

Phoenix Park Special School



# Nurture Group Policy

September 2011

### **Introduction**

The Phoenix Park Special School has established A Nurture Group, which will begin in September 2011.

A Nurture Group is a small class where children spend a substantial part of each week in the group but remain part of their main class, joining the other children daily for planned activities.

A bridge between home and school, the nurture room provides a welcoming and warm environment. They usually have sofas, space for equipment for play, as well as books, worktables and computers.

The Nurture Group aims to provide a flexible and preventative resource, which is responsive to the needs of the pupils. It provides an ongoing assessment and support for children showing signs of emotional stress and behavioural difficulties with the aim of enabling the pupils to access the curriculum and participate fully in school life.

### **Nurture Staff**

The group will have two staff members. The staff have an explicitly supportive relationship, which provides a good model for children to observe and learn from. The staff's job is to make the children feel accepted and valued. They do this by engaging them in learning and in the life of the class, by helping them to relate to each other, and by using the group dynamics to foster good relationships.

### **Theoretical Foundation and Key Principles**

Nurture Groups are based on the principles of Attachment Theory (Bowlby) which articulates the importance of the infant's relationship with their primary carer, both to their lifelong development and their understanding of all relationships.

#### *Key Principles*

#### **1. Children's learning is understood developmentally.**

Staff respond to children in terms of the children's developmental progress assessed through the Boxall Profile Handbook. The response to the individual child is 'as they are', underpinned by a non-judgmental and accepting attitude.

#### **2. The classroom offers a safe base**

The organisation of the environment and the way the group is managed contains anxiety. The nurture group room offers a balance of educational and domestic experiences aimed at supporting the development of the children's relationship with each other and with the staff. The nurture group is organised around a structured day with predictable routines. Great attention is paid to detail; the adults are reliable and consistent in their approach to the children. Nurture groups are an educational provision making the important link between emotional containment and cognitive learning.

#### **3. Nurture is important for the development of self-esteem**

Nurture involves listening and responding. In a nurture group 'everything is verbalised' with an emphasis on the adults engaging with the children in reciprocal shared activities e.g. play / meals / reading / talking about events and feelings. Children respond to being valued and thought about as individuals, so in practice this involves noticing and

praising small achievements; 'nothing is hurried in nurture groups'.

#### **4. Language is understood as a vital means of communication**

Language is more than a skill to be learnt, it is the way of putting feelings into words. Nurture group children often 'act out' their feelings as they lack the vocabulary to 'name' how they feel. In nurture groups the informal opportunities for talking and sharing, e.g. welcoming the children into the group or having breakfast together are as important as the more formal lessons teaching language skills. Words are used instead of actions to express feelings and opportunities are created for extended conversations or encouraging imaginative play to understand the feelings of others.

#### **5. All behaviour is communication.**

This principle underlies the adult response to the children's often challenging or difficult behaviour. 'Given what I know about this child and their development what is this child trying to tell me?' Understanding what a child is communicating through behaviour helps staff to respond in a firm but non-punitive way by not being provoked or discouraged. If the child can sense that their feelings are understood this can help to diffuse difficult situations. The adult makes the link between the external / internal worlds of the child.

#### **6. Transitions is important in children's lives.**

The nurture group helps the child make the difficult transition from home to school. However, on a daily basis there are numerous transitions the child makes, e.g. between sessions and classes and between different adults. Changes in routine are invariably difficult for vulnerable children and need to be carefully managed with preparation and support.

### **Who Nurture Groups Can Help**

Nurture Group provision can meet the needs of some pupils better than others. The following are suggested as areas where the Nurture Group can be particularly beneficial:

- Encouraging withdrawn children to explore new kinds of behaviour and ways of relating to others.
- Developing the process of maturation in pupils who may be behaving in ways more appropriate to younger children.
- Assisting pupils who have undergone some traumatic experience (e.g. bereavement, parental separation etc.).
- Supporting pupils who experience difficulties in adjusting to school life.
- Helping pupils who find it difficult to relate appropriately to their peers (e.g. inability to play effectively).
- Supporting children with on-going emotional difficulties.

Nurture Group provision is considered most effective for children with those needs listed above, rather than for those whose difficulties are expressed in disruptive or aggressive behaviour, although this maybe evident.

**Whole School Involvement**

Whole staff discussion about Nurture Groups began in December 2010. All staff have had access to material about Nurture Groups and were invited to express their opinions and make suggestions following this. Funding was provided for one staff member to travel to the U.K for four days training. The school was successful in its bid for funding to set up the nurture room from the Seán Brosnahan Memorial Fund. The room was set up over the summer of 2011. An application has been made for funding for whole school training on Nurture Groups in September/October 2011.

An official opening is planned for October 2011, where children, parents and professionals will be invited to the school to see and use the Nurture Room.

**Referral**

All referrals will be made, in consultation with parents, and discussed with the Principal, Class Teacher, Nurture Group staff and CAMHS team.

A variety of assessment procedures will be used to inform referrals. These will include the Boxall Profile and appropriate academic assessments. Formal assessment by an Educational Psychologist is not a pre-requisite for admission, but consultation and discussion of relevant factors may be necessary.

Parents will be kept fully informed about the outcomes of these meetings and the reasons for referral.

**Pupil Admission/Discharge**

Pupils will spend no more than three terms in the Nurture Group. After 2 to 4 terms, planning for re-integration will take place in consultation with the class teacher, parents and pupils. Support will be provided within the main class as needed.

**Group Size**

The maximum number of pupils in a group at any one time shall not, ideally, exceed three. The criteria used to establish group size will be the current emotional conditions and demands of all the pupils who constitute that particular group; therefore some groups may have to be smaller than others.

**Programme Content**

Activities are planned around different themes to provide a stimulating and fun environment for the children. Each session follows a similar pattern and is divided into six parts.

1. **Welcome and Circle Time**
2. **Motor Integration**
3. **First Task**
4. **Second Task**
5. **Snack Time**
6. **Celebration Time**

**Recording Progress**

The Nurture Group Leader has responsibility for recording the progress of pupils in the Nurture Group. A brief comment after a session should be made on each child to say how things have gone.

Nurture staff will attend a weekly briefing with the main class staff. This information can then be used when reporting back to pupil reviews/case conferences, and for writing reports.

**Planning and Preparation**

Nurture Group staff will be given time to:

- Plan and prepare together
- Meet with parents
- Keep records and carry out observations
- Meet with school staff and other professionals

**Staff Absences**

Nurture Group staff will not be used to cover absences in classrooms during Nurture Group time.

In instances where the Nurture Group leader is absent, the principal will run the group. An SNA may be used to cover the group in other instances of staff absences.

**Parental Links**

The school will work in partnership with parents. Parents will be invited to participate in certain nurture group activities such as coffee mornings, board game sessions and paired reading groups. Nurture groups staff may also visit children's homes to support parents, discuss behaviour management strategies that may be transferable from school to home, and to report on children's progress.

**Nurture Group Staff, 2013**

Nurture Group Leader: Carolyn O'Brien

Nurture Group Assistant: Karen Jones

