

# Nurture Groups

What are their outcomes?



What are they?



Why are they needed?



How do they work?



# What is a nurture group?

Nurture groups are an in-school, teacher-led psychosocial intervention of groups of less than 12 students that effectively replace missing or distorted early nurturing experiences for both children and young adults; they achieve this by immersing students in an accepting and warm environment which helps develop positive relationships with both teachers and peers.

Nurture groups were originally developed in 1969 in London by educational psychologist Marjorie Boxall who saw that a large number of children entering school arrived with severe social, emotional and behavioural needs. These students were unable to form trusting relationships with adults or to respond appropriately to other children – in effect, they were simply not ready to meet the social and intellectual demands of school life.

Nurture groups are now in over 1500 schools in the UK and offer the opportunity to experience the early nurturing experiences some children and young people lack, giving them the skills to do well at school, make friends and deal more confidently and calmly with the trials and tribulations of life, for life.

### Nurture groups are developed around six principles of nurture:

- Learning is understood developmentally
- The classroom offers a safe base
- The importance of nurture for the development of wellbeing
- Language is a vital means of communication
- All behaviour is communication
- The importance of transition in the lives of children and young people.

### CASE STUDY

#### Devon Nurture Group

*Our primary nurture group has been running for more than two years: Our Key Stage One pupils attend five mornings a week, Key Stage Two pupils two mornings a week, and our nurture graduates are free to return one afternoon a week if they wish. **We have seen significant improvements in attendance and reduced exclusions, as well as an increased love of school, confidence, attainment and self-esteem.** Whole-school planning is integral to the success of our nurture group and we have **weekly meetings with mainstream staff** where progress is discussed and targets can be reassessed. One of the most integral components of our nurture group is **the involvement of parents and carers** – they are an implicit part of the selection, monitoring and resettlement processes and are welcome to NG sessions.*



Nurture groups are a specialist form of provision for pupils with SEBD.

**NGs need:**

- A school committed to a nurturing ethos
- Two caring and affectionate NG practitioners
- A group of no more than 12 students!

First and foremost NGs focus on having the student form attachments to loving and caring adults at school, unconditional positive regard being the most powerful mechanism for change.

**The daily primary nurture routine is explicit and predictable:**

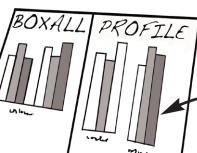


The pupils start their day in their mainstream class

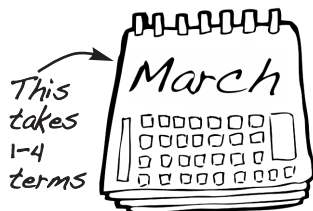
They are picked up by the NG staff and taken to the NG, a hybrid of home and school

Activities undertaken include emotional literacy sessions, news sharing, nurture breakfast and regular curriculum tasks

Pupils still share breaks and lunch with their mainstream class and regularly return for curriculum time



The social and developmental targets for each student are devised using the Boxall Profile - a detailed assessment of social, emotional and behavioural functioning. When the appropriate targets are met the student is reintegrated.



# Nurture Groups

## Improved wellbeing



*Improvements in social, emotional and behavioural skills and strengthening of wider social networks*

## Improved achievement



*Studies have found a statistically significant advantage in academic progress for pupils that attended a nurture group*

## Improved behaviour



*NGs help create positive change to SEBD in school and at home (Binnie & Allen, 2008); and allow for a positive attachment to school (Walker, 2010)*

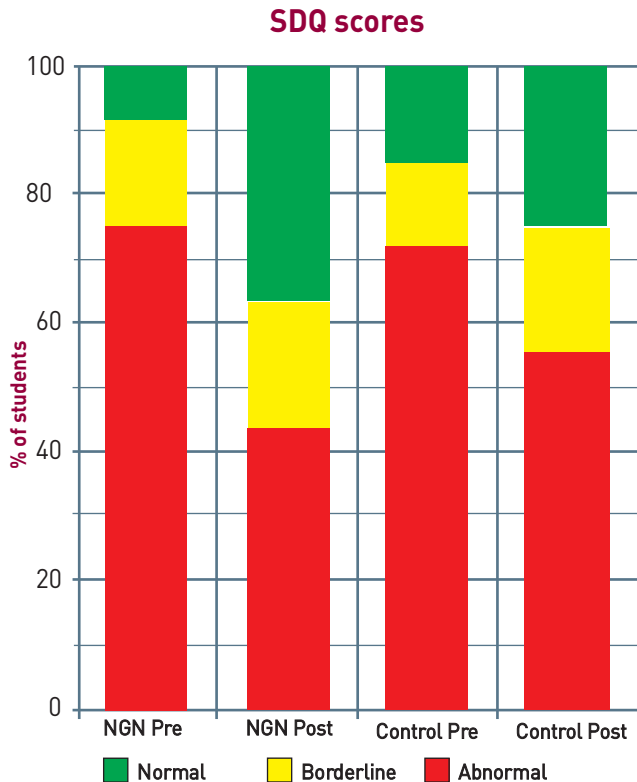
## Improved teaching



*NGs help develop affective bonds between teachers and students, reduce exclusions and help create a wholeschool nurturing ethos (Cooper & Whitebread 2007)*

# What are the outcomes?

Nurture groups have a thorough evidence base with over 62 academic studies in the last two decades. This array of research has highlighted the following outcomes:



## Long-term mental health

**improvements:** Students with SEBD are significantly more likely to improve in social and emotional functioning by attending NG provision than remaining in their mainstream classroom. These gains were also found to be maintained over time (O'Connor and Colwell's 2002). One study found that children's SDQ scores in the abnormal or borderline category improved by 29% to normal levels after three terms of NG provision compared to only 10% in the control group (see graph, Cooper et al. 2001)

## Greater academic attainment:

Children attending NGs showed significant gains in academic attainment as measured by their total scores on their baseline assessment. (Reynolds et al. 2009; Seth-Smith et al. 2010) This included metacognition skills (Gerrard 2005) and language and literacy skills (Hosie 2013).

**Improved attendance:** Nurture groups significantly reduce exclusions and lower truancy. (Cooper 2011) Both Ofsted (2013) and Estyn [Welsh Ofsted] (2014) have recommended NGs to improve attendance in both primary and secondary schools respectively.

## Why are they needed?

**Improve children and young people's mental health:** Childhood conduct disorders predict all adult disorders (Kim-Cohen et al 2003), and half of those with lifetime mental health problems first experience symptoms by the age of 14 (Mental Health Foundation, 2014). Nurture groups help manage these detrimental cognitive, affective, or behavioural styles as a targeted intervention.

**Reduce costs of mental illness to society:** Nurture groups help reduce the extra costs of long-term mental disorders over a lifetime, which in the UK is estimated at costing society £70 billion a year (OECD 2014).

### CASE STUDY

*Tom is in year 9 and is 13 years old. He was taken into care at 2, adopted at 3, and his adopted parents separated when he was 8. He was put back into care shortly after, and at the time of his NG provision lived in a children's home. He has ADHD and is described as aggressive, controlling and suffering from an attachment disorder. After a term and a half of NG provision Tom was found to have improved his attendance, had fewer exclusions and improved his behaviour.*

### **Increase educational attainment for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged students:**

By increasing the chances of having vulnerable and disadvantaged students remain in schools, nurture groups help break the cycle of intergenerational poverty by removing the barriers to learning and succeeding in schools. According to the Office for National Statistics (2014), those with a low level of educational attainment are almost five times more likely to be in poverty now as those with a high level of education.

### **Comply with new mental health and wellbeing policy for schools:**

The role that schools play in promoting the resilience of their pupils is important, particularly so for some children where their home life is less supportive. School should be a safe and affirming place for children where they can develop a sense of belonging and feel able to trust and talk openly with adults about their problems. (Department for Education 2014)

SEBD aren't transient problems students will grow out of.



## AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOUR

has a substantial stability into adulthood and tends to put students at risk of:

- Higher levels of social rejection
- Academic deficiencies (low grades, truancy and exclusion)
- Deficits in problem-solving skills\*

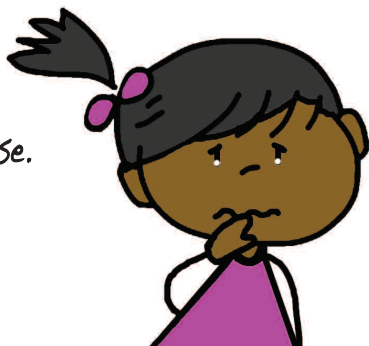
\*Kazdin 1997

## INTERNALISING BEHAVIOUR

and anxiety also has an unremitting course.

It can significantly interfere with:

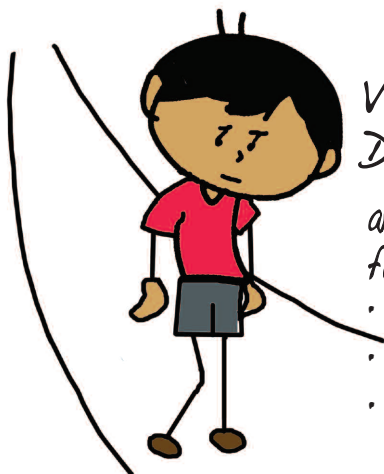
- Interpersonal relationships
- And academic functioning.\*



## VULNERABLE AND DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS

are at very high risks of personal and school failure. They tend to have:

- Lower grades
- Are absent from school twice as much
- And twice as likely to be excluded\*



\*Lansford 2002

# Nurture groups in national policy

Nurture groups have been endorsed by the UK government in numerous reports and policy papers: The Warnock Report (1978), Green Paper Excellence for All Children (1997), The Steer Report (2005), the Healthy Schools Toolkit (2012) the Mental Health and Behaviour in Schools Report (2014), and Ofsted's Supporting Children with Challenging Behaviour (2011) which concludes that:

“The care, guidance and support of pupils are outstanding in nurture groups. Staff are committed to assessing the particular needs of all pupils and providing well-organised and intensive support to overcome barriers to learning. As a consequence, many pupils who have found school challenging are attending regularly and enjoying what school has to offer.” Ofsted 2011

**Nurture groups are recognised by Education Scotland** as being one approach to developing positive relationships and behaviour. NGs are cited by the Scottish Labour Party's Mind the Gap: Tackling Education Inequality in Scotland (2014) policy paper as an example of best practice, and in the Scottish Government's paper (2014) "What works to reduce crime?" as a school-based intervention that has been effective in reducing the risk of offending.

**The Welsh Department for Education and Skills'** Inclusion and Pupil Support guidance (2006) highlights the use of nurture groups as an effective strategy in aiding pupils who are experiencing behaviour and attendance issues, with nurture groups also recommended as an intervention in Estyn's Attendance in Secondary Schools (2014). The Welsh Government has also published Nurture Groups: A handbook for schools (2010) outlining how to set up and run a nurture group.

**In Northern Ireland, the Department for Social Development** has cited nurture groups as an important tool in challenging some of the barriers that result in low educational attainment, and has made additional funding available to establish new nurture units across the country.



# Secondary nurture groups

“

*Sometimes at school people egg me on to do bad things and I get mad, but I've learnt to breathe in and breathe out... count to seven.*”

**Year 7 NG student,  
Staffordshire**

Children and young people have the same basic needs – to be loved, accepted and encouraged - whether they are four or 14. Secondary nurture groups support all these needs and minimise the chances of young people becoming non-attendees further through the school system. Secondary nurture groups have been recommended by various government papers (Estyn 2014;

Scottish Government 2014) and have been the focus of 11 different academic studies. Just like primary school, social and developmental targets for each student in secondary school NGs are devised using the Boxall Profile for Young People – a detailed assessment of social, emotional and behavioural functioning. Secondary nurture groups require that practitioners focus on young people's need to:

- Feel competent
- Be socially connected
- Feel valued and respected
- Make a difference in one's social group
- And feel that one has some control over one's own behaviours and experiences.

*(The National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2002)*

**The NGN 2014 pilot study found students had similar SEBD in both primary and secondary nurture groups, including:**

- Acting aggressively
- Being uncooperative
- Being easily distracted
- Having low self-esteem
- Frequent outbursts
- Withdrawn behaviour
- Running away and/or leaving class
- Disruptive behaviour
- Being disengaged/lethargic

## How to start your own nurture group:

**1** Most nurture groups are established by a member of the senior leadership team in the school. The Head needs to decide on a budget, a suitable room and two permanent staff to act as NG practitioners. Most nurture groups cost less than £10,000 to establish, and a large number are funded annually by the Pupil Premium.

**2** Visit our website [www.nurturegroups.org](http://www.nurturegroups.org) and look at the courses available near you. Learning about the practice and principles of nurture, along with the theoretical models that underpin the effectiveness of nurture group provision, is essential because integrated concepts and practice lead to a better service for the child, and equip the teacher to meet a wide range of needs. Ring our friendly team and they'll help you book a course near you.

**3** Arrange to visit a local Quality Mark Award nurture group in your area. A nurture group with a QMA has been established for at least two years, and has one member of staff who has taken a three-day course on the theory and practice of nurture groups accredited by the Nurture Group Network.

**4** Complete several observations using the Boxall Profile assessment tool to choose the children/young adults who will make up the first NG.

**5** Send letters to parents asking for their permission to involve their son or daughter in the nurture group. Part of the success of NGs is the regular involvement of parents who are given ample opportunities to provide feedback, and staff in turn provide support to parents and give them ideas/equipment for home activities.

**6** Update relevant school policy to reference the NG in behaviour, inclusion, special needs and staff support policies. It is fundamental that a whole school nurturing policy be established for the success of the nurture group. It is recommended to create a separate NG policy also.

“  
NG makes  
my brain  
smile.”

Key Stage 1 pupil,  
Northern Ireland

### AVERAGE NG STATS

Sessions per week: 5

Length of provision: 3 terms

Total hours of provision: 487.5 hours

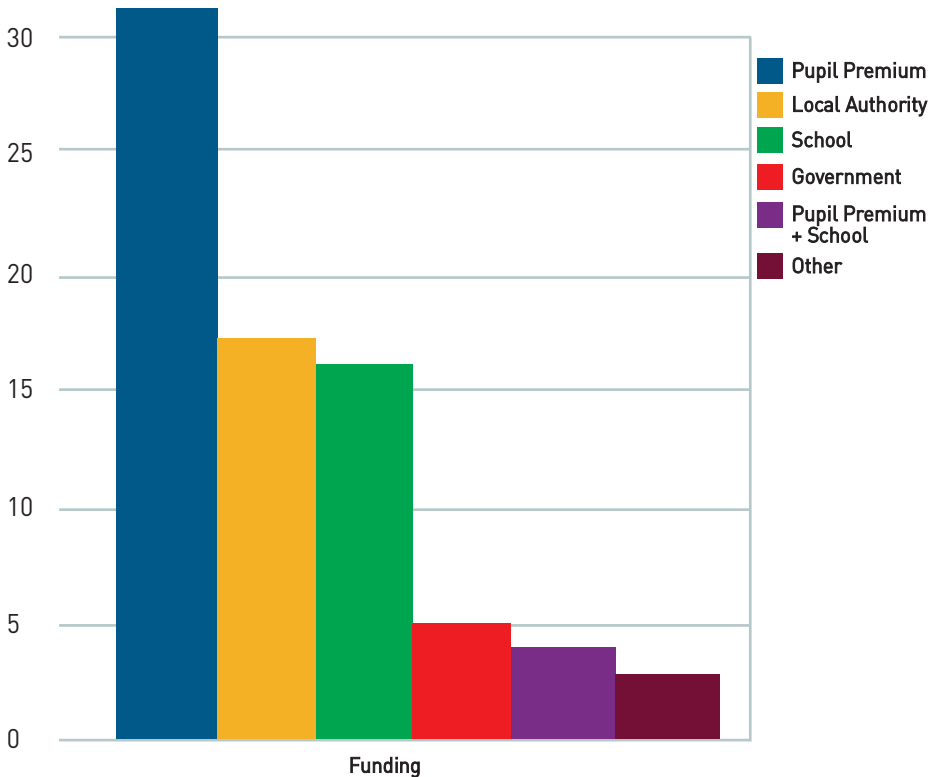
Cost: £1.62 per hour, per child

Sources: QMA course, Pilot Study 2014,  
Staff Questionnaire 2015

# Funding and cost breakdown

## How are most nurture groups funded?

The most popular option to fund NG provision in a questionnaire of over 80 NGs in the UK was found to be the Pupil Premium. This is followed by LEA funding which includes nurture groups in the East Midlands, North West, South East, Wales and Scotland, followed by school funding.



## How much does a nurture group cost to run annually (including NG practitioners' salaries)?

A part-time nurture group (from 3-15 hours a week) costs an average of £48.58 an hour to run. If the nurture group has at least 30 students passing through each year that is £1.62 per hour, per child (487.5 hours, 5 mornings a week for 3 terms).

A full-time nurture group (16+ hours) costs an average of £54.89 an hour to run. If the nurture group has at least 30 students passing through each year that is £1.83 per hour, per child (721.5 hours, 5 mornings and 4 afternoons a week for 3 terms).

## How do they work?

### Attachment Theory

The fundamental theoretical model that underpins the effectiveness of nurture groups is John Bowlby's (1965) attachment theory which argues that children acquire age-appropriate behaviour through interactions with significant others. If a child's early experiences were characterised by missing or distorted nurturing, it can lead to stunted social, emotional and cognitive development. Yet nurture is not a 'once-and-for-all event that must take place in a critical period' (Gopnik et al, 1999), and missing or distorted early experiences can be overcome with the help of nurturing adults.

“*Social and emotional learning interventions have an identifiable and significant impact on attitudes to learning, social relationships in school, and attainment itself (on average around three to four months additional progress). Improvements seem more likely when approaches are embedded into routine educational practices, and supported by professional development and training for staff.*”

Education Endowment Foundation Toolkit

### The neuroscience behind nurture groups

The NGN 2014 pilot study found that 3 in every 5 students in NGs had experienced significant trauma in their young lives. Though a few stressors can be manageable for young children, there is a point where **prolonged stress becomes harmful and neurobiological factors are affected** (Poulsen & Finello, 2001). In turn, the levels of glucocorticoids in the brain, particularly the stress hormone cortisol, get raised and maintained at a level that becomes neurologically harmful. The region of the brain that is most affected by increased levels of cortisol is the hippocampus, the region of the brain predominantly involved in memory. (Gunnar & Lonard, 1998). **Stress in early life could thus permanently impair hippocampus-dependent learning and memory** (Karten et al., 2005), and children who have experienced more intense and lasting stressful events in their lives have been found to post lower scores on tests of spatial working memory, and short-term memory. (Hanson et al. 2012) As Perry (2002) explains, “When in this state, the key parts of the cortex are not receptive to cognitive information that is not relevant to survival ... the capacity to internalize new verbal cognitive information depends upon having portions of the frontal and related cortical areas activated, which in turn requires a state of attentive calm.” The good news is that with sufficient nurture and support from adults, children can return their stress to tolerable or good levels (Middlebrooks & Audage, 2008), and **high-quality**

interventions can eliminate the negative effects of early psychosocial deprivation on executive functioning – a core set of self-regulation skills that regulate thoughts, actions and emotional responses that promote goal-directed behaviour. (McDermott et al. 2012) Nurture groups help students return to healthy levels of stress by:

- 1) Providing a consistent, predictable pattern to the day;
- 2) Having nurturing, comforting and affectionate adults trained in attachment theory run the group;
- 3) Having expectations of behaviour clearly discussed with the child/young adult;
- and 4) By providing a space where the student feels protected, is given choices and some sense of control.

## **NG provision shares many evidence-based components with other effective psychosocial interventions including:**

### **Building affective bonds:**

Forming positive, trusting relationships with students and being responsive to their individual needs.

### **Consensual goal setting:**

Setting achievable targets from The Boxall Profile.

### **Modelling:**

Role modelling of appropriate behaviour/social skills between two adults participating in constructive interaction.

### **Cognitive restructuring:**

Perspective taking; Recognising triggers of anger; Distinguishing between helpful and unhelpful thoughts

### **Affective education:**

Understanding, identifying and labelling emotions; Recognising physical and environmental cues of emotions; Providing opportunities for pupils to verbalise their emotional experiences.

### **Relaxation techniques:**

Mindfulness; Controlled breathing techniques.



## In their own words:

### Students

#### **Key Stage 3 pupil, Lancashire:**

“Before I came into nurture I used to come into school and run away because I didn't feel safe and secure... Now I've picked up my attendance and know how to react and not panic... I think staying in school and sorting the problem out is the best solution.”

### Headteachers

#### **Infant and Nursery School Headteacher, Warwickshire:**

“Attendance improves with nurture and since the nurture group was formed there have been no exclusions at all ...[this is because of] the impact nurture has on vulnerable children and families.”

### Parents

#### **Parent of Key Stage 1 nurture group pupil, Walsall:**

“Her confidence has improved and her learning, she can ask for help in class now. It's changed her, it's focused her, she's a lot more determined. What we have here I couldn't dream it. Everything is focused upon what the child needs.”

### Ofsted

“Nurture Groups allow for pupils to make considerable progress from their starting points, both in the social, emotional and behavioural aspects and with their reading and writing skills. Pupils became more confident in their main classes and this increased their participation. Parents reported that the children were happier and their behaviour was more settled at home. Attendance also improved for those for whom it was an issue.”

**The Pupil Premium: how schools are spending the funding successfully to maximise achievement (2013)**

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## **Kevin Kibble**, CEO of The Nurture Group Network:

Sometimes children need extra support to help them with their learning, making friends and growing into confident and successful individuals. Nurture groups can help provide that support for children and parents to give them the skills they need to do well at school, and deal more confidently and calmly with the trials and tribulations of everyday life.

Most children start school with confidence and enthusiasm but not all. Some do not respond to teachers or teaching methods, leaving them disengaged from their surroundings. This can evidence itself in a child being withdrawn and inward-looking, or 'acting out', behaving aggressively to teachers, fellow pupils or others around them. These behaviour traits limit the child's ability to absorb information and learn and may even reach the stage of exclusion from school, a damaging and emotionally charged experience for both child and parents.

The behaviour of these children also impacts adversely on others in the class, disrupting lessons and taking up a disproportionate share of the teacher's time and attention. Class morale suffers, learning is inhibited and standards and levels of attainment can fall. In many cases this can be prevented. For more than 40 years nurture groups have demonstrated that, with the right help, support and resources applied, these children can be taught successfully, cost-effectively, and reintroduced to mainstream classrooms to continue their education with their peers.

The development of nurture groups led by trained practitioners offers an effective intervention both in primary and secondary education (indicating that it is never too late). The nurture group solution has been shown to be effective in enabling emotionally vulnerable children to engage in, and benefit from, mainstream education.

# About the Nurture Group Network

The Nurture Group Network exists to promote the development of nurture groups and to ensure the continuing quality of their delivery through accredited training programmes, research on effective practice, relevant publications and information exchange. Our aim is to make the nurture group approach available to all pupils who need it and also to ensure that the connections between learning and early development are understood throughout education.

## So, if your school wishes to:

- Increase educational engagement
- Reduce exclusions
- Ensure academic progress
- Foster emotional wellbeing
- Reduce aggression and incidents of withdrawn behaviours
- Create a more inclusive ethos
- And ultimately remove barriers for learning for ALL children and young people


**Introduce Nurture as both a way of thinking and as a targeted intervention!**  
**It works.**

Visit our website for references and more information

### National Office

t 020 3475 8980 e [info@nurturegroups.org](mailto:info@nurturegroups.org)

18A Victoria Park Square, Bethnal Green, London E2 9PB

Tweet us! [@nurturegroups](https://twitter.com/nurturegroups) 

**[www.nurturegroups.org](http://www.nurturegroups.org)**

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