



USING PACE IN SCHOOL

*Through PACE, and as they begin to feel safer, children discover they
can now do better*



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Using PACE in School

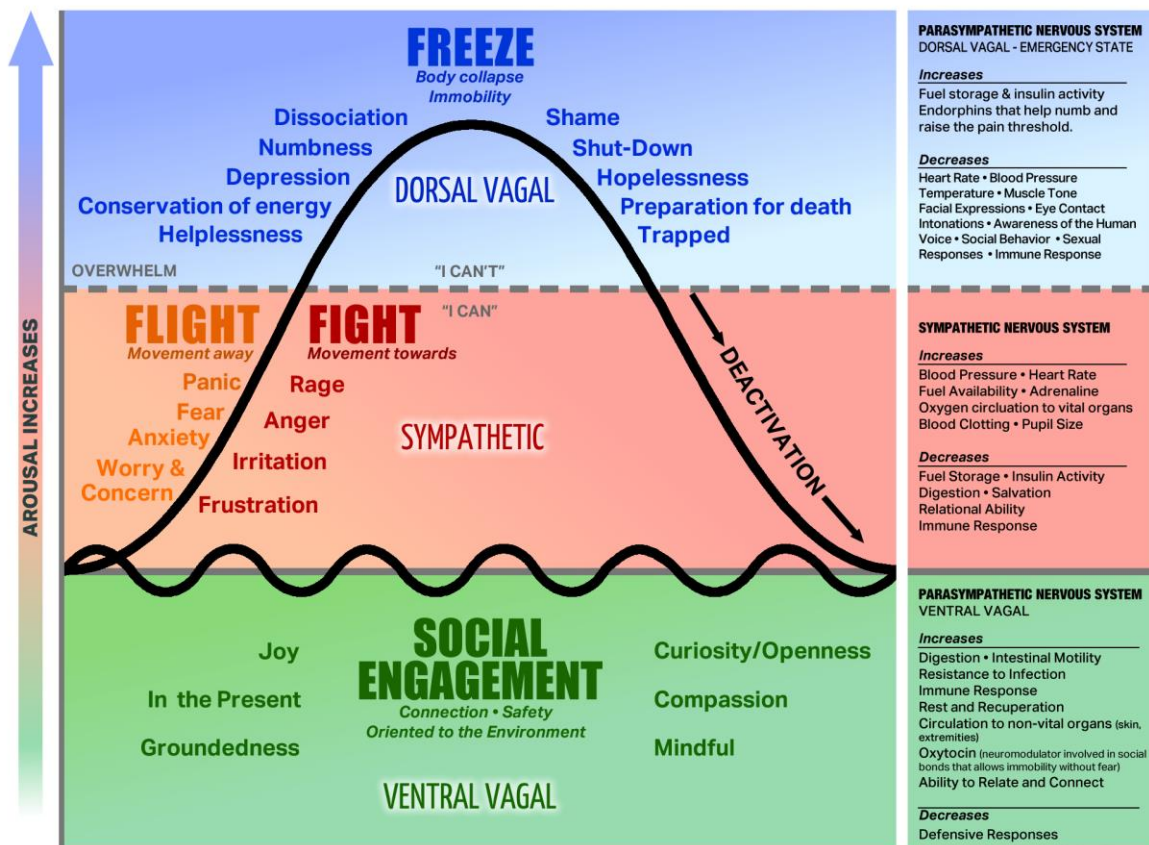
This leaflet is designed to help you to have effective, empowering interactions with children who have experienced trauma and who, as a result, do not respond to you in the same way as other children you teach.

Children who have had a difficult start to life have often learned that the world is not a safe place and that people in it cannot be trusted to help them to stay safe. Without safety and security children cannot settle to learn and explore. Many also do not think that they deserve care and attention, and many feel deeply ashamed much of the time. These feelings and assumptions about the world underpin all the interactions they have with you and their peers.

Working with children who do not feel safe at school is demanding and asks a lot of you as a professional. We hope that this leaflet will give you some more information about why you are successful when you are successful, why things sometimes go wrong, and some ideas for helping hard-to-reach children be settled and able to learn in your class.

Understanding how feelings direct actions

The work of neuropsychologist Stephen Porges has helped us to understand what happens to us all when we perceive danger. His polyvagal theory suggests a hierarchy of three levels:



When we do not feel safe, the body prepares itself to respond to danger. If the danger seems very great, the nervous system is activated in such a way that we have a very high tolerance for pain, and often become very still. In this 'freeze' state, which is the state of greatest stress, children sometimes appear to 'zone out', show confusing behaviours such as laughing inappropriately as though they cannot stop, or even appear to fall asleep. Sometimes this is called "dissociation".

When we perceive threat that is not at the highest level the body prepares itself for defence. Sometimes we call this "fight or flight". It is likely that you have seen this response on many occasions. Children who have experienced trauma escalate into this state very quickly. It may look as though there was no trigger, or that the apparent trigger was very small.

Many children who have experienced trauma are vulnerable to experiencing 'fight, fright or flight' reactions in everyday situations which would not normally make children feel afraid. This reaction is not conscious, is completely involuntary and out of their control. In order for children to be ready to learn, however, they need to be in



the calm, open and engaged state described in the graphic above. Only in this state can they engage with you and others to think about what has happened and how you can understand it together.

When a child is challenging or threatening to you, when you feel deskilled or frustrated by the child, your own defences are likely to kick in. At this point it is very difficult for you to be in a calm, open and engaged state too. Many teachers are more likely at this point to revert to more traditional behaviour management styles which, unfortunately, do not work with children who have experienced trauma. Very often this is the point at which communication breaks down between you and the child and the situation escalates.

What does work?

The experience of safety seems to have a profound effect on pupils

Louise Bomber, 2013

PACE is an approach developed by Dr Dan Hughes, an American psychologist who works with traumatised children. PACE stands for Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity and Empathy. These principles help to promote the experience of safety in your interactions with young people. Children need to feel that you have connected with the emotional part of their brain before they can engage the thoughtful, articulate, problem solving areas.

Connect and redirect: *When a child is upset, connect first emotionally, right-brain to right-brain. Then, once the child is more in control and receptive, bring in the left-brain lessons and discipline.*

The Whole Brain Child, Daniel J. Siegel and Tina Payne Bryson

Once a child feels that you have connected with their level of emotion, they can stop showing you. Children show you how they feel through their behaviour, often in ways that are very unhelpful to you and also to themselves.

Playfulness

The purpose of playfulness is to enjoy being together in an unconditional way. This gives the message that the relationship is stronger than things that go wrong. Using a playful and light-hearted tone, as if you were telling a story, shows your interest and curiosity. Playfulness reduces the shame a child might feel when something has gone wrong; difficult messages or serious conversations can be easier to have if the tone is light. It does not mean you do not take the emotions or the incident seriously. It is also helpful to maintain a playful tone if you need to deliver a short reminder about behaviour in the classroom.

Acceptance

Unconditional acceptance is fundamental to a child's sense of safety because it shows that you have connected with their feelings without judgement, and without seeking to reassure their feelings away. This can be hard to do as it means you and the child sitting with some strong emotions, together. This is painful and uncomfortable, but also very powerful. If a child expresses distressing emotions about themselves or others (e.g. "nobody loves me", "I'm stupid", "I'm bad", "you hate me") it is hard not to challenge them as being wrong, but it is really important to accept those feelings and acknowledge them using curiosity and empathy.

Accepting the child or young person's feelings and emotions does not mean accepting unwanted behaviour and it does not mean agreeing with the child's viewpoint, but for true acceptance to take place, it is important that the child also knows you can see them beyond their behaviour. When a child is very challenging, on a daily basis, this can be hard to do. Try to build in times with colleagues in which you can reflect on the child beyond their behaviour as well as expressing your own feelings about the challenges.

Curiosity

It's important to be curious about the child's thoughts, feelings, wishes and intentions: they may still be learning that other people can think about them in this way or that they can be held in mind by an adult without judgement and accusation at all. Curiosity is also important for discipline to be effective: connect with the emotion before you engage in discussion. Showing the child that you are interested in what is going on for them and willing to do something about it is a very powerful experience. Don't feel afraid to share your curiosity with the child by wondering, not telling them. Try to avoid asking "Why?". Instead you might ask:

"Is it ok if I share my idea of what is going on for you? I might be wrong but these are my ideas."

or

"What do you think was going on?", "What do you think that was about?" or "I wonder what...?"

Try to be curious in a quiet, accepting tone that conveys a simple desire to understand the child: this is not the same as agreeing with their perception of the event, but shows your interest in understanding it and accepting the feelings that were involved.

Empathy

When you show empathy you are showing the child that their feelings are important to you, and that you are alongside them in their difficulty. You are showing that you can cope with the hard times with them and you are trying hard to understand how it feels. Understanding and expressing your own feelings about the child's experience can often be more effective than reassurance. For example, if a child says "You don't care", you can respond by saying "That must be really hard for you. I feel sad that you experience me as not caring"

Acceptance and empathy are your Emotional A&E. They are at the heart of the child starting to feel safe at school, which reduces conflict, stress and withdrawal.

Practical Examples

We have developed some scenarios of situations that frequently occur in schools. These PACE-informed scripts show how to have conversations with young people which connect with their feelings, thoughts and intentions. We hope you will find that connecting with children in this way de-escalates situations more quickly and increases trust between you and the child.

Angry and Negative Statements

When children make negative statements about themselves or you, for example:

You're angry and you don't want me in your classroom

It is tempting at this point to reply with a practical response, which may or may not be true:

I'm not angry and of course I want you to be here.

The PACE alternative would go something like this:

I can see that it feels like I am really cross with you, that is a really difficult feeling to have. I wonder if that is really scary and that you feel you would be better off outside the classroom. Although it doesn't feel like it, I do really want you in my classroom.

If this is too much to say to a child who is at that moment very distressed, use the Emotional A&E response:

It is really hard to feel that I am cross with you, that is such a scary feeling.

When a child runs away

This is a difficult and frightening situation for all concerned: some situations in school are highly emotional and feel unsafe for everyone. It is important that adults make sure they manage their own strong emotions with support from others. These feelings are important to acknowledge, but it is not for the child to take responsibility for the adults' feelings. It is essential to acknowledge that when a child has run away, within school or out of school, you will probably have some strong feelings such as being scared, cross, resentful, and maybe terrified about the consequences. Arrange to talk to a trusted colleague about this so that your own emotional needs are met.

When working with the child, start with connection by acknowledging and accepting the feeling: the child felt so overwhelmed that running away felt like the best option. It may well not have been the best option from where you were standing, but it was for them. Be curious around what they were feeling at the time and about where else the child can go when they have these feelings that are so hard to manage. You want to enable a discussion about finding somewhere that feels safer to both of you. This can feel very difficult and feel like you're putting the child in control, but the aim is to do this collaboratively.

Most of your PACE skill will be used after the child has come back as you reflect on what happened together.

PACEing the situation as it happens:

It may be that, in the short term, you accept where the child feels safe and you follow them gently and at a distance to that place and sit down somewhere near to them and announce that:

I have just come to be with you, because I can see things are really hard for you right now, and I am here for you when you are ready.

If they move further away from you, this is not a sign that they are disrespecting you but they are just continuing to show you that they feel afraid. You could respond

I can see it is hard to be close to me, I will be here when you are ready.

Reflecting with PACE on how it could be different next time:

It's really nice to be sitting here with you now.

You might want to have a playful tone of voice here, because whilst you're talking about somethings very serious it is easier for a child to hear if you are playful or light-hearted in tone.

I was really worried about how you were feeling when you wanted to run away. Those feelings must have been really big. I wonder if [you thought you were going to be told off about what happened at break/ you thought the work looked too hard/ you weren't sure what to do and you didn't know how to ask/ you felt a bit scared and you didn't know why]? I can see that was really difficult, because it made you feel like you had to run away.

I am wondering if we can think together about somewhere else you can go to when you feel like that. You might need somewhere to run to but I'd like it to be somewhere that I know you are safe. I have noticed that you like [think about your school and the places this child likes and what is possible for you, it should be a safe space where they can have 'time in' with someone they trust and find supportive. This doesn't need to be a formal space in school]. When you have really big feelings it is hard to be alone, and it can be helpful to have someone with you, even if they are not saying anything.

The emotional A&E statement:

You must have been so scared and so you ran away. I was really worried about you too, it is so nice to have you back.

Refusal to Engage

The child who won't speak to you at all eg head on the desk or at the top of the climbing frame telling you to go away

I wonder if you are feeling [really angry/ really scared/really overwhelmed/ really sad]

or

I don't know if you are feeling really sad or angry or scared and maybe you don't know either, but I can see it is really difficult. I am worried about you and I don't want you to feel alone with these feelings. I will just stay here if that is alright?"

If the child tells you it's not ok to stay with them the aim would still be to demonstrate your presence with them. So, you might move further away from them or continue to teach the lesson whilst continuing to let them know that you are holding them in mind. If the child isn't able to recover over the course of the lesson it would be helpful to reconnect with them briefly at the end, reiterating that you feel worried about how they feel. You might want to let them know that you will share your worries with their form tutor/ teacher/ head of year/ key person as you know they would be worried about them too.

Refusal to work and or defiance

Many children who do not feel safe at school seek to control what happens around them in an attempt to feel safer. Often this also involves defiance or refusal to work. As their teacher you may well feel deskilled, embarrassed, worried about losing face in front of the other children, angry that your lesson is being disrupted, and worried about the learning of other children so these situations easily become very highly charged. Avoiding the battle, maintaining presence, and managing your own emotions whilst helping the child with theirs, is no mean feat! The goal of this conversation is to deescalate the situation and avoid a head to head, allowing the child to continue or let you know that they can't, and for you to connect with that emotional experience. That connection may help to get them working, or it may help to avoid escalation. We have put together alternative approaches, depending on the needs of the child. Each shows a cycle of steps you could work through.

For the child whose attachment needs make it hard for them to settle and work independently:

1. Acceptance and empathy: Go to the child and say something like:

I can see this feels too difficult to start right now, and it just feels too much

2. Give the child a moment to digest that you have understood they are struggling with an emotional experience, and demonstrate your presence, that you will be holding them in mind while you get everyone else going on the task:

I'm going to get everyone else started, and then I am going to come back to you

3. Return with PACE, using playfulness to acknowledge the big feelings:

How are those big feelings now, do you think we can get going on this together?

or a teenager

So, we need to find a way together for this to feel possible. Because I am worried about you and I am interested in your learning.

4. Maintain a level of presence, for example taking turns, letting the child know that you will do one together, and then leave them to do task independently and you will continue to return to check in with them. This can be subtle across classroom and/or revisiting them.

If they are not ready to engage you could go back to step 1. If you have circled this a couple of times it is important to acknowledge that maybe they are in too difficult a place to engage in learning today and that's ok and you will follow the plan you have in school for this child.

For a child who is overwhelmed with things related to outside of the classroom:

1. Acceptance and empathy: Go to the child and say something like:

I can see this feels too difficult to start right now, and it just feels too much

2. Give the child a moment to digest that you have understood they are struggling with an emotional experience, and demonstrate your presence, that you will be holding them in mind while you get everyone else going on the task:

I'm going to get everyone else started, and then I am going to come back to you

3. Return with PACE, using playfulness to acknowledge the big feelings:

How are those big feelings now, do you think they're going to let us get any work done?

or a teenager

I'm wondering if it still feels like there's absolutely no chance we're going to get any work done today?

4. Use curiosity to find out:

What I would like to try is that we'll look again together at what you need to do so that you feel really confident. I will start you off and then I will check back in with you, how does that feel to you?

If they are not ready to engage you could go back to step 1. If you have circled this a couple of times it is important to acknowledge that maybe they are in too difficult a place to engage in learning today and that's ok and you will follow the plan you have in school for this child.

If you do manage to help the child to settle to the task, you will need to maintain a high level of adult presence throughout the lesson, checking in regularly, putting a hand on their shoulder as you go past, making eye contact across the room to show you are still holding them in mind.



Further Information

If you would like to learn more about this approach, these are useful books to read:

Creating Loving Attachments: Parenting with PACE to Nurture Confidence and Security in the Troubled Child by Kim S. Golding and Daniel A. Hughes

The Whole-Brain Child: 12 Proven Strategies to Nurture Your Child's Developing Mind by Dr Tina Payne Bryson and Dr Daniel Siegel

Further Discussion

School staff can arrange an hour's **telephone consultation** with the ATTACH Team's Educational Psychologist Hester Riviere to think to think about using PACE to support Looked After, Adopted or SGO children for whom you are concerned.

**If you would like to arrange a consultation please contact Marion Richards on
01865 897 083**