



Evaluation of Wee BREATHERS

Final Report

Prepared for:



**Scottish
Attachment
In Action**

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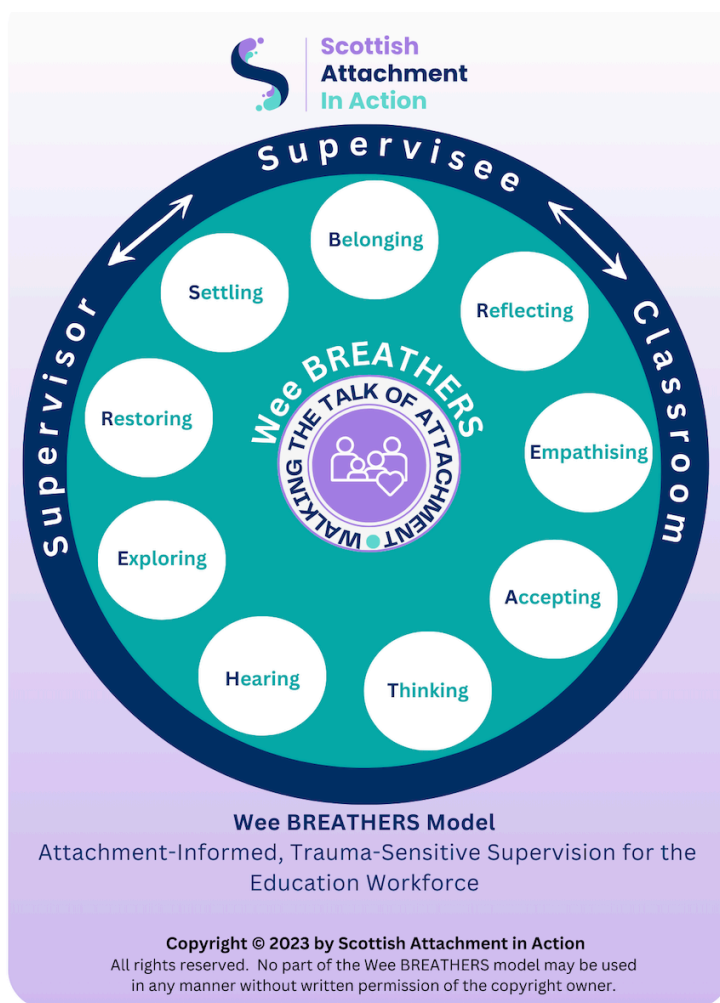
1. Introduction

- 1.1. Wee BREATHERS is a project developed by Scottish Attachment in Action (SAIA) that offers attachment-informed, trauma-sensitive supervision to the education workforce.
- 1.2. This introductory chapter covers the background of Wee BREATHERS before explaining the purpose and methodology of the evaluation.

Scottish Attachment in Action and Wee BREATHERS

- 1.3. Scottish Attachment in Action (SAIA) is a charitable organisation which aims to raise awareness of attachment theory and its implications for policy, practice, families, and communities. Staffed by a small and committed team and working alongside trusted and experienced training associates, they deliver various projects that enable them to provide information, resources, bespoke training, and research aligned with their core purpose.
- 1.4. Funded by the Promise Partnership - Corra Foundation on behalf of the Scottish Government, SAIA's Wee BREATHERS project provides attachment-informed, trauma-sensitive supervision sessions to those working in schools and early years settings.
- 1.5. These one-to-one and group sessions are intended to provide protected time for staff to connect, reflect and learn within a safe and confidential space while developing insight into the needs of pupils they work with who have experienced disrupted attachment and trauma.
- 1.6. The delivery of Wee BREATHERS involves the supervision of school staff by trained supervisors, which impacts those individuals. Still, the ultimate impact is on the young people they support and the culture of the establishments where they work. According to the Wee BREATHERS logic model (see Appendix 1), these intended impacts are:
 - Young people have a safe environment that enables learning, reflects their rights, and where they are supported to realise their full potential; and
 - School culture reflects a commitment to:
 - promoting learning, not just attainment
 - acknowledges and recognises the reasons and influencing factors that sit behind a young person's behaviours
 - supporting and equipping staff to meet the needs of the young people they work with.
- 1.7. In the project's first year, SAIA focussed on foundational work, developing its approach to engaging and working with schools and early years establishments and building relationships with them. SAIA also researched and gained an understanding of supervision models and developed one (Figure 1) they believed would best support the project's purpose. Year one also saw the recruitment and training of supervisors and the development of appropriate safeguarding, data protection and other policies and procedures.

Figure 1. Wee BREATHERS model



- 1.8. The project's second year involved delivering Wee BREATHERS supervision sessions in schools and early years settings. By the end of 2024, the project had trained 42 supervisors across nine local authority areas, provided 218 hours of support for education staff through 185 Wee BREATHERS sessions, and delivered 26 partner support events.

Project evaluation

- 1.9. In May 2024, SAIA commissioned the social research company The Lines Between to support their self-evaluation of Wee BREATHERS and undertake an element of external evaluation. The early stages of this contract supported SAIA in developing the Wee BREATHERS logic model and refining the project's approaches aspects of self-evaluation spanning processes, systems, and tools.
- 1.10. Phase Two of the evaluation involved Senior Researchers from The Lines Between undertaking data analysis from Wee BREATHERS stakeholder survey responses, and conducting interviews with staff from schools, early years settings and supervisors participating in the project.
- 1.11. The evaluation considered the work undertaken at Wee BREATHERS in comparison to the intended outcomes for different stakeholders, notably the staff and senior leadership teams:

Outcomes (from Wee BREATHERS Logic Model)
Participating teachers and staff:

- have a safe space to reflect on their practice
- experience improvement in their emotional support needs being met
- feel heard, valued and that your experiences are validated
- increased their knowledge of attachment theory and how childhood trauma affects brain development
- increased in confidence and self-awareness
- are equipped to develop and use strategies and approaches that respond to young people's needs
- increased their confidence to support young people in distress
- improved their relationships inside and outside of work/school
- increased your job satisfaction (including reduced stress/pressure and increased wellbeing)

Non-participating teachers and staff:

- receive peer support from participating colleagues
- have an increased understanding and interest in supervision and reflective practice and the benefits of these

Senior leadership team:

- have empowered staff / teams
- experience a reduction in time required for their intervention

Young people / students:

- experience reduced disruption in class/school
- feel safe and secure
- feel listened to, understood and accepted
- feel supported and empowered
- feel valued
- feel part of the school community
- feel involved in their education
- have trusted relationships with staff
- have the skills and confidence to articulate their needs

Families / care givers:

- the young person they care for has better attendance and engagement with school
- have improved relationships with school staff
- have reduced 'negative contact' with school staff
- experience improved relationships in the family unit

Methodology

- 1.12. The methods used to generate data for the evaluation of Wee BREATHERS involved:
- Online surveys for participating staff and supervisors. These were initially completed after each session, but this was changed to once at the end of a block of sessions;
 - 13 face-to-face interviews and one online interview with staff from three education settings: early years, primary school, and secondary school. These semi-structured interviews gathered qualitative data which informed the three case studies;
 - interview with a supervisor.

Reporting

- 1.13. This report analyses the quantitative and qualitative data collected by SAIA from the online surveys distributed to supervisors and supervisees and from the interviews conducted by The Lines Between. The report also contains three case studies.
- 1.14. The findings presented are drawn from an analysis of the following:
- 68 feedback forms from Wee BREATHERS participants, completed at the end of each session
 - 5 feedback forms from participants after a block of Wee BREATHERS sessions
 - 8 feedback forms from newly qualified teachers participating in Wee BREATHERS sessions
 - 6 feedback forms from supervisors delivering Wee BREATHERS sessions
 - 14 interviews with staff, including members of school leadership teams who have managed the inclusion of Wee BREATHERS for staff, and staff who participated in Wee BREATHERS sessions, including class, subject and guidance teachers, early years practitioners and family support workers.
- 1.15. The feedback forms span a period in which 69 one-to-one and 15 group Wee BREATHERS sessions across 58 supervisees were delivered. The six supervisors reported delivering one-to-one sessions (ranging from two to 24), averaging 12 sessions per supervisor. Four supervisors reported delivering group sessions ranging from three to four each. Across the six supervisors, four supported nine supervisees each; one supported 15, and the other seven.
- 1.16. The report includes participant quotes to offer context and illustrate findings. Those in the main body of the report are from feedback forms. The case studies have interviews quote. Some have been edited to improve readability or protect anonymity without altering meaning. Case study content has been approved by those who took part.
- 1.17. Our findings and conclusions are presented over four chapters covering:
- Chapter 2: Findings: Process
 - Chapter 3: Findings: Impact
 - Chapter 4: Findings: Challenges and development opportunities
 - Chapter 5: Conclusions

2. Overview of Wee BREATHERS and leaders' motivation for involvement

- 2.1. This chapter explores leadership teams' motivation for incorporating Wee BREATHERS; current support structures for teaching and support staff; and stakeholders' experience of the format, style and content of Wee BREATHERS.

Context for Wee BREATHERS delivery

- 2.2. Leadership team staff members from the three case study settings described why they chose to incorporate Wee BREATHERS into their staff support structures. Themes in these conversations centred on:
- A general desire to support staff wellbeing.
 - An awareness that staff would benefit from specific support relating to work and/or personal issues.
 - Recognition of the potential for work to be challenging and emotive and the importance of having a safe space for staff to process issues.
 - Awareness of the value of informing staff about attachment theory, enhancing their understanding of children's development and behaviour and being better equipped to support them.
 - A desire to give as much support to children with attachment issues as possible.
- 2.3. Other important broader contextual drivers also featured in leadership staff decisions to adopt Wee BREATHERS. These included:
- Schools being increasingly expected to support children with an expanding, wider range of additional support needs. Staff therefore face greater complexity and challenges in their work and require specialised support.
 - Greater pressure on families for a variety of social and economic reasons, which can mean that children grow up in more challenging circumstances, impacting on their development and behaviour.
 - Schools that have already focused on continuing professional development of their staff on trauma-informed practice and attachment theory looking to develop this further to support staff in gaining a deeper understanding and working knowledge.
- 2.4. Staff in leadership and practitioner roles identified that current support structures do not offer as much time or space for reflection and learning as Wee BREATHERS. At best, staff had scheduled sessions on a six-monthly basis, to explore their practice, training, and development needs. This was coupled with an 'open-door' policy enabling them to approach senior staff as required. There was no other form of formal, regular or frequent support.
- 2.5. One supervisor reflected on the lack of support within education and the gap to fill: *"The need within education is that we're supposed to be reflective practitioners, but there's no time built in for reflection – ever."*
- 2.6. Wee BREATHERS introduces a new dynamic: a relatively frequent (monthly) opportunity for staff to step away from their role and reflect on it or other aspects of life that affect

work. The fact that this was with an independent, impartial person was also completely different, along with the attachment expertise they brought.

The format, style and content of Wee BREATHERS sessions

- 2.7. In some cases, supervision was provided on a 1:1 basis, for example, for individual class (primary) or subject (secondary) teachers, whereas Pupil Support Assistants experienced group supervision. The choice of supervision format was primarily decided by the school or nursery's ability to provide cover for staff stepping out of their role.
- 2.8. Regular monthly sessions and protected time were important elements of Wee BREATHERS. Those who participated in case studies all described protected time for planned supervision sessions as challenging but essential to implement.
- 2.9. Many participants commented on the style of Wee BREATHERS sessions. Supervisors were described as having created safe spaces, a welcoming listening approach and an open agenda so that participants felt able to speak about whatever was most pressing for them. Subject matter included particular classes, children, issues with colleagues, or relevant matters outside the work environment.
- 2.10. Supervisors said staff had come to the sessions *"very open, very honest and wanting to offload"* and, consequently, made positive comments at the end of sessions such as *"I needed that – I can focus again"*. Another noted that the enthusiasm and willingness of supervisees to explore and reframe support had brought value to every session. One supervisor reflected that only one supervisee had taken *"a few sessions"* to be more open and honest.

"Every individual I have worked with has brought enthusiasm and passion to learn and reflect. It is a privilege to work with such fantastic staff, eager to change outcomes for the children and families they support. Staff are always keen to explore and reframe ways to support which makes sessions feel valuable and meaningful. It is lovely to share space with others and reflect back so many positives and strengths so that people are reminded of the invaluable work they do and the huge difference they make. Supervisees have commented they leave sessions feeling 'lighter' and 'buzzing' which is the positive, supportive impact hoped for when delivering the model."
- 2.11. Many themes and experiences covering personal and professional aspects of supervisees' lives were reported to have been discussed during sessions. The main themes included:
 - workplace stressors such as isolation in role, stress/anxiety, workplace relationships, demands and competing priorities, meeting the needs of young people they support;
 - self-care;
 - attachment theory, boundaries, understanding and responding to challenging behaviours; and
 - work/life balance and family life.

3. Experiences with and impacts of Wee BREATHERS

3.1. This chapter presents the findings on experiences with and of impacts Wee BREATHERS, spanning:

- The engaging delivery model.
- Understanding of developmental issues and behavioural responses.
- Changing practice based on new knowledge and understanding.
- Improved relationships at work.
- A different mindset for other aspects of life.
- Wider impacts.
- Specific impacts for newly qualified teachers.
- Changes to organisational culture.
- Supervisors' feedback on Wee BREATHERS

An engaging delivery model

3.2. Staff described positive experiences at Wee BREATHERS sessions. Some had few expectations about the sessions, or had imagined that they would focus heavily on attachment theory. The reality was a fresh experience – time to talk, openness, and the experience of being listened to by an impartial third-party supervisor. All interviewees were highly complementary about the 'feel' of the sessions and the fact that they immediately felt comfortable sharing information and experience. They also described feeling 'lighter' at the end of a session; some told us they looked forward to them a place to reflect on and process challenges.

3.3. The benefits of having a safe, non-judgmental space for staff to reflect, talk about professional and personal issues that mattered to them, and be supported and listened to, regardless of any link to or support relating to attachment, were emphasised.

"I find the space very rewarding to talk about the stresses of work, how it affects your life outside of Nursery and how to manage these stresses. The space itself works for me as I am not very confident and do not enjoy talking about my feelings, but this space encourages me to do so and therefore offloads stresses when I talk about them aloud."

"[Supervisor] listened and supported me well on a tough topic which is causing me a lot of concern. Very helpful."

"[Supervisor] was great at meeting our needs related to whatever stressors we found in the class/school and not just related to Trauma Informed Practice and the impact of supporting pupils who required additional care and patience. Having a space to professionally discuss our frustrations and how to potentially lessen them was helpful."

3.4. It was common for staff members to describe feeling reassured and encouraged by the sessions. They noted the value of opportunities to discuss interactions with young

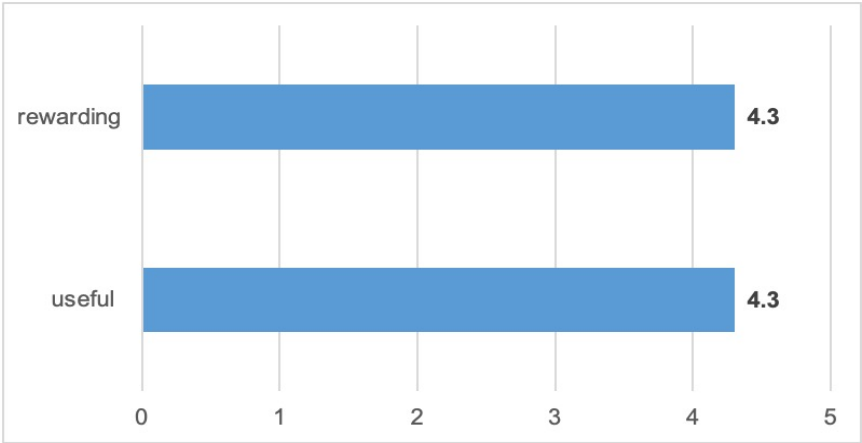
people and colleagues and, with the supervisor's encouragement, began to appreciate that their responses, decisions, and actions had been appropriate. The knock-on effect was that staff felt more confident in their role.

“Having the time, space and support to reflect on my practice has helped to improve my confidence by helping me to see the positives and the improvements in relationships with specific children.”

“My confidence has significantly increased when using this knowledge to inform my teaching practice. I feel better equipped to support pupil's emotional needs, creating a more inclusive and supportive environment.”

- 3.5.
- Post-session feedback data also shows that most participants found Wee BREATHERS sessions rewarding and useful. Using a rating scale of one to five, where one is ‘not all useful/rewarding’ and five is ‘very useful/rewarding’, the sessions score well as shown in Figure 2 which presents the average rating across 68 completed post-session feedback forms.

Figure 2 – Extent to which sessions are useful and rewarding (n=68)



- 3.6.
- The proportion of respondents who selected each rating level is shown in Figure 3. Most rated the extent to which sessions were rewarding and useful as a four or a five.
- 3.7.
- Although a significant minority gave a low rating (1) to the usefulness and reward experience from the sessions, half of these go on to make a positive comment about the session, which suggests an incorrect understanding of the rating scale. Furthermore, there are no explanatory comments from other low-scoring respondents to indicate why sessions were unhelpful. Meanwhile, all of the case study interviews were highly positive about the usefulness and reward of the sessions.

Figure 3 – Breakdown of respondents selecting each rating level

Scale	Useful	Rewarding
5	72%	68%
4	13%	15%
3	1%	4%
2	1%	1%
1	12%	12%

3.8. Supervisors identified two main types of benefits from group supervision sessions:

- they provide an opportunity for participants to share with colleagues, support each other, learn from each other, share ideas and create solutions; and
- they develop a sense of belonging and reduce feelings of isolation.

“It has offered peer support and opportunities to learn from discussion around specific pupils and the recommended strategies.”

“Participants can be supportive of each other and problem solve together.”

3.9. One supervisor noted that some participants could remain quiet within group supervision and was unsure about whether these sessions had impacts for quieter participants. While participants told us group supervision sessions were beneficial, they offer a different dynamic, and one supervisor noted that some may find these less helpful than one-to-one sessions. However, there was no participant evidence of this in the evaluation.

Impact – understanding of developmental issues and behavioural responses

3.10. The supervision sessions helped participants to develop knowledge and understanding about attachment issues, brain development and behavioural responses. Participants also had opportunities to understand their own experiences of attachment and gain insight into their own behaviours and social interactions. This ‘learning about self’ provided a basis for changes in practice and engagement with young people, colleagues, and those outside of the work setting.

“These sessions with [supervisor] have allowed me to reframe my understanding of attachment. Being able to consider my own patterns and attachment styles has allowed for me to reframe tricky behaviours exhibited from children in school and support adults to be trauma-informed in their approaches.”

“She’s coached me to be aware of my own patterns and behaviours which has allowed me to consider this when supporting staff and children and be more empathetic and understanding.”

"Learning about myself, my coping mechanisms and how to manage my energy and expectations."

- 3.11. Newly qualified teachers were among the participants who described how their skills, knowledge, and understanding improved because of Wee BREATHERS sessions.

"Predominantly seeing trauma through the lens of the learner and increasing my understanding of developmental trauma."

Changing practice based on new knowledge and understanding

- 3.12. Respondents were asked about changes to practice resulting from new knowledge relating to attachment and trauma from their Wee BREATHERS sessions.

- 3.13. Interviewees commonly reported changing their perspective on children and young people's behaviour and changing practice due to Wee BREATHERS sessions. Respondents also commented positively on this area through feedback forms.

"I find that maintaining and building relationships with pupils who have experienced trauma isn't as daunting. I am less worried about doing or saying the wrong thing because I now have tools I know can be used to support these pupils."

"Talking my practice over with my supervisor has helped to increase my confidence and helped me to understanding situations, young people and myself more."

"Through greater understanding of the brain and response to external factors I have been able to apply trauma informed knowledge to my practice with young people and those I work with."

"It's given me time to reflect and informed me with more knowledge as to why children may be displaying certain behaviours and how to act to support them."

- 3.14. Some staff provided examples of their learning and specific strategies and techniques that they now use in responding to behaviours and situations.

"I am now able to distance myself from behaviours and not take them so personally."

"Reinforcement of all behaviour is communication - a reminder not to jump on the defence."

- 3.15. One respondent described in detail how Wee BREATHERS sessions had supported them to develop their practice. They said they had gained specific areas of knowledge and confidence to take this into their working role with a fresh approach.

"Wee BREATHERS has positively impacted my relationships, especially with the young people in my classroom. I already take building positive relationships very seriously in my practice and do well to maintain them. With input from Wee BREATHERS, I feel I am even more empathetic and responsive to pupils' needs which in turn develops a stronger sense of trust and connection. Knowing more about attachment styles signs of those attachment styles, such as disassociation, shame, and self-deprecating comments, have enabled me to clock children showing those signs in the classroom, and I feel more informed on how to approach those pupils (for example, in one of the meetings we talked about "flipping the lid" and how when children go into fight or flight mode there is absolutely no way to reason with them, they are unable to have a conversation and identify how they are feeling because that part of the brain has

shut off) knowing this now, means I actively made changes on how I approach behaviour management that would better support pupils during this time."

3.16. There was also evidence of staff being supported in understanding developmental issues through introduction to theory and access to resources for follow-up reading. Five out of six supervisors had shared resources with supervisees. These included:

- The Three Circles of Emotional Regulation;
- The Health Mind Platter;
- Beacon house resources;
- Diagrams relating to anger iceberg for adults and children;
- Diagram of the window of tolerance and responses;
- YouTube videos on attachment or other topics under discussion
- Wider achievement information resources
- Betsy De Thierry's series on attachment and trauma
- Emotional cup visual when thinking about self-care
- Wee BREATHERS resources
- PACE/PACE training session

3.17. Two supervisors reported receiving training requests from supervisees relating to knowledge around attachment and trauma, understanding children's behaviour, emotion coaching training and PACE training.

Improved relationships at work

3.18. Wee BREATHERS participants reported better relationships with young people and colleagues. A reflective space, increased self-awareness, and an understanding of children's development caused this shift in perspective. A few respondents explained how they had communicated to others about their feelings and their new learning or that they both viewed and approached relationships at work differently.

"I have found that as I begin to understand behaviours and reactions, I am better able to adjust my emotional reactions in conversation, making it easier to interact with everyone in my workplace."

"I have been able to compartmentalize experiences and observations of others' behaviours and reflect on my relationships. I have made greater use of my positive connections in school and opened up to my colleagues that I trust about how I am feeling, especially fellow colleagues who are also taking part in Wee BREATHERS as we have a common shared experience."

"I think it's helped me gain more patience and a better understanding for people around me. It's helped me to reflect on how I am with others and how I would like others to be with me."

"Further improved with young people and very much improved with staff colleagues."

"It has improved relationships with a couple of pupils who have experienced trauma."

- 3.19. Improved relationships can enhance everyone's experience at school, as shown by the following example: *"Improved relationships with some of the young people in my class, which has helped to reduce conflict and time taken to de-escalate situations."*
- 3.20. One respondent acknowledged that the sessions were helping but reported that they still faced communication barriers with specific colleagues.
- 3.21. Some high school case study interviewees also reflected that whilst their knowledge and perspective had changed, they were working with colleagues who had not participated in Wee BREATHERS. At times, this led to differences of opinion about how best to respond to particular situations, the potential underlying causes of young people's behaviour and the level of support young people needed.

Impact - a different mindset in other aspects of life

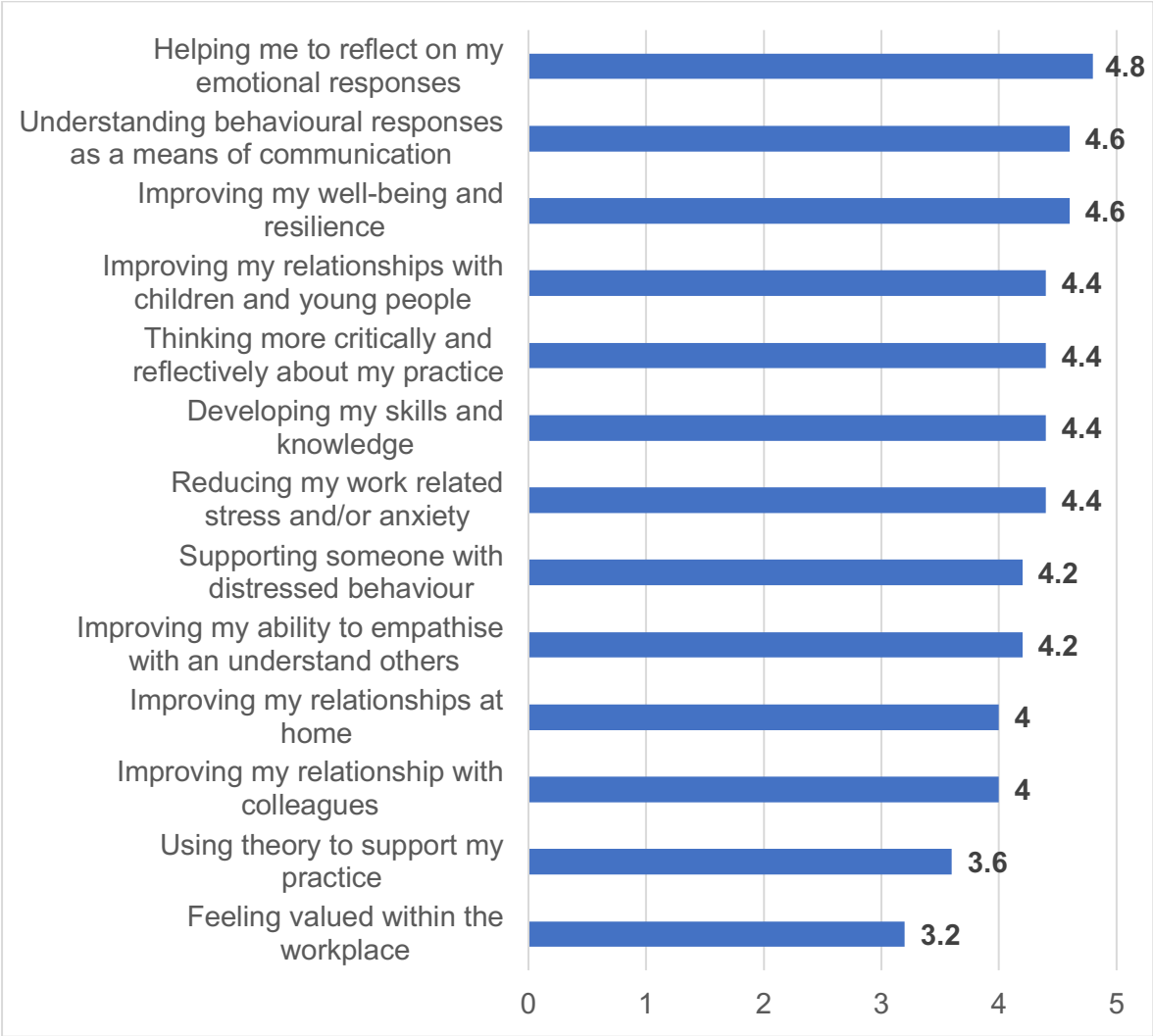
- 3.22. Many case study interviewees talked about the positive impact of Wee BREATHERS sessions beyond work. Examples included being able to offload about work without 'bringing it home', and that their enhanced understanding of the impact of positive communication and relationship-building had extended to their home environment.
- 3.23. One respondent provided detailed feedback about the significant impact of the sessions and the difference they were making at work and beyond:

"[Supervisor] has been so understanding and compassionate throughout this whole process and I feel that I have been able to take the kindness shown, with me beyond the sessions. I have been able to alter my internal dialogue and therefore my behaviours to enhance my wellbeing and at times I feel challenged I am comforted by [supervisor] words and advice. She has provided me the space to complete a mindset shift which has positively impacted not only my work but my home life as well. I am trying not to sweat the small stuff, be patient with the process of change and take time to sit with uncomfortable feelings before then communicating my needs to the people around me. This has allowed me to be less reactive and more proactive in my approach to change and I feel that I know myself better and therefore am more understanding and forgiving of others and their own unique traits which helps me to feel secure and safe within myself and therefore the different spaces that I live and work in. I do not have enough words to be able to say thank you to [supervisor] and how her sessions have given me perspective and a safe space to find myself and my passions again."

Overall range of impacts

- 3.24. At the end of a block of supervision sessions, participants are invited to respond to a feedback survey that explores their experiences of the Wee BREATHERS sessions and the difference they had made.
- 3.25. The survey asks respondents to rate a series of statements exploring how well Wee BREATHERS supports them in different areas. Ratings are on a scale of one to five, where one is 'not at all' and five is 'extremely well'. Figure 4 provides the average rating across five completed post-session feedback forms.

Figure 4. How well Wee BREATHERS provides support across a range of factors (n=5)

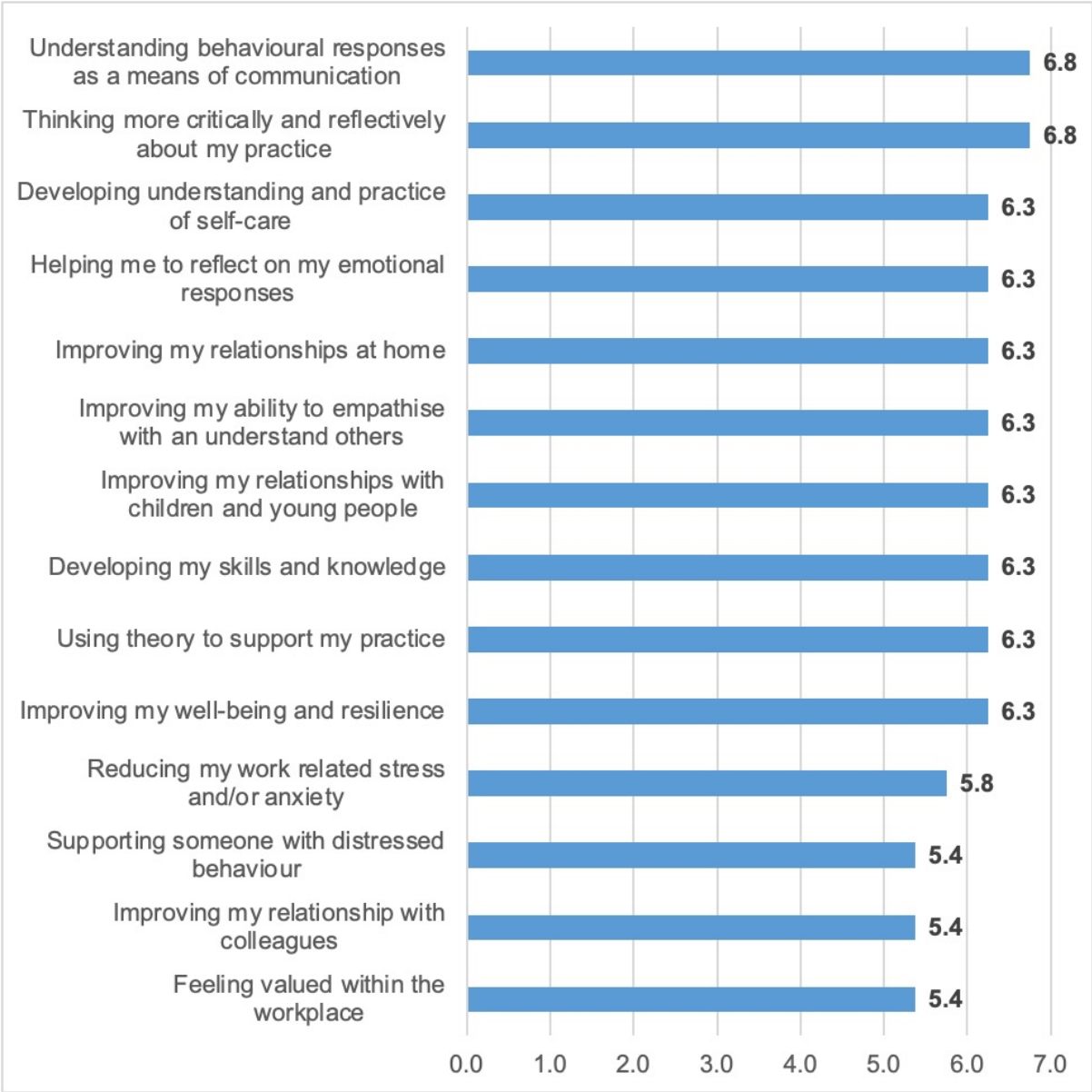


3.26. With an average of four or above, the results from this small sample suggest that session-by-session, Wee BREATHERS is providing effective and thorough support and development. The only areas averaging less than four are ‘using theory to support my practice’ and ‘feeling valued in the workplace’.

Specific impacts for newly qualified teachers

3.27. Eight newly qualified teachers responded to the feedback survey, rating a series of statements and reflecting on their experience of Wee BREATHERS impacting their confidence across various personal areas. Ratings are on a scale of one to seven, where one is ‘not at all’ and seven is ‘extremely well’. Figure 5 provides the average rating across eight completed post session feedback forms.

Figure 5 – Wee BREATHERS impact on confidence levels across a range of personal areas for newly qualified teachers (n=8)



3.28. As the data in Figure 5 demonstrates, almost all areas average six or above from participants, which suggests Wee BREATHERS provides widespread and practical support and development for newly qualified teachers. There are four categories where scores are slightly lower, but these include ‘feeling valued within the workplace’ where many other variables can be expected to have an influence.

“I thought all aspects of Wee BREATHERS was helpful, but I especially appreciated having a safe space where I could speak freely and know there is no judgement coming from those in the room with me. Many fellow probationers have told me stories of how there were times where they felt like they couldn't speak freely or give too much of their own opinion because they still want to make a good impression and don't want to "fail" their probation year. Other times it's that feeling of imposter syndrome, in which you think you are TOO early in your career to be able to have an opinion and so doubt yourself whether or not it's a good enough thought or idea to even be brought up in the first place. Having Wee BREATHERS was good to reflect,

vent, share achievements and mistakes in a comfortable, non-judgemental environment."

Changes to organisational culture

- 3.29. The reported improvements to staff relationships with young people and colleagues are one way in which Wee BREATHERS can impact educational establishments more widely. Some staff felt there would be value in all colleagues receiving the same supervision opportunity. All case study interviewees spoke of wanting others to experience the benefits they had felt.
- 3.30. The leadership team in the primary school case study identified the necessity for Wee BREATHERS to be embraced by the whole school and for efforts to be made to ensure that it does impact school culture. They noted that staff who receive supervision may move on, and the school needs to benefit from their valuable learning.
- 3.31. High school case study interviewees recognised that with a smaller proportion of a staff team accessing Wee BREATHERS, a large cohort of staff remained 'in a different place' and with less knowledge and understanding of the issues and practice promoted by the programme. This can lead to differences of opinion about practice with old and new mindsets in the workforce.
- 3.32. However, the high school case study presents an example where the school has adapted its culture of support for pupils to the extent of creating bespoke timetables and finding alternative ways of teaching and learning environments to be as supportive as possible for each pupil. Senior staff acknowledge that Wee BREATHERS input has supported thinking on this and provided reassurance and encouragement to test out a new approach which challenges traditional school culture.
- 3.33. In both school case studies, leadership teams highlighted their establishment's strong existing approach to the inclusion and support of young people, which has been enhanced and strengthened by their connection with Wee BREATHERS.

Supervisors' feedback on Wee BREATHERS

- 3.34. Supervisors commented on their experience with Wee BREATHERS in terms of the delivery of supervision sessions, the value of the model of supervision used, and their own development and support during this.
- 3.35. Many aspects of the supervision sessions were as supervisors had expected, namely:
- the topics discussed include a mix of issues from professional and personal life;
 - how much the project is needed, and how much education settings need it;
 - the situations experienced by staff in terms of workload and subsequent stress;
 - the emotional benefit that staff gain from participation.
- 3.36. Aspects reported as surprising to supervisors included the pressurised and unsupported context in which teachers work and the impact of Wee BREATHERS sessions. They reported new learning or developing a greater understanding about the following:
- the lack of reflective supervision for teachers despite them managing some extremely challenging situations in relative isolation;

- the lack of knowledge teachers have in the areas of trauma and attachment;
- how stretched staff are and the limited time available to them;
- the extent of stress experienced by education staff;
- the extent to which participants have been comfortable opening up and sharing;
- the extent of the positive impact that support has on education staff.

"I have been surprised by the extent of the benefits reported by some staff I am supervising. Reports that staff are in 'a completely different place' and that sessions have 'changed my life' are hugely rewarding and create further passion for supporting education teams."

The value of the Wee BREATHERS supervision model

- 3.37. Supervisors were asked about the appropriateness of the Wee BREATHERS supervision model and whether it supported their delivery of the sessions.
- 3.38. The majority of supervisors reported that the model had supported their delivery of sessions. They believed it provided a flexible, responsive, relevant structure and offered the space and freedom for supervisees to raise whatever they wanted to discuss. The attachment-focused approach enabled participants to reflect on and discuss relational issues.

"The Wee BREATHERS model has supported me a lot. This was a fantastic resource to use whilst getting to know everyone and it allowed the session to flow. As my confidence grows delivering my sessions, I still find myself subconsciously using the model and it has become familiar to myself and my supervisees. I personally feel that by using the model it appears to allow the individual to leave the session feeling somewhat content. At times the model has not flowed section by section, but this is only down to the fact that I am very aware that as the supervisor it is important for me to allow the individuals I am working with to lead the conversation and offer support that is relevant and compassionate on that day."

- 3.39. One supervisor did not think the model helped to support the sessions, reflecting that sessions tend to *"take their own path"* based on what a supervisee brings each time. Another felt the model 'somewhat helped', citing that the skills of the supervisor and the relationship developed between supervisor and supervisee are key elements to the model supporting the sessions delivered.

Support from SAIA and personal and professional development

- 3.40. Supervisors were highly positive about the support they received from SAIA. Strengths such as the accessibility and responsiveness of staff were highlighted, with group supervision sessions for supervisors being particularly valued.

"The support I have received has been brilliant, my line manager is only ever a message away and is always checking in too which I like. The supervision sessions with other supervisors had been very helpful too."

"Peer discussions in group supervision are great support."

- 3.41. All supervisors reported that their involvement in Wee BREATHERS has positively impacted their professional and/or personal development. Even those with no experience providing supervision explained that Wee BREATHERS had helped them develop their skills further and bring new insights and learning. One supervisor explained that it helped them support their colleagues better.

“As a test for change and new supervision model, it has been fantastic working alongside wonderfully passionate educators. I have developed my own skills as a supervisor and feel huge value being involved with something that is making such reported difference to the staff taking part. Working in such a collaborative and relational way has provided excellent experience both professionally and personally and changed the way I think about my own role in terms of supporting/training others.

“It has supported the development of my skill set in offering direct supervision.”

4. Challenges and development opportunities

- 4.1. The area most commonly described as challenging in the case studies was how readily Wee BREATHERS could be incorporated into the busy daily working life of the school or early years setting. Taking staff out of their working role has implications for resources and may potentially increase others' workloads.
- 4.2. Although this was challenging, each case study establishment found the inclusion of Wee BREATHERS to be possible with flexibility and support from the leadership team to enable it to work. One supervisor spoke of a school that had stopped its involvement because it found this aspect and its knock-on effects for pupils too problematic to manage.
- 4.3. There were a small number of comments on feedback forms from staff saying they had missed sessions because of workload. However, all case study interviews said this area had been workable, and no one reported having had sessions cancelled or postponed because of workload or other commitments. Staff participating in Wee BREATHERS highlighted that they valued the fact that their supervision time had been protected.
- 4.4. Supervisors' experience also identified this area as challenging. They had experienced schools finding difficulty in freeing up staff time to participate. This situation was sometimes compounded if there were absences, increased workload or lack of cover options.
- 4.5. One further practical challenge experienced by some supervisors was the lack of suitable spaces in which to deliver Wee BREATHERS sessions.
- 4.6. Supervisors highlighted specific challenges with group supervision including:
 - dominant group members and ensuring everyone has the opportunity to contribute
 - discussion can become 'negative' as members feed off each other
 - different participants each session due to work commitments
 - difficulty in maintaining focus in sessions
 - challenges in meeting all participant needs

"The schools are clearly keen to have this in place. It's more [of a challenge] about finding suitable places to have the sessions."

"The biggest barrier to supervisees accessing support is their competing demands. There have been several instances where they haven't been available (once on a planned basis) and others on the day, as they feel overwhelmed by workload or their SLT couldn't release them because they didn't have class cover."

Improvements suggested for Wee BREATHERS

- 4.7. The following suggestions were made by respondents when asked about how Wee BREATHERS could be improved:
- ensuring the space used for the sessions is private, with no potential for others to hear what is being discussed;
 - providing further reading materials;
 - making it available to all staff; and
 - ensuring the service is made available in the future.
- “Make it available to everyone! I think it is the single most important support mechanism for teachers to process experiences with a compassionate, non-judgemental individual who sits totally separate from the school body and allows for real meaningful reflection, behaviour change and mental health improvement. THANK YOU!”*
- 4.8. Newly qualified teachers suggested improvements such as more sessions, sessions being introduced earlier in the teaching year, and the content offering better coping strategies.
- “More meetings. I would have loved to meet up more than three times to keep these discussions and learning environments going for longer.”*
- 4.9. Two areas of suggested improvements were made by supervisors. These were:
- providing resources/tools to use in discussions; and
 - more focused learning on adapting responses to behaviours within educational settings.
- 4.10. Some education staff interviewed discussed that they were exploring the option to train as supervisors to support their staff through the Wee BREATHERS model.
- 4.11. SAIA staff confirmed that Phase 2 of the project was actively recruiting staff in several local authority areas and training them. These developments had, to date, been on a reactive basis and were therefore relatively ad hoc in location and with varied educational settings, including high school pastoral care and education psychology and nurture staff. Future funding for Wee BREATHERS and Phase 2 would enable a more structured roll-out, for example, approaching different local authority education directorates.
- 4.12. The context driving this potential future development of Wee BREATHERS was described as being:
- further development from a basis of trauma-informed practice;
 - recognition that teaching staff face increasingly challenging situations, high expectations and are containing an increased responsibility;
 - increased awareness of the need for staff wellbeing to be supported;
 - increased understanding, in line with trauma-informed practice, that staff need to be in a ‘good place’ to best support the children they are working with.

5. Conclusions

- 5.1. Wee BREATHERS offers attachment-informed, trauma-sensitive supervision for the education workforce. The leadership teams of schools and nurseries have incorporated it into their settings because it fits their approach and vision around the inclusion and support of young people, and because of their desire to support the wellbeing of staff who work in challenging roles.
- 5.2. Staff involved in Wee BREATHERS are very positive about its new approach, which is counter-cultural to the usual structures of support in educational settings. The provision of monthly, one-to-one or group supervision with an open agenda differs entirely from the twice-yearly teaching practice-focused support or open door 'as-and-when' support generally offered. Supervision facilitated by an impartial, external supervisor is a further change from standard practice within education. Combined, these factors create a safe listening environment where supervisees feel comfortable to be open about issues affecting them in and out of work.
- 5.3. One of the key features of Wee BREATHERS is that supervisors are knowledgeable about attachment and trauma-related issues, although this is by no means the primary focus of all supervision sessions. Staff have found this viewpoint, and the knowledge and experience of supervisors to be very valuable in informing them about their work with particular children. They are able to discuss options for changes to their practice and can then test these out back in the work setting and reflect on them in subsequent supervision sessions.
- 5.4. The approach taken by supervisors of creating a safe supervisory space and building a supportive relationship also links to the foundations of the project – creating healthy attachments. In the supervisory setting, this approach enables staff to offload, gain a fresh perspective from an independent person, process work or home-related stress and reflect on themselves and their own development and behaviour.
- 5.5. Staff described feeling lighter, sharing their difficulties and challenges, and being reassured and encouraged. In addition, by gaining a fresh understanding of themselves and others, they feel more confident and more self-aware in challenging situations that they return to or that arise.
- 5.6. Relationships within education settings are positively impacted as a result of Wee BREATHERS. Participants describe improved relationships with colleagues based on a new understanding of people's behaviour and on more open communication. There are also reported improvements in relationships with pupils who previously had presented challenges. Staff explain that Wee BREATHERS gives them a 'bigger picture' perspective on pupils' underlying developmental issues and resulting behaviour. They feel more able to engage with these pupils using new strategies that are more attuned to the needs of the young person involved.
- 5.7. There are strong connections between the impacts reported and the intended outcomes of Wee BREATHERS for participating staff and leadership teams. Staff have a safe space, feel heard and have their experiences validated. They experience improvements in their emotional needs being met and increase their knowledge of attachment theory and how childhood trauma affects brain development. They emerge from supervision sessions with increased confidence and self-awareness and are better equipped with approaches

to respond to young people's needs. They are also better equipped to handle stress and experience positive impacts in and out of work.

- 5.8. The experience of participating staff is shared with colleagues, as is the encouragement to take up future opportunities for involvement in Wee BREATHERS. This along with staff feeling more empowered and able to support pupils with attachment issues also meets the project's intended outcomes for non-participating staff and leadership team members.
- 5.9. Young people's behaviour changing due to staff implementing new relationship-building approaches, points towards the project's intended outcomes for young people being achieved. These include examples of young people feeling safe and secure, listened to and valued, and with reduced disruption and trusted relationships with staff, there are examples of them being more able to be part of the school community. Impacts of Wee BREATHERS on parents and carers could not be established from the evaluation.
- 5.10. The desire of educational establishments to deepen their understanding relating to attachment and trauma and strengthen the support they offer appears to be met by Wee BREATHERS. There are examples of practice changing beyond individual staff to the whole school setting.
- 5.11. Supervisors also reflect positively on Wee BREATHERS, witnessing it significantly impacting individuals working in stressful situations which would otherwise have no specialist support. The model of supervision developed for Wee BREATHERS is seen as a positive framework as is the support provided for supervisors by SAIA.
- 5.12. The main challenges with the project are practical in terms of schools and nurseries managing protected staff time and cover to enable participants to leave their busy roles for a supervision session. Ensuring appropriate space for private supervision sessions was also highlighted as an occasional difficulty. Some challenges relating to group supervision sessions were also highlighted by supervisors. However, there are clear examples of these challenges having been addressed by schools and nurseries who feel strongly committed to the principle of involving Wee BREATHERS and to 'making it work'.
- 5.13. Overall, Wee BREATHERS provides members of the education workforce with a valuable space and time to stop and reflect, to learn more about the issues affecting their pupils, and to change practice to be more supportive for them. In the process of doing this, the project also positively and significantly impacts on the working and personal lives of those taking part.

6. Wee BREATHERS Case Study 1 – Early Years

Gylemuir Early Years Centre, Edinburgh

“From that hour or so I almost felt like I had a clear mind, and I could go back into work with a different look on things.”

Background and context

Gylemuir Early Years Centre in west Edinburgh provides care for up to 60 children throughout the year. During 2024/25, some of its staff were offered monthly Wee BREATHERS sessions, and following their positive experiences, a second cohort of staff is now accessing the programme.

This case study is based on interviews with the Senior Early Years Officer and four Early Years Officers and Practitioners.

The involvement in Wee BREATHERS

The involvement in Wee BREATHERS followed staff training on attachment theory and trauma-informed practice, adapted for the early years setting. The management decision to incorporate Wee BREATHERS into the support for staff came from a desire for staff to have an improved understanding and focus on relationships, the recognition that there was potentially hidden poverty in the area leading to families being under stress, and the belief that the wellbeing of staff in early years settings should be prioritised.

“I felt what was missing when I first joined here was understanding around trauma-informed practice. There was a high emphasis on children learning their literacy and numeracy, but I felt what was missing was about relationships; how staff understand children’s emotions and how we can support them, and how we need to look at our interactions with them to provide support for them, rather than expecting them to change as such.”

With working hours at the nursery being 8am-6pm all year round, staff collegiate time was described as being *“really really limited”*. There is an opportunity for staff to get together once or twice a month (on a Flexi Friday), but the content of this single opportunity is pressured. *“It’s never enough...there’s so much to cram in and I just feel staff don’t get a chance to take a breath”*. What was missing was described as *“just being able to pause because they never get to do that.”*

One staff member noted that the gap between these meetings was sometimes *“a long time to wait to have a discussion if something’s not working.”*

Additional support is available through an ‘open door’ approach, but all staff acknowledged that while this was welcome, it did not provide a formal structure of meetings and relied on people being willing to use that support and free to provide it ‘in the moment’.

“Sometimes when they're coming to a senior, as much as I like to think I'm proactive and supportive, I'm also thinking of the whole nursery at the same time and all these other dynamics. So, I think for them just to have time for themselves would be really good.”

Staff participating in Wee BREATHERS also recognised the value of this new form of support. The only current formal structure is for PRDs (Personal Reflective Development). In this six-monthly review, senior staff meet staff to discuss current work and training needs: *“It's a progression thing but also a check-in as well.”*

Wee BREATHERS therefore offered an opportunity to do things differently, *“reflecting on our practice and doing that in a safe space.”* It was described as *“protected time”* and *“a purposeful way to lay it all out on the table and have someone listen”*, as well as *“being given information on the attachment side.”*

Although early years settings typically do not have a culture of supervision, the Senior Early Years Officer believes that it has an important place. *“I can always bring that back to what our staff team needs are - to staff wellbeing - and justify it within our improvement plan. I can state why our staff require this and what the benefits are, and bring it back to benefits for the children as well.”*

There was recognition from the outset that staff might use the space in different ways *“it might be to discuss specific cases, for other staff, it might be about their own professional learning. And we can have lots going on in our own personal lives, so they might have wanted to use that space that way.”*

As Gylemuir embarked on the Wee BREATHERS programme, the Senior Early Years Officer took the view that she trusted the process rather than needing to know the details of what happened in sessions. As time passed, checking in with staff informed her that everyone wanted to continue using it, and a second cohort are now participating, encouraged to get involved by those who had experienced it first.

Involving staff in Wee BREATHERS

For the first year of the programme, staff members' job roles were considered, and the chance to take part in Wee BREATHERS was offered to those with more responsibility for dealing with families, child planning meetings, or those working with particularly challenging behaviours.

Some staff commented that they also recognised from the outset that issues they were dealing with themselves at home or in terms of their own mental wellbeing meant that the offer of Wee BREATHERS created a space to discuss both work and personal issues. Other staff acknowledged that Wee BREATHERS offered an opportunity to consider and discuss children's behaviours, for example, children whose social interactions had been impacted by a lack of opportunity to engage with others during COVID.

Experience of Wee BREATHERS sessions

In practice, the sessions provided an opportunity to talk through various work and personal situations, and staff described surprising themselves with what they shared. They also remarked that they had been much more honest and raised more personal thoughts than they would have done in a large staff meeting. The space created by the supervisor was seen as having encouraged this openness. It was “a very safe space” and “very calm”, with the supervisor herself being “very approachable”. The combination of these “makes you feel comfortable, relaxed, and at ease to talk.”

“It totally surprised me that I was so open to someone I'd just met.”

“It took me out of my comfort zone and I know there's quite a lot of people out there like myself that don't like talking. It actually made me feel better.”

In terms of structure and content, the staff experienced a very open conversation with the opportunity to talk about specific children or situations. Some described this open agenda as unexpected but welcome.

“I thought [supervisor] would lead a little bit more, and it would be a space for us to chat about children and attachment theory and things like that. It was the polar opposite once we got started, which was really quite welcome. She'd do the general, 'How are you? How's your week been? Has it been a stressful week? Just to kind of gauge where our heads were at. I thoroughly enjoyed the change. We got the time to talk, and then she kept linking it back to the trauma and experiences that these children might have had....it was like one big tree, but we were always on a different branch of it - you always have certain children in your head - but there was no sort of set-in-stone agenda.”

“Sometimes I'd go in thinking I'll maybe mention this and then we'd go down a completely different route. It was very natural, very fluid, which I think was really good because it didn't make it feel pressurised or that you have to speak about specific things. It was very adaptive to what you needed that day.

“I'd probably say it's a space to talk about things you're finding challenging within the nursery whether it's to do with other members of staff or children that you might be just struggling to manage - because sometimes it does take a toll on you and your stress levels...I think it's like an all-rounder thing - I got different things out of it.”

The Senior Early Years Officer used the sessions to reflect on leadership and management and on her role in a new post and setting where there had been a lot of change within the team.

Staff began to value forthcoming meetings: *“It seemed to work out that whenever [supervisor] came, I'd had less staff and challenging children in the nursery which puts more pressure on your role - so, it was great just to offload everything. I know sometimes when I'd seen [Wee BREATHERS] on the rota I was like, 'Oh thank God that that's today'.”*

Impact of Wee BREATHERS sessions

Over time, Wee BREATHERS brought a range of impacts for staff:

- Gaining a fresh perspective on work and personal situations
- Considering factors which had impacted children's development and behaviour
- Being reassured about current working practice which helped to address self-doubt
- Gaining new ideas and strategies for working with particular children
- Supporting improvements to confidence and self-esteem
- Encouraging self-reflection within working practice, thereby reducing stress and supporting staff to 'be kinder' to themselves

Talking about some of the children they worked with who had experienced a lot of trauma was an important and helpful element of Wee BREATHERS sessions for some staff. They were able to consider the impact of the life experiences which children had had and gain a deeper understanding of developmental and behavioural issues. These discussions had been transformational for some staff who described immediately thinking differently about situations they were facing and the circumstances of the children they were supporting as a result of Wee BREATHERS.

"I analyse it differently [because of Wee BREATHERS]. It's like being able to understand the bigger picture rather than having tunnel vision...you know, someone questions you and you go, 'Oh!', like the penny does just drop and here's a strategy."

"I would say that I came out with just a little bit more awareness each time of how impactful attachment is and if children haven't had that secure or consistent attachment, even just in their morning, how it can affect them. And I would always come out feeling a little bit clearer in how I can support that child... It's almost as though somebody dropping a wee light bulb in there being like, 'Remember this is what they're dealing with'."

"It was really helpful to reframe and go back in with a different outlook on how that child's behaviour was happening. It was actually 'Because we've dealt with this, this is how we're acting out, but actually now we need a little bit of this to bring us back to that calm, quiet happiness in our attachment'."

"Speaking it through I was like, 'Oh of course [children] have maybe not had social interactions with their parents going to groups or this might be their first interaction with another adult'. So, I think it's broadened my mind to how much children can absorb and how their home life can then affect them."

At times the supervisors' comments and reading material they provided relating to attachment theory, supported staff in their practice with particular children.

"When a child is maybe hitting you, spitting at you, literally taking everything out of you, it's very hard to be understanding. But the trauma books and some things

[supervisor] said makes you a little bit more able to go back and remember what the child has experienced and that that's their coping mechanism. They don't mean to be this way - nobody actually goes out to be violent - especially a child that's making sense of the world. So it just makes you a bit more clear and understanding. Now it is hard sometimes, and still tests your patience, but it just helps."

"There were a couple of incidents after reading this book when I stuck it out [with a child] that they seemed to calm eventually, and then they seemed to come to me because I had a better approach - they just needed someone to listen to them and not just tell them, 'No you can't swear or no you can't throw stuff'. You know, be more understanding."

Vocalising difficult situations was also seen as being a healthy way of moving on from them and dealing with them differently if they recurred. In this way, Wee BREATHERS helped staff to offload about their work, move on from it and in doing so, improve resilience.

"You move on from things as well - when you say things out loud, you're like, 'that's it done now' I've said it out, whereas, if you don't, it can stick in your head, then you'll constantly be the same. If the situation happens again, you remember what happened previously, and it nearly makes the situation worse because you're like, 'Oh, that'll probably happen again'."

Ultimately, the impact of Wee BREATHERS on staff can be felt by the children they are working with. Staff identified that by having a better understanding of the root causes of children's behaviour and awareness of their own behaviour, the resulting practice changes can be experienced positively by children.

"I think it gives them a sense of belonging and confidence that you're there for them. And I think even just sometimes you can just do slight changes in your body language that might just make them feel more like comforted or more confident to be able to come to you in a time of need or just develop their learning. If you are feeling better within yourself, I think that really impacts them and helps adapt us to let the children see that nursery is wonderful."

"Maybe just reflecting on how you speak and what words you use. Maybe like zoning into their interest in that moment to help.... to make that connection and to make that relationship develop further."

Staff described immediate impacts from Wee BREATHERS sessions in terms of their own outlook and wellbeing, as well as a fresh perspective and new strategies.

"When I came out of each session, I felt lighter...like I'd been bottled up, although I didn't even know I'd bottled it all up."

"You can see how your day is affected if you're not as organised as normal or you feel more hectic. So, if you know a child's morning hasn't gone to plan that can spiral their whole day. So (Wee BREATHERS) was almost eye-opening every time you left a

session if that makes sense? It gave you a clearer mind to be able to support staff, support children, and feel like you'd been heard for a little while, which was really quite lovely."

"And sometimes I didn't even know I needed it, which was really nice. Because afterwards, I was like, 'Oh right, I'm going back in with a different outlook'."

[Without Wee BREATHERS] "I don't know if I'd be as confident. I'd probably self-doubt a bit more. And I think maybe taking work home a lot more."

The changes some staff experienced in Wee BREATHERS sessions were remarked upon by colleagues, providing visible evidence of positive impacts.

"I think many other colleagues saw changes within us as well. After the session, one person said to me that I looked like I had had a weight lifted off and I was like, 'Oh, that's really nice to hear. Cause I feel like that.'"

"I was told my attitude has changed within work. 'You don't jump at things. You're not as anxious.' And I was like, it's Wee BREATHERS. It literally is being able to take all these things you've had in your head and repackage it."

Being more attuned to links between behaviour and people's broader circumstances had also helped provide better support for colleagues.

"If you could see someone was having a bit of a day, it was almost the exact same mindset as with a child - you'd wonder how their morning's gone and check in, 'Do you need a minute? Are you okay? Is there anything you want to chat about?' So, it gave me more of a professional approach to supporting our staff. You appreciate the smaller things that can impact..."

The Wee BREATHERS content had also impacted positively on some people's lives outside of work.

"I think that it also helped impact my relationships at home and to just understand how I became the person I am today."

Overall, the combined opportunity that Wee BREATHERS offered, which was to talk openly about what was uppermost in people's minds, consider specific scenarios or particular children, and develop new strategies, were all found to be helpful.

"Now, with the help of [supervisor], whenever there's change I take a deep breath and think."

"The things she said always seemed to make you look at it in a different perspective...if the same situation happened and if I remember what she said then, I think 'Oh maybe it's not so bad'."

"It was really good to just divest, share, chat through, and then obviously [supervisor] was adding in her pieces about attachment theory. She also brought in some really great reads, which were really good to have to look at."

Challenges in implementing Wee BREATHERS

Few challenges were identified in implementing Wee BREATHERS at Gylemuir other than the practicalities of scheduling sessions and cover for staff, and how supervision fitted within a busy working day.

"The only issue for us is logistically freeing staff up out of the room because of the numbers. So, it can be if somebody's off sick or on holiday it could become problematic, but we've been able to do that. The only thing is I feel you come out of the playroom and you're hitting the ground running and that maybe might impact on how your session starts with the supervisor."

However, overall this had not proved too challenging and time for Wee BREATHERS had been successfully prioritised: *"It was respected and you were given that time and it was very much structured within our day."*

Recommendations and the future

Staff saw positive value in an increased number of staff having participated in Wee BREATHERS, sharing learning and understanding and generally improving the culture within the early years centre.

"If we are always self-reflecting on how we're supporting everybody, we're supporting our staff, we're supporting our children, but also supporting yourself... Hopefully now that we've got half of our team involved once the current sessions are done, we're all just a bit more aware and a bit more mindful of our children, our space, our parents and our staff."

Staff described how they wanted others to experience Wee BREATHERS too because *"it's so impactful"* or because *"in my opinion it helps your day-to-day life because you've just vented, or you've been able to repackage it and understand it rather than it being a stress."*

Involvement in Wee BREATHERS was supporting consideration of the development of other support options in the future, including group supervision or planned one-to-one support within the staff team. The experience of Wee BREATHERS had further endorsed the view of senior staff for the need to support within early years settings for staff wellbeing and their understanding of children's development.

"I feel it's really important in the early years. Because of the hours the children attend, our team have to do the same level of work as someone in term time who gets an hour and a half each day off the floor. Our team don't get that."

"It's a must, an absolute must for anyone who works with children in any type of educational setting - mainstream, additional support, social work, early years - we

have a very impactful job, but also a very stressful job. We need to give our staff the right support. Do you know these parents and these children rely on us to be on our 'A' game all the time? It's not really a job where you can just sit away in a corner behind the desk and if you're having a bad day, away you go and just get your head down on your laptop. You have to be on the ball all the time because children feed off of your emotions."

7. Wee BREATHERS Case Study 2 – Primary School

St Albert's Primary School, Glasgow

"If you're feeling supported, listened to, looked after and prioritised, then you're going to be able to do that for the young people in front of you and have the energy for that strength and stay when things are difficult."

Background and context

St Albert's Primary School has inclusion and inclusive practice embedded across the school, and its recent partnership with Wee BREATHERS has enhanced this practice.

After working with Scottish Attachment in Action on attachment theory training, the potential to offer staff attachment-focused supervision sessions through Wee BREATHERS became apparent. The Leadership Team at St. Albert's Primary School chose to pursue this, recognising that it would complement their inclusive strategy and support teachers in an often highly demanding job.

This case study shows Wee BREATHERS in the context of the school's approach, always looking to do more, do better and being open to help to make the school experience easier for children who need additional support.

Recognising Glasgow City Council's approach to and investment in nurture-based practice for younger children, the Leadership Team wanted to consider how a full-school approach could be implemented to support children as they moved from an early years setting into, and through primary school. Initially, the investment was in staff training on attachment and PACE¹ before involvement in Wee BREATHERS.

Ultimately, the Wee BREATHERS model offered expertise in attachment and care experience while also focusing on the mental wellbeing of the teaching practitioners accessing the support. The aim was to create a foundational layer of support for staff working with children with additional support needs which would benefit everyone.

Whilst Wee BREATHERS was a new approach, it was considered to strongly complement the school's ethos – *"it enhances our practice."*

"There would be absolutely no point in having a partnership with the Wee BREATHERS if it wasn't impacting anyone, if we were saying 'we are fine, we're inclusive, we don't need you'. What I'm saying is we are inclusive and we absolutely need the programme because you're never 'there'. You're always taking the next step, you can always get better...we're humble enough to understand that we need this support while we are proud enough to say that we're inclusive."

¹ Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity, Empathy – a trauma-informed approach to working with children and young people

Leadership Team members reflected on a changed context for schools in recent years. There is a need for all schools to revise their pedagogy to ensure it is inclusive to embrace the level of support required by children from a wide and sometimes challenging range of experience. Schools are in the frontline of response because of a reduced capacity in other services.

"The context of schools is changing and the expectations on us, as a service, are increasing within a context of financial cuts. Children must be safe, happy and secure before they can learn. Increasingly we are delivering the services that help support them emotionally, with their health and supporting families through hardship. Especially because other services have been cut...so it's really good to have a safe space to say, 'I'm really struggling to be able to do this'... the framework for schools has changed at the same time as cuts to supports available to children and parents, either in partnership with or outside school. We need support to become more expert in care experience so the expertise that Wee BREATHERS has is essential to support us."

The Leadership Team also recognise the challenging and emotional environments that their staff are in and the corresponding need for appropriate support for their wellbeing. Senior staff members' personal experience of challenging situations from earlier in their careers has also influenced their desire to ensure that their current team have the best personal and professional support.

"I feel quite strongly that people who work in an environment where the expectation is that you are emotionally attached to what you do, and that is definitely the expectation in our school, there should be a pseudo-therapeutic situation where you can talk it through...where thoughts and feelings can come out. I can't understand why schools don't have that on tap, and I can't understand how the expectation is that we just do it and go home having worked with children in crisis which are really emotionally charged situations."

"We come from all different backgrounds, so if I am going into a situation where I'm talking about a care experienced child, how's that going to affect me? For example, children of parents who have been alcoholic - teachers are expected to support the child while potentially being triggered by their own adverse childhood experiences. Or their adverse experiences now. We cannot assume teachers have a balanced, contented life outside school. which is why the Wee BREATHERS programme is excellent, because it's given cognisance of that and a space to talk about the difficulties involved."

"As a profession we need to recognise that health and wellbeing of staff is absolutely integral and take preventative and supportive action to make this a sustainable and attractive job. it's a massive part of our responsibility supporting practitioners and staff."

The Leadership Team members also expressed concern for support staff who feel a high level of responsibility for the educational progress of children who were often disregulated. They described the risk of the “*overwhelming responsibility*” that staff can feel being potentially debilitating, even though they have little or no control over a child’s early childhood connection with adults, their trust in adults or their reaction to sensory overload.

“One of the really overwhelming feelings can be the responsibility to keep the child on track... but we can't put pressure on ourselves all the time to be responsible for how a child's day is going to go. There's lots of underlying components that you have no control over, but you can control your environment to some extent. I think understanding that, and understanding that being there, and having the strength and stay with the relationship is key to all, really alleviates that pressure.”

Managing challenges experienced

At the same time, the Leadership Team have been cautious about the support on offer, and staff taking part also recognised that the sessions could be a trigger for their emotions as they can be talking about difficult situations and their own life experiences; *“It can be quite a vulnerable place to be. We have had to really think about the dignity and ethics around staff participating - so it might be the case that for a member of staff for personal reasons actually they might put pause on sessions for a while”.*

Because of this, the school did describe some areas of challenge in managing the programme but felt strongly that there had been excellent organisational support. *“The test of a relationship with an agency like Scottish Attachment in Action is how responsive and involved and engaged it has been with us as a team. It has been ready to make changes, be supportive and flexible – it has been quite outstanding. We definitely had bumps in the road which we figured out and doing it again we would know how to navigate that a wee bit better, in terms of making sure everyone's protected and safe. But we did feel very supported and difficult conversations had good outcomes, so we couldn't ask for more than that.”*

As a result, the school is even more mindful of issues around disclosure and protection relating to information that might be discussed during Wee BREATHERS sessions, how this is framed for staff, and what the protocols are around information-sharing.

One other area in which the school reflect that they would do differently if they were starting again are around spending more time with supervisors before they work with staff. This would be in order to use knowledge of teaching staff’s personalities and skills to make the best matches.

Involving staff in Wee BREATHERS

Staff offered the option for Wee BREATHERS were working with children who had care experience or where disregulated behaviour was more commonplace – they recognised it as an opportunity to learn, becoming more familiar with strategies to support particular children, considering their work through the ‘lens of attachment’.

"I think it's been a good space to be able to come and say what we've been finding tricky and in a safe space where you're not going to be judged for saying that and then strategies to be offered so that you can almost decompress and go back to the classroom and try things out. If a child had shown aggressive behaviours for example, Wee BREATHERS was a good space for the teacher to come and say, I'm noticing this, I want to understand them, at the same time I want to learn how to put the boundary in place."

For the senior staff taking part, the Wee BREATHERS sessions offered an opportunity to consider the range of family situations represented within the school community, and to lead and support the sharing of learning in the wider staff team which could *"reframe the view of different behaviours in school"*.

"I mean, we've put everything under the microscope."

"[It was an opportunity for] another perspective to understand and consider children's behaviours and understanding that ACEs can come in lots of different forms. For example, we are considering the impact of children having extended stays with relatives and looking at this through the lens of kinship care. We've sometimes overlooked the impact that might have on a child. Wee BREATHERS allowed us to look a bit deeper and reframe what care experienced might actually be and what kinship care actually is as well. It broadened our understanding of that as an issue and to how to support children in different ways."

"I do think having staff at different levels having supervision is very helpful - head teacher, deputy teacher, support for learning worker - it meant when these people were all collaborating and working together they were sharing their learning. They were also able to see each other's perspective."

The Wee BREATHERS sessions

Although staff were initially unsure what to expect from the sessions, they found them easy to engage with from the start, with the supervisor being *"really calm, so welcoming and made me feel so at ease to talk to and admit from the start that [certain aspects of work] were really challenging."* Other comments were around feeling *"safe"* in the sessions and the quality of the listening skills of the supervisor when coming to her with *"so many things in my head"*.

"It's the space to talk frankly, and when you tell your story about your feelings and your experiences, it becomes more refined."

The supervisor's knowledge and support offered understanding, empathy and perspective – highlighting where there had been *"massive progress"* for a particular child which might otherwise have been overlooked because the significance of the change might not have been realised.

Staff noted that even though discussions might have initially focused support for a particular child with care experience, they could talk about and reflect on many other situations.

"Actually she [the supervisor] opened up the space for me and I was able to talk about other children as well within the class who have additional support needs."

It was generally a helpful time of being listened to and acknowledged: *"I felt like I could properly offload it all to her and I knew it wasn't going anywhere. It was just a great feeling - it was confidential, and I could just be honest with her and tell her everything. She understood a lot about attachment and about stress"*.

The Leadership Team's commitment to their staff having access to the sessions meant that these were always prioritised, even when the practicalities of a school day intruded.

"It would be very easy for us as managers doing that role to say, 'oh actually we'll get to that next week or that's going to have to be missed' because it is a busy place. But when it's somebody external coming in I would say that was one of the benefits - it was prioritised." (Leadership Team)

"We would always cover anything needed which is the culture of this school. The feedback was so positive from the staff that it was 'of course that's what we would do'" (Leadership Team)

The impact of Wee BREATHERS sessions

On a practical level staff left the sessions feeling better mentally and practically equipped.

"I feel lighter like I don't have any stress in my head. My thoughts used to be negative. I don't have any worries is how I feel now. After that [a supervision session] when you are lighter, I think you're able to work."

"She gave me a lot of strategies for managing myself as well which was great."

"I learned how to be calm."

Staff reflected that their new attitudes and approaches had enabled them to approach particular children and situations differently, with significant impacts.

"The child at the start wouldn't come to the carpet or anything - totally refused to do anything, or follow any instructions. But by the end of the year they were a joy. So, we came a long way. The supervisor really broke it down and changed my mindset - it really made me not panic. She gave me really small targets - so, if [pupil] did a task a day, it was massive, and as time went on, they were doing the whole day. That made me not worry about the curriculum initially - it took the stress off me - and they were on track by the end of the year - they were doing everything. They followed the routine perfectly - they were secure then with me and their classmates."

"I really understood why there were things that really upset [pupil] and if I hadn't understood their story, I might not have been as patient and understanding. They got

the space that they needed. If I hadn't had [Wee BREATHERS], I might not have understood why they were behaving this way and I might not have been able to take action as quickly."

As well as impacting on specific children, staff believed that the Wee BREATHERS sessions benefited their teaching and support roles more generally: *"I'm more present... I listen more now, so that's the main thing - I listen to them [the children] and that's everything sometimes. I'm present there, so those are my key words - I'm present when I'm working in the class or the playground...it's about bonding - you need to make a relationship first."*

The impact on staff was clear for the Leadership Team as well – they saw staff having a fresh perspective on the pressures faced and new insight into the behaviours they were managing and the extent to which they could affect these.

"The emotional health and wellbeing support that staff were getting regularly I think generally had an impact on how they felt about work and any pressure they were feeling. If you've got a child that's disregulated regularly, it's really hard to not take it personally and not be overly critical because as a profession we are very critical and reflective - getting really down on yourself and feeling the pressure to fix it and get it right. When you remove that and have the understanding that you can't impact on what this child's early childhood looked like or what their developmental trauma is now, brings a certain level of calm."

"I think one of the easiest things to measure was staff's insight and intuition around behaviours. Staff were coming away with real understanding of why certain things were happening. So, it might have been a predictable behaviour, say a child going into a small space and cowering away, or certain times of the day or transitions. Discussing the behaviour with a supervisor who had insight and knowledge around care experience and trauma gave a real opportunity for learning around how to explain the behaviours or framing them in terms of brain development."

There were other benefits for the staff team which *"helped us think really practically and navigate our work with children with care experience"* and gain support relating to engaging with social work and the wider context for children.

"The supervisor also had a background in social work and was able to give really useful practical advice and information on funding and support that we otherwise wouldn't have had access to - lots of really practical nuggets."

The positive impacts of Wee BREATHERS also supported staff on an ongoing professional basis as well as outside of the school setting – helping them to place more emphasis on relationship-building and reducing confrontation.

"I am missing my sessions of course, but I feel like she [supervisor] helped me so much that this year I've hit the ground running a bit more in my class with the

strategies that we spoke about and with managing stress better. She's really helped me with that."

"Even with my own kids as well, I've learned a lot and they can see a big change in me as well - I learned so much from [supervisor], so it's not only work it's home life as well - I can see a big change in myself - I think it's amazing - it's like a self-care thing while looking after other people as well."

"I just do it [more naturally] now...I think being really understanding and trying to figure out the full picture of a child and noticing lots of things that are in their wee bubble that are affecting them."

In embracing the Wee BREATHERS programme, staff commented on the extent to which it had impacted the *"detail of understanding"* of some issues faced by children.

The input was described as having *"allowed us to make the kindest assumptions as opposed to making any judgments"* about particular situations. Overall, Wee BREATHERS was seen as having a place as part of the school's strategy for inclusion.

Sharing learning from Wee BREATHERS and recommendations

The Leadership Team recognises that the learning from individual staff having Wee BREATHERS sessions has spread across the school. This is seen as a crucial part of the programme; improving a whole-school approach to supporting children.

"Whilst sessions might focus on 'this teacher with that child' and figuring out strategies in an honest space from an emotional perspective or a behavioural perspective - that teacher will move on - that teacher will not have that child next year. It needs to leach into the wider school philosophy around care experience. The child who's care experienced belongs to the school. So for me, the interest is in the impact that it [Wee BREATHERS] can have for the whole school. And it definitely has had that impact."

One staff member discussed how there had been a helpful handover of the learning she had gained from Wee BREATHERS, as a new academic year was approaching, and children she had supported were moving class and teacher.

"The teacher that I passed this child on to [for the next academic year] - we had a very in-depth discussion about the child and about what's been said in our nine months and then about what had been spoken about [in Wee BREATHERS], so that she knew their full profile."

Participating staff have recommended Wee BREATHERS to their colleagues and the Leadership Team believes other schools should consider it, with the realisation of the commitment of time and attitude needed for its successful implementation.

"Exploring cultural context around care experience and the learning around what care experience actually means, and the ability to differentiate for children who are

care experienced should they require that... all of that learning has happened, definitely - we wouldn't have done that if we hadn't had the programme. Definitely."

"I think in schools that are particularly inclusive, it would help them to become more inclusive without a doubt. ... We are inclusive and it has enhanced our practice...the rationale of where resourcing goes and where the narrative goes around children with additional needs is a 'push and pull'. So, we need to be part of that dialogue and Wee BREATHERS helps us to do that."

"If you're looking at trauma-informed practice, a child with care experience or actually any child that may be disregulated. That'll be on the radar of any school in the country. I think it was time very well spent although it needs to be prefaced with the expectation around the commitment of time...it really needs to be prioritised - it can't be something that's cancelled last minute - the commitment comes from everybody including your management team."

8. Wee BREATHERS Case Study 3 – Secondary School

Boclair Academy, Glasgow

“If you understand yourself better, you can understand relationships better and you can understand other people better.”

Background and context

Boclair Academy in Bearsden has had a strong focus on inclusion, wellbeing and attachment for many years. More recently this has included ensuring that wellbeing is at the heart of the design of the new school building with learning support and wellbeing spaces positioned centrally, heightening their profile and accessibility.

This case study is based on 1:1 interviews with staff who have participated in Wee BREATHERS sessions including the deputy head, guidance staff and others involved in work relating to young people’s wellbeing and leadership. Staff included those long established in the profession as well as some relatively new to teaching. The case study also incorporates comments from a small group interview with S6 pupils.

Boclair Academy’s long-standing commitment to engaging with external support and training relating to mental health, attachment theory, stress response and the teenage brain, led them to contact with Scottish Attachment in Action and discussion about participation in Wee BREATHERS.

“I felt instantly we were ready for it. We’ve spent the last ten years looking at trauma, and being trauma-informed, and now call ourselves trauma-responsive. We also look at mental health, nurture principles and try to be a poverty-neutral school. These pillars have strengthened as we’ve taken a deep dive into each to help our young people. Taking care of our young people and understanding how people work has really improved our relationships, not only between staff and young people but with each other. That’s how we get involved in Wee BREATHERS. I felt myself and particularly my support staff, were in a good place to learn more.” (Leadership team member)

Wee BREATHERS was therefore seen as being complementary to the ethos developed at the school and offered an opportunity for staff to build on knowledge already gained from training.

“Adding in that layer of individual support definitely makes a difference over and above what we’re doing collectively. We’re looking at how we can support staff to manage the knowledge they have [from training] and work with that.”

Furthermore, the school is based in East Dunbartonshire, a local authority that supports the wellbeing of staff at work, and incorporating Wee BREATHERS was seen as a way of complementing that and supporting the school's efforts in this area.

Staff acknowledged the difficulty of their own support and wellbeing being prioritised in a busy high school environment which focuses on educating and supporting young people. Wee BREATHERS offered a very different proposition giving time to an often-neglected area for most schools – enabling staff to talk about how they were feeling. Staff appreciated this opportunity and strongly connected with the way in which it supported them in their role.

“It's helping you navigate through your work and have time for yourself and then that can really make you a better teacher. I think schools in general can struggle to look after staff's mental health - it's all about the kids' mental health, but sometimes you feel as member of staff, you're constantly trying to support them - that's amazing and we want to do that - but then we kind of forget about ourselves.”

Involving staff in Wee BREATHERS

For its first year of engaging with Wee BREATHERS, the school approached particular staff with the offer to be involved. This meant that mostly staff who were working with young people who were care-experienced or had other support needs were first to be offered the opportunity for the monthly supervision sessions. As a result, it was guidance staff and those involved in wellbeing, intervention, mental health and leadership who took part.

These staff recognised that there was no formal support linked to their own wellbeing and welcomed the change in emphasis. The existing support structure was described as “a formal meeting of, ‘this is how you're getting on, how you can get better’, but there's nothing on your own wellbeing.”

“My reaction was that it [Wee BREATHERS] filled a gap that I think a lot of teachers know themselves is needing to be filled - speaking to somebody external can be quite powerful because it allows you to articulate exactly what it is that you care about and what it is that causes you stress.”

“It [Wee BREATHERS] sounded like a really positive thing because unlike so many other professions, we don't get any form of supervision...It was something new we don't really get offered...We rely solely on our school friends, our families and so on to vent to, talk to and process things.”

“It really aligned with my way of working and definitely my approach to working with young people assisting them in their journey through education. I could see the benefits personally, but looking forward I could equally see real benefits for young people - if my wellbeing was at its best possible state, there would be a positive impact on young people and my relationships with them, and equally my approach, perspective and relationships with colleagues.”

“I could see the benefit of doing this as early as you can in your career.”

Guidance staff highlighted that the context they are working in is one of increased pressure from the fact that *“the range of difficult things we can deal with in a school day has grown exponentially,”* yet the support they can access for this was solely from informal contact with colleagues or from people at home.

“Teaching staff can come across things that are really harrowing and difficult - within an hour you could be dealing with a very serious child protection issue, a heartbreaking situation and then half an hour after you have to go and teach a class. The switch from that role to classroom teacher is really difficult. Other organisations will have supervision sessions, but in schools we don't really have the opportunity to offload or to talk about things or to reflect in such a deep and meaningful way - and not only reflect but learn from someone as well.”

Teachers also recognised the potential value of Wee BREATHERS given that they were working with specific pupils who were coming from challenging backgrounds or with significant attachment issues. The sessions offered *“a really good way for me to talk about what was going on, the impact of all the things that we read about from their background and what I was doing in terms of the attachment training.”*

The content of the sessions

Wee BREATHERS provided a simple intervention - a reflective space incorporating an opportunity to consider attachment theory in practice. The way sessions were conducted and the open nature of the content was key to staff's positive reaction.

“I felt very trusted and very safe in that space...the moment you can feel safe you're then going to open up and you're going to have a more authentic conversation about the things that really matter to you.”

“You can feel like you're doing the right things but then someone else asks a question or says, ‘Why don't you try this or maybe you should do this, or phrase it this way’. It's letting someone else into your thoughts - getting their perspective on it and then equally their anecdotes - their stories can help.”

“It's funny, on the week leading up to [supervisor] coming, I would feel more energised - I'd feel excited knowing that she was coming to support me. I would look forward to it for sure.”

“To begin with I was going into the sessions with a plan - a situation or a young person in mind or something I had dealt with that I felt I would really like to talk about. Actually, I then relaxed into it and just let the conversation happen with whatever happened at that moment because it just changes so much in the school - but I always had a core group of young people I would mention each time because I really felt I was seeing a difference from the work that I'd been doing in the sessions and from increasing my knowledge.”

The impact of Wee BREATHERS sessions

A range of positive impacts resulting from Wee BREATHERS sessions were described by staff and included:

- feeling able to be open about particular issues and feeling lighter as a result
- gaining an external perspective and reframing certain situations
- receiving reassurance and encouragement about particular approaches taken
- connecting situations to a theoretical background
- formulating new strategies and responses
- being able to discuss difficulties and approaches for working with colleagues
- gaining knowledge to support the development of resources for the delivery of a Mental Health and Wellbeing qualification.

"It's nice to hear you're actually doing the right thing. Us Scottish people can be quite negative about ourselves. I was saying things and she [supervisor] said, 'it sounds like you're doing the right thing. So, just believe in yourself.'"

"It reassured me that I was trying my best and reminded me that I couldn't impose things on people."

In addition to providing the space to talk, supervisors also bring staff experience back to the context of attachment theory.

"[Supervisor] would sometimes grab a pen and paper and give me a diagram or explain something in terms of theory and how it plays out - tools of understanding attachment in action – what's happening in a young person's brain – how a scenario fits with theory and how you can apply it face-to-face with a young person. She would describe what is actually happening for them 'Okay do you know if they had breakfast that morning? Do you know what home life is like?' Going through the process of understanding a young person's journey before they even got to you and then when they're in front of you and why that behaviour is being displayed in a certain way and then the things you can do to help them regulate."

"Suddenly you start seeing things differently when you learn about attachment."

"I do think genuinely this year I've got more strategies and more knowledge in terms of what I'm doing to support this pupil... particular ways to frame conversations with the young person and more regular conversations with staff about how they perceive things."

Staff provided specific examples of managing situations with classes or certain young people where they had taken a new and more successful approach as a result of learning and confidence gained from Wee BREATHERS sessions. These included examples of open conversations, giving young people more autonomy and opportunities to be empowered.

"It was perspective. I could just see things differently - by understanding attachment, you can understand why people's relationships might be the way they are or why, particularly with young people, why they don't want to go to class, or can't go to class or why they keep coming to me you know every single day ...so because I started to see that I felt like it just changed my relationship with them - instead of always being in a hurry to get the work done, to get the schoolwork done - you know it just changed."

"Wee BREATHERS definitely gives me the confidence to continue teaching in that [new] way and not fall back into the older habits that maybe I was taught when I was at university. It gives me confidence to have conversations with young people I wouldn't normally have."

The approaches discussed with the supervisor chimed with the school's ethos of restorative conversations, which takes an open, honest, and solution-focused approach when there are disagreements.

"Instead of me punishing her for not taking part, I found out the root reason why."

Staff commented that whilst they would talk about particular pupils and attachment issues or behavioural issues in a specific class, the Wee BREATHERS sessions were far from being exclusively about this. Much of the time involved talking about their role, stress management and issues relating to confidence. Staff talked about being able to see things differently and being supported to improve self-reflection.

"It wasn't just a case of [the supervisor saying], 'Well, that's actually not to do with attachment, so that's not my thing'. It was a much, much wider holistic thing, and I found that really beneficial."

"It's really helped me understand how pupils are coming in each day - things that may have impacted them - why they've acted a certain way. And then taking time after the lesson to think about it and check-in with myself - how have I dealt with it and be aware of how it's having an impact on me."

"I suppose also understanding your own attachment style has a huge impact. I've learned so much about myself and spent a long time understanding that the way that I might approach something or a relationship is a certain way because of what happened when I was much younger. Understanding the way you develop and the impact that has on you as an adult is important."

The deeper value of Wee BREATHERS contrasted with current informal means of support, such as conversations with partners or family members.

"The supervision space is really important. You can go home and speak to partners or friends but they're not teachers and not trained in areas you want to talk about. The supervision conversation is one where you can change your perspective and also

potentially improve some of the mental aspects of working in the job. It meets more of a need than just another conversation."

One commented on how Wee BREATHERS supported self-reflection about personal issues that positively impacted work.

"Had I not had that support and been helped to identify what I was feeling like and why I'm experiencing it, I don't know if I would have had the confidence to produce the work that I have."

Many staff described immediate impacts they experienced from the sessions *"I personally always found I left the room in terms of me feeling better, in terms of my practice feeling reassured and with ideas about how to make it a wee bit better. I always came out feeling positive and feeling that I was going in the right direction in terms of supporting not just one pupil, but umpteen other pupils affected by attachment or many other different issues.*

Staff all said the impact of taking part in Wee BREATHERS sessions exceeded expectations.

"I can honestly say hand on heart, it exceeded all of my expectations. The supervisor's experience meant that everything she said had real gravitas...everything we were talking about in the context of school and working with young people in terms of attachment theory and building our knowledge and practical skills made it meaningful rather than just a tick-box. That was probably the most important part to me - actually being able to apply it. So, leaving each meeting, applying it, trying it out for the month, then coming back to her - being able to go full circle and report back."

Staff reflected that they would be less confident and less well-equipped for their work had they not participated in Wee BREATHERS and that ultimately this would impact negatively on pupils. The 'bigger picture' they had gave them a foundation for their revised practice.

"It's all helping – without it I might not be feeling so comfortable or confident or even just having had the chance to talk about what's happening in my head."

"I'm not saying [without Wee BREATHERS] I wouldn't have been able to support [pupil] - but I would have been in a different way... I just think the more knowledge and insight I have, the better experience that they have. If I don't have that or don't stop to think about things, that's when it goes wrong..."

"Some days they [pupils] may be a bit shouty-sweary, some days they'll be very quiet and closed - every day is different, but we always welcome them back. It's that trust in the process I guess."

Managing challenges experienced

The biggest challenge in implementing Wee BREATHERS was protecting teacher time to ensure that sessions took place. This needed commitment from the Leadership Team so that

timetabling could accommodate the planned sessions. The fact that time was protected in this way was highly valued by the staff involved.

"The hardest part is being able to protect the teacher time so that they can have the space to do it. It's definitely very complicated to do that. It would be very easy to say, 'We'll need to cancel your session - you can't do it because you need to cover someone else's class or there's something else to do' but we've been quite clear about that." (Leadership team member)

"What was really important to us as teachers is our time was protected. So, when I'm not on a timetable, sometimes I can get taken for cover anywhere else in the school that I'm needed...But this time was protected. So, you knew that no matter what, you would get your meeting with your supervisor. That was really, really powerful to have senior management say that this is really important, and the protected time means that this will happen for you."

Another area of challenge is that staff who are growing in awareness of the significance of attachment and the need for changed approaches with certain pupils, can be tested in working with colleagues whose opinions and approaches differ. For example, Wee BREATHERS participants described colleagues retaining a focus on teaching a particular subject rather than ensuring a starting point of a safe environment and an approach which considers a pupil's wellbeing at the outset. Those involved in Wee BREATHERS can emerge with a different mindset which challenges traditional school culture.

"What's changed the most for me, is being able to think about learners differently and not just the traditional 'if you come to school you must go to your classroom'."

"How are we going to get them into school every day? What's the hook? Through the Wee BREATHERS sessions I realised that actually that we need to make them feel that they belong, make them feel valued because they are looking for attachment - maybe don't have that strong attachment at home because of their circumstances – perhaps it's just a little bit chaotic everyday."

Discussion within Wee BREATHERS session had supported the thinking behind developing a flexible bespoke timetable for some pupils, enabling them to get their attainment through an alternative route and location: *"They're in the achievement resource centre and we bring the teachers to them so they can still do their learning....but also they need to be ready to learn first of all. So, it's building the relationships, it's having the connections - they might go into the cafe and make a hot chocolate but while they're making it we're chatting to them, 'How's your morning been? Oh right okay you've had to do this, this and this, or that didn't go so well this morning'. So, you're having these conversations with them through a mindful activity and they're getting ready to learn."*

"The biggest obstacle I come up with now is not the young people it's the staff because schools are generally very traditional and there's a fear around doing

something different. But it's less about the timetable it's more about us keeping an overview of pupils' progress to make sure they're still achieving."

Retaining the school's strong focus on developmental issues for young people and their wellbeing, and keeping this subject matter fresh for staff also presents an ongoing challenge: *"We constantly talk about mental health, we constantly talk about nurture, we constantly talk about poverty, - you can't let anything drop - some people will say with the different types of training 'But we did that last year...' But then we've not solved it have we? So we keep doing it, keep refreshing our minds, keep it at the forefront, keep it in mind all of the time when we're working with young people because it's actually their world."*

Sharing learning from Wee BREATHERS and recommendations

Staff at Bocclair Academy had found the support experienced through Wee BREATHERS to be multi-faceted, impactful on many levels and to fill a gap in the structure of support previously offered. They were positive about continuing to access the programme and to make it more widely available.

"I think every teacher should have this support - not just for pastoral care teachers - I mean they obviously deal with a lot of scenarios where attachment theory would be really, really useful. ... But as soon as a young person is in front of you, they bring everything in their backpack that you can't see...I think for me, it's been the processing of emotions and articulating my experience to somebody who understands the brain and attachment theory and puts that into a language which I think really fits the school setting."

On a practical level, any extension of the teaching staff involved in Wee BREATHERS would present further timetabling challenges. Other delivery formats such as group sessions could be one consideration: *"It will definitely get harder with more staff being involved, but I suppose that's where as a school we need to try and be creative. We could maybe think does it always have to be one-to-one, could it be group sessions..."* (Leadership Team member)

On the positive side, an expansion of involvement in Wee BREATHERS was seen as potentially enabling the sharing of important learning throughout the school, leading to a deepening of new and effective approaches within the school's working culture.

"As it expands, and more staff are involved it's that ripple effect where more people are learning, so more people are being braver to try and put it into practice and keep on putting it into practice and then reflecting and reminding yourself that you can try again tomorrow."

The pupil perspective on support at school

Although the S6 pupils interviewed were not able to comment specifically on the impact of Wee BREATHERS, being unaware of the programme or its content, they did talk freely about

their experience of support throughout their school life. Their descriptions of the way in which support was offered resonated strongly with the content of the staff interviews.

Pupils' experience had been of support being accessible. *"The door of the guidance base is always propped open. So, it's easy to just pop your head in and ask a quick question or ask, 'Can I speak to you for a minute?'"* They also believe that an approachable manner extended to *"pretty much all teachers"* who they felt *"created safe environments"*. They felt individually cared for *"sometimes they even can tell when it's been a bit of a rough day – they'll ask you – very subtly – and talk to you."*

They reflected that it was a significant change moving up from primary school, where you have one teacher, but that over time they have felt able to build relationships with teachers. They also highlighted that many pupils and teachers have been through mental health training together, which they reflected improves awareness and creates a supportive school community and a positive outlook on the subject.

One pupil had experience accessing learning support which she felt was *"incredible"*. Whilst it had been *"scary"* to be in the position of accessing this new area of support at first, she described learning support staff getting to know pupils on a very personal level – *"even if I have the smallest issue, they're the first people I go to."*

The pupils also mentioned the wellbeing base. Although they didn't have first-hand experience of using it they recognised that it provided a haven for pupils who *"maybe don't have that safe space at home, to come in and spend time there, and do their class working there."* The school's café was seen another 'safe space option' with the additional offer of practical role for pupils to take, learn from and feel part of the school. Furthermore, pupils described practical support available in the setup space, where items such as deodorant, shampoo, PE kit, winter jackets and school uniform could be obtained. One of the group recalled being able to get a new pair of tights: *"A teacher said 'Oh just pop down to the setup, there's loads there - you can grab some'"*.

Pupils also described exchanges with teachers which echoed staff descriptions of the restorative relationship approach. They recalled examples of teachers not singling out pupils who were causing difficulties but taking an enquiring approach – trying to understand why a pupil was behaving in a particular way, and giving them an option for time out.

9. Appendix 1 Wee BREATHERS Logic Model

