing curriculum’ based on Dan Hughes’ PACE model, originally developed for therapeutic parenting with abused, neglected or traumatised children. Rooted in attachment theory, the approach works to make pupils feel safe and secure in school, so that they are able learn and achieve. Unwanted behaviours are looked at developmentally.

**“When pupils thrive emotionally, they are able to engage in learning”**

‘Our children have delayed development in some areas because of their past experiences,’ explains educational psychologist Alastair Lidster. ‘We need to build in some of those typical experiences they missed early on so that they can move forward.’

Daniela Shanly describes how even

small changes can have a big impact. ‘We have young teenagers who, when they first come, are very closed in and don’t want to engage. Here they are encouraged to run around and play, but when they do, they play like little children because they haven’t had the opportunity before,’ she explains. ‘It’s joyful seeing them beginning to thrive, and the more they thrive emotionally, the more they are able to engage in learning.’

## *Measuring social and emotional development*

Although from the outset staff could point anecdotally to the progress that pupils were making, they had no formal means to demonstrate it. ‘We wanted to develop something that would allow us to monitor social and emotional progress in the same way that we track academic progress,’ says assistant psychologist Rebecca Best. ‘We started to look at how Goal Attainment Scaling (GAS) could enable us to measure small changes as they happened.’

GAS is an evaluation tool that enables teachers to measure the impact of an



By adding numerical values to each step – using 0 for goal achieved – you can evaluate the impact of interventions quantitatively when using the GAS evaluation tool

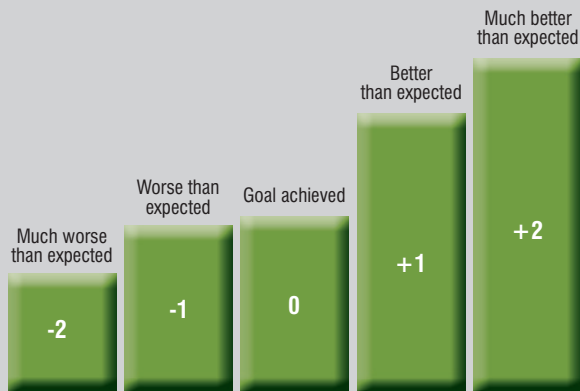


Photo: Baylis Media Ltd

intervention on an aspect of a pupil's behaviour that it aims to change. It can be particularly useful for measuring outcomes like social and emotional development that are difficult to support with data.

The scaling process involves the following steps.

- Identify the focus of the intervention.
- Set SMART, personalised targets.
- Identify success criteria for each target.
- Decide what the expected outcome for that target will be.
- Decide what the outcome would look like if it was somewhat better than expected and somewhat worse than expected.
- Decide what the outcome would look like if it was much better than expected and much worse than expected.
- Review how well the target has been achieved.

By adding numerical values to each step, using zero for goal achieved, the impact of interventions can be evaluated quantitatively (see above).

## Mapping development

The next step was to embed GAS in a context that would help teachers to set appropriate goals for pupils. 'We felt our teachers needed to know more about what typical social and emotional development looks like,' explains Ms Best, 'so we created a resource that maps typical development, which teachers could dig into to find out where a child with delayed development is and where they might go next.'

'If you've got a 12-year-old child who, developmentally, is functioning like a much younger child in some areas, there's no point in setting goals in those areas that would be appropriate for a typical 12-year-old. So the idea is that you track back to where they are, you look at the next

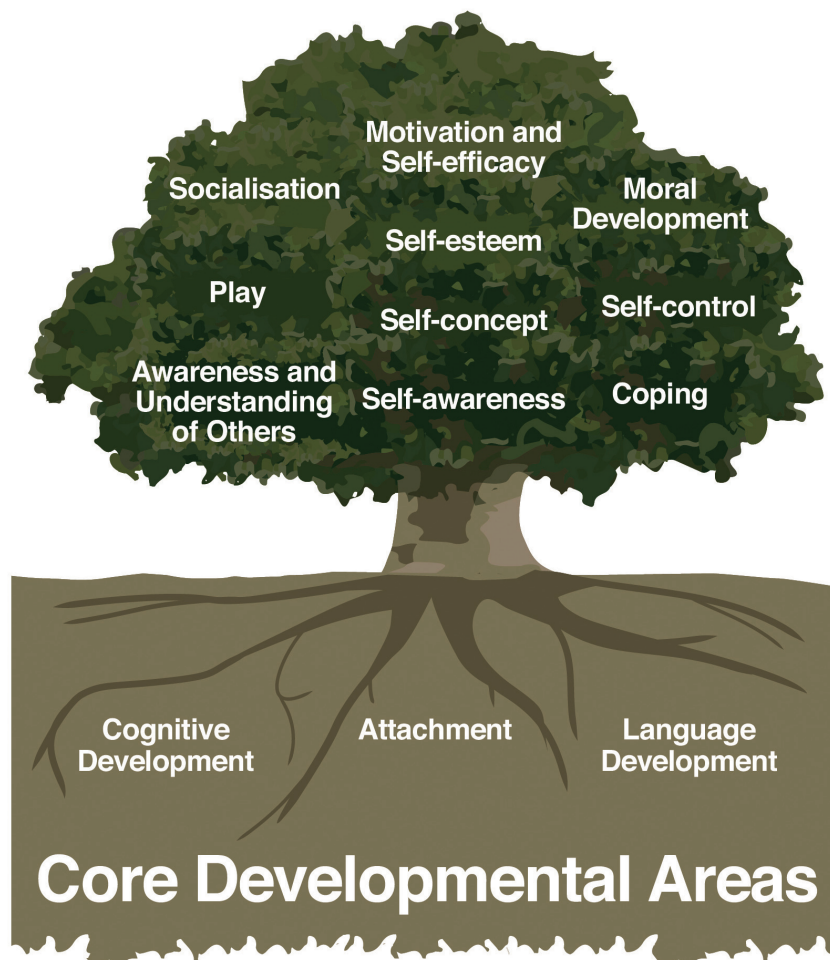
developmental stage and you set goals and measure progress based on that.'

## The Fagus framework

Called Fagus – from the Latin for beech, the tree of learning – the resource comprises a series of 13 booklets, each of which sets out a developmentally sequenced framework of typical behaviours across the core areas of social and emotional functioning.

Each booklet begins with an introduction to the area in question, e.g. play, backed up with research evidence about the importance of that area in terms of social and emotional outcomes. This is followed by a summary of typical development in the area, split into infancy, early childhood, middle childhood and adolescence.

The exception is attachment. 'Attachment is a key theme for us at Beech Lodge, not least because we have



Social and emotional development

A completed checklist for a Year 8 pupil whose poor coping skills and self-control caused him to run out of lessons

	Infancy (0-2)	Early childhood (2-7)	Middle childhood (7-11)	Adolescence (11-19)		
Awareness of others						
Cognitive Development						
Coping						
Language Development						
Expressive Language						
Non-Verbal Communication						
Pragmatics						
Receptive Language						
Moral Development						
Motivation and Self-Efficacy						
Play						
Self-Awareness						
Self-Concept						
Self-Control						
Self-Esteem						
Socialisation						

so many adopted children,’ explains Alastair Lidster. ‘While our attachment booklet doesn’t lend itself to goal setting and intervention using the developmental sequence in the way that the other booklets do, the information it provides helps us understand the children and highlights the importance of attachment for children’s functioning in school – a place where they can feel safe and secure and learn about relationships.’

The booklets, which have been reviewed by academics at Royal Holloway, University of London, were trialled at Beech Lodge. ‘Following the trial, teachers thought it would also be useful to have a briefer summary of each one,’ remembers Ms Best. ‘So we produced checklists that you can work through to create a one-page profile. They show which behaviours a child is demonstrating at what developmental stage, and indicate the most important areas to focus on.’

‘It’s a holistic approach,’ adds Mr Lidster. ‘The profiles tell us at a glance where the difficulties lie, but they also draw our attention to the things that are going well.’

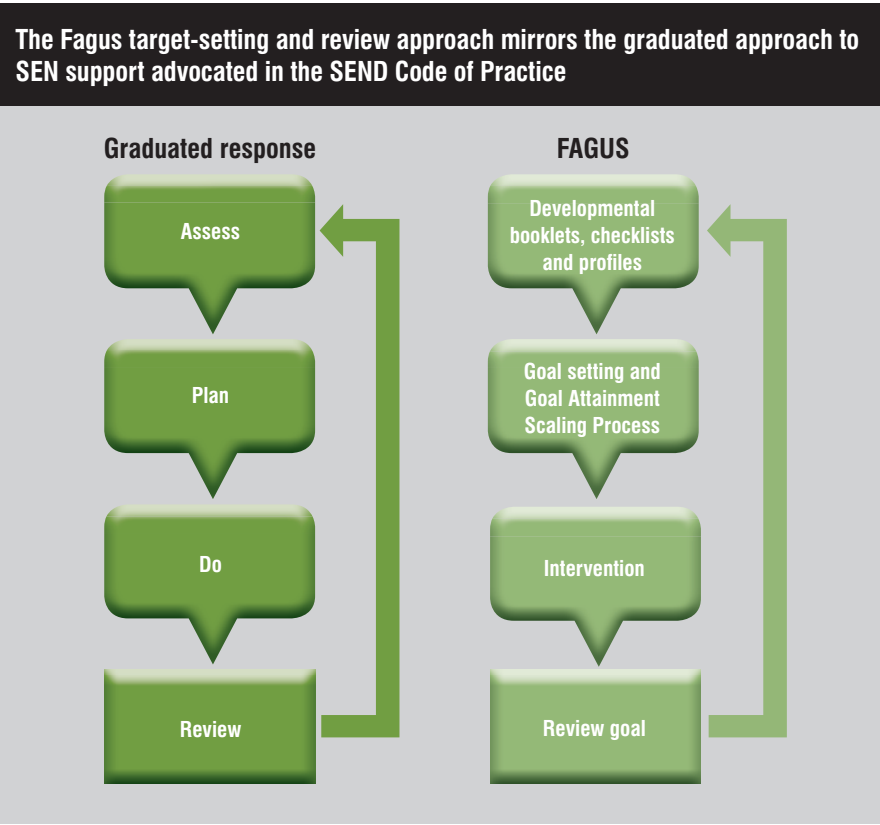
Action planning

At Beech Lodge, the Fagus materials are used by teacher/TA teams to set and review targets. These are shared with parents and, when appropriate, with pupils, and reviewed regularly. Once targets have been agreed, staff develop an

action plan, setting out the interventions that will be put in place to help pupils to move forward.

Alastair Lidster believes that often the most effective interventions are those that are built into the child’s everyday experience in school. ‘Sometimes

we leap too quickly to substantial, complex interventions, delivered in artificial situations, and so learning doesn’t generalise easily to the real world,’ he explains. ‘By framing things developmentally, we can normalise many interventions and build in some of that



experience that may have been missed early on.'

Currently, the Fagus materials do not support teachers' action planning, but an additional booklet, now being written, will link evidence-based interventions to particular development points.

### A holistic approach

Margaret Smith, whose son attends Beech Lodge, first encountered Fagus at an annual review meeting.

'Previously, when he was in mainstream school, the focus was very much on his academic attainment, but this was the first time his social and emotional attainment and progress had been tracked,' she explains. 'For us as parents, it was really important because it highlighted key areas of social and emotional development where he needed support. And that has been the key to his academic achievement too, because if children are not functioning emotionally, the academic side of school is very hard for them to access.'

Mr Lidster agrees. 'The relationships between the social and emotional domain and the learning domain become obvious as you read through the booklets,' he says. 'If children aren't able to function in an age-appropriate way emotionally, they won't manage in a classroom with its complexity of relationships and challenge.'

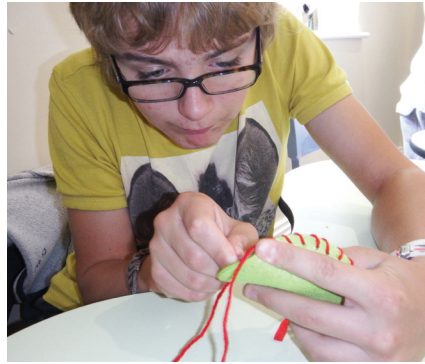
Ms Smith is delighted with the progress that her son has made. 'We can see in the way he presents himself that he feels more confident and capable,' she says. 'Children mature at different rates for all kinds of reasons, and you need to support that. Fagus does this in a very transparent and practical way.'

### Testing the resource with a wider audience

Although originally developed as an in-house toolkit, Fagus is now being piloted in Yorkshire and Humberside by the adoption support agency PAC-UK as part of a project funded by the Department for Education.

Dr Emma Gore Langton, head of the education service at PAC-UK, believes that it provides a useful framework for supporting the development of pupils with attachment, trauma and loss issues. 'When we go into schools, we talk a lot about the atypical development that adopted children might exhibit as a result of their early experiences, but we find that there is often a lack of awareness of what typical developmental trajectories look like,' she explains.

'Sometimes teachers can feel that children are off the map because their



A pupil's deep concentration shows that he is in a good place for learning

behaviour seems so extreme, frightening or bewildering. Fagus helps them understand what is going on because it doesn't focus on all the things a child can't do and what they have done wrong. Every child will be somewhere on that developmental map, with strengths in some areas as well as relative difficulties.' PAC-UK education adviser Helen Hoban, who has used the materials in several schools, thinks it will be particularly useful in helping schools which are already proactive in supporting children with attachment issues to develop

**“School becomes a place where children can feel safe and secure and learn about relationships”**

this work further. 'Pastoral support is difficult,' she says. 'You want to support students as much as you can, but often you're unsure what impact that support will have. Schools have appreciated Fagus because it helps them set specific and measurable goals, and through creative action planning they can really bring these goals to life.'

Dr Gore Langton cautions that until the strategies booklet is available, less confident schools may falter at the action-planning stage. 'The current materials fill a really important gap in terms of giving schools the tools to make decisions about when to intervene,' she acknowledges, 'but for that to be successful, teachers need to have some knowledge about the best way to intervene.'

### Changing practice

Rebecca Best believes that a key advantage of the resource is the

discussion generated by the assess-plan-do-review cycle. 'It's a reflective process,' she says. 'You think about your current practice with the child and how you can improve your approach or systems, and that can have huge benefits for everyone.'

In one of Ms Hoban's schools, the use of the Fagus checklist to investigate a 15-year-old boy's low self-esteem changed teachers' perceptions of his behaviour and raised important questions about behaviour management. 'I think staff were expecting his developmental age to come out at about 11 or 12, but instead it turned out to be four!' she remembers. 'That led to a really helpful discussion about the appropriateness of the discipline system they were using with him – would you use it with a four-year-old? – because despite what it said on his birth certificate, that's where he was emotionally.'

'Seeing children's behaviour as a "disorder" can feel like an end point,' says Alastair Lidster. 'But if we see it in terms of "They haven't reached that point in their development yet", it explains their behaviour and offers a way forward.'

'The understanding it brings encourages schools to be a bit more flexible,' adds Ms Hoban. 'It doesn't necessarily change the world, but it helps them to start looking at things in a different way.'

### A resource for schools

By September, a commercial version of Fagus will be available for schools to buy. Beech Lodge hopes that its flexible and user-friendly format – each booklet is just 20 pages – will make it accessible and manageable for teachers.

'Teachers won't be profiling every child,' says Ms Best. 'It's for children they're puzzling over and thinking: "Where is this behaviour coming from?" Fagus gives them the opportunity to think about these behaviours developmentally, instead of focusing on the difficulties they cause. When you've got a class of 30 and wonder how you can possibly handle it all, Fagus gives you an insight into how you can.'

Annie Grant is a freelance consultant, producer, writer and editor

### FIND OUT MORE

- **Beech Lodge School:** [www.beechlodgeschool.co.uk](http://www.beechlodgeschool.co.uk)
- **PACE:** <http://bit.ly/sc231-09>
- **Fagus:** [www.fagus.org.uk](http://www.fagus.org.uk)
- **PAC-UK:** [www.pac-uk.org](http://www.pac-uk.org)