

The Changing Context for Children and Young People in Wales



A White Paper by Navigate Education
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An unprecedented landscape

Children and young people in Wales are growing up within a markedly different social and economic landscape than that which existed even a decade ago. Across Wales, significant contextual shifts have taken place in relation to poverty, housing stability, employment opportunities, crime, addiction, domestic abuse and mental health. Each of these developments has placed new demands on our public systems and on the professionals who work within them.

Alongside these structural pressures, wider global changes have reshaped daily life for families and communities. The COVID-19 pandemic, rapid technological change, the growth of social media, and increasing global instability have altered how families live, communicate and experience the world. Many families now exist in a context that is information-rich but time-poor. Parents and carers often have access to more information than ever before, yet they are also navigating high levels of stress, competing demands and reduced time for connection. Awareness has increased, but isolation has also deepened.

These pressures interact in ways that affect emotional regulation, family routines and the sense of psychological safety experienced by children and adults alike. Chronic stress reduces emotional bandwidth, destabilises routines, and heightens sensitivity to perceived threat. For children and young people, this often translates into greater emotional volatility, reduced capacity for sustained attention, and increased difficulty navigating social relationships.

Across Wales, many educational settings are deeply aware that the needs of children and young people are changing. There is widespread alignment with the nurturing principles that modern society demands, and many schools have embraced approaches that emphasise wellbeing, relationships and inclusion.



However, despite these intentions, the data suggests that practice has not yet caught up with aspiration. Rising levels of suspensions, exclusions and placements within Education Otherwise Than At School (EOTAS) indicate that the system continues to struggle to meet the needs of a growing minority of learners.

Statistics relating to attainment, attendance, inclusion and equity remain stubbornly misaligned with the ambition that educators consistently demonstrate for themselves and for the young people they serve.

Many of the settings we work with across Wales have shown a strong commitment to relational and restorative practice. Schools have embraced national initiatives led by Healthy Schools, many hold Trauma Informed Schools status, and they work closely with specialist teachers, educational psychologists and school improvement partners. These commitments reflect a clear desire to create supportive environments for children and young people.

Yet despite this progress and the commitment shown, the practice we observe is not always emotionally safe for all learners. In many cases, responses remain reactive rather than preventative. Systems may work effectively for the majority of learners, while inadvertently alienating those who are most vulnerable. The challenge for Welsh education is not a lack of care or commitment, but the difficulty of translating strong values into consistently safe practice across increasingly complex contexts.

This report seeks to examine the pressures currently facing schools in Wales and to use that analysis to define what an emotionally safe response might look like moving forward. Our aim is to explore how systems can better support every learner, every adult and every community to thrive.

Structural pressures affecting children and young people

Economic hardship remains one of the most significant contextual factors shaping the experiences of children and young people in Wales. Welsh Government monitoring indicates that 31.2% of children in Wales are living in relative income poverty after accounting for housing costs. In practical terms, this means that almost one in three children are growing up in households experiencing sustained financial strain.

The impact of poverty on children extends far beyond material deprivation. Persistent financial stress within households can lead to increased uncertainty, reduced access to enrichment opportunities, challenges around nutrition and sleep routines, and heightened sensitivity to experiences of shame or exclusion. Within schools, this may present as fatigue, difficulties with concentration, emotional reactivity and increased peer conflict linked to status insecurity.

Housing instability compounds these pressures. As of March 2025, homelessness statistics showed that 10,800 individuals in Wales were living in temporary accommodation, including 2,584 dependent children under the age of sixteen. For children and young people, housing instability disrupts routine and belonging, increases anxiety and hypervigilance, and frequently leads to interruptions in school attendance and engagement. Trust in systems and adults can also be affected where stability is absent.

Opportunities available to young people as they transition towards adulthood also influence their engagement with education. For the year ending September 2025, government statistics showed that 17% of young people aged 16–24 in Wales were classified as NEET (not in education, employment or training), representing an increase of 6.2 percentage points within the year. At the same time, Wales' overall employment rate remained below the UK average.



When young people perceive limited opportunities beyond school, the motivational power of education can weaken. Schools increasingly report disengagement among older learners who struggle to see how education connects to meaningful future pathways. Where opportunity structures feel uncertain, young people may be more vulnerable to exploitation, criminal involvement or disengagement from formal systems.

Community safety also shapes the experiences that children bring into school environments. The Wellbeing of Wales 2025 report notes that while violence against the person decreased by 3% in 2024–25, rates remain significantly higher than they were a decade ago. During the same period, drug offences increased by 28% and sexual offences increased by 11%.

These trends contribute to heightened fear and vigilance within communities. Schools may observe increased normalisation of aggressive language or behaviour, as well as more complex safeguarding concerns. Police operations such as Operation Sceptre in Cardiff, which focuses on knife crime prevention, illustrate ongoing concerns about youth exploitation and serious violence.

Domestic abuse remains a significant and often hidden influence on children's development. The Office for National Statistics estimates that 3.8 million people aged 16 and over experienced domestic abuse in the year ending March 2025 across England and Wales (ONS, 2025). Welsh national advisers have also highlighted ongoing fragmentation in the commissioning of domestic abuse services and a limited focus on primary prevention.

Children exposed to domestic abuse frequently develop heightened threat responses. Within school settings, this may manifest as aggression, withdrawal, emotional shutdown, or difficulty trusting adults in positions of authority. Shame sensitivity and hypervigilance can make relational interactions particularly challenging.



Substance misuse continues to affect many Welsh communities. In 2024, the ONS recorded 417 drug poisoning deaths in Wales, including 288 drug misuse deaths, the highest number on record. Approximately 69% of these deaths involved opioids, which continue to be the greatest cause of drug deaths in Wales, according to Public Health Wales data. Alcohol-related harm also remains significant, with 562 alcohol-specific deaths recorded in 2023 and 683 alcohol-related deaths overall (Public Health Wales, 2024).

For children growing up in households affected by addiction, caregiving environments may be inconsistent and unpredictable. Some young people take on hidden caring responsibilities, while others experience heightened shame, secrecy and emotional instability. Public Health Wales reports that 4,960 children were receiving care and support due to parental substance misuse, and that there were 869 school exclusions related to alcohol or drugs during the 2022–23 academic year.

The emotional wellbeing of children and young people has also changed significantly. Public Health Wales estimates that diagnosable mental health conditions among young people have increased from approximately one in ten in 2004 to around one in five by 2023.

While improvements have been made in waiting times for local primary mental health services with 96.2% of young people assessed within 28 days as of February 2026, wider paediatric waiting times and access to specialist support remain a concern.

Within schools, rising mental health pressures are frequently reflected in anxiety-based school avoidance, increased emotional dysregulation, and more complex additional learning needs. Escalation can occur quickly where children perceive shame, rejection or exclusion.



Emerging neurobiological pressures

Alongside structural pressures, there are also emerging developmental changes linked to the environments in which children are growing up in. The modern childhood experience increasingly interacts with core neurobiological systems responsible for motivation, mood regulation, connection and stress. Changes in digital environments, physical activity levels, social interaction patterns and exposure to stress are shaping how these systems develop.

Many educators report that children and young people appear to have a lower tolerance for frustration, increased task avoidance, greater impulsivity, and difficulty sustaining effort. These behaviours may be linked to changes in dopamine regulation, which plays a central role in motivation and reward. Fast-paced digital stimulation and instant gratification can lead to repeated dopamine spikes, reducing sensitivity to ordinary rewards and lowering baseline motivation between periods of stimulation.

Serotonin systems, which influence mood stability and emotional regulation, may also be affected by changes in lifestyle patterns. Reduced time outdoors, lower levels of physical movement, disrupted sleep due to screen use and increased exposure to online social comparison can contribute to irritability, social anxiety and heightened shame sensitivity.

Human connection itself has also shifted. Oxytocin, the neurochemical associated with bonding and relational safety, is strengthened through warm face-to-face interactions, shared experiences, and physical co-regulation. Increasing time spent on devices, busier family schedules and more individualised childhood experiences may reduce opportunities for these regulating interactions. In schools this can present as attachment insecurity, reduced empathy, and increased dependency on peer approval.



Physical play and risk-taking also play an important developmental role. Activities that involve movement, challenge and manageable discomfort stimulate the release of endorphins, which buffer stress and build resilience. Reductions in rough-and-tumble play, outdoor exploration and sustained physical exertion may leave some children less equipped to tolerate emotional or physical discomfort.

At the same time, digital environments frequently simulate threat or excitement, producing adrenaline spikes that can prime the nervous system for high levels of arousal. Social media conflict, online drama and constant stimulation can make real-world environments feel comparatively under-stimulating, while also increasing emotional volatility.

Finally, chronic stress remains a significant factor. Financial pressure, academic demands, continuous digital comparison and exposure to adult-level news cycles can maintain elevated cortisol levels within families and communities. Prolonged low-level stress contributes to anxiety, sleep disturbance, irritability and difficulties with attention and learning.



What this means for education

Taken together, these pressures suggest that childhood development is occurring within a fundamentally different context than it did for previous generations. The conditions shaping development today are not the same as those experienced by the adults currently leading educational systems.

Children and young people cannot simply be expected to respond to schooling in the ways that previous generations did. Many are navigating environments that leave less cognitive and emotional capacity available for learning. When stress and uncertainty increase, the brain prioritises safety and survival over reflection and self-regulation. In practical terms, this means that emotional safety, predictability and belonging become even more critical within educational environments.

At the same time, attention has become a powerful currency. For many young people, being noticed can feel more important than being liked. In environments where positive attention feels scarce or uncertain, some learners discover that unwanted behaviour reliably generates recognition. Over time this can reinforce patterns where attention-seeking behaviours escalate.

Young people's relationship with boundaries has also evolved. Social movements, global events and rapid social change have emphasised the importance of personal autonomy and self-advocacy. While this can sometimes be interpreted by adults as entitlement or overconfidence, it is often rooted in a heightened awareness of personal rights and vulnerability. In uncertain environments, individuals may learn to defend their boundaries earlier and more strongly as a protective strategy.

Finally, the concept of relationships within schools requires careful consideration. Many educational approaches emphasise the importance of relationships between adults and learners. While relationships remain vital, it is important to recognise that relational engagement is not equally accessible for all children.



Young people who carry a strong sense of shame or fear of rejection may find traditional relationship-based approaches difficult to navigate. Their protective strategies may include avoidance, control, testing or withdrawal. In these situations, adults can experience frustration and emotional exhaustion when relational efforts do not produce the expected responses.

Relationships therefore cannot be the sole organising principle of support. Systems must also be designed to provide emotional safety, predictability and regulation in ways that do not depend entirely on reciprocal relational engagement.



A bit about Navigate Education

Navigate Education is proud to be working in partnership with a number of local authorities across Wales. We have developed strong relationships with Public Health Wales and Aberystwyth University, and currently work with Swansea, Blaenau Gwent, Carmarthenshire, Pembrokeshire, Neath Port Talbot, Gwynedd, and our home local authority of Ceredigion.

Our work focuses on helping schools and systems translate relational and restorative principles into consistent practice. Through coaching, modelling and professional learning, we support leaders and staff to build emotionally safe environments where behaviour, learning and wellbeing can develop together.

Our co-founder, Gareth Lewis, is a Welsh speaker who lives in Aberystwyth. Until recently he was Headteacher of the Ceredigion Pupil Referral Unit and he continues to support work on equity and attendance within Ceredigion local authority. Our other director, Charlotte Clarke, has worked extensively with schools and colleges across Wales, and beyond, to support the implementation of relational practice and emotionally safe systems.

Spending time in schools every day is a privilege that we do not take lightly. We are grateful for the trust placed in us by school leaders, practitioners and local authorities. This report has been prepared to share some of the insights we have been fortunate to gather through this work over the past eighteen months, in the hope that they may contribute to the next phase of development for Welsh education. Our ambition is simple: that every school in Wales becomes an emotionally safe place where all learners have the opportunity to thrive.



What we are seeing

Much of the day-to-day reality within Welsh schools sits in stark contrast to the increasingly negative national narrative about behaviour in education. Across the majority of settings we visit, we see young people who are engaged in learning, supported by positive relationships, and surrounded by adults who care deeply about their success. The vast majority of learners experience schools as safe, structured environments, where they are known, valued and encouraged to succeed.

The commitment shown by educators across Wales should not be underestimated. In comparison with some other parts of the UK, the adults working in Welsh schools demonstrate a strong and unwavering dedication to the young people they serve. The practitioners we have worked alongside have consistently shown skill, compassion, determination, and a willingness to reflect on their practice. Many go to considerable lengths to support both learners and families, often far beyond what might reasonably be expected.

Schools also remain deeply embedded within their communities. In many cases they maintain strong relationships with the families that they serve and demonstrate a good understanding of the lives their learners lead beyond the school gates. This community connection is one of the enduring strengths of Welsh education and provides an important foundation for inclusive practice.

However, despite this strong commitment, the pressures facing schools are clearly increasing. Many staff describe feeling overwhelmed by the changing needs of children and young people. The growing narrative of a behaviour “crisis” in schools can also be unhelpful, particularly when it frames children and families as disrespectful, defiant or manipulative, rather than recognising the wider pressures that are shaping their behaviour.



At a system level, schools are navigating multiple overlapping reforms and expectations. The implementation of the Curriculum for Wales and the Additional Learning Needs Act has introduced important and necessary change, but these shifts can place additional pressures on systems that are already stretched. In some cases, issues are addressed in isolation rather than holistically, leading to responses that feel reactive rather than preventative.

Local authorities continue to invest in training and professional learning for schools. However, where relationships between local authorities and schools have become strained, these offers can sometimes feel disconnected from the realities of school life. A menu of training opportunities may exist, but engagement and impact are not always monitored in ways that ensure meaningful change.

Within schools themselves, these pressures can occasionally be reflected in fragmented internal systems. It is not uncommon to see a culture of divide and blame emerge between different roles or teams, particularly between Additional Learning Needs Coordinators, behaviour leads and pastoral staff. When responsibility for behaviour becomes compartmentalised, opportunities for coordinated whole-school responses can be lost.

We also see occasional misinterpretations of concepts such as independence and resilience. High expectations for learners are important, but independence cannot be demanded before emotionally safe conditions have been established. Without deliberate attention to building self-esteem and psychological safety, expectations around resilience may inadvertently place pressure on learners who are not yet equipped to meet them.



Across almost every school we visit there are also a small number of learners whose needs are significantly more complex than was typically seen a decade ago. Schools are working harder than ever to maintain engagement across the system, and the vulnerable minority of learners has grown both in size and complexity. Many of these young people are navigating fear, confusion, anxiety, frustration and anger. Although they represent a minority in most settings, the impact they have on school culture and on the wellbeing of staff can be considerable.

Despite the broad commitment to relational and restorative approaches, differing views about behaviour expectations and effective strategies remain common within staff teams. These differences are often most pronounced when adults are supporting the small group of learners who find expected standards of behaviour hardest to access.

In this context it is not unusual to encounter a degree of learned helplessness among some educators. Faced with rapidly changing needs and limited clarity about effective solutions, some adults begin to feel disempowered. External factors such as parenting, social change or wider societal pressures are sometimes blamed, and staff may conclude that there is little more that they can do.

When this sense of disempowerment becomes embedded, it can lead to defensive narratives that unintentionally justify withdrawing support from the learners who need it most.



School leaders frequently report feeling ill-equipped to navigate these tensions. Holding difficult conversations about behaviour, challenging entrenched beliefs, and building collective clarity about expectations can be extremely demanding. While many staff share a sense of the destination that they want to reach, there is often less clarity about how to implement the changes required to get there.

Without clear models of practice and structured support for implementation, staff can default to reactive responses in moments of pressure. In these situations adults may find themselves raising their voices, shaming learners or isolating young people in an attempt to regain control or secure short-term compliance, even when these approaches conflict with their underlying values.



Successes and strengths in Wales

Across Wales there are a number of significant strengths within the current educational landscape that provide a strong foundation for the continued development of relational and emotionally safe practice in schools. The Curriculum for Wales, when implemented with confidence, offers one of the most powerful frameworks available for supporting this work. Its emphasis on purpose, wellbeing and authentic learning creates the conditions for schools to move beyond rigid delivery models, and instead shape environments that respond to the real experiences of children and young people. When the flexibility within the curriculum is used well, practitioners are able to design learning experiences that recognise the individuality of each learner, create meaningful engagement, and support young people to experience success within education in ways that feel relevant and achievable.

Alongside this, structural changes within the system have strengthened the potential for more coherent and joined-up responses to behaviour and additional learning needs. The strengthened strategic status of Additional Learning Needs Coordinators, now positioned on the leadership scale, represents an important shift in how inclusion is understood within Welsh schools. This change signals that meeting the needs of vulnerable learners is not the responsibility of a single role or department, but a whole-school endeavour that requires strategic leadership and collective ownership. When this is embedded well, it allows schools to move away from fragmented or reactive responses and towards a culture where behaviour, wellbeing and learning are understood as interconnected aspects of the same system.



Perhaps most importantly, there is a strong cultural readiness within the profession itself. In our work with schools across Wales we do not see resistance to relational approaches; instead, we see educators who are deeply motivated to respond to the changing needs of the children and communities they serve. Many schools have already invested considerable energy in developing nurturing and restorative cultures, working closely with specialist teachers, educational psychologists and improvement partners to strengthen practice. This reflects a profession that cares deeply about getting this right and that is willing to reflect honestly on where further development is needed.

At a national level there are also encouraging signs of alignment. Public Health Wales has played an important role in supporting preventative, wellbeing-focused approaches, and there has been a clear willingness within the Welsh Government to engage openly with the realities that schools are facing. The decision to convene a national behaviour summit and explore a more coordinated national response demonstrates recognition that behaviour challenges are not isolated issues within individual schools, but reflections of wider social change that require collective solutions. Policies such as universal free school meals further reinforce this commitment to equity and dignity within the system. Ensuring that every learner has access to a nutritious daily meal not only addresses practical barriers to learning, but also signals a wider commitment to creating conditions in which all children feel valued and able to participate fully in school life.

Taken together, these developments show that Wales already possesses many of the essential foundations required to build an education system that is both relational and emotionally safe. The challenge moving forward is not a lack of commitment or vision, but ensuring that these strengths are translated into consistent practice that reaches every learner, particularly those who currently find school a hard place to succeed.



Creating the conditions for system change

One of the clearest lessons emerging from both Welsh practice and wider international examples is the importance of a clear and consistent message coming from the top of the system. Large-scale cultural change in schools rarely happens through isolated initiatives or short-term programmes. Instead, it requires visible leadership, consistent expectations and a shared language that signals to the entire system what matters and why. Glasgow's long-term implementation of nurture principles provides an important example of this kind of clarity. By establishing a consistent framework that was understood across schools and services, Glasgow created the conditions for nurturing approaches to become embedded within everyday practice rather than remaining a series of individual projects. Similarly, Ceredigion's development of the CERI framework (Community, Equity, Recover, Include) demonstrates the power of a clear organising narrative that helps schools, families and professionals align their work around a shared set of values.

For this kind of cultural shift to take hold, it must reach beyond schools themselves. A genuinely relational and emotionally safe system cannot sit solely within classrooms; it must involve everyone who contributes to the lives of children and young people. This includes teachers, support staff, school improvement services, Additional Learning Needs teams, families, residential settings, community partners and public health. Where these groups operate in isolation, schools can become the place where competing expectations collide. Where they work in partnership, however, there is far greater opportunity to build consistent experiences for children across the environments in which they live and learn. The Behaviour Forum developed within Ceredigion provides a helpful example of this collaborative approach. By bringing professionals together to share expertise, examine challenges and coordinate responses, the forum helps ensure that the skills, support and accountability required to address behaviour exist within the local authority rather than resting solely with individual schools.



Alongside collaboration, effective system responses require a strong commitment to understanding behaviour through evidence and data. Data should not simply record incidents; it should help systems understand what is happening, where pressures are emerging and why particular patterns of behaviour are occurring. When schools and local authorities develop clarity around key “pinch points”, they are better able to identify underlying causes, track improvements and respond proportionately. Used well, data allows systems to move away from reactive responses and towards thoughtful, preventative practice.

However, even the strongest strategic vision will only succeed if adults within the system feel confident and capable of implementing it in their day-to-day practice. For this reason, professional learning must focus on pedagogy rather than ideology. Educators need clear explanations, explicit examples and opportunities to rehearse and embed new skills over time. Effective development is rarely achieved through one-off training events. Instead, it requires learning that is broken into manageable steps, delivered in ways that are accessible to all staff and reinforced through ongoing practice. In our work with schools we consistently find that when expectations are clear, practical and connected to everyday classroom experiences, adults are highly motivated to develop their practice.

A blended approach to professional learning is therefore essential. Schools already hold a significant amount of knowledge about behaviour, wellbeing and inclusion. The challenge is not always generating new ideas, but ensuring that existing knowledge becomes implementable and achievable for every adult in the building, not only those in leadership roles. Short, predictable learning opportunities – sometimes as little as five minutes per week – can provide a powerful mechanism for building shared understanding across a staff team. When learning is consistent, accessible and clearly connected to real practice, it becomes far easier for staff to integrate new approaches into their daily work.



Time and clarity are often cited as barriers to change within schools. Yet many of these barriers can be addressed through the way learning is delivered. On-the-job coaching, modelling and collaborative problem solving allow staff to learn within the context of their own classrooms rather than requiring additional time away from practice. This approach enables teams to develop confidence together while maintaining focus on the realities of the school environment.

Leadership support is also critical in sustaining improvement. School leaders and system leaders play a key role in ensuring that expectations remain clear, that progress is monitored thoughtfully and that staff feel supported to develop their practice. This includes modelling desired approaches, using data to track progress, and maintaining clarity about what improvement should look like over time. Importantly, leaders must also recognise that strategies evolve as cultures develop. Approaches that are effective in the early stages of cultural change may look different from those required to sustain a well-embedded culture. The process of improvement is therefore distinct from the process of maintaining strong practice, and leadership needs to reflect this evolving journey.

Successful long-term approaches also recognise the importance of consistency. Behaviour strategies should not feel like separate systems for different situations. Instead, they should represent a blended approach that can be applied across all contexts while remaining flexible enough to adapt to the needs of individual learners. Schools require a strong understanding of how universal provision interacts with targeted support and additional interventions, particularly for learners who have experienced trauma or who have additional learning needs. When practice is consistent, children experience fairness and predictability, even when adjustments are made to support individual needs.

Within this model, emotionally safe practice remains central. Schools must be equipped to respond to difficult, unwanted or complex behaviour while maintaining dignity, regard and psychological safety for every learner. This requires adults to understand not only how to respond in moments of challenge, but also how to build environments that prevent escalation in the first place.



Finally, any sustainable system change must recognise that adults across the wider community play a vital role in shaping children's experiences. Families, community members, visiting professionals and residential carers all contribute to the environments that children navigate. Bringing these adults with us, through communication, shared understanding and partnership, is essential if relational cultures are to extend beyond the school gates.

At the same time, some learners will need explicit support to understand how to participate within emotionally safe communities. For children who have experienced instability, unpredictability or injustice, fairness within school environments may initially feel unfamiliar or confusing. Helping learners understand how communities work, why expectations apply differently to different individuals, and how adjustments support equity rather than inequality, becomes an important part of the learning process. In this way, behaviour support becomes not only a response to difficulty, but also an opportunity to teach young people how to belong within communities that are fair, respectful and safe.



Implications for Welsh Government: Building an emotionally safe education system

If Wales is to respond effectively to the changing needs of children and young people, the next phase of reform must move beyond broad agreement with relational principles and towards a more coherent, implementable national approach. The challenge is no longer whether schools value inclusion, wellbeing and belonging. In the vast majority of cases, they do. The challenge is how to ensure that these values are translated into clear, consistent and emotionally safe practice in every school, for every learner, every day. This requires a system response that is both ambitious and practical, and that recognises behaviour not as a narrow discipline issue but as an expression of learning, development, stress, safety and belonging.

There is a significant opportunity for the Welsh Government to provide clarity, alignment and confidence at a national level. A clear message from the top of the system matters. It shapes culture, signals priorities, and gives local authorities, school leaders and practitioners permission to move in the same direction. Where a coherent national narrative exists, implementation becomes easier because schools are not left trying to interpret complex challenges in isolation. Wales would benefit from a clearly articulated national framework for emotionally safe and relational practice; one that brings together behaviour, inclusion, wellbeing, trauma-awareness and additional learning needs within a single, coherent vision. This would help to move the system away from fragmented initiatives and towards a shared understanding of what good practice looks like, how it develops over time and how it should be supported.



Alongside this, the Welsh Government has an opportunity to strengthen the implementation infrastructure around behaviour and inclusion. Schools do not need more ideology; they need clarity, examples, rehearsal and support. A national approach should therefore be accompanied by professional learning that is practical, accessible and rooted in pedagogy. Adults need support to understand not only why emotionally safe practice matters, but also how to enact it in classrooms, corridors, playgrounds, and meetings with families. This learning must be designed for all adults, not only leaders or specialists, and must be deliverable in ways that recognise the time pressures that schools are under. Short, predictable, high-quality professional learning, reinforced through modelling, coaching and collaborative practice, is likely to have far greater impact than one-off training events or disconnected offers.

A stronger national approach should also include clearer expectations around the use of data. If Wales is serious about reducing exclusion, improving attendance, and strengthening inclusion, then schools and local authorities need support to understand behaviour with greater precision. This means moving beyond headline figures alone and towards the identification of patterns, pinch points and underlying causes. Data should help the system ask better questions; which learners are struggling most, at what points in the day or school journey difficulties arise, what adult responses are escalating or reducing distress, and where improvements are beginning to take hold. Used well, data can support both accountability and compassion. It can help local authorities and schools quantify challenges, evaluate progress and make better decisions without reducing children to numbers.

There is also a clear role for the Welsh Government in strengthening collaboration around behaviour and emotionally safe practice at local authority level. The most promising work we have seen is not isolated within individual schools, but supported through shared language, collective problem-solving and local structures that bring education, inclusion, public health and wider partners together. A national direction that encourages this kind of cross-disciplinary collaboration would help ensure that responsibility for behaviour does not rest solely with schools. Children's lives do not happen in silos, and the systems that support them cannot afford to operate as though they do.



Any meaningful policy response must also recognise that consistency is central to emotional safety. Schools need approaches that are coherent enough to be understood and applied by all adults, while flexible enough to respond appropriately to individual needs. For this reason, national guidance should support schools to develop behaviour systems that work across universal provision, targeted support and additional intervention. Learners who have experienced trauma, instability or unmet additional learning needs do not require a separate philosophy; they require skilled adults who can adapt consistent practice without compromising dignity, equity or regard. The long-term aim must be to create systems in which all children encounter fairness, predictability and belonging, even when support is differentiated.

Finally, the Welsh Government has an opportunity to shift the national conversation around behaviour itself. Too often, public discourse frames behaviour challenges as evidence of declining standards, poor parenting or weak discipline. This framing is not only unhelpful but risks pulling the system away from the nuanced and emotionally intelligent response that current conditions demand. Wales has the opportunity to lead with a different narrative: one that remains ambitious about expectations while also being honest about context, development and the realities facing children, families and schools. An emotionally safe system is not a permissive one. It is a system that understands behaviour accurately, responds skillfully and creates the conditions in which better behaviour becomes more possible.



In practical terms, we believe that this points towards several national priorities. Wales would benefit from a clear national framework for relational and emotionally safe practice, supported by implementation guidance that helps schools to translate principles into everyday action. It would benefit from a professional learning model that focuses on practical behaviour pedagogy for all adults, not just specialists. It would benefit from clearer data frameworks that help schools and local authorities identify behavioural pinch points, evaluate progress and respond preventatively. It would benefit from stronger local authority structures that build collective responsibility, shared expertise and accountability across education and wider services. Above all, it would benefit from a national commitment to ensuring that emotionally safe practice is not treated as an optional addition to school improvement, but as a central condition for inclusion, attendance, equity and achievement.

Wales already has many of the foundations needed to lead this work well. There is commitment in the profession, policy alignment in key areas, and a growing recognition that current challenges require a more coherent response. The next step is to create the clarity, consistency and implementation support that will allow this commitment to translate into lasting change. If we do this well, Wales has a genuine opportunity not simply to respond to current pressures, but to build an education system in which all children and young people feel safe enough, valued enough and supported enough to thrive.

