

Act your age!

Why this can be a challenge for children with emotional and social development and attachment difficulties and how educational psychologists working at an independent school in Berkshire have created a support framework which is helping pupils across the country.



Alastair Lidster

Understanding that a pupil's developmental age might be very different from their chronological age is a useful concept to grasp in terms of supporting a child with social and emotional difficulties according to Alastair Lidster, Educational Psychologist at Beech Lodge School.

Beech Lodge School was set up four years ago and specialises in teaching children with developmental trauma and attachment difficulties. These difficulties can manifest themselves in a number of ways including a lack of engagement in class, introverted or acting-out behaviour, low self-esteem and school refusal.

The school offers a uniquely nurturing environment which, alongside academic progress, prioritises social and emotional development. Very soon after the school opened, staff began to see positive changes in the emotional and social development of their pupils. Subtle changes such as greater eye-contact, more personal interaction and general wellbeing was increased thanks to the school's unique approach.

Head teacher Lucy Barnes believes that support from the Educational Psychologists working with the school enabled her team to develop a deeper understanding of the challenges their pupils were facing – and that this understanding helped them to support the pupils more effectively.

She says: "Alastair Lidster explained that many of our pupils have delayed development in certain areas due to their traumatic past experiences and that we would need to build in some of those typical

experiences that they missed early on so that they can move forward. For example, we have a few young teenagers who didn't want to engage academically or socially when they first arrived at the school. We encouraged them to run and play around and when they did they played like little children because they hadn't had the opportunity to do so before."



Lucy Barnes

Lucy continues: "We could clearly see the change in our children in terms of behaviour and increased levels of wellbeing and this was beginning to translate into academic progress. However, we realised that we had no means of tracking and recording these positive changes. Whilst we knew we could evidence academic progress to Ofsted or ISI, we had no means of evidencing what incredible and important progress our pupils were making in their social and emotional functioning. We also wanted a means to improve the knowledge in the school about pupils' social and emotional development and apply this understanding to set them developmentally appropriate goals. So, together with Alastair and his team, we created a method we could use in the school for our own purposes, this then developed into Fagus – an educational resource which teachers in all schools can use to monitor and measure social and emotional development."

Alastair Lidster takes up the story: "I have worked as an educational psychologist for nearly 20 years and I have found the developmental frameworks available for pre-school children to be very helpful when understanding a young child's

progress. However, we could find nothing quite like this for school age children in the educational resource market. So we set about creating a developmentally sequenced framework which clarifies the understanding of a child's strength and difficulties across social and emotional functioning.

"Our educational framework – Fagus – enables teachers to measure developmental age against chronological age, monitor progress and set goals and is the result of three years of extensive research. Fagus increases understanding of a child's behaviours and how to work with each individual to change these behaviours; this in turn helps pupils to begin to realise their academic potential. It comprises a toolkit including 13 printed developmental guides, each one relating to a social and emotional domain, and supporting online tools including developmental checklists and developmental profiles."

This resource has been warmly welcomed by the adoption community as it is particularly helpful for pupils with attachment and trauma related difficulties often faced by adopted and looked-after children. Adoption charity PAC-UK piloted Fagus in schools in Yorkshire and Humberside in a DfE-funded project with excellent results. However, Fagus has wider applications and is also now being used in schools around the country for a range of pupils who demonstrate delayed or impaired emotional and social functioning.

Rachel Endacott, Inclusion Manager, at Furze Platt School in Maidenhead has been using Fagus for six months:

"We have employed this resource to help a pupil and their teacher

focus on one particular area, in this case, 'coping'. By concentrating our efforts, we have been able to set a clear objective – 'to co-ordinate coping responses with less support from adults and to independently choose coping behaviours without support'. This has resulted in a change in the pupil's reactions and behaviour. As a result, the child is happier and their classroom is calmer. We have also found that the simplicity of the Fagus framework is helping us explain to parents the challenges their children are facing at school. And to describe how we are supporting them – through the Fagus programme – to develop the emotional resilience they need to thrive."

As well as SENCO support, Fagus has been reviewed and endorsed by the psychology team at Royal Holloway College, University of London. Dr Jennifer Nock, a Chartered Psychologist specialising in developmental/relational trauma and attachment in educational settings, believes a resource like Fagus is long overdue:

"Fagus provides a clear and comprehensive framework for teachers to support a child who feels disconnected from the educational environment because they are not emotionally and socially equipped to cope. By applying Fagus tools and checklists, teachers can assess a child's current development and in so doing, acquire a deeper understanding of their challenges. Then the Fagus resource can be used to develop a clear pathway – punctuated by achievable objectives – to help the child attain the skills they need to build emotional resilience, succeed academically and ultimately, feel happier at school."