



The Starfish Pink Paper

Re-centering Education
Around Belonging
The Starfish Way



A Different Kind of Paper

This is not a response to policy.

It is a response to what it feels like to be in our schools right now.

To be a child trying to find your place.

To be an adult holding more than you can sometimes name.

To be part of a system that is trying, often deeply, to do the right thing.

There is a lot being said about education.

About reform.

About change.

About outcomes.

Yet within all of that, something quieter risks being lost.

The human experience of school.

This paper is an invitation to come back to that.



What We Are Holding

Schools are holding a great deal.

Rising need.

Increasing complexity.

Children arriving with experiences we cannot always see.

Staff working with care, commitment, and often quiet exhaustion.

There is no lack of effort.

There is no lack of intent.

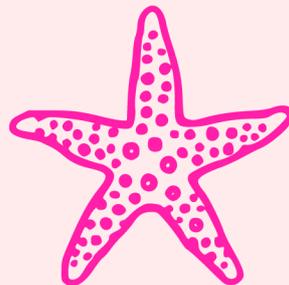
There are moments where the system moves faster than the relationships within it can hold.

What this looks like in real life:

- A child arriving late and being met with a sanction before a conversation
- A member of staff holding multiple disclosures in a single day
- A leader balancing attendance figures with a child who cannot yet walk through the gate
- A parent unsure whether school is a place of support or scrutiny

These are not failures of people.

They are signals that the system needs space to breathe.



What Children Need

Before progress, children need to feel they belong.

In practice:

- Being greeted by name, every time
- A consistent adult who notices when something has shifted
- A quiet space offered before behaviour escalates
- An adult saying:
- "You're safe here. We'll work it out together."

Before they can engage, they need to feel safe.

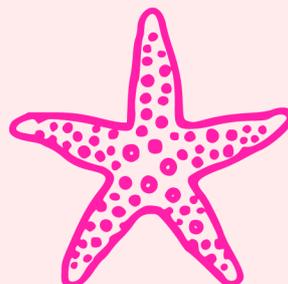
In practice:

- Predictable routines
- Clear, calm communication
- Adults who regulate themselves first

Before they can trust the system, they need to trust the people within it.

In practice:

- Keeping small promises
- Following up, even when it's inconvenient
- Listening without rushing to fix



What Adults Need

Adults need permission to work relationally.

In practice:

Leaders saying:

- "Take the time you need with that child."
- Space in the day for conversations, not just coverage
- Trust that not every moment needs to be escalated to a system

Adults need permission to pause.

In practice:

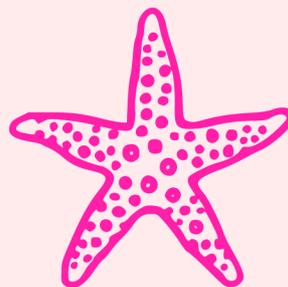
- Choosing not to issue a sanction immediately
- Asking "What's happened?" before "Why did you do that?"

Adults need to be trusted to use professional judgement.

In practice:

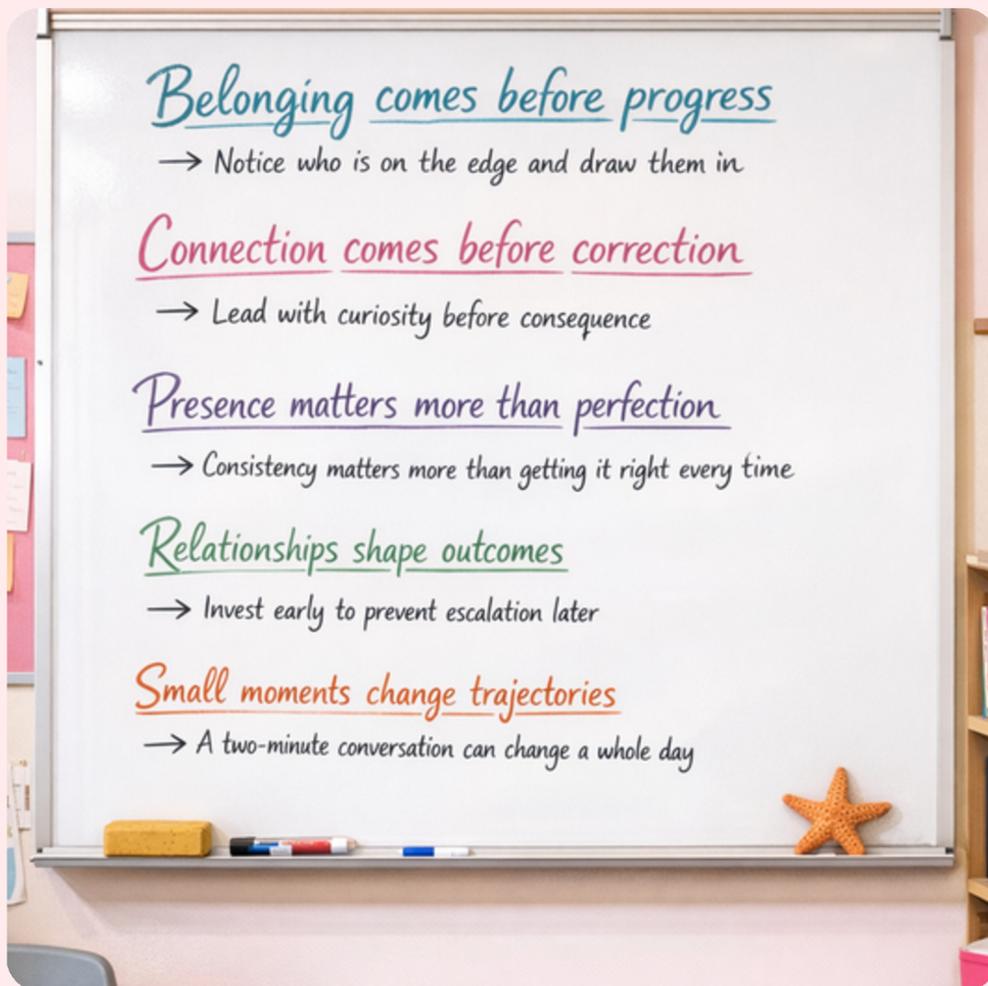
- Flexing expectations when a child is dysregulated
- Adapting the moment, not abandoning the standard

When adults feel trusted, children feel it too.



The Starfish Principles

The Starfish Way reminds us:



What This Looks Like In Practice

It looks like a conversation before a consequence.

“Talk me through what happened.”

A pause before escalation.

Giving a child time to regulate rather than removing them immediately.

A child staying in school when they might previously have been removed.

Adjusting the environment instead of excluding the child from it.

A member of staff choosing to understand.

“What is this behaviour telling us?”

It looks like:

- Walking a child back into a classroom instead of sending them alone
- Sitting beside, not standing over
- Repairing after rupture
- Trying again tomorrow

It is not about lowering expectations.

It is about changing how we help children reach them.



Leadership

Leadership sets the tone for what is possible.

In practice:

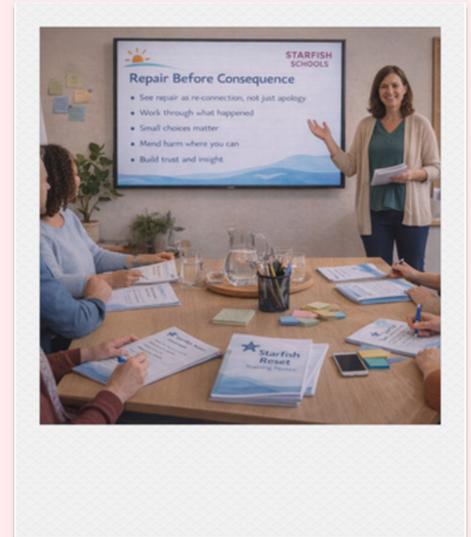
- What gets noticed in briefings
- What gets challenged, and how
- What gets protected when pressure rises

Relational leadership looks like:

- Backing staff when they choose connection over control
- Creating systems that allow flexibility, not just compliance
- Modelling calm, especially when things feel difficult

Leaders who say:

“We are going to hold the child and the standard” and mean it.



A Closing Thought

We do not need to turn the tide all at once.

We do need to remember what we are standing for.

On Monday morning, that might look like:

- Greeting one child differently
- Pausing in one moment that would usually escalate
- Choosing connection in one interaction

In the end, it is not systems that change lives.

It is people.

One moment.

One relationship.

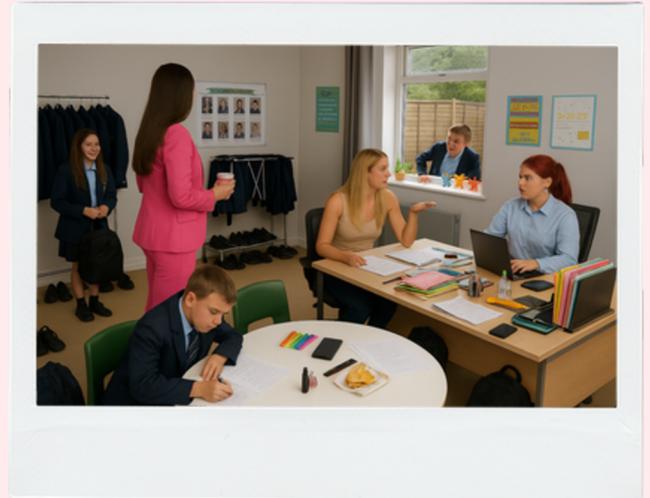
One starfish at a time.



The Starfish Reflection

A gentle pause before we carry on
Before the next lesson.
Before the next decision.
Before the next conversation.

A moment to pause.
To notice.
To remember what matters.



Who needs noticing this week?

- The child who is quieter than usual
- The one who is louder than they need to be
- The one who arrives late, or not at all
- The one who seems “fine” but might not be

Who is on the edge of your classroom, your corridor, your thinking?
How might you draw them back in?



Where could I choose connection first?

- Before a sanction
- Before a raised voice
- Before a quick decision

What might change if I paused long enough to understand?

What might this behaviour be trying to communicate?

What is one small moment I can do differently?

- A greeting that is warmer
- A conversation that is longer
- A response that is softer
- A boundary that is clearer, but still kind

It does not need to be everything.

It just needs to be something.



For the adults

You are allowed to pause too.

You are allowed to feel tired and still care deeply.

You are allowed to take a breath before you begin again.

The work you are doing matters,
even on the days it doesn't feel like it.

When it feels like too much

Come back to this.

Not the whole shoreline.

Just the one in front of you.

The Starfish Way

We don't need to fix everything today.

We keep showing up.

We keep noticing.

We keep choosing connection.

We keep saving the starfish in front of us.



A final thought

Somewhere this week,
because of you,
a child will feel safer,
a little more understood,
a little more able to stay.
That matters more than you know.

Final Note

The Starfish Way

A community rooted in belonging, connection, and the quiet power of showing up

