



## **Attachment and Trauma Sensitive Schools Award (ATSSA)**

*A framework of support and understanding for schools and other educational establishments within which children and young people who have experienced adversity, can heal, thrive, play, and learn.*

Jennifer Nock Training and Consultancy

Helen Tantouri,  
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20<sup>th</sup> April 2022

Dear Helen, Caroline and Hannah,

Thank you for registering for the Attachment and Trauma Sensitive Schools Award (ATSSA) at Bronze Level, and for providing comprehensive evidence in support of your application. Thanks also for inviting me to conduct the verification for the Award today. I should like to extend my thanks to you and other staff for making the virtual visit so purposeful and enjoyable.

I should like to warmly congratulate you and the rest of the staff on achieving the Award, which is an external sign of recognition of your commitment to the steps you have taken at Valewood Primary School to develop a culture of compassion and nurture. This, as you well know, plays a pivotal role in getting your pupils into a state of 'learning readiness'. The Award is valid for two years and will run from April 2022 to April 2024.

All the criteria have been evidenced adequately, and in most cases, more than adequately. The evidence you have submitted comes from a broad variety of sources: case studies; extracts and examples of key documents and policies provided by you; from your website; and from interviews with a range of staff, including you and other members of the team. You provided me with much evidence to further support my own data gathered today and previously, and this has added depth and context to the completed evidence folders.

There are a number of significant points that are worthy of special mention:

- The personalised, individual approach to all pupils is evidenced through numerous practices, including induction and information gathering, ongoing formal and informal

assessment and observation, and reflective dialogue and practice. Knowledge of each pupil's needs across the developmental spectrum underpins relationships, interactions and planning, and you along with other members of staff provided particularly powerful evidence of this. This is a particular strength of the school, and I was really impressed by the many mechanisms you have in place to ensure that planning and support are fluid and organic, rather than static and inflexible.

- The commitment of the leadership team to developing a culture of attachment and trauma sensitivity has been demonstrated through a high investment in CPD for all staff and a willingness to make changes. Leaders' passion has led to a shared vision of how to deliver the best experiences and outcomes for all the pupils at Valewood Primary School. You gave multiple examples of how strategy and practice have developed to become increasingly attachment and trauma sensitive, for example through developing strengths and needs based language; through allocating sufficient time and support for truly reflective practice. Staff are trained to a high standard and show an excellent understanding of attachment and trauma related issues. Relationships, safeguarding, mental health and wellbeing are prioritised, with an understanding of the necessity of putting the child and his or her overall well-being and secure development at the center of education, in order for them to achieve academically. There is a shared belief that relationship-based practice provides the foundation for academic progress. This is a particular strength of the school.
- A broad range of strategies to support executive function is being used consistently throughout the school. Staff who were interviewed demonstrated comprehensive knowledge and understanding of the challenges faced by children who have difficulties with organisational and regulation skills, and clearly make links between the developmental vulnerabilities of developmental delay, self-regulation and executive function. Classroom staff work seamlessly together to provide a supportive environment for learning. This is a particular strength of the school.
- Quality staff care and emotional support to protect mental health and well-being is multi-levelled and provided at a very high level, through SLT and varied therapeutic and support. The staff group itself provides a strong and effective circle of support around individual members. Leaders are aware of the multiple risk factors to staff mental health

and well-being and are proactive in providing support to cope with the psychological and emotional demands of the job. There is an extensive range of processes and strategies to protect staff from 'overwhelm' or burnout, including referral to external services. Staff members interviewed shared that support for staff is non-judgemental and that leaders are approachable, flexible and empathic. They were fully aware of many avenues of support to which staff can be referred, formal and informal, in-house and external. They shared particular personal challenges that they have faced, and spoke about the support and compassion offered by leaders and staff within Valewood Primary School. I found the testimonies moving. Care for staff is a particular strength of the school.

- Staff are fully aware of the importance of viewing a child through a developmental lens rather than a chronological one. Throughout all the interviews, staff demonstrated sensitivity to children's histories and experiences. They were able to explain how adverse experiences have impacted development and describe how they are working with the children to support regulation and develop pro-social behaviour. Staff spoke a lot about building trust through emotional and physical availability, recognising that this is a long process for some children, because many of the adults they have encountered in the past simply have not been trustworthy. Multiple examples were given of how developmental delay can be caused by trauma, and how staff work in order to help children to notice and manage their uncomfortable thoughts and emotions. All staff interviewed demonstrated a deep curiosity about how to make the best possible provision for each individual child through meeting them at the developmental stage they are in at that time, and how they frequently have spiky developmental profiles. Viewing children through a developmental lens is a particular strength of the school.
- There is a range of strategies in place for supporting parents and carers in developing understanding of child development and attachment relationships. These strategies are largely informal in nature, and particularly engage parents who may find it difficult to trust service providers, including educators. Staff demonstrated a depth of understanding and empathy about why some families may be described as 'hard to reach', recognising that their relationship to 'help' may not have always have been positive in the past. Staff gave many examples of really hearing parents' voices, including use of the Timeline and home visits. This

really builds relationships and helps parents to connect with school staff in a non-threatening context. Connection with and care for families is a particular strength of the school.

I think that your comment, Helen, summed up much of what is at the heart of practice at Valewood Primary School: “We are relentless in our pursuit of making sure our children get what they need.’ This was evidenced in many of the case examples shared, where you have explored multiple options in order to ensure that each child has the provision they need in order to be successful, both academically and socially, in school in particular, and indeed, in life in general.

I hope that you will celebrate your achievement with pupils, staff, governors, parents/carers and other stakeholders to celebrate the school’s commitment to its children, successfully removing barriers to learning and participation in the life of the school. I have felt particularly privileged to share your journey – our first Sefton ATSSA school! I am delighted that you intend to register for the Silver Award – Attachment and Trauma Friendly. I already look forward to continuing to support you through the next steps!

Yours sincerely,

Dr Jennifer A Nock, CPsychol, AFBPsS, PhD, BSc (Hons)

Bridie White LLB MA