

Aberlour Evidence to Scottish Parliament's Education, Children and Young People Committee on the Scottish Attainment Challenge

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Key Messages

1. If children come to school hungry, tired or stressed then they are going to find it difficult to learn
2. Children's learning is significantly impacted by what happens away from school, at home and in the community
3. To help improve children's learning we need to understand the interaction between school and home – then we can better put in place what support children and families tell us they need
4. Putting relationships at the centre of how we support children develops consistency and trust in the adults around them that can help children to regulate, enabling them to come to school ready to learn
5. Family support is a vital part of how we support children and families before and beyond the school gates and help to improve children's learning
6. The pandemic has had an unexpectedly positive impact on the learning experiences of some children in residential care
7. We need to develop more flexible and individualised approaches to learning for children and young people whose circumstances mean they struggle to engage with education

Introduction

Aberlour is Scotland's largest, solely Scottish children's charity. We work with vulnerable, disadvantaged and marginalised children, young people and families throughout Scotland, providing services and support in communities around the country. We help to overcome significant challenges, including the impact of drugs and alcohol on family life, growing up in and leaving care, poor mental health, childhood adversity and trauma, living with a disability, and the impact of poverty and disadvantage. We aim to provide help and support at the earliest opportunity to prevent problems becoming intractable or spiralling out of control. We are committed to **#KeepThePromise** and to the incorporation of the UNCRC.

Aberlour is a member of the End Child Poverty coalition and is committed to combatting the impact of poverty and disadvantage on the children and families we work with, as well actively campaigning

to see a Scotland where no child grows up in poverty. We are also committed to realising and fulfilling children and young people's right to learn, by supporting their learning in ways that best respond to their individual circumstances, needs and interests. We aim to make sure children and young people are at the centre of decision making around what their education and learning looks like, and that their voices and views are elevated in ways that can influence and shape their own learning and education experiences.

Supporting Learning at Aberlour

Aberlour supports children's learning in a variety of ways, working in partnership with schools and local authorities across Scotland. We deliver Pupil Equity Fund (PEF) and attainment focused support in schools, including in primary and secondary schools. This includes direct one-to-one support or group work with children in school, focusing on routines, change and transitions, health and wellbeing and emotional support.

Our family support services work with children and families at home and in the community, and often in partnership with schools, to help and support children with the challenges in their lives that can impact on their learning. Our dedicated Learning Service supports the learning of children who live in our cluster of residential children's houses in Fife. During the pandemic our services have worked closely with schools to support children's learning at home.

We know that when children come to school hungry, tired or stressed their ability to learn is significantly diminished. A critical part of the work we do to support children's learning is focused on family wellbeing and mitigating the impact of the often multiple and intersecting challenges families face in their lives. The single biggest challenge that the majority of families we work with face is poverty, and we work with families in a range of ways to limit the impact of poverty and disadvantage on their children's learning.

Our family support services work with families on their terms, to understand the stressors in their lives and to ask them what will best help them and their children. We aim to make sure children and families are at the centre of decision making so they can determine and have choice in what the help and support they get looks like. This allows us to develop trusted relationships, find solutions together and ultimately help children to be ready to learn when they arrive at school.

We know that what most often impacts on a child's learning is what happens away from school – before and beyond the school gates, at home and in the community. Children spend the majority of their time away from school, with only around 15% of their time spent in school¹. For children who are struggling with their learning, additional in-school support is important, such as nurture hubs, learning support bases and education support workers.

However, there must equally be a focus on what is going on in children's lives when they are not in school. Children who are affected by family breakdown, domestic abuse, addiction, poor parental mental health, trauma and other forms of childhood adversity are unlikely to be able to focus and learn as well as their peers. In order to help vulnerable and traumatised children learn we must help

¹ <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN07148/SN07148.pdf>

them to regulate². By understanding and responding to the stressors and challenges that are causing children's distress, and by building and maintaining trusting relationships with those children, we are better able to help them regulate and to support them to be ready to learn.

Aberlour Attain Case Study

Aberlour Attain is a mentoring and family support service that provides flexible, relationship-based mentoring to support care-experienced children's learning for children looked after at home or in kinship care. Adult volunteer mentors support children in the community with a focus on strengths to build confidence and support learning. The service works with the whole family in partnership with schools to identify barriers to learning and to find family focused solutions to challenges they face

Joe (13) and Robert (14)* are both autistic. Dad passed away last year and Mum has very poor mental health, resulting in emotional breakdown and suicide ideation. Renfrewshire Council social work supported the family and referred them to Aberlour. The family were in financial crisis and needed financial support from Aberlour's Urgent Assistance Fund. Joe and Robert both attended the same school for children with ASNs. Pre-pandemic the boys received respite care at the weekends, but this stopped during lockdown. Aberlour Attain were able to support the boys match them with individual volunteer mentors. During the pandemic the mentors met with the boys for socially distanced contact and activities. The service had regular contact with Mum to provide emotional and practical support (even just to let off steam on the phone). Mum was supported to a school meeting due to concerns about Joe's behaviour. The service worked with the school to help arrange groups for the boys to attend in school, and also helped to deliver additional in school support. The boys are now coping much better and engaged with their education. Joe recently achieved full marks in a recent science test.

*names have been changed

Delivering PEF at Aberlour

Aberlour delivers dedicated PEF funded work in Dundee, Falkirk and Glasgow working in partnership with schools locally in each of those areas. The PEF funded support we deliver is primarily focused on in-school support for learning, with additional practical and emotional support for children and their families away from school when required.

The support is largely focused on working individually with children or in small groups in school and during the school day. The support and activities include: Seasons for Growth groups focussing on change and transitions; one-to-one sessions focussing on health and wellbeing; family focused support to understand and respond to family circumstances; building strategies for emotional support to help children self-regulate; and exploring routines, including sleep routines. Support also often includes 'ad hoc' support to respond to family crises. In addition, support includes delivering family sessions or peer support activities to help and support parents.

² <https://cycj.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/BBBL-Final-Version.pdf>

Children and family workers maintain regular contact with parents to discuss their children's progress, as well as to provide advice, information and signpost families to other agencies (including other Aberlour services) which are able to help respond to specific issues, including: sleep routines, financial support, bereavement support, housing support and mental health concerns.

In Dundee alone, we have been able to support more than 500 children in the last year through the delivery of PEF funded work across 6 primary schools. This equates to more than 80 hours dedicated support per week. One primary school teacher has commented: *"The support our children receive from Aberlour is invaluable, having (Aberlour staff member) has allowed time and space for children to discuss their feelings and find ways to manage them."*

Supporting the Learning of Children in Residential Care

Our children who live with us in our cluster of children's houses in Fife have access to Aberlour's Learning Service. Early relationship disruption and trauma, such as that experienced by children who can't live with their family, can impact on a child's development and learning. For some children and young people who struggle with their education our Learning Service provides an alternative learning environment that encourages them to be actively involved with their education plan whilst supporting them to recognise their ability and fulfil their ambitions. We have strong links with local schools and have educational psychologists as part of our dedicated learning service team.

Working in partnership with schools the Learning Service plans and develops alternative ways to support learning. This includes, outdoor learning, the Duke of Edinburgh Award (DofE), as well as access to our Nurture Hub – a quiet, safe space to explore ideas and creativity as well as traditional curriculum-based material supported by the child or young person's school.

The pandemic has been unexpectedly positive for some of our children and young people in residential care. During the pandemic our children's houses offered an insight into how we can think differently about how we support the learning of some of our most vulnerable children and young people. Many of our children and young people, as well as the adults who work with them, reported reduced stress as a result of not being in a formal school environment. The positive impact on children's learning and wider wellbeing was significant, with many children and young people flourishing during that period.

During lockdown a more relaxed, personalised programme of learning meant increased engagement with education. Children who previously struggled to complete their schoolwork started to do schoolwork independently, asking for support when they needed it. Many children learned to manage their workload when they had the agency to work and learn at a pace that suited them – in contrast to pre-lockdown, where some of children required full-time, one-to-one support to help them engage with their school day. Some children completed more work during lockdown than they previously did at school.

This has enabled us to think differently about how we support the learning of children in residential care. Working in collaboration with our children and young people we have conducted a review of our Learning Service (see Appendices A and B) to help us develop an approach that allows a more personalised and individual way of supporting learning that draws on children's strengths, interests and talents.

What we observed during lockdown:

Sense of difference was removed for children; everyone was now learning a different way and in a different environment; some of the shame and worry our children have about how school can feel for them was removed;

We could think more flexibly, be creative and less prescriptive, focus on individual interests, relate learning to everyday activities, be less formal and think differently about we access learning;

When demand was reduced, young people improved – building trust is crucial to enable goal focused conversations with children;

Relationship between children and young people in the houses improved;

Later starts worked better;

Children and young people had more time to reflect on and consider what they want and need.

What children and young people told us:

Often they feel their skills, interests and talents aren't nurtured in school; but home learning/lockdown enabled them to explore these more;

They would like: to be listened to more; more interactive learning; flexibility; later starts; more outdoor learning; more choice over their education; and more time to think about what they want and need from education;

A more relaxed and less distracting environment is better for them;

Some would like to carry on with the lockdown model, whilst others looked forward to return to school.

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