



From mountain to sea

NURTURE GROUPS

Guidance for schools

November 2021



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Introduction

Marjorie Boxall established the idea of nurture groups in the 1970s and 1980s. Through her experiences of working as an Educational Psychologist with children and young people who were experiencing a wide range of social and emotional challenges, she began to recognise the link between their social and emotional difficulties and their early years experiences. Upon reaching school age, many of these children were unable to cope with the social and academic demands of the school environment and the curriculum. She created and developed nurture groups to attempt to help support and meet their needs effectively. It is important to note, that although nurture in the early years is very important, difficult early experiences related to nurture and attachment can be overcome later with the help of nurturing adults within the child's life. Teachers and other significant adults can provide very important attachments for children and young people.

Nurture groups take place in school and are teacher-led, short term interventions that are focused on supporting the social, emotional and behavioural needs of children and young people. Identified children and young people attend the nurture group but still remain an active member of their class. They may join the nurture group for two to four terms, however during that time they very much remain part of class activities when they are not in the nurture group. They spend their break and lunch times with their peers and they are fully included in wider class activities and projects. Also, the class teacher remains responsible for working alongside the nurture teacher to jointly plan for the child's needs.

Nurture groups have been created around evidence-based practice and offer short-term, inclusive, targeted intervention that benefits children and young people in the long term. Nurture groups support the social, emotional and learning needs of children and young people through helping to mitigate against the barriers to learning that they may be experiencing. The supportive, accepting and warm environment that the children and young people are welcomed into is important in developing any missing or disrupted early nurturing experiences.

Aberdeenshire Context

In 2013 Aberdeenshire Council set up ten nurture Hubs as part of an early intervention framework to support children. A Nurture Hub is defined as a group which is run by a centrally funded Nurture Teacher. A [2017 evaluation of the Hubs](#) highlighted many factors for successful implementation of nurture Hubs and has informed this guidance. It is important to note, however, that a Nurture Hub is not the only way of implementing a targeted approach to Nurture. Other targeted nurture interventions include establishing a 'nurture neuk' or a nurture group run by a member of school staff. A targeted approach involves implementing specific targeted nurture interventions for pupil/pupils with particular needs. This guidance is for settings which are looking to implement a more formal nurture group.

Evidence base for nurture groups

There have been many academic studies which have demonstrated the positive impact of nurture groups. Although the primary goal of nurture groups has been around improving children and young people's social, emotional and behavioural difficulties they have also found to have had other positive outcomes for the pupils themselves, teachers and the whole school community, across a wide range of areas. Nurture UK (2019) provides an overview of some of the positive outcomes that nurture groups have had. These include:

- Improved Social and Emotional Skills
- Improved Parent- Child Relationships
- Improved Attainment and Attendance
- Improved Self-Regulation and Reduced Exclusions
- Positive Impact on the Whole School

Staffing and structure

Nurture groups are run with two staff members and approximately 6-10 children attend. Having two members of staff allows the children to see the consistent modelling of interpersonal skills. The children usually start their day off in their mainstream class with their peers and class teacher. A member of staff from the nurture group meets a child at their class and takes them to the group, which usually runs for the whole morning. The group aims to be a combination of home and school, with activities aiming to include social and emotional literacy sessions, news sharing, breakfast/snack and regular activities linked with the curriculum. Pupils spend 2-4 terms in the group, then transition back into their mainstream class.

Everything in the nurture group is explained and supported through positive role modelling and demonstrating appropriate social interactions. At breakfast or snack time there is an emphasis on food sharing which allows for social learning opportunities. Clear, predictable routines are established which allow the children to develop a sense of safety. Rooms will (typically) include an eating area; a play area; a soft seated area and a space for formal learning.

Needs of pupils

Those attending will have a range of needs, but what they have in common is that they will have missed out on elements of their early learning experiences. Many will have ways of coping that prevent them from being able to accept help from others or build relationships. Due to their difficulties, children may express their feelings and emotions

through distressed behaviour. It is the aim of the group to support them to start to develop positive relationships, trust and a sense of safety.

Children who benefit from nurture group intervention find it very difficult to regulate their responses to stress and anxiety and get easily overwhelmed. They may find it difficult to:

- trust adults and build relationships
- share resources and the attention of adults and other pupils
- ask for help
- have feelings of self-worth
- explore the world around them
- attempt new things confidently without fearing failure

Nurture groups in secondary schools

Nurture groups in secondary schools have demonstrated effectiveness in supporting the social and emotional wellbeing of pupils through developing nurturing relationships (Grantham and Primrose, 2017). Nurture groups in secondary schools have a similar ethos to those in primary with the six nurture principles underpinning the delivery of the nurture intervention, however they often run differently due to the nature of secondary timetabling being substantially different from primary. 10- 12 pupils may attend, and pupils would typically spend 2-5 periods a week within the nurture group. Just like primary nurture groups, the pupils spend around 2-4 terms attending the group. Activities within the group are aimed to support social and emotional learning and are linked to the curriculum.

Assessment and planning

Children and young people attending the nurture group are identified carefully through the use of the Boxall Profile. The Boxall Profile is used to identify social and emotional targets for each of the pupils that will be worked towards and monitored throughout the pupil's time in the nurture group. It is an assessment tool for identifying the pupils' social and emotional barriers to learning and supports the planning of effective interventions. The Boxall Profile consists of two sections:

- The Developmental Profile describes different aspects of the pupil's developmental process
- The Diagnostic Profile describes behaviours that inhibit or interfere with the pupil's involvement in school

Staff who have completed both the Educational Psychology Service Universal and Targeted Nurture Training Courses may access centrally funded Boxall Profile Training. Please contact the Inclusion, Equity & Wellbeing Team for more details.

The materials are then available for purchase at <http://www.nurturegroups.org>. The Boxall Profile is used alongside the Handbooks in order to interpret the results correctly. It can highlight a range of social and emotional needs and help ensure transparency in communication between staff within the school setting and can also be used to facilitate open and helpful discussions with parents.

Role of the class teacher

The class teacher / subject teachers have responsibility for continuing curricular planning for a pupil who attends the nurture group. The Class Teacher works very closely alongside the nurture teacher to complete the Boxall Profile. Within a secondary school this role is undertaken by the Guidance Teacher and/or ASN staff in collaboration with the Nurture Teacher. The targets identified are used to inform the child's Individual Education Plan (IEP). Targets should be reviewed jointly every two to three weeks and discussion should take place about the pupil's learning, attainment and overall wellbeing. Regular communication between the class teacher and nurture teacher is essential for sharing information about effective approaches, any changes to be made and also to share successes.

Applying the nurture principles to the nurture group

In order for pupils to form attachments and develop positive caring relationships with adults at school, there must be an everyday conscious commitment to the use of the six key nurture principles. The nurture principles underpin the entire ethos and environment within the nurture group. For further insight into the application of these principles please see the case study in Appendix 1.

1. Children's learning is understood developmentally.

This principle takes a holistic view of pupils' learning and requires the adults to respond to the child's developmental stage and not their chronological age. Consideration is given to all aspects of a pupil's development including their language, emotional, social and cognitive development. Learning experiences are scaffolded, and emotional and social development is supported through ongoing modelling provided by staff. The Boxall Profile and the "Beyond the Boxall" book is used to inform individual targets set to support the barriers to a pupil's learning. The pupils are explicitly taught how to listen, share, play and work together.

2. The classroom offers a safe base.

The nurture room provides a welcoming, warm environment which promotes physical and emotional safety. Visitors to the Nurture Room are limited and if possible planned to reduce interruptions and to develop the feeling that it is a safe space. Everyone should at least knock on the door before entering even the staff who work in the room. Planned visits are added to the visual timetable and where possible visitors can be invited to join the class for snack. The safe base is also achieved through consistency of approach, predictable routines, consistency of staff and building trusting relationships with the pupils.

3. The importance of nurture for the development of wellbeing.

Pupils need to develop trust with the adults and the group. They should feel listened to and be supported to develop their own voice. Through the development of nurturing relationships, staff support pupils with their feelings. The staff consistently model to the pupils how to deal with a range of emotions. All achievements should be shared and celebrated with the class, the teachers, the management team and parents. Nurture also includes having high expectations for the pupils. Challenge can be added in when relationships are established and will be tailored to the pupils' individual needs.

4. Language is a vital means of communication.

Every pupil has the right to be listened to and heard. Emotional literacy is explicitly taught. The children and young people learn about the various emotions they experience and why they experience them. Then they can begin to learn how to regulate and manage them and learn empathy. The daily calendar is also important as children need to know time and place and where they are in the world. The adults model naming emotions, scaffold the art of conversation, listening and talking rules and social skills.

5. All behaviour is communication

A child's behaviour is the child's loudest voice. Behaviour is not judged, rather adults try to understand what the child is trying to tell them. The adults model and explicitly teach and name emotions. They name the behaviours and offer children explicit choices. Nurturing approaches and restorative approaches inform the school behaviour policy. The adults in school attempt to Regulate (remain calm and safe), Relate (validate the child's feelings) and then Reason (guide the child towards Restorative Conversations).

6. The importance of transitions in children's lives.

Routines should be explicit and predictable and supported by visual timetables. It is essential that nurture groups are run by the same people and on a regular basis where possible. Children and young people respond to consistency and need to be prepared for change by staff whom they have a trusting relationship with. Small transitions are as difficult as the big ones. Children require warnings that an activity will come to an end. Egg timers of varying lengths are silent yet provide a visual reminder that the time is running out. Visitors are kept to a minimum. Transitioning back to class full time from the nurture group should be planned for and tailored to the individual pupil.

Considerations for starting and running a nurture group

Setting up

- For the nurture group to be effective in meeting the needs of pupils, the six nurture principles are embedded into every aspect of the group. Therefore, it is crucial that two consistent, committed members of staff (one teacher and one pupil support assistant) are identified to run the group. These staff members should receive Nurture training prior to setting up the group.
- If you have identified a need for a nurture group in your setting, Consideration will need to be given as to how this will be staffed and resourced (e.g. soft furnishings, snacks).
- Identify an appropriate space for the group and consider any adaptations to be made to the space to make it as homely and welcoming as possible.
- Consideration should also be given to options for if a member of staff from the nurture group is absent.
- Plan how you will ensure the nurture group runs alongside your other classes.
- Due to secondary schools being larger, more complex organisations, the implementation of nurture groups requires careful planning. Consideration of timetabling and staffing is necessary.
- Inform parents of the nurture group. Leaflets, coffee mornings or evenings could be used to promote the idea of nurture groups and their benefits.

Financial costs

- There are financial implications for setting up and running a nurture group. This will include staffing and resources for the nurture room, as well as ongoing costs for snacks (an important part of a nurture group).

Pupil needs

- The balance of pupil needs within the nurture group is really important so think about:

- the age range
- the mix of pupils social and emotional needs and how these can be best supported in the nurture group

Whilst the make-up of the group will change over time as pupils transition back to their mainstream class, there should be as much consistency as possible. It is not appropriate for children to dip in and out of the nurture group.

Whole school ethos

- Existing evidence on Nurture groups, [including the 2017 Aberdeenshire evaluation of Nurture Hubs](#) highlights the importance of nurture groups existing within a wider culture of whole school nurture. It is beneficial for all staff to have an understanding of nurture and of the purpose of a nurture group. This can be achieved through whole school Universal Nurture Training. More information can be provided by the school Educational Psychologist.
- New staff should receive training on nurture as part of their induction to the school.
- It is essential to get the wider school involved in the nurture group. This may be achieved by inviting school and support staff into the group for a morning to see the children in a different context and by sharing stories of the children outside the group.
- It is important for staff to have opportunities to share good practice with others in the school setting.

Senior leadership team

- Nurture groups need to be supported financially and logistically by management teams. This might include for example the provision of toast and tea at breakfast time, healthy snacks for social meal times, craft materials for parent engagement sessions, and maintaining small pets within the group such as a rabbit or hamster.
- Important for senior leadership teams to be invested in the nurture group and whole school nurture and include it in the school improvement planning cycle to ensure it is constantly reflected upon.
- Plan for enabling staff to balance the needs of curriculum with nurturing activities and how they will be able to develop effective planning and recording systems.
- Ensure there are opportunities for the nurture group staff to receive ongoing support through peer mentoring, discussions with the senior leadership team and CPD opportunities. [\(See Aberdeenshire Nurture Hubs 2017 Evaluation\).](#)

Communication

- Pupils' class teachers are responsible for overseeing the pupils' learning and they should liaise closely with staff from the nurture group over targets, progress and strategies to implement in the mainstream classroom. This should take place on an ongoing basis and especially when a pupil is returning to their mainstream class.
- The nurture group is most effective when planning and timetabling is shared between the class teacher and nurture teacher. It is also more effective when the class teacher is involved and aware of the progress of the child in the nurture group. Therefore, they can implement identified strategies in the classroom, ensuring consistency in the approach being used with the child.
- If nurture group staff are used flexibly, clear delineation of roles needs to be outlined so that they are working to their strengths with the right children and to avoid overlap with Support for Learning or Intervention and Prevention work.
- When nurture groups are understood by the wider community outside the school, this helps them to function better. This is because it allows for consistent approaches used between home, school and other professionals involved with the child or family.
- Consideration should be given to what the nurture group will be called, and how it will be referred to publicly in order to promote positive associations and avoid potential stigma.

Parental Involvement

- Parental consent will be required for a child to attend a nurture group. Early discussion with parents should explain the purpose of nurture and how the group may support the child.
- Parents should have regular opportunities to discuss their child's development with the nurture group teacher and strategies and activities can be shared for family to work on at home.

Evaluation of progress & transition

- The Boxall Profile should be used rigorously to provide a robust measure of a child's progress.
- While a child is attending a nurture group they should have a single or multi agency Child's Plan which is regularly reviewed and updated
- The nurture group teacher will keep regular records of observations and monitor and evaluate each child's progress. This should be done in partnership with the class teacher.
- The nurture group should only be for two to four terms and the transition back to mainstream needs to be carefully planned jointly with class teacher to ensure effective strategies are in place.

Common Pitfalls

- It is important to ensure that progress is regularly evaluated jointly by the class teacher and nurture teacher to reflect on the impact of the targeted nurture intervention. It should not be the responsibility of just one member of staff.
- The nurture group should be seen as a short term intervention and not continue on a long term basis. If the group is required for more than two to four terms, evidence should be gathered through the Boxall profile and IEP to demonstrate progress and should be time limited.
- It is important for pupils who attend the nurture group to be supported by nurturing approaches outside of the nurture group. Nurture should not only occur at certain times of the day or in specific environments with certain staff members. Rather, nurture must be embedded throughout the whole school environment. (See Universal Nurture guidance).

References

Aberdeenshire Educational Psychology Service. (2017). *Nurture Hubs in Aberdeenshire. Evaluation Report.* <http://asn-aberdeenshire.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Nurture-Hubs-in-Aberdeenshire-Evaluation-2017.pdf>

Grantham, R., & Primrose, F. (2017). Investigating the fidelity and effectiveness of Nurture Groups in the secondary school context. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, 22(3), 219-236.

Nurture UK. (2019). Nurture groups. Retrieved from https://www.nurtureuk.org/sites/default/files/nurture_groups_booklet_online.pdf

Appendices

Appendix 1: Case Study of a nurture group in a local Primary School

Targeted nurture daily sessions are run in the nurture group by two adults, a teacher and a PSA both of whom have completed the Nurture Network training. There are a six pupils who attend this session five mornings per week. However, there is flexibility to increase the numbers when responding to need e.g. for additional emotional and social support following a bereavement.

Pupils are identified for this support in a number of ways:

- following tracking meetings with SLT and class teachers;
- from observations by the nurture staff;
- from parents themselves in meetings with the Head Teacher and the SLT.

All pupils require parental consent before attending the sessions and a meeting is offered to the parents with the nurture staff before they make a decision. The Boxall Profile is used as a baseline assessment and termly whilst the pupil attends the targeted nurture sessions. Each pupil attending the nurture group has an IEP and the Boxall Profile is used to inform the targets each child is working on.

Decisions on the mix and age of the pupils attending the targeted sessions are given great consideration. Other children who do not attend the targeted sessions can be supported in the afternoons by the nurture staff in a variety of other ways. Where possible a time is set aside for the nurture teacher and class teachers of pupils attending the nurture group to review targets and the IEP, discuss learning and attainment and complete Boxall Profiles. This for 30-45 minutes approximately every two to three weeks.

Daily Timetable

9am – 9.15am

- The pupils register in class with their peers and unpack bags etc as normal. Some children who find this too difficult can be supported in other ways e.g. a parent/ member of staff can support the child to register in class and come to the group. Other pupils are collected from their classes by the Hub staff.

9.15am-10.45am

- The morning begins with a set of routines which never change. The pupils and staff sing a welcome song and sit together in the sofa area. The children then change the calendar and update the weather. They also do some mental maths with the date using Numicon to support the children.

- Next, it's "Feelings Time". Everyone takes turns to name and share their feelings including lots of modelling provided by the adults. Staff usually teach one feeling per week and the children work together to make a feelings chart which is used as a visual support.
- Staff use a visual timetable to share the plan for the morning. Before break the children may do some individual literacy or numeracy tasks or some finishing off tasks. For example, it may be a hand control task, a reading task, a rhyming game, dominoes or a more formal numeracy job. If children are in the process of transitioning back to their class from the group, the tasks may involve some work set by the class teacher.
- One of the adults prepares the snack alongside one of the pupils. Snack is formal, the table is set and some food is prepared. Usually some toast, a small amount of fruit and a choice of milk or water to drink. This is flexible and according to need. During this time, staff model and teach sharing, turn taking, listening and talking skills and social skills. The children have responsibility to help clear the table and wash the dishes or stack the dishwasher.
- Following snack, staff aim for cooperative play but many of the pupils are stuck at solitary play. The adults and children also play table-top games which involve winning and losing as the pupils need to experience accepting disappointment in a safe, supported environment. Staff use a set of large egg-timers of varying lengths to signal when it's time to tidy up an activity and when it's time to stop.

Break time

- The children usually go outside for break with their peers. Some pupils require supported breaks but it is usually delivered by staff other than the nurture staff. The pupils cannot be allowed to only form attachments in school with the nurture staff. The children then come into school with their classes following break time and are met by the nurture staff to walk back to the Nurture room.

11am until lunch time.

- After break everyone gathers together again in the sofa area and have daily story time. This time is also used as an opportunity to revisit feelings or hold restorative conversations if required. Routine and flexibility go hand in hand in the nurture room. Stories are another daily essential and are used to model and teach listening and talking outcomes.
- The next activity could include anything from art or craft; baking or cooking; gardening; writing; roleplay; games the list is endless. Some activities are for wallowing in such as free painting, playdough or the learning intention maybe

all working together to create a wall display or baking or cooking to share with others. There are usually topics or themes being worked on such as Kindness or Wonderful Me or Celebrations or People who help us.

- The session ends with Star Time, which is announced with another song. This is when staff review the targets with the children and everyone takes part. The children share each other's successes and have the opportunity to self and peer assess. Simple certificates are awarded when small targets are achieved. Daily success is shared with parents via a written home school book and the children bring this with them daily. Learning is also shared with home via the online learning platform Seesaw. The nurture staff accompany the children to the dining room. Following lunch time they register and join their classes for the afternoon.







Appendix 2: Case study of a P2 pupil

Girl A joined the nurture group in 2015-2016 when she was in Primary Two. In school, girl A really struggled to engage with activities and would appear distressed at times. She would throw herself on the floor and refused to move for lengthy periods. When she first joined the nurture group she said “I can’t read and I can’t write and I hate numbers!” She loved drawing and was a perfectionist. She also preferred playing on her own.

Her first Boxall profile identified the following individual targets:

- Has difficulty giving purposeful attention in the classroom. Lacks concentration and is unwilling/unable to follow simple instructions.
- Remains egocentric and has problems accommodating to others and participating in group work and games.
- Lacks trust in adults and is unwilling to follow the social norms in school.
- Lacks empathy, has a poor self-image and shows negativism towards others.
- She finds transitions, both big and small, difficult and has problems coping with changes to her routine.

Girl A attended the nurture group five mornings per week and returned to her primary two class in the afternoons. It was identified that she required support with transitioning between tasks and learning to understand that a task comes to an end and a new one begins. This was achieved through using large sand-timers, a visual timetable and adult support. She also learned to rely less on transitional objects usually large soft toys from home. By working on this target she quickly understood that her toy could be kept in an agreed safe place and would still be there at the end of the session.

By November she started to write a few words or even a short sentence. Around this time her grandfather had been visiting the group at an open afternoon and had an opportunity to discuss approaches to writing with staff. Girl A frequently went to her grandparents for after school care and her grandfather was anxious about her spelling mistakes when writing. Staff reassured him that they were trying to get her to enjoy writing and to get her to feel confident enough to write. He came back at a later date to thank us as he noticed a big difference in her writing by adopting this approach.

By January the focus was on play. Girl A preferred to play on her own or lead the play if others joined in. By focussing on this she became able to play with the small world materials with one other child. From observations of the group it became obvious there was a need to develop a role play area for all the children in the group to help them to learn to play in a cooperative way. The pupils were involved in the whole process from planning, making things and developing shared rules. The “café” was successful as

all the children could relate to this and they were able to draw on their own experiences to take on the roles.

By February Girl A took on the role of a chef or a waiter and not just the customer. She began to understand friendships and could talk about empathy but still found it hard to put it into practice. The next step was to transfer these skills to the classroom and playground with support. She was also supported to develop her ability to share, take turns and to begin to accept disappointment. Her progress to engage with learning continued and in term four Girl A was observed to be engaging with reading, writing and number work and indeed was willing to rectify any mistakes, something she had never done before.

At the end of May a meeting was held with her mum and it was agreed that Girl A would begin the transition back full time to her Primary 2 class. For girl A it was a very gradual transition back. Formal work was gradually introduced in the Nurture room in collaboration with the class teacher. Transition to class sessions was planned in liaison with the class teacher. Girl A initially participated in lessons such as literacy and art as these were her strengths. Staff built on this success until the child was in the class for all learning and teaching. During this transition period she continued with her targets and returned to the nurture room at the end of each morning to chat about her successes.

By the middle of June Girl A had been in class for two full days and had been coping with all of her work. The nurture room PSA works in the playground at lunch times and when pupils leave the nurture room this continues the connection and allows the children to get support if required. Staff also provided some outreach support in her class in the afternoons until the end of term. At the end of school year parents' night her mum completed the nurture room exit questionnaire and shared that she felt her daughter had come so far, and the nurture group had been very supportive.

Outcomes since leaving the nurture room:

By the end of Primary Four girl A had achieved her first level for writing, listening and talking and health and wellbeing and continued to make progress. She is still unhappy when she makes mistakes but is now able to accept disappointment with a little support. She has established friendships in her class and has no real problems socialising and playing at break and lunch times. She can find it challenging when presenting a talk to a large group but recently talked to the whole class about her skateboard and the tricks she is learning. She still finds it hard to cope with teachers who are new to her as happened earlier in the school year when the class teacher was off ill. She can become worried and anxious at times but she has developed coping strategies such as talking to her teacher or writing them in her feelings book.