

# Relational EXCHANGE

Sharing trauma  
informed practice  
ideas and strategies  
for the ACT's  
early childhood  
educators

## Building team support for implementing trauma responsive practice

### Welcome

Welcome to our next blog piece for 2021, relating to trauma-informed practice for the ACT's early childhood education and care (ECEC) community.

These pieces will provide links to practice and questions for discussion that you might find useful in your work – particularly when reflecting on supporting and educating children who have experienced trauma, and their families.

### Why Relational Exchange?

We have called this blog 'Relational Exchange' for two reasons. Firstly, because this reflects the importance of connection through relationship that underpins both child development and repair or healing from the impacts of trauma. The nature or quality of the relational exchanges we engage with children and their families are critical. And every relational exchange provides an opportunity for understanding and an opportunity for repair.

Secondly, because this can provide an opportunity for an exchange of ideas amongst early childhood educators and other professionals. The topics explored here and the discussion questions presented will provide you with opportunities for reflection and exploration across your team, your site or centre, your networks and the broader communities of practice.

## Building team support for implementing trauma responsive practice

In one of our other Relational Exchange pieces we have introduced the PRACTICE audit tool and a process for auditing our current trauma responsive practice. One of the challenges of this process is bringing everyone on the team along with this process of implementing trauma responsive practices across the centre or service. However, it is a reminder that trauma responsive practice is not always all new and means we have to completely overhaul our practice. It is also a reminder that for the majority of us trauma responsive practice reflects a lot of what we are already doing and can even be validating.

This blog reinforces the use of the audit tool but this time looks at the six steps, and questions, that follow the completion of the PRACTICE based audit tool. It explores each of the review questions and provides some ideas or answers as well as additional considerations to implementing trauma responsive practices.

**Please note:** It is strongly suggested that you complete the online training program and view one or two webinars prior to using the audit tool as it requires a solid understanding of the neurobiology of trauma for its most effective use.

### Introducing the tool – reviewing the first page

On the front of the tool you will see that each of the elements of the PRACTICE framework are delineated. There are also different application groups outlined. This part of the tool is asking us to consider the application of trauma responsive practice with individual children, small groups of children, across the whole room or group, with the staff team, with families and across the centre or site as a whole. The tool asks you to consider, and record, what you are already doing in each of these areas. We continue to remind you to not worry if you can't put something in every box – that is part of the purpose of using the tool!

### Key questions to build support for implementing trauma responsive PRACTICE

This article focuses on the second page of the tool and the questions for planning and implementation included there. These really focus on what we need to consider and do as a team to support the implementation of trauma responsive practices. As a reminder and summary of each element we have provided some questions to consider to start the audit process. Of course, these are not the only possible questions but provide a starting point for reflection and discussion.

## Question 1: What is reasonable for me personally, and for my service or centre, to develop, take action on or learn more about regarding trauma responsive practice?

This initial question is a reflective one that really asks you to reflect on the general outcomes of the audit tool completed on the first page of the tool. It asks you about areas of current knowledge as well as gaps in knowledge or skills that would be helpful to build on or develop. Hopefully, some of those gaps can be addressed by some of the resources within this program, such as the webinar series, other Relational Exchange articles or by attending the Professional Support Networks available to early childhood educators across the ACT.

## Question 2: To what extent is the impact of abuse and trauma on a child's behaviour and learning widely understood and identified across the setting?

Understanding the impacts and manifestations of relational or developmental trauma is a key element to implementing trauma responsive practices because it facilitates a shared response framework and supports all staff to interpret and effectively respond to the behaviours of children who have experienced trauma.

Having a shared response framework, grounded in PRACTICE, is crucial to supporting children who have experienced trauma because it, as we now know:

- Enables consistency of repetition of responses which supports the experience of safety as well as supporting brain development
- Ensures no one individual within the service carries the challenging load of supporting all the children who have experienced trauma
- Facilitates creative and flexible response options when there are challenges, such as being able to move a child between rooms when they are struggling or if there is a replacement staff member there for a day
- Allows for the development and implementation of consistent and clear plans to respond to challenging behavioural issues, that are still grounded in a needs based response model

As combined with the answer to question 1, the team can also think about creative ways of using the resources of this program to support consistent learning. For example, you can discuss one of these blog pieces in a staff meeting, you can complete the online learning program as a group – completing one module per week or fortnight – or you can register one team member into the Professional Support Networks and they can bring a summary of the network discussions into the team meeting.

It is also the case that trauma responsive practices often integrate well with other initiatives and programs that are requirements of your service delivery and/or are optional programs that have been identified as priorities by your centre or service. It can be a valuable conversation to have to connect these practices with other initiatives and requirements to ensure a consistency of application.

### **Question 3: To what extent does the existing service culture (embodied in charters, policies and processes) reflect understanding of, and compassion for, the needs of children who have experienced trauma?**

This question gives services and centres the opportunity to review their formal documentation to consider how it reflects an understanding of trauma responsive practices. For example, how do learning plans incorporate goals that relate to the wellbeing of the child and the possible impacts of the trauma? Also, how do policies and processes incorporate an understanding of, and response to, staff wellbeing given how important this is to the implementation of supportive and effective trauma responsive practices?

Another key area is the behavioural response policies and processes – are they grounded in a response to the needs underpinning children's behaviour and do they support maintaining relational connection over the response to the behaviour? An example might be the use of time in rather than time out – although it is acknowledged that it is unlikely time out will be used as a strategy in early childhood education.

The issue of touch is also one that often needs to be considered in a service policy and procedure context as it is fundamental to relationship building and supporting but can be difficult in the context of child safety requirements.

In terms of some of the centre's processes, such as identifying the core values of the service, we might like to consider those that most support the needs of children who have experienced trauma. Examples might include: trust, belonging, positive regard, consistency, relationship, security and safety.

### **Question 4: To what extent does the informal centre culture demonstrate a positive and shared commitment to meeting the specific needs of these children?**

It is important to acknowledge that the issue of child abuse, and relational trauma, and its impacts are very difficult for many adults to engage with. Adults can experience a range of unconscious responses when confronted with the behaviour and needs of a child who has experienced trauma. Some people minimize the problem, others divert their discomfort to others and some disengage from reminders of the issue. And, of course, still others are impacted by providing ongoing support to children who have experienced trauma ie: vicarious trauma. The informal culture of the centre, and its team, supports each team member to be able to effectively and safely support the children. Some examples of how to do this can come from the PRACTICE framework itself.

- Predictable:** Always use trauma responsive language around issues to do with those children who have experienced trauma. This builds a sense of consistency.
- Responsive:** Understand the confronting nature of issues of child abuse and how this might be mirrored in adult's behaviour toward colleagues and the children. Respond to your team member's behaviour from this understanding ie: what is the meaning behind the behaviour?
- Attuned:** Frame children's behaviour in terms of their emotional responses eg: this is a child who is feeling shamed at the moment. Equally, acknowledging that these children can be hard work is important in terms of minimizing the potential for vicarious traumatization within the staff team.
- Connecting:** Acknowledge the strengths that each colleague brings to working with children who have experienced trauma. While it is a cliché, it really can be that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts!
- Translating:** Continually refer back to the service documentation to reinforce the overall focus of supporting all children, particularly those who have experienced trauma. You can also undertake a staff culture survey to build a story of understanding regarding the perceptions of practice and safety across the service as a whole.
- Involving:** Developing and maintaining a range of professional support mechanisms that meet the needs of all of the staff team is invaluable in an effective whole of centre response.
- Calming:** It is as true for adults as it is for children that we are best able to think clearly and learn more when we are calm and our cortex is most engaged and working well. Does the overall environment support a calm workplace?
- Engaging:** Strong and supportive relationships across the key staff members enable an overall sense of cohesiveness and shared vision. For site leaders, a clear conceptualization of management and leadership styles and centre priorities can enhance the relationships across the site and enable all of the team to feel safe and supported in their work.

## Question 5: To what extent does the setting incorporate collaborative strategies and processes for supporting children who have experienced trauma?

The following ideas give guidance and/or reinforcement of collaborative processes both internally and externally to the centre or service:

- Clear communication methods that include a variety of modalities eg: face to face, staff newsletters or information sheets and using emails or the intranet.
- Acknowledging the value of social activities that can be spontaneous and that include all of the staff team.
- Building or joining peer networks, such as the Professional Support Networks that form a part of this project, to enable you to be supported in your role.
- Building protocols or processes with external organisations that can provide additional support and knowledge.

## Where to from here?

You might like to reflect on – or discuss with your colleagues – your responses to the following questions:

- What do you see as the biggest issue that influences the level of support for implementing trauma responsive practices within your centre – be it positively or negatively?
- Which of the 5 questions is of most relevance to your centre and your work? Why is that?
- How do you think as a staff team that you have most effectively engaged with trauma responsive practice?
- Share one example of a collaborative process or strategy that has worked well in your service or centre.