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## Improving pupil wellbeing and family engagement through a bespoke Learning Mentor model in a primary school

### What's the BIG Idea for SEND?

## Project Focus

Devonshire Primary School implemented a tailored Learning Mentor (LM) initiative to address the complex needs of pupils and families in one of England's most deprived areas. This case study outlines the rationale, implementation, and impact of the project, offering a replicable model for other schools facing similar challenges.

## Introduction

Devonshire Primary School is a two-form entry school with an attached nursery, serving communities ranked among the most deprived in England. With 63% of pupils eligible for pupil premium and 26% on the SEND register, the school faces significant challenges including high mobility, low attendance, and complex social needs.

The school's SENCo, recognised the need for a holistic, proactive support system. Families were hard to reach, and pupils were struggling with emotional regulation, behaviour, and engagement. The BIG Idea was born: to formalise and measure the impact of Learning Mentors—dedicated staff who could build trust, offer consistent support, and act as a bridge between home and school.

## Implementation

The school recruited two full-time Learning Mentors, carefully selected for their empathy, resilience, and ability to connect with families. These mentors were not just support staff—they were integral members of the school's wellbeing ecosystem. Their role was designed to be both proactive and reactive, responding to immediate needs while also delivering structured interventions.

Training was a cornerstone of the model. LMs received comprehensive professional development in areas such as:

- trauma-informed practice,
- safeguarding,
- mental health first aid, and
- behaviour management.

 Improved parental/carer satisfaction

 More inclusive ethos/culture in the setting

 Earlier and more accurate identification of SEN

 Increased engagement of learners with SEND

 Improved transitions for learners with SEND

## Implementation (continued)

This ensured they were equipped to handle the complex and varied challenges they would encounter.

The mentors operated flexibly throughout the school day. In the mornings, they greeted pupils and parents at the gate, offering a visible and reassuring presence. They led regulation activities to help children settle into learning and hosted coffee mornings where families could access support in a relaxed, non-threatening environment. During the day, they delivered targeted interventions, supported pupils with sensory needs, and liaised with external agencies. After school, they ran clubs focused on personal development and continued their engagement with families.

Infrastructure was also key. The mentors had a dedicated space within the school, access to safeguarding and attendance systems, and the tools needed to communicate effectively with staff and families. Their work was closely monitored through regular meetings, data analysis, and feedback from teachers.

## Outcomes and Impact

The results were striking. Every pupil identified as needing LM support received it. Parental engagement soared—from just 12 participants in LM-led courses at the start of the project to 86 by the end. Coffee mornings became a hub of community connection, with new attendees joining each term. The demand for LM-led courses grew so significantly that a waiting list had to be introduced.

One particularly powerful example is the story of Pupil J, a child with significant SEMH needs. From his time in nursery, J was supported by the LMs through tailored interventions that helped him regulate his emotions and build social skills. His mother, initially hesitant, developed a strong and trusting relationship with the mentors. By Year 1, J was thriving—his risk of suspension had decreased, his needs were well understood by staff, and his mother was actively engaged in his education. The school successfully secured statutory assessment for J, a testament to the depth of support and evidence provided.

## Key Learning

The Devonshire Learning Mentor model offers a wealth of insights for schools aiming to implement a similar initiative. While the context of each school will differ, several core principles emerged as essential to the success of this project:

- **Recruitment is critical.** The success of the initiative hinged on selecting the right individuals—those who were not only experienced but also deeply empathetic, resilient, and able to build trust with families. The personal qualities of the Learning Mentors were just as important as their professional skills.
- **Training must be comprehensive and ongoing.** LMs were equipped with a wide range of training. This ensured they could respond confidently and competently to the diverse needs of pupils and families.
- Consistency builds trust. Full-time contracts and a visible presence throughout the school day allowed LMs to form strong, reliable relationships with pupils and parents. This consistency was a key factor in the programme's success.
- **The role must be embedded in school systems.** LMs were not an add-on; they were integrated into the school's safeguarding, behaviour, and attendance systems. Their work was informed by data, monitored through regular meetings, and aligned with the school's wider strategic goals.

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## Key Learning (continued)

- **Balance fidelity with flexibility.** While certain elements—such as safeguarding protocols, referral processes, and core training—must be adopted with fidelity, the LM offer should be adapted to reflect the unique needs of each school community. This flexibility allows the model to remain relevant and responsive.
- **Measure impact to sustain investment.** By collecting both quantitative and qualitative data, the school was able to demonstrate the value of the LM role to governors and stakeholders. This evidence was crucial in securing ongoing funding and support.
- **Collaboration enhances scalability.** The model has potential to be scaled across a Trust, with shared resources, standardised training, and opportunities for cross-school learning. However, each school must retain the autonomy to adapt the model to its own context

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## Conclusion

The Learning Mentor initiative at Devonshire Primary School is a compelling example of how targeted, relational support can transform outcomes in challenging contexts. By investing in people, training, and infrastructure, the school created a sustainable model that not only improved pupil wellbeing but also strengthened family engagement and community trust.

For other schools facing similar challenges, this case study offers a roadmap: start with your context, recruit with care, train with purpose, and build a system that puts relationships at the heart of learning.

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