

# Developing an Attachment Aware, ACE Educated, Trauma Sensitive School

Lisa Cherry

CREATING  
SOCIAL  
CHANGE

ONE CONNECTION

AT A TIME

## PRINCIPLES AND UNDERPINNING VALUES

- Being 'fair' is not about everyone getting the same (equality) but about everyone getting what they need (equity)
- We understand that behaviour is a form of communication and we approach with compassion
- Curiosity and empathy are present towards all behaviours
- Reflection about language is a constant, eg. communicating distress rather than naughty. We think about a child as attachment needing rather attention seeking
- We think about what drives behaviour rather than the behaviour itself
- Relationships are at the core of everything we do recognising that strong relationships support strong learning
- We work together to create a climate that fosters connection, inclusion, respect and value for all members of the school community
- We maintain clear boundaries and expectations around behaviour by promoting safety through predictable routines, well managed transitions and offering supportive strategies when someone is in need of them
- We do not use sanctions that seek to shame
- We recognise that some children live in environments that are emotionally distressing or difficult and that this can affect their mental health and well being
- We check in with ourselves first. Are we calm?

## A WHOLE SCHOOL APPROACH

The responsibility for a school that is attachment aware/ACE educated and Trauma Informed lies with everyone, not just the SENCO or a Designated Teacher. It must be driven by the Headteacher and school's SLT in order to be endorsed by and embedded across the whole school community.

A strong emphasis on relationships and mental health and well being leads to better practice for all including staff retention, pupil attendance and attainment. However, it is not a quick fix to these particular issues. Research by the Rees Centre shows that it can take a minimum of three years to fully see the desired changes. These start with reduced exclusions then move to attendance and then on to progress and attainment.

Good leadership, working together with parents and the wider community, embedding reflective practice and focusing on safety and calmness will create the environment most conducive to children and young people's mental health and well being.



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## EMOTION COACHING

Emotion coaching is about developing in ourselves and others the best possible responses to the behaviour of children and young people 'in the moment', intervening with the child as the behaviour is happening. In order to do this, we have to develop our own Emotional Intelligence and connect with our own inner calm.

In order to use emotion coaching techniques most effectively we need to become more aware of how adults respond to children and young people.

Gottman identified that when children were experiencing strong emotions – which often expressed themselves in behaviours which adults found difficult to deal with – then these provided the best opportunities to learn how to deal with those emotions.

Showing empathy for the emotions then providing positive guidance as to how to move forward are the two key skills demonstrated by parents whose children had fewer behaviour problems, achieved well in school, and were most emotionally stable.

The style shown by a parent/carer/teacher that is largely Emotion Coaching looks like:

- Having a regard as emotions as a time for intimacy and teaching
- An awareness of the child's emotions
- Valuing the child's emotions
- Making time to talk about feelings with them
- Trying to find out why the child is feeling the way they do
- Helping the child to be aware of their feelings, label and express them
- Avoids criticising or labelling them (for example, not calling them stupid, shy, mean or silly)
- Has an awareness of their own emotions
- Is able to remain calm and help their child/young person problem solve

These children and young people are more likely to grow up able to manage their emotions and learn to problem solve when dealing with life situations.

Emotion Coaching is an approach that focuses on the development of emotional regulation through supportive relationships. It can benefit not only CYP but also parents/carers and professionals, to better understand and regulate their emotions, in order to manage strong feelings and take ownership of behaviour.

Emotion Coaching offers practical steps for responding to behaviour, and is linked to key attachment concepts, such as the importance of connection.

Emotion Coaching is an evidence-based approach that provides an understanding of the neuroscience behind behaviour.

### THE 5 STEPS OF EMOTION COACHING:

**Step 1 TUNING IN** Be aware of emotions (I hear you)

**Step 2 CONNECT AND TEACH** with your child (you're not alone)

**Step 3 ACCEPT AND LISTEN** to your child (what happened)

**Step 4 REFLECT** Name emotions (it sounds like this is what you're feeling)

**Step 5 END** with limit setting and find good solutions (we can sort this out together)

## POLYVAGAL THEORY

Stephen Porges has worked for decades on developing the polyvagal theory. It can be quite complex to understand but it brings huge value in understanding the science behind social engagement, attachment and connection.

Having good vagal tone enables our social engagement system, that is, how we read the world around us, to act well with our survival system. They work together. The social engagement system allows us to 'read' the world around us using our middle ear, facial muscles and voice tone. Using our social engagement system, we can assess the environment for danger and if perceived, this will trigger the automatic stress response. It is crucial that we understand when the stress response has been activated IT IS AUTOMATIC. It is not coming from the thinking part of the brain. The lid has been flipped (Dan Siegal's hand model) and essentially why a behavioural approach can often not work because it is often used when a child/young person is not in their thinking brain.

We cannot access our 'thinking' brain until we feel safe.

Where someone has experienced trauma, making sense of the environment through the social engagement system can be impaired and becomes a more complicated experience.

The social engagement system is activated through connection with another human so as to help a person out of their stress response, proximity, a calm tone of voice and our facial expressions activate the vagus nerve positively which is why Emotion Coaching is so helpful in creating better outcomes for everyone.

Demonstrating empathy, practising connection using positive facial expressions, a calm voice and open body language will trigger the self-soothing mechanisms of the vagus nerve. In turn this will help the child/young person learn to regulate their own stress response system. Mirror neurons are also at play here as the child/young person may respond automatically and 'copy' what is in front of them.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF RELATIONSHIPS

- Relationships are central to our sense of belonging and to our emotional well-being  
This includes: staff-pupil, pupil-pupil, staff-staff, staff-parent/carer, child-parent/carer relationships
- Relationships create the space for co-regulation, the attuning and support provided to another person from an adult who is calm and is self regulated
- Promoting positive school staff relationships and emotional well-being
- In order for school staff to be able to effectively build relationships with CYP and parents/carers, they need to firstly prioritise their own emotional well-being and staff relationships
- Home-school communication is seen as being a two-way relationship with communication from school being positive rather than reactionary and punitive

## RESILIENCE

- Resilience is not extraordinary. It is normal
- The purpose of understanding resilience is to determine how to reduce risk factors and how to develop protective factors
- Resilience is NOT a character trait
- Some of the protective processes involved in resilience are not in the individual at all but in their relationships and connections to external resources



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IF PUPILS  
HAVEN'T GOT A  
WORTHWHILE  
RELATIONSHIP  
WITH AT LEAST  
ONE ADULT  
THEY AREN'T  
REALLY AT  
SCHOOL.”  
TIM BRIGHOUSE

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## RESOURCES

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CDC-Kaiser ACE Study. Available at <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/acestudy/about.html>

Rees Centre - <http://reescentre.education.ox.ac.uk/> (research on education and looked after children, care leavers and children in need)

Wales ACE Study. Available at <http://www.cph.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/ACE-Report-FINAL-E.pdf>



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