

Relational EXCHANGE

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

Looking beyond behaviours.

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.

The focus of this blog is on elaborating on how children show their feeling through their behaviour. It is common among adults to react to the child's behaviour rather than to the feelings and needs that are hidden behind the behaviour. Meanwhile, among adults, early childhood educators who respond appropriately to their children are trying to understand their needs and feelings and not just focusing on their behaviour.

By introducing a metaphor about children's behaviour, this article seeks to show how educators respond to children in a mindful way and what makes them able to see beyond the child's behaviour where feelings and needs are perceptible. This blog is based on a discourse that challenges deficit points of view about children's behaviour and rather believes that all behaviour has meaning. This belief is based on an understanding of the emotional needs of children that can assist adults to appropriately responding to children's behaviour. In this condition, a child learns to regulate his/her behaviour through the experience of being soothed by a regulated or calm adult.

Young Child's brain

As an early childhood educator working with children affected by trauma, the behaviour is all we see from children. It is behaviour that challenges us, shows us clues about what's going on inside the child, and invites us to react or respond to it. Issues around responding to behaviour are particularly pertinent for educators working with the 0 – 2 age group. Between the ages of one and four, a child's emotional brain centre is like a construction zone (or like your house, part-way through renovations!). The 'synaptic exuberance' inside the child's brain, manifests with behaviours of easy frustration and strongly expressed feelings, which are so typical of toddlers. Beyond this behaviour lies the toddler's big needs and very big feelings. Let's look at a common example:

Two year old Archie wants the truck Jack is playing with. He grabs it from Jack. When Jack begins to cry, Archie hits him and starts to cry himself. The both children are acting from the limbic system, all about "me and my feelings".

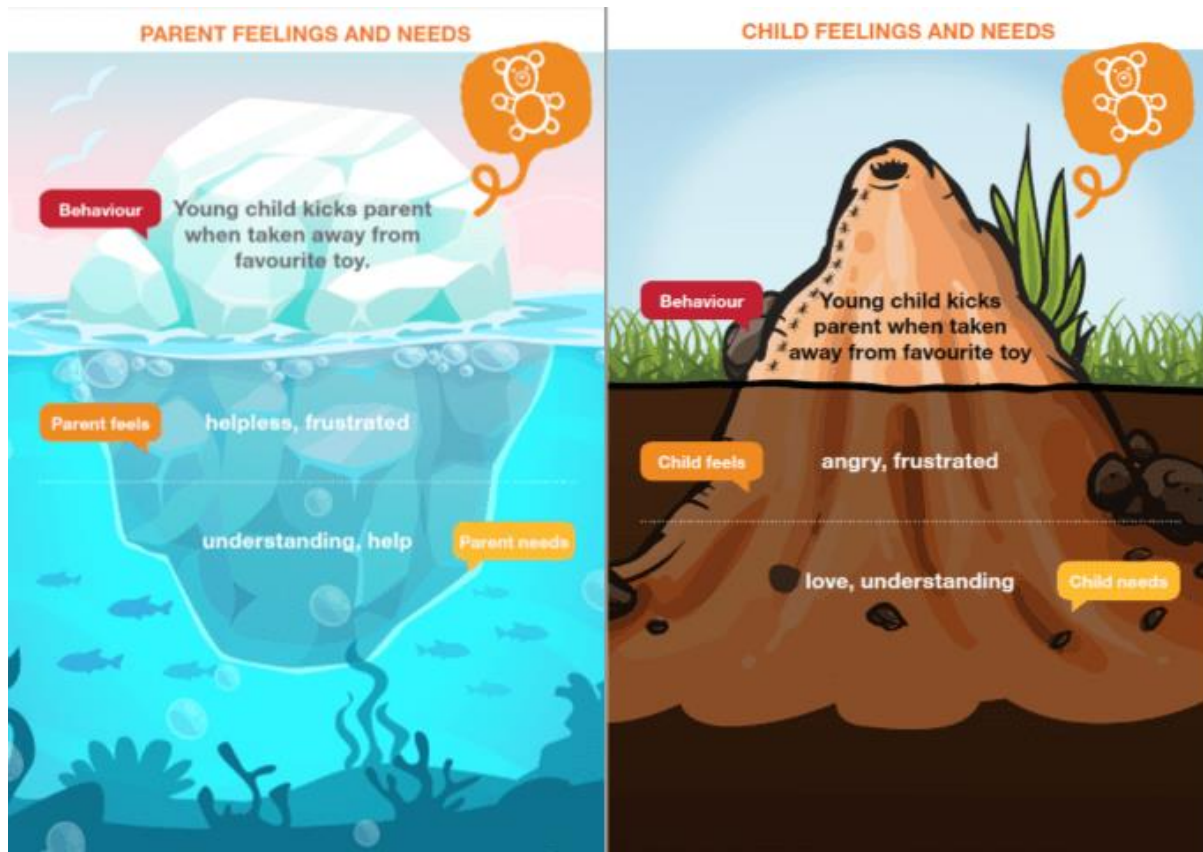
An analogy

Behaviour is all we see from the child but it doesn't mean that behaviour is the whole child. This is very similar to an iceberg or an anthill. All we see is the tip but it is important to remind ourselves that the tip is not the whole iceberg or anthill. The big hidden part that somehow makes the tip visible is underneath. Using this analogy, in the case of the child, the big non-visible part that causes the behaviour includes the child's feelings and needs. For this reason, to understand a child's behaviours, it is important to be able to identify feelings and needs.

An educator who understands the iceberg model of behaviour would wonder about Archie's needs and feelings ('I need that toy and I need it now!') and would then show Archie non-verbally, 'I get you'. Staying with young children physically and emotionally when they are upset, lets them know that their feelings are understood and helps them to calm down.

The analogy of the iceberg/anthill has the behaviour in the tip whilst the hidden part below contains the purpose of the behaviour (i.e., feelings and needs). Often so much reaction is put into the behaviour, which is the smallest part of the whole situation because it can be seen. The behaviour is what we see, it provokes a response/reaction in us. The feelings and needs are not as obvious unless we tune in and recognise them.

We have developed this analogy to support parents to understand their children's behaviour but I think it is just as useful for early childhood educators. In the scenarios below replace parent with educator. You have been kicked by the young child, rather than reacting to the behaviour itself the skills is not to react, but to dive down into the water to look at feelings and needs (or digging down the dirt in the case of anthill). What is going on behind (underneath the behaviour)



Recognising and acknowledging the importance of feelings and needs supports early childhood educators to see the whole child and not just their behaviour. Then it is time to identify and sometimes guess the feelings and needs that might be underlying the behaviours observed. But here is where we come across a common barrier.

Needs versus wants

Many early childhood educators have trouble distinguishing feelings from needs, and needs from wants. We mix them up, use terms interchangeably in our sentences and find it hard to label them properly. In our daily conversations, we might say “You need to pack up”, or “We need to leave the shopping centre”. These phrases highlight the parent’s want rather than their need. This is a nuanced distinction.

In the example described in the above diagrams, replacing the parent with the early childhood educator we have a young child kicks their parent (educator) when taken away from their favourite toy. We can assume that

- The child wants “more time to play” and is probably feeling “angry and frustrated”. However, in this situation, the child’s need is probably “love and understanding”.
- The parent’s (educator) want is “to take the child off the toy”, and/or “to leave the room asap” and may feel “frustrated”. However, the parent’s (educators) need is perhaps “understanding and help”.

At first, these situations can produce a standoff as ‘children’s wants’ and ‘parents (educators) wants’ often look opposite to each other.

As you can see in the image, we place the iceberg and the anthill side-by-side, looking to make a balance between the child’s and parent’s (educators) needs. We believe that this approach can bring sustainability to the early childhood educator- child nurturing relationship.

We have observed that when adults focus on wants, usually, there is no way to find a solution that fits both. But, by switching focus and being mindful of needs, the early childhood educator might be able to suggest a solution that meets the needs of both parties (i.e. comfort, a hug that then promotes cooperation). This approach is complicated by the significant range of ideas we all have about what the wants, feelings and needs are in different situations

Technique versus practice

The aim of training ourselves to look at feelings and needs is to mindfully respond to the situation rather than react. There are many mindful exercises that we know (e.g., mindful breathing, walking, eating, drinking, and listening). All these practices are built on things we unconsciously do every second in normal life. When we spend a few minutes in consciously doing those same things, we are in fact doing a mindful practice. Listening to another in a mindful way, eating a sultana while being aware of its shape, size, and taste, drinking a glass of water and feeling how it cools the mouth space and goes down to the stomach, are examples of simple mindful practices that can be done at any time of the day.

We are commonly asked just how effective mindful practices can be in those moments when they are most needed. Highly emotional moments between adults and children are precisely the moments when educators need to be mindful and to prevent ‘flipping their lid’. An educator cannot stand in the middle of a room with a number of toddlers and be mindful by taking five breaths! It is almost impossible to calm down through breathing when two children are crying

and screaming, each of them pointing his innocent finger towards the other. Early childhood educators often wonder if mindful practices are applicable as an effective technique in parenting at all.

The answer to this question lies in distinguishing 'practice' from 'technique'. Techniques operate like keys: when a door is locked you just need to find the right key to open it. Once the right key is identified, the door will always be unlocked using the same key. To use the key you don't need to practise. Everybody who has the key can open the door. In the same way anybody can use techniques to accomplish jobs.

While techniques are meant to work for anybody who has learnt them, regardless of who they are, with concepts like mindfulness, 'being' matters. It is not enough to know about mindful activities or even to learn mindfulness practices. It is not even helpful to try them a couple of times to make sure that we have them in mind. Let's remind ourselves that athletes do not leave their exercises for the Olympics. Concepts like mindfulness need to be practised. It is good practice that makes perfect. By practising repeatedly, we master them overtime. Practice 'enables' us and embeds the ability as part of our being. By going through the practice, the practitioner is mindful rather than trying/struggling to be mindful. When mindfulness practices are part of a person's daily life, the educator or parent can find themselves being more mindful when they need it. They discover that compared with the past, they are better able to think before they act. They find themselves better able to manage big feelings and see beyond behaviours.

To clarify, the mindful educator does not need to do ten breaths in the middle of a chaotic toddlers' room. They do not need to do the mindful drinking activity to keep being mindful when children are screaming. They just find themselves acting more and more mindfully. Athletes don't try to remember things during games they just act and let their abilities flourish. Mindfulness activities are lifelong capacity building practices. This is a progression that never ends.

Where to from here? Good practice makes perfect

Looking beyond the behaviour and noticing feelings and needs, is a skill. Like every other skill, it needs practice to develop. We suggest educators start the practice by identifying their feeling and needs. Then, at peaceful times when they feel like have the capacity, try to guess others' feelings and needs. And finally, never forget that building up a skill comes only with repetition, so just repeat and repeat the exercise again and again.

This repetition of practice builds a capacity that can more easily be drawn on in times that we need it. We will find ourselves more able to see underlying feelings and needs at times of being challenged by behaviour. By being consistent with the exercise we also develop a habit of shifting our focus, concentrating less on the behavioural tip and more on diving down the water or digging down into the dirt to explore the feelings and needs. In turn, once we are more aware of our and our children's feelings and needs (or at least can have a good guess about them!), we have the opportunity to suggest other solutions that might work better in that situation and meet both needs and slowing the reactive cycle of responding to behaviours with frustration and overwhelm.