

# Colour me confident

Introducing children to candles, music and bright hues has brought an amazing improvement to SAT scores – and cut truancy, says

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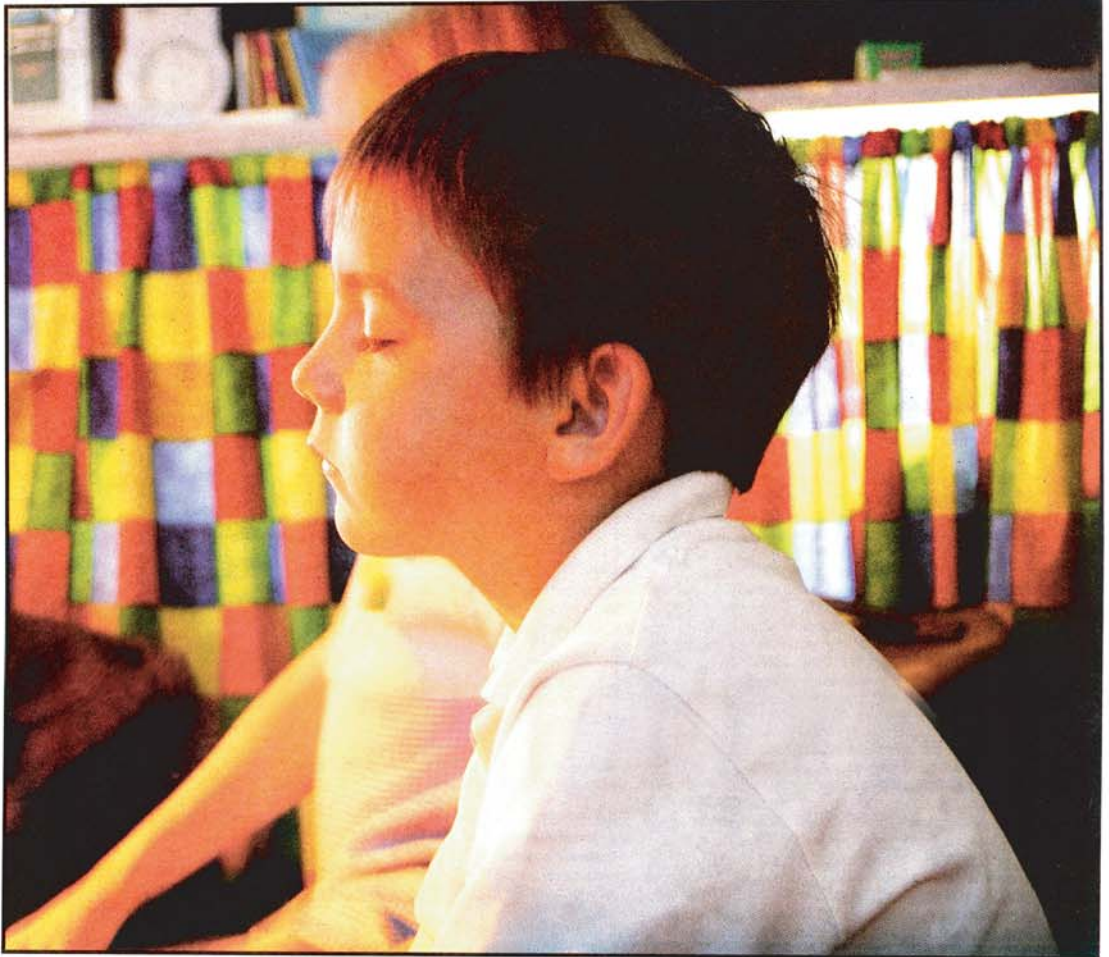
**H**as education ignored “emotional intelligence”? Ruminations about the burden of SATs, the rising number of children who self-harm and demotivated high-fliers are all par for the course. Low self-esteem is the insidious poison blamed for a chronic lack of confidence at one end, and bullying at the other. And those are just the headlines – there are also the legions of mothers who leave nursery school tearfully each morning having had to prise a crying toddler off their legs, or parents of older children with strangely undiagnosable but repeated stomachaches and headaches, all signs of stress and lack of confidence.

Yet the school prescription for failure is, by and large, more of the same. Get on with it. Do additional classes to catch up. So a one-off experiment to boost pupil self-esteem in a Milton Keynes primary school comes as a breath of fresh air, and with, quite literally, a splash of colour.

The Kaleidoscope Project at Pepper Hill School has been running all this school year, and it has all the hallmarks of an idea whose time has come. One-and-a-half-hour sessions of relaxation, self-affirmation and exercises to boost self-esteem were initially timetabled for children who were withdrawn, who had angry outbursts, or who had difficulties with friends. Now, other parents are demanding that their children be allowed to take part, and a “how to do it” CD is selling like hot cakes. Word of mouth has spread, and other schools in the area are interested. Kaleidoscope is, for now, just one person, Pepper Hill’s head Anne Lubbock. She can’t believe her luck in having been able to sneak her unshakeable belief in self-esteem, and her way of promoting it, under the wire, as it were, of the school timetable.

“As a deputy head, I had to do a lot of work with disaffected, demotivated children, and I wanted to use my skills in drama, colour therapy and counselling,” she says. “I didn’t think I would be allowed to do so, but, to my astonishment, they said yes.”

If Milton Keynes’s education department was initially sceptical, it soon changed its mind after seeing results from a pilot project that Lubbock ran with children aged five to 12 in another local school, part of her dissertation for her own diploma in colour therapy. More than half the children improved in their relationships with adults; they developed an ability to ask for help when they couldn’t previously; and they spoke out more in small and large groups, and demonstrated more positive moods and body language. That was enough to secure funding under a social-inclusion project when she moved to Pepper Hill, and the attentions of an independent educational psychologist who will be carefully evaluating the new project to see if it can replicate the earlier good results.



Mallory Henson, a senior educational psychologist at Milton Keynes, says that the project is ahead of its time: “It’s using recognisable approaches from a variety of backgrounds – anger-management techniques, yoga relaxation and visualisation, and stress control. Even employers are now recognising that emotional intelligence is a better predictor of success than IQ, and are testing accordingly. I think there has been a gap in schools. We’ve majored on rewards, punishments and sanctions, but the whole area of emotional development has been largely left out.”

In the Kaleidoscope room at Pepper Hill, Rhianna, seven, sits enveloped, literally and metaphorically, in a comfort blanket – a silver foil wrap. The room is softly lit, a glitter ball, quiet music, candles and colour projections transforming an ordinary classroom into a womb-like sanctuary. Rhianna is taking part in the “building self-esteem” bit of the 90 minutes the group has in the classroom. She will hear her peers, grouped round her, say what she means to them. There are strict rules – be positive, and pass if you can’t think of anything to say. No one passes. Small voices falteringly come up with the goods. Rhianna has a big smile; she plays with everyone; and, when she finishes her work, she helps others. “People feel safe with you,” Lubbock tells Rhianna, who grins delightedly, as well she might.

Earlier, I’d spoken to Mandy Coomes, Rhianna’s mother, who told me that her

**Relaxed and serene: a boy at Pepper Hill School enjoys a Kaleidoscope colour-therapy session**

daughter’s “bellyache”, which mysteriously used to appear once a week, had almost completely gone, and that she was much more calm and confident about school. Other mothers told similar tales.

Later, I ask Lubbock what happens if an unpopular child has a turn. “They always find something to say,” she says. “Even if it’s just, ‘What a nice T-shirt you have’.”

“I think this is about taking away the fear of failure,” she adds. “It’s about daring to fail to succeed. Children in any school can come out of the most dire situations at home and we just expect them to perform when they get to school. Here, we bring them back to a calm state, to the centre, and build on that. It’s really a meditation. We say that sad feelings are OK.”

The session proceeds through set steps: relaxing with slow breathing; visualising colours (“when we can’t find words we use colours”); expressing emotions (through puppets); building self-esteem; moving and dancing; experiencing success through therapeutic natural materials (no buckets and spades for sand, just hands and bare feet); and finally an affirmation – looking in a mirror and saying, “I am good at doing things.” And remembering to repeat that three times a day, because “our brain only believes it then”.

The children clearly love it, especially the dancing to “Search for the Hero Inside Yourself”, and there are pleas to come back after lunch. Next year, Lubbock plans to

incorporate 10 minutes of Kaleidoscope “centring” into the start of every school day, as well as making the longer sessions available to everyone, so they are not exclusive. Milton Keynes will look at the new assessment to see whether the Kaleidoscope idea can successfully transfer to other schools, or be taught by other teachers. Lubbock has trained others at her own school, so this seems likely. At Pepper Hill, absences are down by a third, and SAT results have improved by the same amount, although Lubbock is wary of attributing the latter purely to Kaleidoscope until the group on which it was started has passed right through the school.

Kaleidoscope does chime with the times – the Government recognises that a lack of social and emotional skills acts as a barrier to learning, and is running a pilot Behaviour Improvement Programme in 25 local authorities, focusing on promoting “solutions that are inclusive and constructive”, rather than relying on punishment and exclusion, which, it notes, could lead to more serious problems later on.

Pepper Hill awaits the results of its independent audit in September. For now, it’s a one-off, surviving thanks to Lubbock’s personal determination. If the results are good, word could spread even further.

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