

Relational EXCHANGE

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

Effectively responding to behaviours we might see in the early childhood education space.

Welcome

Welcome to our next blog piece 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.

Responding to behaviour

When exploring a trauma informed approach many professionals want to dive into changing some of the (what are often called) 'challenging behaviours' that children who have experienced trauma present with. This presentation of the internal distress of the child is often a challenging thing for us as professionals too!

However, we need to continually reflect on the 'how' of our response to behaviour but to do that we always need to ask ourselves the 'why' – why am I responding in this way?

Behaviour is a story

We know that behaviour is a story – it tells us a story of what is happening for that child in that moment, but often that is grounded in the experiences of their past. As we continually reflect on these stories we want to look for the underlying needs of the child represented by the behaviour and then consider how best we can respond to those needs rather than that presentation.

For example, if a child is calm, sitting quietly and engaging with the story we are reading, we can ask – 'why are they doing that – what is the story of this behaviour?' We might reflect that this is telling us of a child who is feeling safe in our learning environment, they are secure in the relationships they have with us and the other children in the room and they are able to focus on the content of the session because they have come to experience this environment as familiar and rewarding. What is this child's underlying needs? They need more of the same experiences for their world to remain familiar and their relationships secure.

Have we ever actually done this analysis for a child such as this? Perhaps not, but it is equally as effective a process if it is a child who we might say is displaying challenging behaviour. Why do we call the behaviour challenging? Is it because it is challenging the environment we are trying to establish or, actually, is it challenging us to try to understand its purpose and respond to what this behaviour is demanding we provide. A trauma responsive practice approach would say it was the latter.

Exploring a range of behaviours

Let's look in more detail at a group of particular behaviours. These might include things like:

- Not easily accepting praise or a kind or positive word from us as educators
- Not accepting or denying responsibility for an issue that has arisen eg: "I didn't hit him" or "I didn't tip over the jar"
- Struggling with connecting with others in the room – both educators and other children. This might include running away from people who try to talk to them, swearing at those people or even lashing out when others are trying to connect

These behaviours can indeed be both challenging and frustrating but let's consider the possible meaning behind them. And we start with a quote from educator Annette Breaux.

*9 times out of 10, the story behind the misbehaviour
won't make you angry, it will break your heart*

All of the above behaviours can stem from what we call a shame base. How can we define shame? Shame stems from how I see myself reflected in the eyes of the other – particularly if I see myself reflected as worthless or unlovable. Shame is a relational experience as it only happens in connection with other important people in our lives. Thus, it manifests in relational ways – which can then feel confronting to us when we are trying to engage children in positive experiences of interaction but are rejected or rebuffed in those attempts.

What is the story of, or meaning behind, shame based behaviours?

As the child, I am not being rude when I ignore your praise or scribble over the drawing or painting you just told me that you liked because of the green I used in it. It was a response to an input or experience that just could not be reconciled with my internalized sense of worthlessness, stemming from my experiences of relational trauma.

As the child, I am not being 'manipulative' or a 'compulsive liar' when I say I didn't do something we both know I actually did. It is just that, sub-consciously, an acknowledgement of that just reinforces my sense of unlovability and I really hope that maybe it's not true and that I am loved and I am lovable. But it feels very unsafe.

As the child I really do want to connect with you, and the other children, but my sense of worthlessness makes me feel like that is just not possible (although I don't have a conscious understanding that that is how I feel) and so I push away any attempts at connection because then it won't reinforce that experience of being unloved. It is an unconscious attempt to stop the hurt before the hurt happens again – because that has been my repeated experience of relationships in the context of trauma.

These can be challenging meanings for us as educators to hold in the midst of the aggression or the rejection but we need to try to be able to hold this position of understanding and then respond accordingly.

How can we respond supportively to shame-based behaviours?

The underlying need of children filled with shame is repeated, but small, experiences that challenge their global sense of worthlessness. We can't change this with one interaction and we can't overcome this sense by 'heaping on' positivity because the child just won't be able to tolerate that. So, we need to provide 'bite-sized' pieces of positive relational interaction on a consistent and repeated basis. I like to call one of these methods 'drive by praise', where I am walking past a child and make a small positive comment and then just keep on walking so the message can't

be negated or challenged. However, 'drive by praise' will only make a difference when it is provided consistently and repeatedly – as we are reminded that the brain develops through repetition.

We also need to give clear messages about what is OK in terms of relational experiences together – and what is not – and to keep the focus on the connection, not the behaviour. We continually counter the sense of worthlessness and unlovability with ongoing experiences and messages of worth and love that can be tolerated by the child.

This exploration tells us about the complexity of trauma, its impacts and how best to respond. But, when you break it down, you can see how important and impactful small actions can be for children when they are provided in enough repetitions and with enough genuine care and concern.

Where to from here?

We continue to talk about relationships and consistency and repetition a lot throughout the trauma informed project and this blog is no exception. Working with the impacts of trauma can be challenging but we need to understand the experience from the child's view – how challenging is that? We also need to think about how we can work as a team to support each child and what we need to do to look after ourselves in the face of some of these behaviours. Because of that you might like to reflect on – or discuss with your colleagues – your responses to the following questions:

- Do the examples of shame based behaviour bring to mind any of the children you work with?
- What do you need to be able to consider the story behind the behaviour in the moments that those behaviours present?
- What relational response do I already put in place with the children with whom I work?
- What could I be more aware of going forward to be even more supportive of the children with whom I work?
- What can we do as a staff team to put this understanding into action?