

Relational Behaviour Policy

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1. Aims

In River Tees Multi-Academy Trust (RTMAT) schools, we aim for everyone to feel valued and safe. We support learners to approach school with confidence, resilience and hope for their future.

This policy aims to enable staff to:

- Understand the whole-school approach to implementing a relational behaviour policy
- Have a clear proactive approach to building relationships
- Have a framework of reactive approaches focused on co-regulation and de-escalation
- Understand the unique needs and context of each learner
- Understand behaviour as a form of communication
- Reflect on professional practice
- Work with our learners to overcome the barriers previously experienced in education and develop into well-rounded adults

This policy should be read alongside the following policies:

- Child Protection and Safeguarding
- Keeping Children Safe in Education (KCSIE)
- Positive Handling
- Searching Students
- Self-harm
- Suspensions and Exclusions

2. Underlying Research and Theories

- Trauma-informed care
- Child development theory
- Attachment theory
- Behavioural science, including Positive Behaviour Support (PBS)
- Research in neuroscience
- Branded approach (such as Thrive)

3. Rationale

The ethos and values of RTMAT are informed by multiple theories, built on evidence-based research. These theories are underpinned by the need to develop solid and trusting relationships with each learner.

The need for connection is wired into us from birth. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1954) explains the importance of connection and belonging. Being part of a family, group or community, make it more likely for a person to grow and develop. Physiologically, positive connections boost mood and lower blood pressure, which in turn supports the ability to regulate emotions and learn effectively.

Children who are able to self-regulate will have improved outcomes and greater success throughout their lifetime. At RTMAT, we understand that each young person’s journey is different; their unique needs are developed through the context of their life experiences across home, school and their community.

“The teacher - child relationship is an intrinsic reward and the withdrawal of approval an intrinsic ‘sanction’, which in most cases [removes the need for a positive/negative behaviour point system]. ... I have never met an effective teacher who relied on these as a substitute for relational approaches. Though they were always good at praise and clear boundaries, it was their relationships with their children that gave their responses worth and authority, not the value of a token, or the threat of a sanction. Were it otherwise; were rewards and sanctions sufficient to change behaviour, we might end up with children who only behave because of what was in it for them, or because they feared punishment – hardly conducive to developing pro-social adults.”

Tony Clifford (2023)

Staff at RTMAT are supported to be reflective practitioners. Managing behaviour and supporting children is difficult. When their behaviour is challenging, the first challenge is to staff. At times, it can be difficult to not take the words and behaviours of learners personally. We cannot always expect learners to understand the unintentional impact of their choices on staff who care about them. Working within an Attachment Aware, Trauma-informed (AATI) approach means moving past knee-jerk, punishment-based responses, to instead focus on how to meet the child’s need for restoration and repair. Understanding is different from accepting or condoning behaviour. To combine safe relationships and fair rewards and consequences is fundamental to young people overcoming trauma and becoming resilient, pro-social adults (Clifford, 2023).

Staff promote the accountability and resilience of learners, whilst recognising when the external environment (staff approach, enabling environments) needs to be adapted to facilitate their success.

We support the development of our learners through our 3Cs curriculum.

Character - who you are and who you want to be

Community - links to others and the wider world

Currency - learning for your future

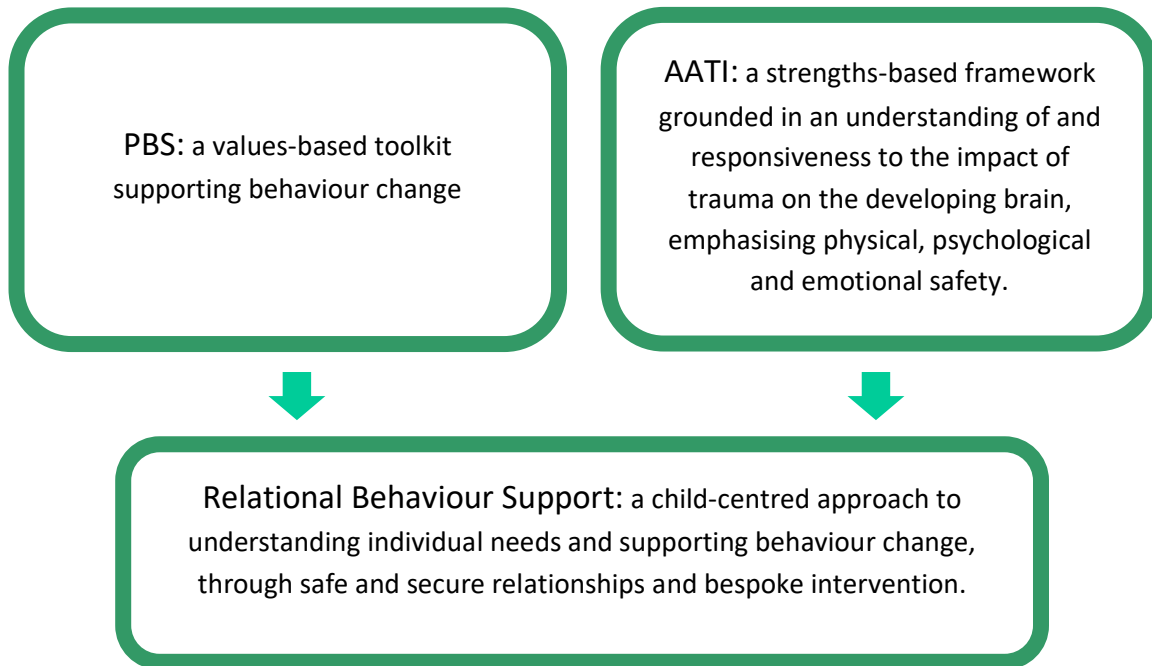
4. Learner and Staff Consultation

The SIT Team reviewed and developed this behaviour policy and views of the staff team from across all settings were sought via consultation with Senior Leadership Teams across the Trust. A sample of learners were consulted and these views were embedded within this policy (see section 12).

5. Relational Behaviour Support (RBS)

RBS is a behaviour change model used across the Trust, incorporating the principles of Positive Behaviour Support (PBS) from an Attachment Aware, Trauma-informed (AATI) perspective.

This model aims to equip staff with strategies and empower learners to develop the tools to regulate their own emotions and make positive choices.



The aim of PBS is to prevent and reduce challenging behaviour with the underlying goal of improving quality of life. The focus is on developing the skills of the person and those who support them and reducing restrictive practices.

When we perceive behaviour as challenging, a learner is often communicating that a need is not being met. Staff at RTMAT aim to actively listen to the learners and explore what their behaviour is trying to tell us. Behaviours can be broken down into the following functions:

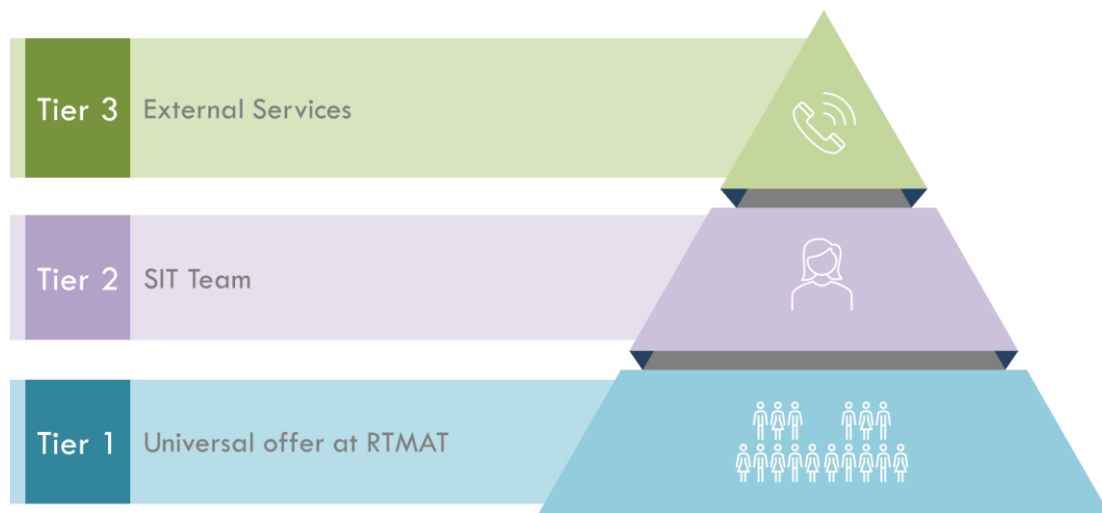
1. Escape – getting away from an activity or person
2. Attention – gaining attention beyond what is already available
3. Tangible gain – gaining an item or activity
4. Sensory needs – using behaviour to replace discomfort or experience a pleasant sensation

Once we understand the function of a behaviour, we can support the learner to develop the skills to express their needs positively, without turning to challenging behaviour.

6. Tiered support at RTMAT

At RTMAT, we understand that supporting the Social, Emotional and Mental Health (or SEMH) of our learners increases the likelihood of them accessing a quality education and becoming a well-rounded individual who can achieve their hopes and aspirations.

More than one in three children and young people are exposed to at least one potentially traumatic event by age 18 (Lewis et al., 2019). The right support can make a substantial difference to the extent that trauma impacts on their lives. SEMH support for learners at RTMAT involves bespoke intervention from a tiered approach.



For most learners, Tier 1 intervention alone can meet their needs. For more complex SEMH needs, a referral into the Specialists in the Trust (SIT) team and / or work with other agencies may be required to support the learner and their family.

Tier 1: Universal offer at RTMAT - Relational Behaviour Support

- Teach and model positive social interaction (skills teaching)
- Environments within school are enabling, proactive and predictable
- 1-1 or group intervention with Personal Development Leads (PDLs)
- Adaptations in line with recommendations from Special Educational Needs (SEN) documents

Support within tier 1 is graduated. Some learners may require more frequent or more specialist intervention than others. Identified members of staff can deliver bespoke interventions, for example, Thrive Practitioners, Mental Health First Aiders, Emotional Literacy Support Assistants (ELSA) and Drawing Talking Therapists.

Tier 2: Specialists in the Trust (SIT) Intervention

Sometimes a learner might need more help and support than the universal offer at RTMAT. The SIT team are a multi-disciplinary team of practitioners who support learners with SEMH needs. SEMH needs can be a significant barrier to learning and the fulfilment of potential. MIND are also available to support at this level, where appropriate.

The team offers therapeutic support to learners; working alongside the family and school staff (tier 1). The practitioners can provide bespoke and child-centred assessment and intervention. When required, practitioners will signpost to or collaborate with external agencies (tier 3).

Tier 3: External Agencies

At times, school staff need to work in partnership with external agencies to address all needs of the learner and family. External agencies include:

- Emotional Wellbeing Support e.g. a counselling service
- Children and Young People Service (CYPS) / Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS)
- Allied Health Care Professionals: Occupational Therapy; Speech and Language Therapy
- Educational Psychology

7. Proactive Approaches

Skills teaching

Skills teaching is a model used to support a learner to learn a skill that will ultimately lead to an improvement in quality of life. An example of a skill would be the ability to communicate the need for a break when feeling overwhelmed. The development of this skill will then lessen the need to communicate by using challenging behaviour.

A skills teaching approach breaks down tasks into manageable chunks, sequenced in a way that the individual learner can feel success.

Positive school environment

A positive school environment is fundamental to developing positive relationships between peers and with staff. When learners feel safe, valued and respected, they are more likely to engage with learning and develop a growth mindset.

- The physical environment feels enabling, inclusive and promotes collaboration.
- Staff take time to get to know each individual learner's context – their strengths, interests and needs.
- Staff use a strengths-based approach, recognising and focusing on the behaviour we want to see more of, including seemingly small steps of progress.
- Typically, children respond far better to positive reinforcement than to punishment, and this often leads to a decrease in challenging behaviour. Research continues to validate this social dynamic (e.g. Rumfola, 2017).

- Whilst punishment as a behaviour management technique can have a short-term effect, it does little to change behaviour in the long term (Children & Young People’s Mental Health Coalition, 2022).

Positive reinforcement - the addition of a positive outcome to strengthen a behaviour, e.g., awards, praise

Punishment - the addition of a negative outcome to 'weaken' a behaviour, e.g. a detention

- Staff appreciate the importance of separating the behaviour from the learner, e.g. ‘disruptive behaviour made it hard for me to teach’ rather than ‘you made it hard for me to teach’. These messages over time contribute to the learner’s view of themselves and their identity. If learners are repeatedly told they are bad or have negative qualities, they may continue to act up to this, believing it is just the way they are.
- School rules and consequences are clearly communicated, consistent and predictable. Empowering learners to recognise and respect the boundaries within school provides the foundation for feelings of safety and trust.
- RTMAT take the approach of every day is a fresh start where possible; consequences are rarely carried into the following day or after a suspension. An exception of this is when time and space to reflect is required for a successful mediation. Staff model the behaviour of letting things go so learners can gradually mirror the ethos of learning from negative choices and moving on.

Examples of rewards and consequences

Rewards	Consequences
A positive call or text home, even for small successes	A call home sharing negative behaviour
Verbal praise	Verbal challenge to inappropriate language
Certificates, e.g. the 3Cs awards	Being kept at the end of the school day – sometimes this is as simple as a 5 minute restorative conversation, or an opportunity to catch up on missed learning
Attendance incentives	Parent meetings
	Internal exclusions
	Suspension

RTMAT understands that every learner and situation is nuanced and unique. Whilst we aim for consistency in consequences, a ‘one size fits all’ approach does not always meet the needs of our learners.

When we are concerned about a learner’s behaviour, this should be discussed at the school’s Vulnerable Learners Meeting (VLM). The VLM is a forum to gain multiple staff perspectives to

explore the holistic context of the learner, understand possible underlying drivers of behaviour and decide on the tier of intervention required.

8. Reactive Approaches

Despite proactive interventions, there are times behaviour may escalate. High levels of dysregulation can lead to risks for the learners and those around them, necessitating responsive interventions.

When a learner presents with aggressive behaviour, it is likely their fight or flight response has been activated. This is often an involuntary response and not within the learner's capacity to control. At this point, the overriding aim is to support the learner to regulate their emotions and behaviours. When an individual is in a high state of arousal, 'higher-level' thinking tends to go offline; they are unable to access skills such as reasoning, reflection, understanding of consequences or long-term thinking.

In the crisis / recovery phase:

- Processing become impaired - staff use clear and simple language to tell the learner what we would like them to do (as opposed to what we would not like them to do)
- Avoid threats of punishment
- If we can compromise with the learner, we do this – we do not need to be concerned about reinforcing a behaviour in the crisis phase
- We avoid power struggles, i.e. the need to be 'right' or 'win'

It can take up to 90 minutes for a learner to recover fully, e.g. for adrenaline and cortisol levels (stress hormones) to return to baseline. Once a learner appears regulated and ready, restorative conversations can take place. This may involve:

- Reflecting on choices
- Discussing the impact of actions
- Finding ways to repair harm and restore positive relationships
- Identifying interventions to support the learner (skills teaching)

Safe Touch

It is not illegal to touch a pupil. There are occasions when physical contact is appropriate and necessary.

Safe Touch is entirely different to physical restraint. Physical restraint should be used in line with Team Teach Training, when a learner is being unsafe to themselves or others or committing a criminal act.

Examples of when touch might be appropriate:

- Comforting a learner in distress (staff know the learners well, e.g., for some, even a hand on the shoulder could further escalate the behaviour)
- Congratulating or praising a learner

- Demonstrating how to use a musical instrument
- Demonstrating techniques during PE lessons
- First aid

**Please refer to Positive Handling Policy and Team Teach Training*

9. Relational Behaviour Approach: Key Points

RTMAT's Relational Behaviour Approach

Behaviour is understood as a form of communication.

Positive and secure relationships between learners and staff are at the centre of our approach.

Opportunities for success are created and celebrated.

Interventions are tailored to each individual; we recognise a one size fits all approach is not always best for our learners.

Skills key to personal development are taught and reinforced, such as emotional regulation and positive communication.

Every day is a fresh start.

10. Dedicated Contacts

- Rebecca Mathews (Headteacher at River Tyne Academy Gateshead)
- Adam Burns (Headteacher at RTMAT Hospital School)
- Leanne Chilton (Headteacher at RTMAT Grangetown)
- Sarah Birch (Headteacher at RTMAT Secondary)
- Sophie Moss (Headteacher at RTMAT Primary)
- SIT Team: SITteam@rtmat.org.uk

11. Glossary

Active listening: active listening requires you to listen attentively to a speaker, understand what they're saying, respond and reflect on what's being said, and retain the information for later.

Emotional dysregulation: the state in which we are unable to control or modulate our emotional responses to stress. At a physiological level, our bodies are unable to maintain our levels of arousal within the optimum range.

Fight/flight response: a state of hyper arousal (over arousal) in which the body is geared up physiologically and emotionally to take action to overcome perceived threats in the environment.

12. Learner Voice

The SIT Team spoke to a sample of learners and the views have been embedded within this policy.

- When teachers are kind, it can lead to better behaviour.
- Minutes off break and after school detentions are really bad. Sometimes consequences don't work.
- There should be no swearing, hurting people, bullying, or cyber bullying.
- There are times physical restraint is necessary.
- Staff to spend more time 1-1 time with students.
- Consequences can get people more angry.
- Detentions sometimes work but sometimes don't.
- Restraint is ok in certain situations.
- Staff are good at behaviour management in school.
- Shouting makes behaviour worse.
- We need more explanation about the uniform policy.
- Teachers to ask how we are feeling and if we need anything and to not be cheeky.

13. Further Reading

- <https://uktraumacouncil.org/resources/childhood-trauma-and-the-brain>
- www.thriveapproach.com
- <https://www.england.nhs.uk/6cs/wp-content/uploads/sites/25/2016/07/bild-key-questions.pdf>

14. References

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Rumfola, L. (2017). Positive reinforcement positively helps students in the classroom. *Education and Human Development Master's Theses*, 786.
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