



# **Closing the poverty related attainment gap;**

early learning from our partnership  
work with schools and communities  
across Scotland.

May 2019

**Believe in  
children**  
 **Barnardo's  
Scotland**

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## Key points

- Relationships are central, but developing and sustaining relationships takes time, consistency and resources. Short term funding and reporting undermine relationship-based approaches.
- Health and wellbeing interventions make a vital contribution to reducing the poverty related attainment gap and are of equal importance to literacy and numeracy interventions. However, there is a lack of evidence about which approaches to health and wellbeing have the greatest impact.
- Locating decision making in local communities allows for flexibility and innovation to meet local need, but presents challenges for providers in developing relationships with commissioners, transferring learning and scaling up success.
- Working strategically delivers greater impact, but clear linkage between local planning processes and individual school decisions is not always evident
- The attainment gap starts long before the school gates, therefore families should have access to support from birth and through the early years.

# Introduction

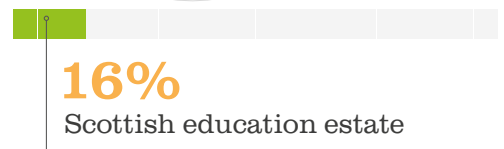
Barnardo's Scotland has a long history of working in partnership with families, schools and communities, and the introduction of the Scottish Attainment Challenge in 2015 has enabled us to extend this work. We currently deliver support in over 400 schools across 14 Local Authority areas in Scotland: approximately 16% of the Scottish education estate.

While we recognise that there are a number of complex issues which can affect children and young people's educational outcomes, we are particularly pleased that the Scottish Government has focussed on the poverty related attainment gap, as we know that those living in poverty often face the greatest challenge reaching their full potential.

We understand the pressures placed on schools, who are called to support and respond to children and young people who come through their gates with a range of emotional and material needs as well as issues related to their mental health and wellbeing. We also know that when children and young people feel safe, they are better able to engage and reach their full personal and academic potential. We work with children and young people, their families and their teachers to ensure that everyone has the support required to ensure that children and young people achieve better educational outcomes. We emphasise the importance of relationships and attachment, and ensure that our approach is informed by a strong understanding of how traumatic it can be for children and families to live in poverty, and the impact this can have.

Our work in schools includes individual support with children, young people and their parents and carers using a family support approach; targeted and universal attachment focused family learning activities; training, workshops and learning events on relational, attachment aware and trauma-informed practice; and a range of programme approaches including *PATHS® Programme for Schools (UK Version)* which is a universal, evidence based, social and emotional learning programme for children aged 4-11.

This paper outlines our learning to date from our work in schools since 2015, and our emerging thoughts on what we can do collectively to achieve a greater, positive impact on the lives of the children, young people and families we work alongside.



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## Learning point 1: Relationships are central, but take time and resource

Our approach to support is based on building strong relationships. Children, young people and families tell us they respond best to supportive, respectful, trusting relationships which are built over time. They also tell us that any disruption of this is acutely felt and can have a significant impact on engagement and progress toward the goals they have identified for themselves.<sup>[1]</sup>

In our experience it takes time and resource to develop trusting relationships with families, especially for those who historically have found it difficult to engage with services. Some children, young people and families need a lot of investment of time to reverse entrenched patterns around non-attendance, late-coming and other longstanding issues which have impacted their engagement in learning. Authentic, meaningful, relational approaches cannot be mandated, scheduled or fast-tracked. Building and sustaining relationships takes time, and time takes resource.

**It is our view that only longer term investment will enable us to deliver relational models of support which will secure the culture change we collectively seek to achieve and leave a sustained legacy beyond the term of funding.**

We have outlined below the ways in which short term funding and reporting structures restrict the ability to achieve this aim.

### **Short term funding and reporting can undermine relationship-based support**

Any funding which is annual and where demonstrable outcomes are required in short timeframes present a challenge to a relational approach. Where head teachers know that it is likely to take longer to build strong relationships which will improve outcomes for the most vulnerable children, they may be subtly incentivised to place resources and

focus on those who do not have the greatest need in order to demonstrate impact within the prescribed timeframes. We must guard against this by committing to ensuring all children and young people have access to emotionally available adults who engage empathically with their stresses and challenges, no matter how long this may take.

The commitment to continue the Challenge Authorities and Schools Programme, Pupil Equity Fund and Care Experienced Children and Young People Fund until 2021/22 has given some clarity and is warmly welcomed by colleagues working in schools where activity is dependent on these funding streams. However, the process of confirming financial allocations annually can result in funding for commissioned work being granted on a short term basis, thus undermining our ability to create stable, consistent, predictable services and relationships for the communities we support. It's difficult to build a 'secure base' for children, young people and families when the system is in a constant state of flux.<sup>[2]</sup>

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**It takes time and resources to develop trusting relationships with families**

Some anxiety was expressed in the evaluation from years one and two of the Attainment Scotland Fund about the sustainability of approaches initiated through the Scottish Attainment Challenge. A by-product of this has been a degree of caution about investing in additional staff, including partnerships with third sector organisations, which may

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[1] <http://www.ccpscotland.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Family-support-research-project-Part-1.pdf>  
<http://www.ccpscotland.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Family-support-scoping-review-part-2.pdf>

[2] The term 'secure base' refers to a relationship with one or more sensitive and responsive attachment figures who meet the child's needs and to whom the child can turn as a safe haven, when upset or anxious.

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create a perceived over reliance on this temporary additional funding. However, the third sector bring complimentary skills and approaches which can be a positive component to nurturing engagement with children, young people and families in schools and communities.

The structure of the fund also means there is pressure on commissioned organisations to deliver improvements which justify continued investment. In some instances this can be difficult to achieve within short funding cycles, for example an intervention that focuses on improving a child's health and wellbeing, to provide a solid and sustainable base for learning, may demonstrate fewer 'attainment' outcomes in the short term. Our staff are concerned that schools are under pressure to demonstrate the benefits of a an intervention rapidly, and where there isn't a quick return on this it could result in hasty decisions to try alternatives, not taking enough account of the time it can take to establish services and gather

outcomes data. Therefore It is crucial we should be seeking to balance the understandable need to produce evidence of impact while also mitigating against the creation of unrealistic expectations about the process of building trust, providing support and gathering feedback about 'what works' within the prescribed decision making time frames.

An additional issue in relation to reporting is that, while schools can spend their allocated attainment monies on any/all children in the school, their reporting must be specifically on how this money has impacted the children living in the lowest SIMD areas. This means that although money can be used for everyone, the overall driver for the school in terms of the impact of the work is focused on children living in those areas. This can risk excluding other vulnerable populations, including children experiencing trauma/ adversity at home and children living in poverty who don't receive free school meals or live in SIMD areas.



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## Learning point 2:

Attainment is wider than literacy and numeracy, but there are barriers to be overcome in supporting initiatives that focus on health and wellbeing as a means of closing the attainment gap

Health and wellbeing is identified as one of the three pillars of the Curriculum for Excellence, alongside literacy and numeracy, yet our colleagues express frustration that health and wellbeing is still, at times, perceived as secondary to literacy and numeracy interventions. This is particularly disappointing given the national focus on children and young people's mental health and wellbeing, reflected in the creation of the Children and Young People's Mental Health Taskforce. Many schools report confidence in selecting literacy or numeracy interventions but are less sure when identifying which particular approach to health and wellbeing is right for their context.

This may partly be a result of the choice of available programmes linked to health and wellbeing and a perceived lack of evidence about which particular methods deliver the greatest impact. It is especially difficult to secure reliable evidence when multiple approaches are implemented across the education estate at the same time. Therefore, **there is a need to gather feedback on the spectrum of work underway and produce national guidance to highlight which health and wellbeing interventions work with which populations, and in which context.**

### More emphasis could be given to family engagement

A key aspect of Barnardo's Scotland's health and wellbeing work to support attainment is through a focus on supporting families to engage with their child's learning. The evaluation of the Attainment Scotland Fund of Years 1 & 2 stated that teachers and local authorities are *'now more aware of the need*



*to strengthen partnerships with those outside the school setting'*.<sup>[3]</sup> However, the year 1 & 2 survey responses also indicate *'relatively fewer initiatives focused on family learning or parental or community engagement with the school'*.<sup>[4]</sup> In the table of interventions grouped thematically, parental engagement and family learning had the lowest emphasis with no clear reason why, as 30% of head teachers cited lack of parental engagement as a significant barrier in improving attainment.

Reported challenges to delivering family engagement identified by education staff

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[3] <https://www.gov.scot/publications/evaluation-attainment-scotland-fund-interim-report-years-1-2/p146>

[4] <https://www.gov.scot/publications/evaluation-attainment-scotland-fund-interim-report-years-1-2/p53>

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within the report included reaching out and connecting with some of the more vulnerable populations within school communities. This is an area where the third sector can provide bespoke support as we have extensive experience of reaching communities and families who do not always find it easy to engage in mainstream, universal provision. Our flexibility, including provision of services outside core hours and in school holidays, alongside our ability to meet people where they are, both physically and emotionally, is key in securing trusting, respectful relationships

which can be a catalyst for positive change. Interestingly, where supportive partnerships had been created, head teachers and families reported a wide range of benefits around increased collaboration.<sup>[5]</sup>

The recent Education Scotland Inspection of Inverclyde highlighted the coordinated approach to parental engagement across a range of services including, Education, Barnardo's, Community Learning and Development and Inverclyde Council libraries. Parents involved reported:

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**That they are now increasingly confident in supporting their children's learning and are more involved in the life of the school. For example, family drop-ins within schools, family learning clubs after school, family breakfast clubs, the Star café and Seasons for Growth for adults. These initiatives are supporting parents and carers to participate more in their child's learning and to engage in their own personal development”.**<sup>[6]</sup>



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[5] <https://www.gov.scot/publications/evaluation-attainment-scotland-fund-interim-report-years-1-2/p148>

[6] <https://education.gov.scot/assets/contactorganisationinspectionreports/inverclydecouncilins301018.pdf> p11

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### **The interplay between adversity and poverty must be recognised**

Alongside the work to strengthen parental engagement, there is increased understanding of the impact of developmental trauma and childhood adversity in schools, which is much needed given research by the University of Edinburgh found up to two-thirds of Scottish children experience early life adversity.<sup>[7]</sup> This has led to a deepening awareness of children's behaviour as communication. Positive steps are being taken in many schools to shift from a punitive culture to one of restorative and relational practice. This is an important change which can offer opportunities for collective reflection on how we build a culture and ethos which is supportive and nurturing and ensures we are providing our children and young people with a safe space to learn.

However, as Dr Morag Treanor notes:

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**'Families living in poverty affected by ACEs are more likely to come to the attention of schools, statutory and voluntary services as they are unlikely to have the resources, confidence, skills, knowledge, experiences, or the social, emotional or practical support to mitigate the traumatic effects of ACEs. When poverty and ACEs combine children and their families require dedicated service intervention and engagement with multiple services including health, housing, financial and family support workers.'**<sup>[8]</sup>

Is crucial that within the movement towards a greater awareness of the impact of childhood adversity within schools we also continue to take account of socioeconomic disadvantage. Support to children and families who are impacted by both childhood adversity and poverty should be holistic, addressing both issues in a non-stigmatising way.

Therefore importance of health and wellbeing interventions and the contribution they make to our wider progress toward reducing the poverty related attainment gap cannot be underestimated and must be given equal weight to literacy and numeracy as we plan for future investment.



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[7] <https://bmjpaedsopen.bmj.com/content/3/1/e000340>

[8] <https://www.children1st.org.uk/blog/poverty-and-adverse-childhood-experiences-aces/>



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## Learning point 3:

### Connections with local communities are essential, but create new challenges for providers

The introduction of the Scottish Attainment Challenge, followed by the Pupil Equity Fund has undoubtedly supported decision making and resource allocation being kept in or very close to communities.

This has led in many instances to creative and innovative solutions which reflect the very specific needs of an individual or local context.

As continuation funding of initiatives is based on results, this means education colleagues are not tied into long term funding of approaches they feel are not working. This is useful in facilitating open and honest appraisal of the effectiveness of different approaches used, encouraging a culture of listening and learning, reviewing and refining what we are doing continuously. At times, in our partnership work what we thought was needed hasn't always been what is actually right for a particular school or community. When this situation has arisen we have reviewed and adapted our approach to integrate this knowledge and understanding of what is needed to maximise our effectiveness. This requires trust and commitment between partners but ultimately enables us to deliver a person, and setting-centred service which is completely bespoke.

However, it can also be very resource intensive for third sector organisations to negotiate and deliver across multiple school communities, with potential duplication of activity and effort. We are mindful of the need to make best use of the available resources through identifying where there can be economies of scale across clusters or other groupings. In addition, we strive to ensure that opportunities for practice sharing and learning from different settings are not lost due to a fragmented and individualised approach to implementation.

As already mentioned above, we are also aware of the risk of short termism and reactive decision making which doesn't take account of the complexity of the wider environment, including the time it can take to establish and embed new cultures and approaches in practice.

So while there are undoubtedly positives of the decision making being located within school communities, in our experience it is not always easy to scale up successes or extend approaches which are working so they can reach and benefit greater numbers of children and young people.



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## Learning point 4:

### Working strategically delivers greater impact, the link between local planning and individual school decisions is not always evident

We firmly believe working strategically can deliver greater impact. The recent Education Scotland Inspection report in Inverclyde states,

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*‘Scottish Attainment Challenge and Pupil Equity Fund plans are very well aligned with the council’s strategic aims and priorities. These funds are being used effectively to extend the reach of existing and previously planned initiatives. This ensures the council’s approach is embedded within their longer-term strategic priorities, and is therefore likely to be more sustainable.’*<sup>[9]</sup>

This is surely the approach we seek in all communities across the country.

The provision of funding directly to schools which doesn’t link back to locally agreed strategic priorities risks missing opportunities to connect investment decisions and approaches with wider multi-agency strategic priorities. Locally developed Children’s Service Plans are intended to ‘... improve outcomes for all children and young people in Scotland by ensuring that local planning and delivery of services is integrated, focused on securing quality and value through preventative approaches and dedicated to safeguarding, supporting and promoting child wellbeing’<sup>[10]</sup> and appear a constructive place to start when identifying areas to focus improvement activities, aligning collective resources to achieve positive impact.

Local Authority services generally have absorbed a 6.9% real term cut in Scottish Government revenue funding since 2013/14.<sup>[11]</sup> In terms of education this has often meant fewer teaching assistants, fewer support staff, and reduced access to specialist resources like educational psychologists and speech and language supports. The result of this is an ongoing risk that some of the additional funding is used to make up for the shortfall in what used to be part of core service delivery.

The location of additional resource within education without concurrently strengthening the capacity of local authority provision more widely means our progress in reducing the attainment gap may well be undermined or difficult to sustain in the longer term due to reduced budgets and lack of capacity elsewhere in the system.

In our experience a key component of success is having a whole system approach which is coherent and has **‘very strong alignment between the strategic vision and the day-to-day practice of staff working in various roles across the service.’**<sup>[12]</sup>

Collectively across all children’s service providers we need to better understand how poverty influences attainment and continue to develop our knowledge and evidence base of what works, for whom, in which contexts, to enable us to affect change in the most effective way. It is also our view that local authorities and the newly established Regional Improvement Collaboratives are a crucial resource helping to shape this work, providing support and strategic oversight to ensure everyone has the information and evidence they need to make the best possible use of our finite resources.

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[9] <https://education.gov.scot/assets/contactorganisationinspectionreports/inverclydecouncilins301018.pdf> p12

[10] Children And Young People (Scotland) Act 2014: Part 3

[11] <http://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/report/local-government-in-scotland-financial-overview-201718>

[12] <https://education.gov.scot/assets/contactorganisationinspectionreports/inverclydecouncilins301018.pdf> p7

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### The GIRFEC framework is essential

In Scotland, 'wellbeing', as defined within the Getting It Right For Every Child (GIRFEC) framework through the eight wellbeing indicators; Safe, Healthy, Achieving, Nurtured, Active, Respected, Responsible and Included has embedded a shared approach to understanding a child or young person's circumstances within schools and across children's services more widely. The GIRFEC approach has been developed over many years and is built on the broad consensus that our culture, systems and practice should support a child centred and integrated approach to delivering high quality children's services across Scotland for all children, young people and families. This approach is already a key driver of practice improvement within schools across Scotland.

We know children in Scotland spend approximately 15% of their waking hours in school.<sup>[13]</sup> The remaining 85% of children and young people's lives are lived with families, in communities. This time spent at home and with groups of other people also has a very significant impact on each individual's learning outcomes. Schools alone will not be able to deliver the change we seek.

The complexity of individual and community need means we need a whole child, whole family, whole community approach. We also need to acknowledge that without concurrently reducing the levels of poverty we will not successfully reduce the poverty related attainment gap.

Explicitly linking our efforts to reduce the poverty related attainment gap to the GIRFEC framework allows us to think about a child or young person's educational attainment in relation to their wider environment. This ability to understand the spectrum of, sometimes complex, factors which are impacting a child or young person's relationship with education is essential in developing attuned, person centred plans to address barriers to learning.

Our work with schools across Scotland is rooted in the principals of GIRFEC, offering families access to help and support at the earliest possible opportunity. We undertake a wellbeing assessment at the very start of our journey with children, young people and families, identifying outcomes we can work in partnership with them to achieve including a focus on;

- Improved emotional health and well-being
- Improved behaviour in school
- Increase in ability to express feelings
- Increase in positive attitude to learning

Although we use a holistic approach, promoting healthy relationships and addressing identified health and wellbeing needs creates a positive foundation from which they can make best use of their learning opportunities, thus enabling us to collectively make progress toward reducing the poverty related attainment gap.



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[13] Education Indicators in Focus (22) OECD 2014

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## Learning point 5:

# The attainment gap starts long before the school gates, so we must start addressing the issues earlier

Evidence, experience and families themselves tell us that inequalities emerge long before a child crosses the threshold of a school.

We know the early years are critical, as our experience in this period starts to shape the way we relate to others: 'Our brains are malleable throughout the lifespan, but nowhere near as much as those critical first few years.'<sup>[14]</sup> Therefore it makes sense to make the most of this window to enable children to get the best possible start through access to holistic support and early help for those who need it.

In Scotland, almost one in four children are officially recognised as living in poverty, and there are further increases predicted.<sup>[15]</sup> We know children living in poverty are more likely to be delayed in terms of language acquisition, and have a higher incidence of behavioural problems than their more affluent peers, with evidence that 'by age 5, there is a gap of 10 months in problem solving development, and 13 months in vocabulary.'<sup>[16]</sup> This gap then increases over time. In our work in schools over the last few years early language development consistently emerges as an area of concern for children starting primary 1. Our staff also report high levels of parental stress as a factor which is almost universally present in our targeted work with families in early primary school. This can have a significant impact on a child due to the fact that 'mothers exposed to persistent economic hardship are more likely to experience continued stress, which in turn is associated with reduced cognitive stimulation for their children and less involved parent-child interactions, which in turn impacts negatively on their children's developmental outcomes.'<sup>[17]</sup>



Getting to these families earlier would mean more could be done to reduce or eliminate sources of stress, increasing the capacity of parents and carers to engage children in wide range of home learning activities which we know to have a positive impact on children's cognitive development.

Recent research from Glasgow also shows children from more disadvantaged backgrounds already have worse mental health than those from well off backgrounds

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[14] <https://youthtoday.org/2019/02/even-toddlers-preschoolers-need-early-trauma-informed-intervention/>

[15] <http://www.cpag.org.uk/scotland/child-poverty-facts-and-figures>

[16] <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/closing-attainment-gap-scottish-education>

[17] [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/237078363\\_Impacts\\_of\\_poverty\\_on\\_children\\_and\\_young\\_people](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/237078363_Impacts_of_poverty_on_children_and_young_people)

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by the time they start primary school, again progressing to

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**‘more than threefold widening of this disparity over time, so that by the age of 7 years, children from the most deprived area quintile had rates of difficulties 3.5 times higher than their more affluent peers.’<sup>[18]</sup>**

Robust evidence confirms the relationship between inequality and poorer outcomes. Work being undertaken by schools across Scotland to address these issues is very positive, however, we believe an approach is needed where

early help and support is available to families from birth and throughout the early years, securing enriching early learning and positive attachment experiences as well as reducing the need for more intensive, and potentially intrusive, interventions later in a child’s life. As the Scottish Government has itself noted, this doesn’t only avoid personal distress but it makes economic sense too as *‘a failure to effectively intervene to address complex needs of an individual in early childhood can result in a nine fold increase in direct public cost.’<sup>[19]</sup>*

Therefore, we advocate holistic support for families to enable them to develop attuned, responsive early relationships as well as us collectively taking action to alleviate the impact of developmental trauma and poverty for every child and family from the earliest possible opportunity.



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[18] <https://jech.bmj.com/content/72/1/27>

[19] <http://www.gov.scot/About/Performance/scotPerforms/outcome/children>

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## Conclusions

The Pupil Equity Fund has been positive in that it has allowed us to increase the provision of both universal and targeted support to children, young people and families across Scotland in line with the aspirations within the GIRFEC framework. Work funded through the Scottish Attainment Challenge undertaken through third sector partnerships with education has extended family support, family learning, community learning and development as well as spreading relational and trauma informed practice across our education estate.

However there are some challenges which are impacting on our ability to deliver coherent, consistent services largely centred around the structure of the fund, including the short term nature of funding cycles, the weighting of resource allocation to individual schools, lack of connection between school spend and locally set strategic priorities and the lack of robust evidence on what approaches work with whom in what circumstances, especially in respect of health and wellbeing interventions.

We would like to see the Scottish Government consider these challenges and opportunities as they work to deliver the next round of funding.



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