

## Balancing act

A pioneering scheme helps children to see the classroom as a place where family and society meet.

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It's 10am and in Beech class at St John's primary in Warminster, Wiltshire, you can hear a pin drop. More than 30 children sit silently in a circle, legs crossed, eyes shut, hands on hearts, as teacher Caroline Dixon takes them through a visualisation. This is their "stilling", designed to calm them and ready them for learning. A graduated, coloured "feelings thermometer" hangs from the ceiling so each child can clip on their own named peg and let people know how they feel today. A mobile, with each child represented, marks the centre of the room. "Being in balance helps us learn," explains nine-year-old Ben. "If someone's causing trouble or being noisy, Miss puts a peg on the mobile and it goes out of balance. We know that's not helping us get on so we all have to decide what to do to get it back in balance."



St John's is one of 16 Wiltshire primary schools pioneering this new approach to enhancing children's learning, part-funded by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES). Led by Judith Hemming, a psychotherapist and director of the Nowhere Foundation, a multi-disciplinary team of counsellors, researchers and educational consultants, it's based on an approach known as systemic constellations, which focuses on the influence of systems - family, school and community - rather than individual behaviour.

"It's solution rather than problem-focused," explains Hemming. "We look at the classroom as a social system where family and wider society meet." Her belief is that by better understanding a child's place in all their systems, improving harmony and respect in the classroom and encouraging children to learn about themselves in new and different ways, it's possible to enhance each child's sense of belonging and, as a result, improve their learning environment. "What we're trying to do is create the core conditions for other initiatives to have a chance of working," says Hemming.

## Different perspective

The training, which takes the form of short residential courses, twilight sessions and in-school support, encourages staff, including teachers, headteachers and teaching assistants, to look at their place - and the child's - in their own systems.

"It gives teachers a different perspective," says Alison Barclay of the Nowhere Foundation. "We had a child whose father was in prison and whose mother had multiple partners. Using this approach, the teacher was able to acknowledge and respect the reality for that child: that he loved and felt loyal to both parents regardless of what they had done. For the child there was no 'good' or 'bad' parent."

Children are encouraged to choose a "special person" and write their name or draw their picture on a piece of card to keep close at times when they need support. At St John's, eight-year-old Cara has two special people - grandad, who died two years ago, and her baby sister, Bria. "They help me work better because they give me support and company," she says.

Rachel, 11, had her special person - her mum - with her during her English SATs. "It calmed me down when I felt agitated, and even though I knew I'd made a big mistake, having her there made me feel positive." Tizzy, 10, got her teacher to hold up the picture of her special person for support during a school swimming gala.

One school gave year 6 children one maths test when they had a picture of their special person and one when they did not. Most children scored much better when they had their support symbol with them.

By using tools like the mobile and feelings thermometers, children start to understand more about loyalty and belonging and about how each part of a system affects another. "The class mobile, for example, creates a powerful focus which gives children a visual sense of their class system and balance" explains Barclay.

At Sambourne primary in Warminster, teacher Sally Lucas says that using the mobile has helped one child who was so angry and frustrated that he would regularly abscond from school. "The mobile helped him to see, in a very real way, how he affected the balance in the classroom and at circle time we all talked about it. He gradually realised that the whole class wanted to help and, that, along with other things, has helped him to calm down."

Using counters or blocks to help children show where they see themselves in relation to the rest of their family system and class gives teachers, and peers, a deeper insight.

"Without the child saying anything at all, you get a far greater sense of how life is for them and what's going on," says Dixon. Children are finding out about each other, articulating their feelings and learning to respect their similarities and differences. At Chapmanslade primary school, teachers get children to stand in groups to discover this at a physical level - hair colour, eye colour, number of siblings - and a deeper one: children whose parents are separated or who may live with a step-parent.

"Exercises like this have helped children who are struggling with their situation to realise that there are others in the same boat, and to feel less isolated," says Joss Jewell, head of Chapmanslade.

The feelings thermometers help children to let others know how they're feeling in a safe, non-verbal way. As one teacher commented, "baggage can be a problem for children and for all of us. This approach has allowed children to understand and sympathise with others' problems. Most important, it's allowed them to be truthful with themselves and know it's OK to feel how they do." No one would suggest that this approach can banish behaviour problems and class conflicts, but the schools involved say there are tangible changes. A study of schools involved in the initial phase of the project found that, almost without exception, children were more calm, confident and relaxed, and there were fewer tantrums and less aggression and rudeness.

### Emotionally vulnerable

"Children feel a collective responsibility for each other's wellbeing and we certainly use fewer ice packs in the playground," says Jewell.

Schools like Chapmanslade and St John's say the system has helped improve Sats results. "Our most recent year 6s were a very emotionally vulnerable group who don't perform well in test situations, but the SATs marks were way above expectations," says Sue Humphries, head at St John's. On feedback forms many children mentioned how stilling, breathing exercises and having special people had helped them feel calm in the tests.

As Jewell points out: "It's the best kind of humanity. As a teacher I find myself problem-solving, saying the same old stuff to the same children, and it makes no difference. But this isn't about solving or sorting anything. It's about helping children be calm, to see themselves in relation to others, to understand and respect that the way they and other people feel matters, and about helping them to learn from teachers who know and care about them."

More information about the enhancing **childrens** learning initiative can be found at [www.enhancingchildrenslearning.org](http://www.enhancingchildrenslearning.org). Alternatively you can contact Alison Barclay by email at [alison.barclay@nowherefoundation.org](mailto:alison.barclay@nowherefoundation.org)