



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.

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Caroline Belchem,
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Dear Caroline,

Thank you for registering for the Attachment and Trauma Sensitive Schools Award (ATSSA) at Silver Level, and for providing comprehensive evidence in support of your application.

Thanks also for inviting me to conduct the verification visit for the Award. I should like to extend my thanks particularly to you, and also to other staff, for making the visit so purposeful and enjoyable. It was an absolute delight to see your wonderful school and its staff and children.

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 ISP School to develop a culture of compassion and nurture. This, as you well know, plays a pivotal role in children's personal development, well-being and happiness, enabling them to fulfil their potential. The Award is valid for two years and will run from October 2024 to October 2026.

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 interviews with you and other staff members. 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 several significant points that are worthy of special mention:

- Methods for eliciting, hearing and responding to children’s voices are broad and extensive. You described numerous strategies to ensure that no pupil is denied participation and all pupils, including the most vulnerable are enabled to communicate. Eliciting pupil voice at ISP School is not limited to formal methods; every opportunity is taken to have meaningful encounters so ‘listening’ also takes place through observation, and staff monitor this closely, responding discreetly and sensitively. Staff are aware of the body as a ‘loudspeaker’ for what is going on inside and are quick to respond and offer coregulation. Staff have many methods and skills for helping children to communicate uncomfortable, even painful emotions, and provide them with a broad range of strategies and resources to elicit their voices. All approaches are individualised and truly personal to meet each child’s needs. At ISP School, there is an authentic and passionate desire to truly ‘hear’ and ‘see’ children and staff are genuinely curious about what matters to the pupils. This is a particular strength of the school.
- There is a strong focus on the physical and sensory environment, with the safety and comfort of all being a priority. Formal sensory audits are carried out and informal sensory audits are carried out daily and acted upon to tailor the day to individual needs. The environment is well ventilated, well lit, with comfortable spaces. Communal areas, classrooms and other spaces are well-planned and clutter-free, with a focus on communication-friendly spaces. Each classroom is very different and truly reflects the needs of the children. The resources and organisation of space facilitate curiosity and exploration. You demonstrate deep awareness of the need for children to be outside and your outdoor spaces are well-resourced and inviting. Forest School is accessed by pupils with a wide variety of needs and with the focus on play and exploration, they are able to gain confidence in all developmental domains, and to experience deep, meaningful connections with the natural world. There is a focus on creating calm, attractive and adaptive surroundings which put children's mental health and wellbeing at the centre of both the indoor and outdoor learning environments – truly therapeutic spaces. This is a particular strength of the school
- Staff are skilled in monitoring excitement and anxiety, and they have a comprehensive understanding of survival behaviours. They have excellent de-escalation skills and were able to describe a wide range of grounding strategies. Adults use the Three Rs model of

reaching the thinking brain by first regulating through the body, then through emotionally availability, reconnecting with the child, and only then helping the child reflect, learn, remember, articulate and self-regulate their emotions by teaching them the language of emotions, strategies for regulating them, using story to explore emotions and remind them of their safe places and safe people. A frequently mentioned theme was the importance of having a deep knowledge of each child as an individual; staff meet children 'where they are' rather than using a one size fits all model. All support is individualised and personal, tailored to the needs of the child. There is a recognition that inappropriate adult expectations, both academic and social, can be a trigger for dysregulation. Exit plans, where required, are developmentally appropriate and enable children to ask for help and support when becoming uncomfortable or overwhelmed. Managing anxiety and dysregulation is a particular strength of the school.

- Closely linked to the above comments, Maslow's Hierarchy is an implicit focus for staff reflection, ensuring that physiological and safety requirements are met first and foremost, then love and a sense of belonging become the priority. Relationships are placed front and centre, providing social buffering, especially for those children who struggle to form social bonds because of their experiences and their lack of trust in adults. Staff strive to develop self-esteem, self-efficacy and self-confidence in the children. Thus, the four 'deprivation' needs are met, leaving the children feeling physiologically and emotionally safe, enhancing their capacity for learning and achievement in the classroom. This put me in mind of Karen Treisman's metaphor of the school as 'brick parent' where children experience multi-layered safety and trust. The holistic focus on the needs of the whole child is again, a particular strength of the school.
- Children, including the most vulnerable, are supported in communicating emotions, feelings and worries. Community Meetings four times a day, and regular check-ins regularly throughout the day attest to this. Staff interviewed described how listening, validating and accepting children's feelings is more important than trying to 'fix things' for them. Staff reassure children that uncomfortable emotions are absolutely acceptable. This reassurance normalises uncomfortable emotions and helps children to develop self-regulation skills, in the knowledge that while the feeling might be

uncomfortable, it is not dangerous and can be managed. The use of informal strategies such as naming emotions, reflecting back; being curious; staff modelling; social stories, walking and talking, complement formal interventions and enable children to be their authentic self and also help build self-regulation skills. Adults model the use of the language of emotion helping children to learn and use a rich emotional vocabulary. Emotional literacy is embedded in the curriculum, particularly in English and great care is chosen to select texts which tap into children's own experiences. This enables them to see their own experiences and emotions in a projective way, which is often less frightening than thinking directly about what has happened to them and how they feel. It does however, facilitate reflection and connection to their own lives. their own experiences.

What really shone through in today's verification is that an attachment- and trauma-sensitive approach is becoming increasingly interwoven into strategy, policy and practice. It is not a 'tick box' of things to do, but a rich tapestry which is organic and dynamic, responding to children's needs in each developmental area. Staff hold shared values, which are expressed through a common narrative. Themes around trust, relationships, empathy, commitment and compassion emerged in each conversation I held today. These shared values are the 'golden thread' running through the whole culture and life of the school.

I hope that you will celebrate your achievement with pupils, staff, parents 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 feel particularly privileged to share your journey and I am delighted that you intend to register for the Gold Award – Attachment and Trauma Committed. I already look forward to continuing to support you through the next steps!

Yours sincerely,

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