

# **Improving relationships and behaviour in schools: ensuring safe and consistent environments for all**

## **Joint action plan 2024 - 2027**

August 2024



## Introduction

This Joint Action Plan draws together a wide range of actions which will be taken in response to the current evidence on relationships and behaviours in Scotland's schools.

The Behaviour in Scottish Schools Research ("BISSR") 2023 was the fifth wave of time-series research, first undertaken in 2006, and the first wave to be completed since the COVID-19 pandemic. BISSR provides a robust national picture of the experiences of school support and teaching staff, headteachers and school leaders, and education authority staff on relationships and behaviour in Schools. In addition, throughout 2023, evidence was gathered from representative organisations and individuals through the Relationships and Behaviour in Scottish Schools Summits, the Headteachers Task Force, and professional organisations' surveys, and these insights have contributed to the actions set out within this plan.

## A collective commitment to improvement

What this collective evidence shows is the standards of relationships and behaviour in our schools are not where we want them to be. While most children are well behaved most or all of the time, the evidence demonstrates that there is increased disruption in classrooms and increases in physical and verbal aggression. No child or young person, parent or carer, or member of staff should go to school, or their place of work, and be subject to violence or abuse.

It is important to recognise the complex picture underpinning the trends in behaviour. Since the last wave of BISSR was undertaken in 2016, our children and young people, and the adults in their lives, have faced unprecedented challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic, as well as other pressures such as the impact of austerity and the cost-of living crisis, have impacted on all of our resilience. The number of pupils identified with additional support needs has increased markedly since 2010 and there continue to be year on year increases. In our schools, the impact can be seen in reduced rates of attendance, the relationships between children and young people and their peers, and with staff, and an increased disconnect between families and schools.

If we are to create the safe and consistent environments in our schools that will enable everyone to thrive, there needs to be a strengthening of relationships across our whole school community:

- Between children and young people and staff, to reinforce a culture of respectful relationships;
- Between schools and parents, based on a shared understanding of the reciprocal relationship in responding to needs and behaviour;

- Between local authorities and schools, national agencies and other statutory and third sector partners so there can be confidence in the response and support that will be available to deal with challenges; and
- Between the whole-school community and government with an understanding of the scale of the challenge and the collective role that all have to play in improving relationships and behaviour.

To reflect the importance of these relationships, this action plan has been developed by the [Scottish Advisory Group on Relationships and Behaviour in Schools](#) (SAGRABIS) and is formally jointly owned by the Scottish Government and COSLA. SAGRABIS provides advice to local and national government on behaviour and relationships in schools, and its membership comprises stakeholders including the Scottish Government, COSLA, the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland, Education Scotland, the main teaching unions, and parents and carers representatives. All members of SAGRABIS share the ambition of improving relationships and behaviour in schools, and a collective commitment to act in support of the implementation of the plan.

For the action plan to be effective, there needs to be a whole-school and multi-agency approach to support delivery, underpinned by the Getting it Right For Every Child (GIRFEC) framework. Whilst the action plan is focussed on schools and school communities, it recognises and encompasses the role of local authorities, the Scottish Government, SAGRABIS, and wider stakeholders including children and young people, parents, speech and language therapists, educational psychologists, communities, health and justice, and third-sector partners. The respective roles of organisations supporting this plan are set out in Annex A.

### **Supporting relational approaches based on high warmth and high standards and expectations<sup>1</sup>**

Evidence consistently shows that a positive school ethos and culture is essential to developing positive behaviour in the classroom, playground and wider community. The current national guidance on relationships and behaviour in schools, has at its foundation a whole school ethos of prevention, early intervention and support against a background which promotes positive relationships, learning and behaviour.

There is growing evidence that the type of relational style that is offered to children and young people impact greatly on behaviour, staff and child wellbeing and attainment. Positive outcomes are most evidenced in a relational style characterised by high warmth and support, high standards and high expectations of socially

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<sup>1</sup> An approach which features high warmth and high standards and expectations includes emotional responsiveness and support, and an ability to effectively set limits for behaviour.

responsible behaviour, and an ability to effectively set limits for behaviour, ensuring effective implementation of values, and expectations in a firm and consistent manner while using reprimands and consequences when necessary. It aims to promote autonomy by encouraging children's participation in decisions about their behaviour. This combination aims at preventing problems and alleviating issues and also has the dual purpose of managing behaviour in the short term and developing responsibility among children in the long term.

Whilst it is clear from BISSR and the discussions held at the relationships and behaviour summits that there is general support for relationships-based approaches, it is similarly clear that there are challenges with how such approaches are working on the ground, with staff feeling disempowered from setting the effective boundaries. Some of the difficulties highlighted by school staff are:

- That relationships-based approaches have resulted in a lack of meaningful consequences for disruptive behaviour.
- Lack of time and resources needed to implement such approaches successfully.
- There is a need for alternative options of support for those children and young people who, for a variety of reasons, struggle with boundaries and meeting the established expectations of behaviour.
- The challenges for school staff of applying relationship-based approaches when faced with the realities of dealing with violent and aggressive incidents in schools.
- Lack of options as to how to manage the behaviour of a small core group of young people with whom all other approaches and strategies had been exhausted.
- Lack of alternative options and resources for pupils for whom mainstream education may not be appropriate.

In recognition of this evidence, this plan remains grounded in the national approach of promoting positive relationships and behaviour, and supporting the wellbeing of children and young people, but puts in place a range of actions designed to empower staff to address the spectrum of dysregulated, distressed, violent and aggressive behaviour seen in our schools.

In doing so, the actions focus both on setting guidance and expectations using national policy, and providing practical support to schools and school staff to support the implementation of policy in practice and to provide children and young people with the right support at the right time.

The action plan aims to:

- Support schools to reinforce a positive ethos and culture, where all members of the school community are respected and safe, their wellbeing is protected, and children and young people are included, engaged and involved in their learning and in the life of the school.
- Apply a whole-school approach to improving relationships and behaviour, where all members of the school community – school staff, parents and carers, children and young people – recognise their role in developing community values by creating, modelling and supporting positive relationships and behaviour.
- Provide guidance and support to ensure schools can embed relationships and behaviour policies, based on the needs of their children and young people, in line with national guidance and developed in collaboration with staff, parents and children and young people, which set clear expectations of relationships and behaviour.
- Seek to address the broad spectrum of behaviours identified within BISSR, in recognition that all behaviours, and a school's associated responses to these, contribute to the culture and ethos of a school.
- Empower schools and staff to apply relational approaches based upon high warmth and high expectations, whilst providing further guidance to support interventions in situations where children and young people are not responsive to such approaches and where assessment would dictate that a more individualised plan will more likely lead to change over time.
- Support schools to implement a spectrum of relationships and behaviour approaches, appropriate to the specific context, taking account of issues such as the Public Sector Equality Duty, and intersectionality.
- Acknowledge the respective responsibilities of Scottish Government, national agencies, local authorities and schools, and to ensure complementary actions in priority areas, as set out in this action plan.
- Draw together actions being taken forward across national government and in both education and wider policy areas, in recognition that addressing some of the behaviours and challenges in schools is a society-wide concern that will require a multi-agency approach.
- Recognise that there are developmentally and contextually different problem situations in our primary and secondary schools (and in different year groups within this). Each sector has its own challenges and though approaches require to be tailored through self-evaluation to individual school context and staff and children's needs, these should be based on the common foundation of a clear and consistent setting-wide relationships and behaviour policy over which all members of the school community have a sense of ownership and participation.

- Support the effective recording and monitoring of inappropriate behaviour, which may lead to initial increases in recorded statistics. This is understood and supported as an appropriate consequence of ensuring schools and local authorities have the necessary information to support their response.

## Action Plan Outcomes

As a result of the actions of this plan, the intention is that **schools and school staff** will:

- feel safe and supported in their place of work, confident that their employer is acting in line with their legislative duties including health and safety legislation and the Equality Act 2010;
- have in place school-level relationships and behaviour policies, in line with national guidance and developed in collaboration with staff, parents and children and young people, which set clear expectations of positive relationships and behaviour;
- be able to draw on national guidance and support to implement evidence-based relationships and behaviour approaches, including exemplification of relevant practice;
- work together towards a culture of collaboration and collegiality with teachers and school staff, parents, carers, children and young people, and multi-agency partners;
- be able to put in place appropriate assessment of wellbeing and plan of support, in keeping with statutory duties, and applying both the GIRFEC principles and Additional Support for Learning duties, when a child's social, emotional and/or behavioural needs give rise to a wellbeing concern;
- be supported in their wellbeing, with links made to wider support as appropriate;
- be empowered to implement a culture of high expectations by implementing an understanding of behaviour, child development, classroom management skills and a spectrum of evidence-based relationships and behaviour approaches;
- understand within the school context how to support children who have experienced trauma and adversity;
- have improved access to relevant professional learning, and wellbeing support, to assist them in their roles;
- be supported to adopt robust, evidence-based approaches to addressing disruption and abuse, including that caused by mobile phones;
- be confident and competent addressing behaviour rooted in inequality, including those linked to the protected characteristics in the Equality Act 2010.
- feel confident to report, record, monitor, assess and respond to individual incidents and patterns of behaviour;

- have procedures in place for undertaking assessment of need, risk assessments and clear expectations of local and multi-agency support.

The intention is that all **children and young people** will:

- feel safe and supported in their learning environment;
- be included, engaged and involved in their learning;
- be able to learn in a culture that promotes equality and the prevention of discrimination;
- be supported to understand their emotions, develop communication, co- and self-regulation and social skills, supported by a partnership of parents, carers, schools and school staff, and other professionals;
- be supported in their wellbeing, with links made to wider support as appropriate;
- be involved in the development of policies and curricula relevant to wellbeing, social and emotional learning, relationships, and social skills to promote greater understanding and use of relational approaches;
- understand clearly the expectations of their behaviour and the behaviour of all in the school community - and how the school's relationships and behaviour policy will apply when these are not met;
- feel confident to report incidents and be confident that their school and the wider system will have an appropriate response;
- be provided with accurate information about vaping, and the impact it can have on their life and health, to support them to make healthy choices.

Over time, the intention is that **children, young people and staff** will:

- experience higher levels of engagement in learning;
- experience fewer instances of dysregulated, distressed, violent or abusive behaviour;
- experience fewer instances of misogyny and gender-based violence;
- experience fewer instances of harassment or abuse motivated by prejudice or linked to a protected characteristic;
- experience a reduction in vaping at school, which will benefit their learning and health.

The intention is that **parents and carers** will:

- develop and feel part of a shared understanding of positive relationships, partnership-working and supporting children and young people to create effective learning environments;
- be an integral part of the development and implementation of policies about relationships, behaviour and support in schools;

- play a key role as part of a whole-school approach to relationships and behaviour in ensuring children and young people hear consistent messages and have consistent support;
- understand the prevalence and consequences of children and young people vaping;
- understand clearly the expectations of their behaviour in interactions with the wider school community.

## Context informing the development of the Joint National Action Plan.

The actions identified within this plan are informed by the evidence provided by the BISSR 2023<sup>2</sup>. BISSR was commissioned by SAGRABIS to provide a nationally-representative picture of relationships and behaviour in schools:

### Behaviour Trends

- BISSR found the majority of staff reported that most/all children and young people behave well around the school. Primary school staff are more likely than secondary school staff to report that all or most children and young people display good behaviour around school.
- However, there has been a decline in children’s behaviour since 2016, with primary and secondary staff reporting decreases in most positive behaviours and increases in most of the low level disruptive, serious disruptive and disengagement behaviours.
- BISSR found that serious cases of disruptive behaviour towards staff, though reported to have increased, are still infrequent. Research conducted by professional associations has reported more frequent experience of such behaviour than was reported within BISSR.
- There was a general trend of positive behaviours decreasing and negative behaviours increasing as children and young people’s ages increased.
- The exception to this trend was physical aggression and violence, both directed at other children and young people and towards staff, which were more often experienced in primary schools compared with secondary schools, particularly within the P1-3 age-range.
- Female staff were more likely than male staff to have encountered at least one incident of physical violence towards themselves in the last 12 months. In

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<sup>2</sup> The language used in this section reflects that used within the Behaviour in Scottish Schools Research survey questions. Further information on the behaviours included within the categories ‘positive behaviour,’ ‘low level disruption,’ ‘disengagement,’ and ‘serious disruptive behaviour’ can be found at: [Supporting documents - Behaviour in Scottish schools: research report 2023 - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](https://www.gov.scot/resources/consultation-papers/collections/documents/Supporting_documents_-_Behaviour_in_Scottish_schools_research_report_2023_-_gov.scot)



contrast, male staff were more likely than female staff to have experienced homophobic, biphobic or transphobic abuse or verbal abuse.

- The BISSR research also identified new and emerging themes of challenging behaviour which are widespread in secondary school, and are beginning to emerge within the primary sector:
  - Vaping, including asking to be let out of class to go to the toilet, in order that they can vape;
  - in-school truancy, whereby children and young people are in school but not attending class, and instead congregate in corridors, toilets and social areas;
  - a rise in misogynistic views, and use of misogynistic and explicitly sexualised language, amongst boys and young men;
  - problematic use of mobile phones and social media, which was leading to disrupted learning in class, and online bullying and abuse.
- Teachers and support staff were asked about which behaviours that they had experienced in the last week had the greatest negative impact on their teaching experience or their experience as a support staff member. The three behaviours that staff identified as having the greatest overall negative impact were all low-level disruptive behaviours: talking out of turn, hindering other pupils and using/looking at mobile phones/tablets inappropriately.
- For those staff experiencing violent and aggressive pupil behaviour, qualitative participants reported a profound impact on their mental health as well as their role. Particular concern was raised regarding the wellbeing of teaching and support staff, who frequently manage disruptive behaviour in classrooms. Violent and aggressive behaviour was also seen to have an impact on school ethos and atmosphere and had led to greater stress and anxiety and a tense atmosphere within schools. Interviewees perceived incidents of pupil violence and aggression having a negative impact on the mental health of pupils.
- BISSR suggests that serious disruptive incidents might be under-reported within school statistics, with primary and secondary staff stating that they were less likely to report an issue to anyone in 2023 than they were in 2016. Reasons given included the lack of information provided to teachers and support staff following previous incidents to update them of the outcome; a lack of support from local authorities; and a lack of consequences for behaviour.
- School staff were generally positive about the level of support they receive from other staff within their school, particularly the formal and informal support they receive from their colleagues working in the same role. There were some differences in staff types, with secondary staff having lower levels of confidence than primary staff that senior staff would help them if they

experienced behaviour management difficulties, and support staff highlighting particular challenges in attending meetings or training to support relationships and behaviour approaches. There was also a mismatch between the support local authority representatives identified as being available to schools, and the support reported by schools.

### **Factors contributing to behaviour trends**

- Most school staff in BISSR reported that pupil behaviour was worse in 2023 than before the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions began in March 2020, both in the classroom and around the school. Opinion differed as to whether the COVID-19 pandemic was the cause of these changes in behaviour or had exacerbated and accelerated existing trends.
- The mitigations put in place to limit the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic were felt to have had a negative impact on behaviour, particularly for those children and young people whose transition - either between early years and primary or primary and secondary - was disrupted because of periods of home-learning. Among the impacts identified were:
  - delays to children and young people's social and communication skills, leading to distressed and disruptive behaviour related to sharing, playing together and communicating their feelings in primaries, and interpersonal relationships and group work in secondaries;
  - disengagement with school and schoolwork;
  - reduction in attendance for some children and young people;
  - anxiety and poorer mental wellbeing;
  - greater reliance on mobile phones and social media.
- The most negative impacts of COVID-19 were considered to be felt by the most vulnerable children and young people: those affected by poverty, deprivation and trauma.
- Other underlying factors contributing to changes in behaviour identified by participants in the BISSR research were:
  - a lack of consequences for children and young people;
  - a lack of support for children and young people with additional support needs (particularly Autism Spectrum Disorder and Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder);
  - disengagement from school and learning;
  - wider societal changes such as a general lack of respect in society, the ubiquity of social media and changing approaches to parenting.
- The scale of the challenge in the BISSR research is backed by other research by teaching unions and third-sector organisations, who have published their own research into issues such as violence, abuse and gender-based violence.

- While the BISSR research did not involve parents or children and young people directly, [Public Health Scotland research](#) provides evidence of the significant impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on parents' and carers' wellbeing, relationships and feelings of connectedness with others and their community. Periods of home-learning have been felt to have impacted on parental engagement and involvement in schools and to have amplified unmet needs, and created new needs.<sup>3</sup>
- In addition, the [early childhood development statistics 2022/23](#) identified the percentage of children having a concern noted about at least one area of their development at their 4-5 year review had increased from 15% 2021/22 to 17% in 2022/23. Language and communication (8%) and emotional/behavioural development (8%) were the most frequent areas of concern noted. Given the evidence from BISSR 2023 of how delays in the development of these skills are impacting on the behaviour of children in early primary, it may be expected that this increase may be reflected in the findings of the sixth wave of BISSR, when these children will be in primary 3 or 4.

### **Relationships and behaviour approaches**

- Within schools, there was evidence of a culture shift towards a focus on relationships, restorative practice and nurturing approaches and away from punitive approaches since 2016. Nurturing approaches, the promotion of positive behaviour through whole-school ethos and values, and restorative approaches were commonly used across primaries and secondaries to both encourage positive relationships and behaviour and manage serious and low-level disruption.
- School staff were generally supportive of more nurturing and restorative approaches to managing behaviour, with the caveat that time and support were needed to integrate these fully within the school, and that there had to be meaningful consequences within this approach for more serious disruptive behaviour.
- Analysis showed perceived poorer school ethos and poorer promotion of policies on behaviour were associated with frequent negative behaviour including low level disruptive behaviour, aggression towards other children and young people and social exclusion.
- Teachers' confidence in their ability to 'promote positive behaviour' and 'respond to indiscipline' in the classroom, both in primary and secondary schools remains high, although confidence in their ability to 'respond to indiscipline' has decreased since 2016.

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<sup>3</sup> [Connect's Parent/Carer Survey Reports 2020-2021: Connect](#)

- Analysis showed limited confidence in one's own abilities 'to respond to indiscipline in the classroom' or to 'promote positive behaviour' was also associated with more frequent experiences of negative behaviour, though no inferences can be drawn from the analysis about causality of this relationship.

## Policy cohesion

While a number of in-school factors which predict behaviour were identified within BISSR, participants in the qualitative phase of the research focused on societal factors such as poverty and deprivation, and challenges associated with home and family life such as trauma and adverse childhood experiences, as the root causes of disruptive behaviour. While schools undertake activity to try and reduce the poverty-related attainment gap and are expected to adopt trauma-informed approaches to supporting children and young people, schools cannot and should not be expected to address these broader challenges in isolation. A multi-agency approach, spanning a number of policy priorities is therefore required.

The action plan therefore sits within the wider context of action the Scottish Government, COSLA and other local partners are taking to ensure our children grow up loved, safe and respected, and able to realise their full potential. In particular the action plan has been informed by a range of key policy and implementation priorities, including but not exclusively: the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child \(Incorporation\) \(Scotland\) Act 2024](#); [Delivering Excellence and Equity in Education](#); [Getting it Right for Every Child \(GIRFEC\)](#); and [Implementation of The Promise](#). Wider policies and approaches including the [Mental Health and Wellbeing Delivery Plan](#), [Equally Safe Strategy](#), National Youth Work Strategy, [developing a trauma-informed workforce](#), and [Children's Services Planning Partnerships](#) also have interdependencies with this plan. This plan should therefore form part of whole system planning and as part of a multiagency approach underpinned by GIRFEC principles.

This whole-system planning and multi-agency approach is exemplified by the connections between this action plan and the Scottish Government's [Violence Prevention Framework](#). The Framework adopts a public health approach through focusing on preventing violence before it occurs, by addressing the underlying causes and, if and when it does occur, preventing further escalation of violence and its harm by identifying opportunities to intervene and enable positive change. The actions within the Framework to prevent violence amongst children and young people and amongst adults will also contribute to the outcomes identified within this action plan.

While this plan seeks to address relationships and behaviour in schools, we know that what children experience during their early years lays the foundations for life, so this also sits within the context of [the Early Child Development Transformational](#)

[Change Programme](#), which aims to provide oversight and better integration of the policies that contribute to early child development, with a focus on prevention, in order to reduce development concerns identified at the 27-30 month review. This includes work to improve early communication skills. The Scottish Government is also continuing to take forward a range of activity to support delivery of high-quality ELC and to support delivery of play-based, child-centred, and outdoor approaches to learning in the early years. These approaches support children's early development in many ways, including their emotional and social development, the benefits of which should be seen over time in school-age children.

The Scottish Government is also investing in a new programme of work to support early intervention in speech, language and communication development for children and their families, helping to build the confidence and capacity of staff working in early learning and childcare settings and joining up efforts across other key public services, such as health visiting. The 'Regional Early Speech and Language Leads' team in Education Scotland is working in partnership with local teams and at a national level on prevention and early support, and across the whole system to support improved outcomes for children in relation to their early language and communication needs.

The additional support for learning policy and legislative framework supports positive behaviour through its focus on the identification and meeting of children and young people's needs. The Scottish Government is delivering the Additional Support for Learning Action plan ("ASL Action Plan") in partnership with COSLA to improve the implementation of additional support for learning across Scotland by March 2026.

Workforce development and support (including for teacher education and development and for pupil support assistants) is front and centre in the delivery of the ASL Action Plan, as it is one of the nine recommendations included in the [Review of Additional Support for Learning Implementation \(2020\)](#). In delivering these actions, it is recognised that ELC practitioner, teacher and pupil support staff training, deployment, and professional development and learning processes must align with the changed and changing support needs of children and young people in Scotland.

The joint action plan also sits in the context of other education developments where delivery will address factors underlying some of the behaviours seen in our schools. These policies include [Education Reform](#); the [Hayward review](#); the [ASL Action Plan](#); [the Anti-Racism in Education Programme](#); [the Gender-Based Violence in Schools Working Group](#); the [Gender Equality Taskforce in Education and Learning](#); and the [review of Respect for All](#).

We also know that adversity, including adverse childhood experiences (“ACEs”), and psychological trauma are very common and have been exacerbated in recent years by both the Covid-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis. The stress of experiencing trauma and ACEs can cause changes in brain development in children and young people which, in practice, may mean children can present as developmentally younger socially and emotionally, dysregulated, and with challenging, violent or risk-taking behaviour in educational settings. All school staff have a unique and essential trauma-informed role to play in responding to children and young people who may be affected by psychological trauma. Not everyone needs to be a trauma expert, but it is important for all members of a school’s staff to be aware that every interaction with a child or young person affected by trauma is an opportunity to support their recovery and resilience and help improve their life chances, including their educational outcomes.

### Action plan delivery

Since the publication of the BISSR 2023 report, the following action has been taken to respond to some of the most pressing issues identified within the research:

- Provision of £900k funding to support the training of support staff, to respond to the need identified by support staff themselves that they would welcome more training to support them in their roles.
- Publication of new [guidance on preventing and responding to gender-based violence in schools](#), which will assist in addressing the emerging theme of increased misogyny in schools.
- Publication of [updated guidance on mobile phones in Scotland's schools](#), in recognition that children and young people using/looking at mobile phones or tablets when they should not be was identified within BISSR as the behaviour most commonly reported as having the greatest negative impact on secondary school staff.
- HM Inspectors to provide schools with enhanced feedback on relationships and behaviour as part of their inspection reports, to ensure inspections help support improvement.

This action plan sets out a wide-ranging response to the evidence provided by BISSR. It is recognised that government, local authorities, agencies and third sector organisations face a challenging financial situation. In acknowledgement of this, the action plan seeks to prioritise prevention, early intervention and support to promote positive relationships and behaviour. This is underpinned by a commitment to set clear national direction through provision of guidance, and develop capacity through enhanced practical guidance and support for local authorities and schools.

Given the complexities of factors underpinning behaviour, improving relationships and behaviour in schools will not be a short-term task. This plan aims to put in place

the building blocks that will put us on the correct trajectory to reinforce a positive culture and ethos in schools, embed and disseminate developing practice to promote positive behaviour and create safe and consistent environments in schools.

To reflect the three-year cycle of the plan, the action plan will be split into three phases of delivery. While priority actions are detailed below, it will be important that the action plan remains responsive to emerging issues or concerns:

### **Phase 1 – setting expectations, clarifying approaches and supporting consistency (year 1: from publication until 31 March 2025)**

Phase 1 will focus on actions which help to set clear expectations around relationships and behaviour, and the spectrum of approaches and actions which can be taken by schools, families and partners to both respond to and support children, young people and staff. This phase will focus on actions that support the implementation of a whole-school approach, underpinned by the GIRFEC national practice model, to creating a safe and consistent environment for all children and young people and staff.

Priorities for phase 1 are:

- To provide guidance to local authorities and schools on whole-school approaches to relationships and behaviour, grounded in developing strong relationships, high expectations, and effective limit setting.
- To build a collective understanding of how we create situations in which children are most likely to learn to behave well; how we intervene effectively when they do not; the purpose of consequences; how consequences can be used to support the promotion of positive relationships and behaviour; and how consequences and effective interventions lead to change.
- To provide clarity on the range of approaches and consequences that are available, including exclusion where there is no appropriate alternative, to empower staff to promote positive relationships and behaviour and respond to behaviour that impacts on learning and teaching or the health and safety of others.
- To provide further guidance around responding to situations in which children and young people are not responsive to authoritative approaches based on strong relationships, high expectations and limit setting, and where assessment would dictate that a more individualised plan will more likely lead to change over time.
- To set out good practice in evidence-based relationships and behaviour approaches through a staged intervention model.
- Ensure assessment and intervention of individual need leads to improvement over time, including processes for risk assessments appropriate to the educational context.

- To ensure schools have access to support locally and nationally to assist in promoting positive relationships and responding to challenging incidents and trends, including the provision of relevant exemplar policies.
- To provide updated guidance on reporting, recording and monitoring bullying incidents, and commence further work to consider the simplification of approaches to recording all behaviours in schools.
- To provide clarity for parents and carers about how they can support whole-school approaches to promoting positive relationships and behaviour.
- To provide practical support to prevent violence and reduce its harm such as the Mentors in Violence Prevention, No Knives Better Lives and Medics Against Violence programmes available (delivered as part of [Violence Prevention Framework](#).)

### **Phase 2 – effective engagement and support (year 2: 1 April 2025 until 31 March 2026)**

Phase 2 will continue to focus on the support necessary to promote positive relationships and behaviours in schools by focusing on actions which promote the values of fairness, respect and equality in order to create inclusive learning and teaching environments for all.

In phase 2, the focus will be to build on the actions developed and delivered during phase 1 with prioritisation of the following:

- To further update, consolidate and rationalise the existing suite of relationship and behaviour guidance.
- To publish a whole school approach on preventing and responding to racism and racist incidents.
- To commission a national review on the implementation of the gender-based violence in schools framework to establish positive practice and further areas for improvement.
- Identify and promote resources and professional development available to staff and schools on relationships and behaviour in schools, and reporting, recording and monitoring of incidents.

### **Phase 3 – embedding cultural change (year 3: 1 April 2026 until 31 March 2027)**

Phase 3 will focus on embedding the changes necessary to effect the long-term systemic culture change needed to create a safe and consistent environment for all, and to identify developing practice and impact.

In phase 3, the focus will be to build on the actions developed and delivered during years 1 and 2 (phase 1 and 2) with prioritisation of the following:

- To undertake HM Inspector led national review(s) on relationships and behaviour.



- To commission the sixth wave of BISSR to monitor progress and identify any further emerging trends.

There will also be actions developed and delivered throughout all phases of the plan which focus on the broader consolidation and rationalisation of relationship and behaviour guidance, practical support to local authorities and schools to support their development of local policies and approaches, and actions to ensure policy cohesion. There are also a number of actions which broadly focus on the development, updating or publication of resources which will require additional supporting actions to ensure effective implementation – including, dissemination of information, development and implementation of professional learning and a robust communication strategy to ensure these are embedded effectively within the context of wider school relationships and behaviour policies.

### Reviewing progress

The actions within this plan form the initial response to the current evidence on relationships and behaviour in schools. It is accepted that given the nature and timing of some of the interventions, evidencing impact may take longer to deliver than the lifespan of the plan. Successful implementation of some actions, such as improved reporting, recording and monitoring of incidents, may initially lead to an increase in recorded incidents.

This plan, therefore, should be viewed as the first stage in a longer-term commitment to ensuring improved relationships and behaviour in schools and a decrease in disruptive, violent and abusive behaviours. By its nature, this action plan should be regarded as a live document, the actions of which may require to be adjusted or reprioritised in response to emerging circumstances. Critical to this will be ongoing monitoring and review of the plan by SAGRABIS. The sixth wave of the BISSR, scheduled for publication towards the end of the plan, will act as a formal mechanism through which progress will be monitored, with escalating and emerging issues identified. To ensure appropriate agility, there will be regular consideration of delivery against the plan at SAGRABIS meetings, with ongoing insights provided by SAGRABIS members.

The Scottish Government and COSLA will jointly publish an annual progress report, at the conclusion of each phase of delivery, summarising the key actions taken to deliver the action plan.

## Ensuring Safe and Consistent Environments in Schools – Joint Action Plan

The joint action plan sets out 20 key actions to be delivered between 2024 and 2027. These actions are designed to support schools in their practice and approaches, by responding to the concerns and challenges identified within the evidence on relationships and behaviour in schools. Given the three-year term of the plan, key deliverables supporting these actions have been identified to be led by partners including national and local government, Education Scotland, SAGRABIS, schools, third sector partners and health colleagues. These deliverables should not be interpreted as exhaustive and will be kept under regular review by SAGRABIS over the life course of the plan.

Actions are set out under overall themes of:

1. Setting clear national expectations for promoting positive relationships and behaviour in schools
2. Supporting local application of national policy
3. Support for children and young people
4. Supporting the workforce
5. Reducing violence and harm in schools
6. Engaging with the whole-school community
7. Tracking impact and progress
8. Policy cohesion

### Theme 1: Setting clear national expectations for promoting positive relationships and behaviour in schools

**Action 1:** Create a clear and consistent definition and understanding of relationships and behaviour.

**Action 2:** Identify good practice in evidence-based relationships and behaviour approaches, including consequences.

**Action 3:** Publish new national guidance on emerging areas of concern.

**Action 4:** Review all current processes for recording incidents including violent incidents, to identify potential means of streamlining processes and improving consistency.

**Key deliverables** (how the actions will be supported and implemented)

During **phase 1:**

- Develop a clear national definition of relationships and behaviour, including violence and aggression, to be integrated into national and local school policies and guidance.

- Provide resources to schools on whole-school approaches to relationships and behaviour, grounded in developing strong relationships, high expectations, and effectively setting limits.
- Publish evidence-based guidance: such guidance should support early intervention and prevention through a staged intervention model; further clarify relationships and behaviour approaches; and include improved guidance around responding to situations in which children and young people are not responsive to authoritative approaches based on strong relationships, high expectations and limit setting and where assessment would dictate that a more individualised plan will more likely lead to change over time.
- Update Respect for All, the national anti-bullying guidance.
- Establish a working group to review current processes and mechanisms for recording different types of incidents, including bullying, violent incidents, and incidents against staff.

During **phase 2**:

- Publish a whole school approach on preventing and responding to racism and racist incidents.
- Develop guidance on vaping/substance use in schools.

In **all** phases:

- Update, consolidate and rationalise existing suite of relationship and behaviour guidance.
- To provide, clear, concise, consistent and practical real-world guidance.
- Develop appropriate communications plans to support roll out of guidance and resources.

## Theme 2: Supporting local application of national policy

**Action 5:** Implement framework of support to assist the local application of national policy.

**Action 6:** Identify examples of current/ developing practice that can be shared with schools.

**Action 7:** Develop mechanisms to provide schools with individualised feedback on relationships and behaviour approaches and areas for development.

**Action 8:** Implement the recommendations of Education Scotland's report 'Improving Attendance: Understanding the issues'.

**Key deliverables** (how the actions will be supported and implemented)

During **phase 1:**

- Establish a tracking and monitoring short-life working group on attendance, led by the ADES Performance and Improvement Network, to create key messages to support attendance tracking and monitoring, drawing together reporting issues into co-ordinated approaches.
- Provide bespoke support to assist schools and local authorities to address and improve attendance through the publication of resources, exemplification of practice and enhanced support for tracking and monitoring patterns of absence.
- Evaluate the pilot of the suite of professional learning resources aimed at supporting positive relationships and behaviour, nurture and emotional-regulation approaches.

During **phase 3:**

- Undertake HM Inspector led national review(s) on relationship and behaviour, including gender-based violence and relationships and behaviour approaches.

In **all** phases:

- Ensure all publications are clear, concise, and realistic for real-world implication
- Ensure that publication of any new or updated guidance is accompanied with exemplar policies.
- Provide practical support to local authorities and schools to support the development of local policies and approaches.
- Provide schools with enhanced feedback on relationships and behaviour as part of HM Inspector reports.

### Theme 3: Support for children and young people

**Action 9:** Age and stage appropriate resources are available to support children's social and emotional development.

**Action 10:** Children and young people are supported to develop healthy relationships and behaviours, grounded in tolerance and respect

**Action 11:** Children and young people's views are embedded in the development of school policies and procedures.

#### **Key deliverables** (how the actions will be supported and implemented)

##### During **phase 1**:

- Consider how to support parents to support their children's social and emotional development.
- Review and update resources linked to social and emotional learning.
- Publish updated teaching guidance on Relationships Sexual Health and Parenthood education.
- Conduct desk research on evidence of young people's views and experiences of relationships and behaviour in schools.
- Collate examples of current/emerging practice of children and young people participating in the formulation of policy.
- Work with Mental Health in Schools Working Group to consider how to encourage take up of mental health resources, including e-learning module for staff.
- Continue delivery of Mentors Against Violence Prevention programme.

##### During **all** phases:

- Review PSE materials to support provision of learning resources to allow teachers to deliver relevant, engaging and stage appropriate learning on topics such as anti-racism, gender-based violence, vaping, alcohol and drugs.
- Identify opportunities to gather young people's views and experiences of relationships and behaviour in schools to inform update to national suite of relationships and behaviour policies.

## Theme 4: Supporting the workforce

**Action 12:** Support all education settings to have a planned and ongoing programme to promote staff wellbeing.

**Action 13:** Empower staff through provision of relevant professional learning to support relationships and behaviour approaches and practice and to respond to emerging trends in behaviour.

**Action 14:** Identify and promote the approaches to curriculum design, pedagogy, and assessment to facilitate learner engagement of all children and young people.

### **Key deliverables** (how the actions will be supported and implemented)

#### During **phase 1**:

- Consider the outcomes of the joint SG / ADES Education Workforce Health & Wellbeing Support Project and next steps on improving existing wellbeing support that is provided by local authorities and teaching unions.
- Promote learning resources to support local authorities and schools to understand the underlying causes of absence and disengagement and consider how best to support improvement using relationship building, nurturing, trauma-informed approaches.
- Scope development of learning on emerging areas of concern, including gender-based violence and far-right extremism.

#### During **phase 2**:

- Identify and promote resources and professional development available to staff and schools on relationships and behaviour in schools, and recording and monitoring of incidents.
- Identify, develop and promote professional learning and resources on relational practice (including universal and targeted supports).

#### In **all** phases:

- Seek to ensure educational settings have a proactive and responsive approach to promoting and maintaining staff wellbeing and provide support following incidents.
- Identify and promote resources and professional learning resources available to staff and schools on relationships and behaviour in schools, rights and equalities, wellbeing, care and inclusion, and recording and monitoring of incidents.

## **Theme 5: Reducing violence and significant disruptive behaviour in schools**

**Action 15:** Identify supports for schools for situations where children and young people are not responsive to authoritative approaches and consequences.

**Action 16:** Support schools' development of clear protocols for both preventing and responding to violent incidents and incidents involving a weapon, including risk assessments, relevant to age and stage of child or young person

**Action 17:** Develop evidence-based on factors underlying violence, and develop teaching resources to support children and young people.

**Key deliverables** (how the actions will be supported and implemented)

During **phase 1:**

- Provide national advice and resources on risk assessment in schools.
- Publish guidance on a relationship and rights-based approach to physical intervention in Scottish schools, to ensure schools have the most up-to-date human rights-based advice on reducing distressed behaviour and minimising the use of restraint.
- Refresh school resources on violence and weapons.
- Work with national professional associations to identify the range of approaches and services that can be offered to support relationships and behaviour, at a school and local authority level. This will include both Educational Psychology Services, based on their five core functions of consultation, assessment, intervention, training, and research and policy development, and with Speech and Language Therapy Services.
- Implementation of the actions for violence prevention and harm reduction, specifically targeting the effects of social media on violence (delivered as part of Violence Prevention Framework).

## Theme 6: Engaging with the whole-school community

**Action 18:** All members of a school community - children and young people, parents and carers, and staff – have their views embedded in the development of school policies and procedures

**Key deliverables** (how the actions will be supported and implemented)

In **all** phases:

- Ensure that new or updated national relationships and behaviour policies and guidance set clear expectations of how schools should engage with children and young people, parents and carers, and school staff during development and implementation of local policies.
- Identify, develop and promote support for parents and carers, children and young people to understand relationship and behaviour approaches.
- Clarify expectations of parental and carer engagement and partnership with schools to support actions plans and strategies.



## Theme 7: Tracking impact and progress

**Action 19:** Continue to update and maintain evidence base on relationships and behaviour in schools

**Key deliverables** (how the actions will be supported and implemented)

During **phase 1:**

- Identify relevant data sources across national statistics, commissioned research and other policy documentation that can provide insights into young people's experiences of relationships and behaviour in schools.

During **phase 2:**

- Commission HM Inspector to undertake a national review on implementation of the gender-based violence in schools framework.

During **phase 3:**

- Commission the sixth wave of BISSR, for publication by the end of the action plan period.

In **all** phases:

- Utilise school inspection data to influence relationships and behaviour policies and reflect actions in joint action plan where appropriate.

## Theme 8: Policy cohesion

**Action 20:** Ensure alignment with existing cross-government policy commitments that seek to support children and young people to reach their full potential.

**Key deliverables** (how the actions will be supported and implemented)

During **phase 1**:

- Review the membership and terms of reference of SAGRABIS to ensure the composition represents the multi-agency nature of the response required.

In **all** phases:

- Work closely with the Gender Equality Taskforce on Education and Learning to ensure the taskforce and behaviour in schools ambitions align.
- Continue to engage with implementation of the Violence Prevention Framework and Equally Safe Strategy to identify actions of mutual interest.
- Engage with the Additional Support for Learning Project Board to raise awareness of this joint action plan and, where appropriate, incorporate actions into their delivery of the ASL Action Plan.
- Coordinate with relevant early years strategies, including the play strategy and early child development transformational change programme.
- Work with a wide range of anti-racism organisations to further strengthen resources and approaches to prevent and respond to racist incidents through the Anti-Racism in Education Programme.
- Consider and respond to the educational needs of looked after children and young people by implementing the Promise in education framework to ensure looked after children and young people are appropriately supported to engage and thrive in education.
- Provide guidance to schools on how to prevent and respond to behaviours grounded in prejudice.

The following organisations have committed to working in partnership to develop and deliver the actions set out in the action plan:

### **The Scottish Government**

There are a number of key policies that underpin Scottish education – the Scottish Government is responsible for national policies and guidance, including national policies such as relationships and behaviours in schools.

The Scottish Government will work jointly with local government, through COSLA and its professional networks, to develop and implement the action plan and therefore the plan will be jointly owned between the Scottish Government and COSLA. This will require continued engagement with partners to ensure the actions are meaningful and deliverable.

### **COSLA**

COSLA is the national membership organisation for Scottish Local Government. Comprising all of Scotland's 32 councils, COSLA sets the strategic direction for Local Government to best deliver for Scotland's communities. COSLA engages with governments on councils' behalf on policy, funding and legislation. COSLA will jointly own the action plan with the Scottish Government and therefore will have an integral role in the oversight of the associated actions.

### **The Scottish Advisory Group on Relationships and Behaviour in Schools**

The Scottish Advisory Group on Relationships and Behaviour in Schools (SAGRABIS) provides advice to local and national government on behaviour and relationships in schools. The group is chaired jointly by the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills and COSLA's Spokesperson for Children and Young People.

SAGRABIS will have oversight of the action plan and will monitor progress against the actions set out, providing challenge and support.

### **Association of Directors of Education in Scotland (ADES)**

ADES is an independent professional network for leaders and managers in education and children's services.

ADES is a key delivery partner of some actions within in the action plan, including through working in partnership with local and national government, Education Scotland, COSLA and other relevant agencies.

## **Education Scotland**

Education Scotland is a Scottish Government executive agency responsible for supporting quality and improvement in Scottish education.

Education Scotland supports the career-long professional learning for all practitioners across the education system and will therefore have an interest, and likely a leading role, in the actions within the action plan which focus on professional learning and development.

## **Local authorities**

The provision of education in Scotland is the responsibility of local authorities who have a statutory responsibility to ensure that there is adequate and efficient provision of school education in their area. In Scotland, 32 Education Authorities are responsible for ensuring that statutory requirements are met and for taking forward nationally agreed policies and guidelines.

Local authorities will be responsible for implementing the action plan at a local level which will involve strategic planning and partnerships with their local schools.

## **Schools**

Schools will be responsible for implementing the action plan at a local level using a whole-school approach which will require collaboration with their school community and support from their local authority.

## **Trade Unions**

Unions represent the voice of their members to help influence and shape education policies, ensuring the profession is considered during policy development and implementation.

## **Parents and Carers**

The relationship between schools and parents and carers is integral to establishing a broader culture and ethos that supports positive relationships and behaviours. Parents will have an important role in helping inform the development of local policies, and working with schools to support relationship and behaviour policies.

## **Children and Young People**

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024 places duties on public authorities which include taking into account the views of the child or young person. Therefore, children and young people should play an integral role in shaping the local policies on relationships and behaviour that will affect them.

## **Educational Psychologists**

Educational Psychologists provide support on relationships and behaviour, at a school and local authority level, based on their five core functions of consultation, assessment, intervention, training and research & policy development. The Association of Principal Educational Psychologists will continue to contribute to the work of SAGRABIS.

## **Speech and Language Therapists**

Speech and Language Therapists aim to improve outcomes for children with communication and swallowing needs. They support improved communication and behaviour by facilitating a whole systems approach that is based on quality provisions at a Universal, Targeted and Individualised level and across the five strands of Intervention, Environment, Family Support, Identification and Workforce. The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists represents speech and language therapists working in educational and community settings across Scotland.

## **Third sector and other statutory partners**

Addressing some of the behaviours and challenges seen in schools is a society-wide concern that will require a multi-agency approach. Organisations in areas such as health, justice and the third sector will therefore have a role in supporting or delivering some of the actions identified within the plan.



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