

# The Thrive approach Part 1

**Alison Thomas** presents an overview of an approach that supports children's wellbeing and hence their learning

**The Thrive Approach is a dynamic, developmental, trauma-sensitive approach to meeting the emotional and social needs of children and young people.**

It supports them in becoming more self-assured, capable and adaptable. It can also address any troubled, or troubling, behaviours providing a firm foundation for academic attainment. Schools using the approach have reported many benefits, including reduced exclusions, fewer disruptions in class and improved academic results.

## *An integrated approach*

There are five building blocks that comprise the Thrive Approach.

- Neuroscience.
- The theories behind Thrive including attachment theory, child development theory and some transactional analysis.
- Thrive-Online to support assessment, action-planning and monitoring.
- Relational skills.
- Targeted Thrive activities, which are arts and play based.

'The neuroscience part underpins everything we do,' says chief operations officer Paula Holbrook. 'All Thrive practice is based on what robust studies and established neuroscience reveal about the structure and function of the brain and how it develops during childhood and adolescence. What we look at is what can go wrong and how to heal it.'

## *Whole-school and individual support*

Licensed Thrive practitioners receive in-depth training that enables them to assess the needs of all children and young people, and to support them with tailored action plans.

However, Thrive can be practised by any adult who has an open and positive relationship with children. As a result, many schools use it not only to support individuals who are in difficulty, but as a whole-school approach to promote the wellbeing of children throughout the school.

'All staff can do it with a little bit of training,' explains Ms Holbrook, 'and then



Creative approaches provide a platform for exploring a sense of self, the pupils' tactile responses to the world around them and sensory feedback which explores their physical being

practitioners who have taken the more in-depth training can work with children with a higher degree of need.'

'Essential skills include PACE – being Playful, Accepting, Curious and Empathic (D. Hughes) and knowing how to relate to a child differently depending on their emotional needs at the time.

'If children have been triggered into flight or fight reactions, which is something we often see, they can't learn and can't listen or socially engage. Nor can they learn if they are in freeze, which is a behaviour you may not detect so readily, as they may be adapting, but they are not working in a socially engaged way.'

## *How science underpins everything*

The neural pathways of the brain and wider nervous system undergo much of

their development during the first three years of life in response to relational experiences with primary caregivers. A key development during this period is the establishment of the body's stress-response system. This lays the foundation for social and emotional responses throughout life, affecting a person's capacity to relate, love, learn and manage stress in healthy ways.

However, research shows that the brain retains its plasticity far longer than was previously supposed. This means that its capacity to create new neural pathways can be unlocked at any age if we know how to set about it.

## **Child development**

Thrive uses a developmental framework to clarify the connections between emotional and social development,

behaviour and learning.

In this model, social and emotional development can be depicted as six building blocks or strands of experience, each with accompanying tasks and opportunities.

The stages cover emotional and social development from birth to age 18.

- Being (0-6 months).
- Doing (6-18 months).
- Thinking (18 months to 3 years).
- Power and Identity (3-7 years).
- Skills and Structure (7-11 years).
- Interdependence (11-18 years).

As the child grows, the developmental strands come 'online' sequentially. However, once they are in place, they remain available and open to change throughout life. This means that developmental tasks can be addressed at any point in a person's life. Where a child may have missed out on these experiences at a very early stage we are still able to revisit and address any developmental needs due to the plasticity of the brain and the ability to grow new neural pathways.

#### **Attachment theory**

A strong emotional and physical

attachment to at least one primary caregiver is critical to personal development (J. Bowlby). The emotional regulation system is made up of three levels that are shaped in a child's early experience in their closest relationships. These are addressed within the Thrive model through the first three strands of experience: Being, Doing and Thinking. By giving the child loving attention and repeated experiences, we can shape these three levels – or fill in any gaps.

*The brain's capacity to create new neural pathways can be unlocked at any age*

#### **Arts and creativity**

Thrive uses arts and play-based activities in a targeted way to support healthy neural development, promote a positive sense of self, develop creativity, support emotional and social development and build optimal learning capacity. There are many artistic

media that you can work with, each of which has particular benefits and strengths.

#### **Practicalities**

The teacher or TA logs on to Thrive-Online to complete a whole-class assessment. This allows them to identify the children whose social and emotional age matches their chronological age, those who are functioning at a level slightly below their age, and those who would benefit from additional support.

The whole-class assessment enables staff to develop an action plan tailored to the stage of development of their pupils, drawing on hundreds of curriculum strategies and teaching suggestions. Using the online tracking tools, they can chart results and monitor progress for the whole class.

Children identified with higher level needs will work with a Thrive practitioner, who will conduct a more in-depth profile and create a targeted action plan that will be regularly updated as the child progresses.

#### **Training**

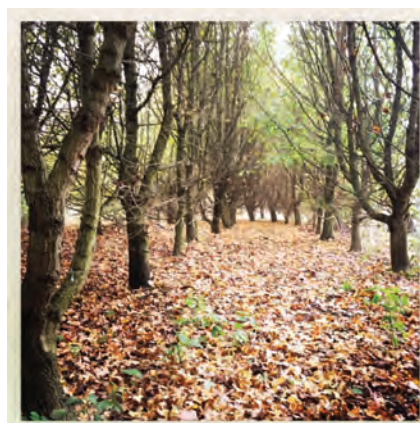
Thrive offers a variety of training courses at different levels and for different contexts. See [www.thriveapproach.com/courses](http://www.thriveapproach.com/courses)

## Assistant headteacher Lucy Knibb describes how the Thrive Approach is an integral part of provision in her special school

**Three Ways School in Bath provides a nurturing environment for pupils aged 2-19 with a range of needs, including moderate learning difficulties, severe learning difficulties and profound and multiple learning difficulties, as well as autism spectrum conditions.**

The Thrive approach was set up by an assistant headteacher who left us last summer. I am now lead practitioner, one of six qualified practitioners and we have two more in training. Most schools have one, maybe two, but we have such a high number of young people who need Thrive-based interventions that we felt it was important to train as many people as possible.

Within that, we do whole-class assessments. Out of our 208 children, 51 young people are on direct Thrive intervention, mostly one to one with a few small focus groups. We use Thrive assessments to write an action plan that



The space, atmosphere and resonance of the dense trees in the woodlands enable the pupils to explore themselves freely without inhibition

works appropriately with that young person. Either a Thrive practitioner will deliver it, or a Thrive practitioner will oversee sessions with a key adult, and liaise closely with that person.

#### **Understanding Thrive**

We have two Thrive-based nurture rooms and a yurt, a beautiful space with a log burner that is quite often the focus for work we are doing. We also go out into nearby woodlands to run 'Being and Doing in nature' sessions.

We put on an extensive CPD programme for teachers and TAs looking at what Thrive is, how we can use the Thrive relationship skills, what it means to say that someone has moved up from 39% Being to 50% Doing, and where we are trying to pitch our interventions for that young person. So if I tell a member of staff that a pupil is working in the low level of Being, they know it is about being safe, being special and having their needs met.

Thrive has also given us a huge licence for the type of education we put in place. We are a generic special school, but a lot of our curriculum is based on sensory approaches, therapeutic approaches and cross-curricular activities. Thrive



The log burner in our yurt is the focus for quite a lot of our work. I have been working one to one with a little girl who has a really low level of Being. We were trying to get her to be in her body and with her breath. She couldn't do it – she couldn't breathe in and breathe out. If we lit the fire, she could blow to see the embers glow or get the flames going, and we have slowly translated that into her everyday life. When she is stressed, we encourage her to visualise the fire and breathing onto it. It has worked brilliantly.

also dovetails superbly with our PSHE curriculum. It has allowed our staff to understand: 'This is why we approach our children in the way that we do. This is why we quite often prioritise social and emotional wellbeing and physical regulation before we teach English, science or whatever.'

### **Behaviour management**

My background is in behaviour management, autism and creativity and I provide training in these areas. Whereas in the past I presented more traditional behaviour management strategies, today I introduce staff to lots of the Thrive principles. A few weeks ago, I had 25 mainstream colleagues here in school who had never talked about behaviour management in that child-led way, really focusing on attachment theory and the joyful fact that the brain is plastic, meaning that damage caused by early trauma doesn't have to be permanent and we can put things in place to help the young person repair.

We also looked at the importance of relationships. It doesn't matter what you are trying to teach, it is about meaningful relationships where you value the child, show a genuine interest in who they are and put their wellbeing at the forefront of anything you are trying to do.

Another theme we explored was attunement and the call and response

that takes place between adults and babies. A lot of our pupils have missed out on that. Many of them are looked after, fostered or adopted, or they have experienced some sort of high-end trauma in their formative years.

### **Child-led adventures through play**

Much of the work that we do in school is through play. Last year we had a whole-school wellbeing thematic day where we looked at light. The PE teacher made the PE hall into a UV light environment with lots of fluorescent lights. We had painting with fluorescent paint, cooking outside on the fire pit, exploring light through music



Sensory play is seasonal and thematic, boosting engagement with the natural environment

in the hydropool, torchlight stories and dens, UV maths, glow games and more.

At the same time, it was a sort of training day by proxy, because the role of staff was to be co-adventurer and to look at the Doing side of Thrive, using play to promote curiosity, engagement, self-initiated exploration and a deepened sense of self. In the process, I wanted them to get down to the children's levels, and to look at what happens afterwards to their relationship with the child when they have allowed themselves to be child led and play in that way. That was a really good tool for getting a whole-school ethos moving and a whole-school understanding.

### **Reviewing progress over time**

Thrive has an online tracking system which allows you to review a child's assessments over time to see where their assessment points have been and where the focus has been. This reveals a huge development in our young people's emotional engagement, ability to regulate physically and emotionally and build stronger stress-management systems, and that is having a knock-on effect on their academic work.

Children who weren't able to be in a class base at all with their peers or with a group of adults are now able to transfer their skills into different social settings or into high stress school environments like the dining hall. We are lucky as we have scope for really personalised programmes, and that is what makes such a massive difference.

### **Thrive and nurture**

We have a nurture-based class at the end stages of primary run by a Thrive-trained teacher and a lot of what they do is underpinned by Thrive. The current group comprises seven boys who wouldn't ordinarily be able to be in class together. Some of them have made astonishing progress. Next year they may be able to have less small group work and spend more time in the main body of the school.

These are young people with extremely challenging behaviour who have been excluded from several schools. Some of them have had Thrive interventions in the past, so we have years of history to let us see how they have progressed.

### **Parents**

We are seeing quite a big impact with parents and for many, Thrive is providing insights as to why their child is presenting in the way that they are. It's also helping them to appreciate that parenting doesn't have to be all singing and dancing. You



A whole-school play day on the theme of light used play, underpinned by Thrive theory and practice, to promote curiosity, engagement, self-initiated exploration and a deepened sense of self

can be good enough with your children and that is OK.

Working with parents is the next wave. Our family support worker is a Thrive trainer and she is going to run some sessions with them on the vital relational functions and exactly what it means to be at all the different developmental strands, so that the children get a more rounded experience.

### **A multi-pronged approach**

Since I took over as lead practitioner at the end of the summer term last

year we have changed systems. Thrive practitioners (a mixture of teachers and TAs as well as the family support worker) now have timetabled release time to have really high quality interventions, and liaise with parents and class teams.

Meanwhile, the director of Brighter Futures, a social enterprise under the umbrella of our school, is a Thrive trainer and he has been facilitating things like whole-school Thrive inductions. In addition, the team of Thrive practitioners has run two terms' worth of weekly twilight sessions for staff. We started at

Being, and looked at the theory behind it. A week later we looked at the practical side. Then we worked up through the developmental strands for Skills and Structure. And within that we did lots around behaviour as a communicator of emotion, attachment and control issues. Alongside that we regularly deliver training which focuses on mental health, engagement, intensive interaction and an overview of attachment theory.

So we have a multi-pronged approach and it is working. Where possible PEP meetings, team around the child meetings and annual reviews consider the child's Thrive plan. Likewise, our looked after children (LAC) lead makes sure that she brings that to the table for every LAC meeting (all LAC children have a Thrive plan or are on a Thrive intervention).

It is really inspiring how everyone has taken it on. Thrive has been part of our practice for about four years, but it has come into its own in the last two years. It takes quite a long time to change mindsets and get the groundwork done of people understanding why we are doing it, and the implications of the theories behind it, and then starting to embed it.

And for people to see the value. When they start to see the difference in a child, that is when they all start to key into it even more. We have lots of data to track progress, but data is not the most important thing. What is important is the presentation of the child, and for some of them it is vastly different. It is a holistic thing, it is not Thrive in isolation. It is our whole approach of nurture and wellbeing and the skill and dedication of our incredible staff team.

### **A personal perspective**

For me personally, it has been very illuminating. I trained as an art teacher, so my creative background has been very helpful. I have worked in a high security school with young people who had high-end behavioural needs and I have done a postgraduate qualification in autism. Eventually I want to move into art therapy work.

Thrive has shed light on all of that and given it real clarity. Here is where my behaviour background comes in. Here is where my creative background comes in. And here is where my passion for skilling other people up comes in and pulls it all together.

As a model it works beautifully in our type of school.

*Lucy Knibb is assistant headteacher at Three Ways School, Bath*

# The Thrive Approach Part 2

The Thrive Approach is embedded in many primary schools, but now an increasing number of secondary schools are taking it on board. **Vicky Ransom** shares her experience

**When I was appointed as student support adviser at Priory School, Lewes, it was a completely new role to the school.**

The senior leadership team had become increasingly concerned about the gap in provision for young people who are struggling in school. We have an education behaviour and attendance support service provided by the county that students can be referred to, but they almost have to be at crisis point for this to happen. Then someone will come in to work with them once a week for six weeks.

In response, they created an internal post so that students could receive immediate support from someone who was part of the school and who would be able to go into the home to support the parents as well.

That was two years ago. On my appointment, I suggested training as a Thrive practitioner, although at the time I didn't know too much about it. It has made a massive difference to how I practise what I do with young people and their families. Quite a few of the local primary schools have Thrive practitioners, which is an added advantage as it provides continuity.

## Regular contact

Students are referred to me by the head of house, whether it's for behaviour, emotional issues, attendance, or a combination of all three. Sometimes pastoral staff are not entirely sure what is going on, but feel that a particular individual needs a little extra support.

Initially, I arranged hour-long appointments as that was how it had been done before. But the nature of my job means I can get called away for emergency meetings or safeguarding concerns. If I cancel an appointment, not only am I breaking the student's trust, but another week goes by before they get to see me. So I changed the system. I still have weekly appointments for students who just need to check in for a little reassurance, but most of the young people I work with come for 15 minutes at the same time every day.

Sometimes we just sit and talk, sometimes we play a game or go through



Puppets, a sand tray filled with shells and assorted fiddle items in the calm space at the front of Ms Ransom's office

some more specific activities from their action plan. Sometimes they don't want to talk and they use some of the things in my office to try and calm down and self-regulate.

The students have found this way of working more helpful and their parents agree. Most of the young people stay with me for quite some time, because Thrive is not a quick fix. It is about building trust,



In response to the challenge: 'How quickly can you pass/touch the ball round the group?' the students started standing up with the basic throw and catch and ended up on the ground to take it in turns to touch the ball. Great for problem-solving and team work

building rapport, and having a safe space to self-regulate. The work is quite intense. It's hard, but amazingly beneficial.

## Creativity and positive relationships

To allow time for longer, more sustained activities and encourage the development of positive relationships, I arrange regular drop-down days where I bring students together for a two-hour session of interactive, creative work.

What we do varies from session to session. They might make something together, passing it round for each person to add a bit on, so they are all taking ownership, or they might engage in individual projects. Sometimes I have different activities available and they can choose.

## Media group

Together with one of the SENCOs, I also run a weekly media-based programme for a group Year 9 students, who are assessed using Thrive-Online both as a group and individually, and have specific targets within their individual action plans.

We did quite a lot of work on the neuroscience with them last term – how the brain actually works and how it regulates. That is probably the biggest difference with older students. You can explain a little bit more about how and why things happen. They watched a short clip which provided a simple explanation of the triune system, then we did cauliflower printing, where they coloured in the three areas of the brain and labelled them. They were brilliant. They really seemed to grasp the concept.

Trips out have included a visit to Brighton beach and Brighton museum, and a day out in London, where highlights ranged from the ceremonial of the changing of the guards to simple pleasures, like feeding the ducks in St James's Park. Back at school, activities are equally diverse, from spray painting outside to dressing up in weird outfits and painting each other's faces.

That last one is quite a challenge for some of them. Having the intimacy to have glue and paint on your face, to have someone really close to you and touching you can be difficult if you are not used to it at home. And just letting your guard down to silly in front of others.

In some cases, there may be additional sensory issues. One of the boys didn't want anything on his face, so he painted his hands instead, which was absolutely fine. Likewise, when we did the cauliflower printing, one of our young people had various food phobias. By that time, we were four terms in, so we were able to do some of the sensory work that takes a lot of trust between the children and the adults supporting them.

### Chill-out room

My office has two parts. The room furthest away from the door is the actual office, but the entrance area, which is separated by another door, is a calm space with lots of different things for students to look at or fiddle with – a box of shells, a box of buttons, leaves, ribbons, different visuals on the wall that they can look at.

The young people who work with me know that my door is always open. I am here first thing, so they can come before school, at break or at lunchtime. If I haven't got anyone with me I will chat if that's what they want, but if I have an appointment they can still come and use the space. On the rare occasions when that is not possible, they can use the house office instead.

### Parental engagement

How much parents engage varies. Some of them are very keen to be proactive, others are reluctant to get involved and you have to try to pull them in slowly and gently.

Sometimes parents just don't want to know, in which case we have to keep working with the young person and their teachers in school to try and maintain regularity and consistency. Or the young person may not want me to contact their parents. They quite like that little bit of privacy, a little something that is just for them.

I have just done the family Thrive course and started running a programme open to all parents of students in years 7 and 8, which will also be made available to our local feeder primary school parents.

It goes through the basic neuroscience



Feeding the ducks in St James's Park

and offers tips and ideas on work they can do to support the young person at home. Siblings, grandparents and anyone else who has input into the young person's upbringing is welcome to attend. It is free and runs for two hours over six weeks. The young person doesn't have to be working with me for the parents to come to the course.

### Knowing the students

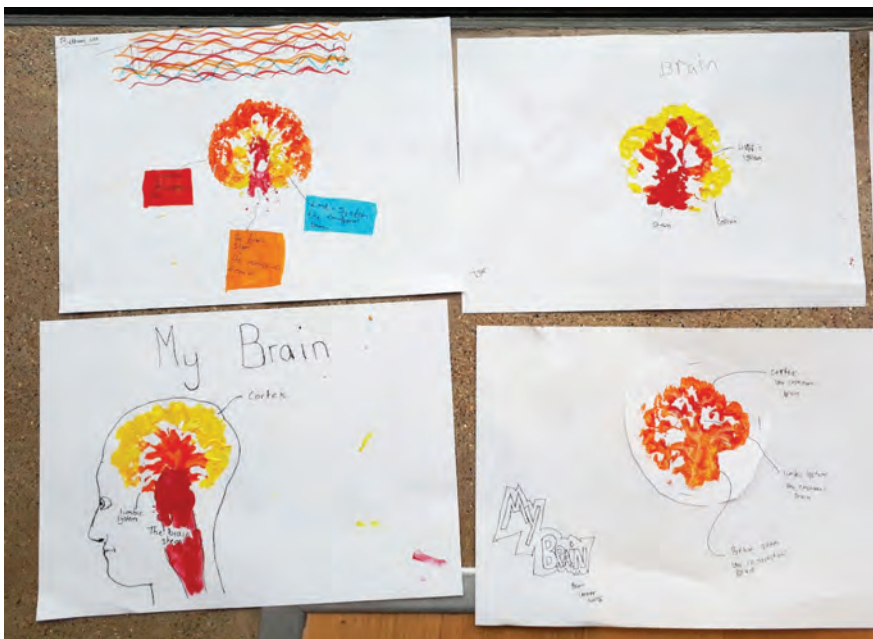
The Thrive-Online assessment tool is my bible. It takes time to get to know children, and the assessment really homes in on the fine detail. We get the house team or class teacher to screen the class looking at age-related expectations, while parents work with us to do the more in-depth baseline skills questionnaire. That feeds into the online tool to produce an action plan, which we review every term to see what has worked and what hasn't.

The action plan targets areas to work on and gives a variety of strategies to assist with this, which can be used in the classroom and at home, together with more specific work for me to do with the student. Whenever I can, I talk the plan through with all of the student's teachers and they always have a copy.

### Changing staff perceptions

The head is very supportive, but the responsibility for Thrive provision sits with me and I have to drive it. That is tough going, trying to convince some of the teachers that while these students may present physically as 11-16 years old, in some cases their emotional development and ability to self-regulate is stuck at that of a three-year-old and we have to find ways of unsticking it. So it is quite a battle, but it is a good battle and we are slowly winning the fight.

It is hard work, but it is rewarding work. Even the tiniest change is a massive reward because it means things are beginning to shift.



Cauliflower printing helps students understand how the brain works

### FIND OUT MORE

● [www.thriveapproach.com](http://www.thriveapproach.com)