

# Trauma Informed Classrooms: Four Essential Activities

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## 1. Greet the child before they do anything to initiate engagement with you.

Greeting children in this way offers them the experience that they are in your thoughts, that they are worthy and that you are accessible. This is necessary as children who have experienced interpersonal trauma have learnt that they cannot rely on others to attend to them and their needs. They also have a low opinion of their worth. Promoting their sense of self-worth and the worth of relationships with others underpins all endeavours to promote recovery from interpersonal trauma. Check in with them proactively throughout the day.

## 2. Tune into the child's emotions and restore calm.

When the child is happy, allow yourself to feel and project happiness in your interactions with them. When the child is sad or frustrated, show a little of those emotions as well. In doing so you and the child will be connected at an emotional level. Then restore calm. They will remain connected and return to calm themselves. These experiences of emotional connection offer the child experiences that their feelings matter; that they matter; that they are worthy. It also promotes tolerance of, and a return to calm from, a range of emotions. That is, when doing this activity you are making a real contribution to the child or young person's developing capacity to regulate their own emotions (self-regulation), to be aware of the emotional experience of others (essential for the development of empathy and socio-emotional reciprocity), and you are providing a safe interpersonal space for experience and exploration of a range emotions and a full and satisfying experience of life.

## 3. Say what is in their head and in their heart.

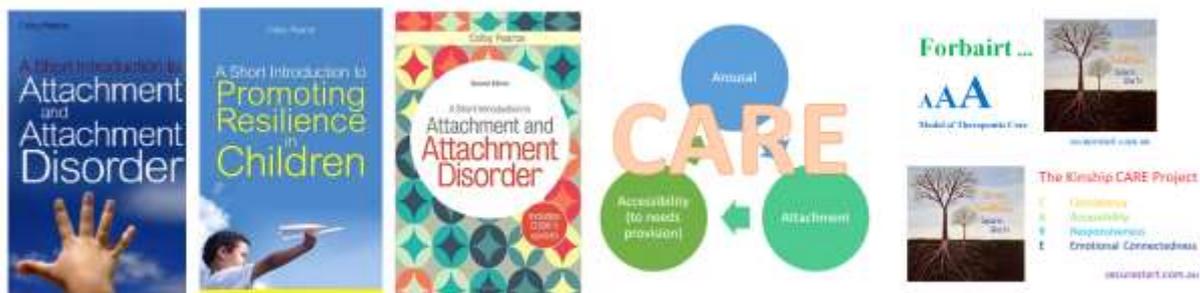
Observe the child and the situation/activity. Say what you think is their experience of the situation/activity. Make it a statement. If you find yourself wanting to ask the child a question about their experience and you can see what the answer would be (whether they would answer your question or not), don't ask the question; say the answer. Say what you see. Say it with congruent feeling. Speak their mind. Communicating in this way offers the child an enriched experience that they are understood, that their experience matters, and that they matter. Avoid asking questions, as questions communicate that you do not know them. Providing experiences of being understood in this way supports children who have had a tough start to life to develop a vocabulary for expressing themselves, as opposed to expressing themselves through (often problematic) actions. It provides experiences of understanding that are one of the foundations for the development of secure dependency on adults in a caregiving role, which usually occurs in infancy but is likely to have been inadequate during their own early years. Start with the easy stuff, such as what they like, what they feel good at, or what they are having difficulty with. Get them used to the closeness that is a by-product of experiences of being understood before you tackle more difficult experiences, such as feelings of anger. When they are angry, and after a period of getting the child used to you communicating with understanding, you might observe that they *just want to be left alone right now*. Verbalising understanding generally reduces arousal levels. Used correctly, it can help defuse anger levels in children who are prone to emotional dysregulation as a result of inadequate parental CARE (Consistency, Accessibility, Responsiveness, Emotional Connectedness)<sup>1</sup> during infancy.

#### 4. Develop a ritual involving one-to-one time.

Plan to spend five minutes per day of one-to-one time with the child. Do it in a routine and predictable way, such as at a certain time of the day. This satisfies a number of important needs the child has, including their needs for attention and order. Help them with a task or play a simple card game with them. Tune into their emotions and say what is in their head and in their heart (enrichment activities 2 and 3). If you play a game of Uno, for example, play their hand. Match your emotions and your words to their experience of the game.

#### A Final Word

As with all of the strategies I suggest, only set out to do what you can maintain to a reasonably consistent regime over time. Consistency is vital, especially with respect to children and young people who are recovering from adverse childhood experiences. Inconsistency is an irritant, and children who have experienced developmental trauma are more sensitive to irritants than others. So choose consistency over frequency. Good luck!



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<sup>i</sup> Pearce, C. (2016). *A Short Introduction to Attachment and Attachment Disorder (Second Edition)*, London, Jessica Kingsley