

CALM Reflections – connect, accept, learn, mend

Goal of child debrief –

- ❖ To reduce stress (now and future)
- ❖ Support the child's self-esteem and self-concept (how they see themselves)
- ❖ Promote understanding
- ❖ Explore coping strategies
- ❖ Heal relationships



Through the use of trauma-informed approaches including the use of the PACE model, staff must seek to re-attune with children following a disruption to relationship that occurs during incidents and limit setting. The following steps will support interactive repair and stabilisation of key relationships. Talking through incidents while avoiding shame-inducing judgements supports the development of resilience for the child by helping them to recognise that incidents are just part of their learning journey towards more self-regulation and emotional stability.

It's important to consider having reflective conversations with children who have also WITNESSED incidents as they may be highly anxious about what has happened. It could include high levels of conflict between peers or another child being held. We need to ensure they have the opportunity to talk about how it has made them feel so that we are able to reassure them.

Firstly, consider Bruce Perry's 3Rs – the bottom-up approach. This ensures we offer support to an upset child in the right order. Reasoning or fact-finding won't really work when the child is still in survival mode!

Reason



Thirdly – We can now support reflection and learning, helping the child to remember, problem solve and become more self-reliant

Relate

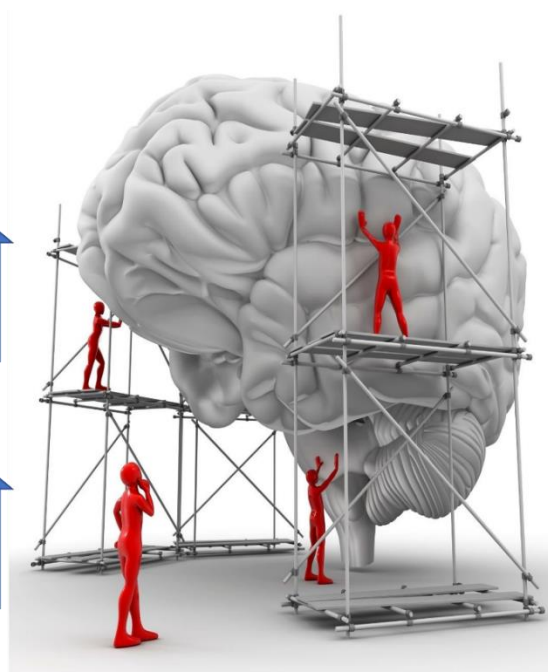


Secondly – Relate and connect with the child by validating their feelings through an attuned

Regulate



Firstly – Focus on regulating the child – This will help to reduce their fight / flight / freeze responses – Calm tone, possible sensory input



Connect –

- With the child (safe space, time, actively listen/observe)
- Demonstrate nurture and empathy
- Listen without judgement or correction to the child – allow them to describe the sequence of events as they perceive them
- Link the child's feelings to behaviours (emotional literacy)

**Accept –**

- The child's feelings. Validate them in the context of what they've been through
- Communicate that it was an understandable response to the situation, given their own past experiences
- Reduce shame, blame and guilt – avoid asking 'why did you do that' for example.
- Promote responsibility
- Praise child's engagement in this process

Learn –

- Explore other ways of coping, aiming for more helpful strategies
- Let the child lead, give suggestions if needed, but the child still has to choose
- Mistakes are ok when we try to learn from them - otherwise we'd be stuck (Change is Possible)
- It's also ok to get help; discuss how
- Help the child identify the impact short and long term (natural consequences)
- Role play (if appropriate)

**Mend –**

- The immediate situation (relationships, environment etc)
- May or may not involve an apology (from the child? child led / from you? Role model!)
- Natural/Logical consequences
- Address child's self-concept (I am not bad, or broken, but sometimes I find this difficult)
- Praise and reward the child for engaging
- Promote the process of long-term recovery and better coping

Steps of Co-Regulation

Children are not born with the ability to regulate. They are dependent on sensitive and responsive caregivers to offer co-regulation (do it for them) so they can learn what feeling soothed and safe actually feels like!

It is the process through which children develop (through others) the ability to soothe and manage distressing emotions and sensations. It is done through their connection with nurturing and reliable caregivers (Secure Base). Co-regulation is very important when working with children impacted by complex trauma and it involves various types of responses from us as caregivers. We can do this still with the 3 Rs in our mind.

Regulate

Calm environment

Firstly, ensure the immediate environment supports emotional and physical safety. Trying to co-regulate with a child, while chaos is going on all around, simply won't allow the child's autonomic responses come out of survival (fight/flight/freeze). It needs to be a space where the survival response is no longer being triggered and allows us, the adult, to focus on the child – demonstrating 100% availability to them, which will help to reduce their stress response.

You!

Remember when we talked about our autonomic nervous system? It's a fact that anxious or overwhelmed adults cannot soothe an anxious or overwhelmed child. So we may need to utilise our mindful response before any other....deep breath in and out for longer – to engage our calming hormones to assist with our own regulation, before diving in to support the child. Offer a warm, calming presence and tone of voice that signal "I've got you". Consider slow, measured movements (as you would with a frightened kitten), to reduce the fight/flight/freeze response.

Silence

This can be incredibly powerful, and difficult to do! It is really natural for carers to want to 'fix' the problem. Sometimes, when a child is overwhelmed, it can be really difficult for them to comprehend words and intention. So they may simply deflect this difficulty with swearing back at you or disengaging altogether. This is why silence can be so effective. It allows the child time to process. They need to process how they're feeling, how they are now with somebody who is trying to help them (rather than seeing them as a threat – which they did a minute ago), and process what you are currently doing to support them. It allows them to just BE.

Relate

Validate their feelings

It is so important for a child to be able to trust that their emotions will effectively communicate what they are feeling inside, to their outside world to get the help they need. This is usually difficult, because children from adverse childhoods have often learnt that their emotions aren't safe, so when they feel the emotion rising, it already puts them into a survival response. So this process relies on the carer validating their feelings – and communicating that back to them by offering words to name emotions and feelings. This creates a narrative to help the child understand their feelings. For

example “I can see you are really upset. You’re breathing heavily and you are a bit tearful. That makes me think you may be sad?”

And an educated guess is ok! If you get it wrong, they’ll soon tell you! Wondering out loud techniques (see our Ultimate Guide to PACE for more on this technique) also help to re-engage their thinking brain, without overwhelming the child with direct questions which can be too much at this stage.

Connection

As the child starts to come down from their stress response, we can gently explore what might help them right now. So this is NOT bombarding them with 20 questions – or trying to address the incident. It is simply connecting with them gently to offer soothing strategies which will help them to start to regulate. This could include:

- Do they need something to meet their sensory needs? If you know what might help, offer it to them now
- Do they want you to stay quiet for a bit longer while they process what is going on for them?
- Do they need you to help them with good breathing?
- Do they want to go for a walk with you – walking will help to reduce cortisol levels

Reason

And now (and only now) can we support the child to reflect and problem solve. All too often, adults will start here when the child is still flooded with emotion! “Think what you need to do” “Why are you doing this”, “What’s that suppose to achieve?”, “You need to make a good decision”.....which can be tempting in the moment, but they literally don’t have the right part of their brain engaged at the start of this process.

Now, however, having done all those other co-regulation steps, you can encourage thought about what may help next time. Show them that you are working with them and taking their views seriously. Reassure them that you are willing to try things that they think will help.

Using PACE wisely!

So let’s also link back to Intersubjectivity. Remember we spoke about this during the attachment module? It’s about the 1:1 relationship and interaction between you and the child.

Using our Ultimate Guide to PACE and what we know about this subject as laid out by Dan Hughes, we can ensure that we maximise our chances of successful connection which will aid better reflection and repair. Let’s recap on intersubjectivity – the key to human connection.

Intersubjectivity has three components.

- **Shared emotion/affect (attunement)** – this is the process in which the parent and child mutually create, match and share their affective/emotional states. This is represented in the nonverbal, bodily expression of each other's emotions, sentiments, and desires. This is often where miscommunication or misinterpretation can occur. If the child is overwhelmed with emotion and expressing that through anger, then they are expressing their underlying emotion. When the adult matches that 'affect' "what, the teacher didn't listen to you at all? No wonder you were angry!" without taking on the emotion themselves, they are expressing their understanding and empathy for the child's underlying emotional state.
- **Shared attention/focus** – for connection to be present, it requires both the child and the adult to be focused on the same 'content' (as stated by Dan Hughes). Content could be something in the present that both are experiencing, something from the past being remembered by both, or something from the past being shared by one that the other hasn't experienced. Once both are focused on the same event, they are bringing two perspectives together which may differ.

So once you are on the same page when having difficult conversations, you can then explore perspective so the child can separate the feelings they have from the event itself – which supports recovery. For many reasons such as shame, fear of recrimination or rejection or capacity to focus – it can be tricky to get on the same page, because the child doesn't want to talk about 'it'. It is important that we doesn't jump in too quickly to the point we want to make, but rather reach the same focal point with the child - through connection – engaging with the child.

- **Shared intention** – simply put, this means we want the same thing from an interaction. So if the child is talking, we are listening, if we are teaching, they are learning, they are trying to be understood, we are understanding – these are what Dan Hughes refers to as 'complimentary intentions'. This is co-operative engagement. This can also be applied to simple activities such as watching tv, having a meal together and so on. It's about the authenticity of the engagement.

For example, if we suggest watching a film, but 5 minutes in say "While I've got you here, can I just ask about what happened earlier?" – The shared intention is lost. The child no longer trusts your desire to share the activity of the film.

So with these three components in our mind when we are interacting, it helps to keep those moments true and credible. This will allow the child to truly feel supported, heard and cared for, even when having difficult conversations and stop them feeling rejected or patronised.

Connection before Correction

Last but by no means least, we have this. A child needs both of these to thrive. Kim Golding summarises this within her “Two hands of parenting”. We’ve already introduced this to you when we talked about “High Structure and High Nurture”. Connection before correction recognises that boundary setting causes a rupture to relationship and this makes children feel unsafe (with the potential of rejection). Therefore, to reduce the impact of this, it is important to first of all give the child the message of being connected to them in that moment, before we rupture the relationship. This helps the brain to feel safer and can reduce the level of fight/flight/freeze the child goes into.






Golding says we need:

Two hands for parenting:

Hand One: provides warmth and nurture, and allows children appropriate autonomy matched to their developmental age.

Hand Two: provides structure, and boundaries.

She goes on to suggest these 5 great foundational approaches

-  Connection before correction
-  No correction without understanding
-  Avoid lectures and delay problem solving
-  Avoid punishing with the relationship
-  Adult takes responsibility for relationship repair

Examples of what Connection and Correction might look like:

CONNECTION	CORRECTION
Adult remaining calm and regulated	Time in strategies (i.e. being alongside them, until they are open and engaged)
Acceptance and Empathy (for feelings and thoughts)	Boundaries for harmful behaviour
'Name it to tame it' – Labelling feelings	Conversations about the behaviour (reasoning)
Curiosity (I wonder what this behaviour is communicating? What are their hidden needs?)	Providing natural and logical consequences for their behaviours – if needed (linking directly to the behaviour)
Helping to regulate emotions	Increased supervision, matching a child's developmental age
Light and caring voice	Collaborative Problem Solving - focuses on building skills like flexibility, frustration tolerance and problem solving, rather than simply motivating kids to behave better.
Time in strategies (i.e. time away from a situation to regulate emotions, but alongside/with support from a trusted adult)	
Drawing out feelings/their experience	
Staying with the child	
Avoiding shame	
Avoiding conversations about the behaviour / problem solving	

So, with all these strategies together, your repair of relationship should feel easier to manage. And with this in place, the relationship between you and the child will be able to get back on track quickly, developing stronger bonds and trust.