



# A Guide to Our Trauma Informed School

Dec 2023 – Dec 2026

## Welcome

We believe in a whole school, trauma informed culture. This means that:

- ✓ We take a nurturing approach, one where every child feels listened to.
- ✓ Staff are committed to the emotional well-being of pupils.
- ✓ Staff understand how toxic stress can impact learning and behaviour.

This booklet tells you more and gives lots of practical examples of how we do this.

## What is a trauma?

It's an emotional response to an event that is frightening or distressing. It can be a one off event, or can be something that happens over a number of years.

## What is a trauma informed school?

Trauma can be caused by a range of life events, for example bereavement, neglect, witnessing domestic violence or being the victim of racial abuse.

In a trauma informed school, all adults understand the impact of trauma on the child – and have strategies to support the child.

Pupils who experience trauma often find it harder to regulate their feelings or make good friends. Some of their behaviours can seem antagonistic to an uninformed adult. Trauma informed staff understand how previous life events can lead to the behaviours we see today. These staff adjust their approach so that we deal with the behaviour even better than before.

In short, **trauma informed** means that adults respond in a way that sees not only the issue at hand, but also what's gone on before.

# What are ACEs?

The term *ACEs* is short for *adverse childhood experiences*. These are traumatic life experiences that occur before the age of 18.

## What kind of experiences are adverse?



### Maltreatment

e.g. abuse, neglect



### Violence and Coercion

e.g. domestic abuse, being victim of violent crime



### Adjustment

e.g. migration, asylum, ending relationships



### Prejudice

e.g. sexism, racism, LGBTQ+ prejudice, ableism



### Family adversity

e.g. substance misuse, intergenerational trauma, destitution or deprivation



### Inhuman treatment

e.g. torture, forced imprisonment, female genital mutilation



### Adult responsibilities

e.g. being a young carer, involvement in child labour

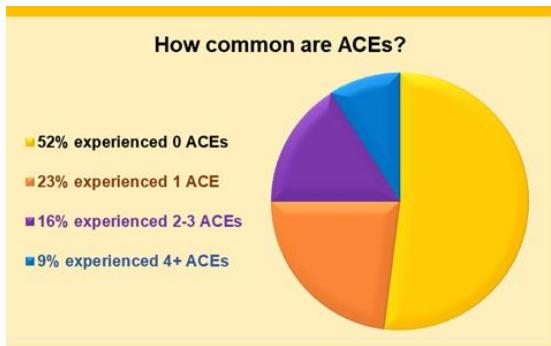


### Bereavement or loss

e.g. traumatic deaths, surviving an illness, natural accident

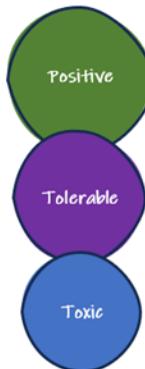
## How common are ACEs?

The national charity, Young Minds, says that almost half of children have experienced one or more ACEs.



## Toxic Stress

Children who experience more ACEs, without the support of an *emotionally available adult* (EAA), are at risk of damaging changes to their brains and bodies because of toxic stress.



### Levels of Stress

Brief increases in heart rate. Intensified focus. Mild elevation in levels of stress hormones.

Serious but temporary stress responses which can be mitigated by positive buffering influences (e.g. our relationships).

Intense and prolonged activation of stress response systems without positive buffering influences or relationships

# ACEs continued...

## What are Behaviourist Approaches?

Very simply, a behaviourist approach is one where children learn to behave through rewards and consequences. This works well for some children. In fact, most schools use some of this approach to reward good behaviour or effort – but also sanction children who have done the wrong thing.

## Behaviourist Approaches & ACES

Although the sanctions of a behaviourist approach do work for many children, they do not work for all - especially those who've experienced multiple ACEs.

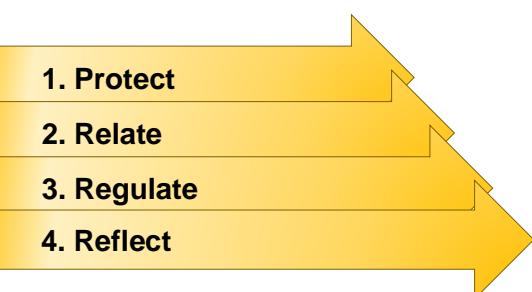
Some children might be more likely to have experienced trauma and loss. This can include:

- Children in care
- Children at the edge of the care system
- Children previously in care.

For these children, behaviourist approaches can re-traumatise and do little to teach the child how to understand and express emotions in a better way.

## And, that's why we take a trauma informed approach

There are four strands to our approach.  
Each help children who've experienced trauma to be more successful.  
Read on to find out more.



1. Protect
2. Relate
3. Regulate
4. Reflect

*“Everything changes when the adult changes.”*

Paul Dix

# 1. Protect

**The protect strand is about creating an environment and culture where every child flourishes.**

When staff and leaders create emotionally safe environments, we reduce the chances of children falling. In other words, we protect them from things going wrong.

**Examples of how we create that environment and culture at Oughtibridge:**

- **Safety cues:** These are small things that we do that give children the cue that this is a safe place. It's often simple things that are common in many schools (e.g. class staff welcoming each child at the classroom door or signs to remind children who to talk to if they are worried).
- **An open-door policy:** This means we welcome informal chats with the child's family.
- **Staff trained in *PACE* modes of interaction:** These PACE approaches are proven to shift children out of flight, fight and freeze responses.
  - Playful
  - Accepting of where children are in their behaviour / learning
  - Curious and thoughtful with children about their behaviour and what it means for them
  - Empathetic and warm.
- **Speaking to everybody with dignity:** A pledge to cease all use of harsh voices, shouting, put downs and shaming (which are proven to be neurologically damaging).
- **Tweaks for individual children:** Staff adjust school life based on a child's needs, including non-judgmental tweaks to parts of the school day that a child is not managing well. For example, children who can't yet cope with the main playground can access calmer, smaller areas with emotionally regulating adults.
- **Interventions that strengthen relationships:** These help staff get to know children as individuals. They enable children to develop a relationship with an *emotionally available adult*, which helps them to feel safe to talk, if they wish, about painful life experiences, those which are interfering with their ability to learn and the quality of their life. Sometimes they have a more than one benefit for the child, for example:
  - Attachment play activities to allow children to experience joy, which is a high stress emotion that they may not be able to manage (e.g. 2 truths and a lie; draw each other with paper on your head; make up a story a line at a time; feather blowing; blowing bubbles; cotton ball hockey and clapping games).
  - I wish my teacher knew...

I wish my teacher knew...

Sometimes it is hard to talk about how we feel or things that are going on in our lives. So, sometimes it is better to write them down.

What do you wish your teacher knew about how you feel or things that are going on in your life? What do you wish your teacher knew about what you think about school?

Write what you wish your teacher knew.

## 2. Relate

**The relate strand is about building strong relationships with individual children, but also modelling what good relationships look like.**

We work hard to build meaningful bonds with pupils and know that this benefits the child's mental health and happiness. Therefore, the relate strand is not just about our interactions in the classroom, hall or playground, it's also about our understanding of how children's brains work.

Overall, we ensure that there are repeated **positive interactions** between the children and their adults. These positive interactions create neurons in the frontal lobes which help the child's brain develop in a healthy way.

### **Examples of our approaches to building relationships**

- **Pre-frontal cortex:** We know that limited positive experiences of relationships leads to poor development in the part of the brain called the pre-frontal cortex (PFC). There is plasticity in the PFC and it is never too late to develop functions in the frontal lobe. This means that, once any consequences have happened, we quickly to forgive & move on.
- **Affect attunement:** We 'tune into' the emotional intensity of the child, so as to connect with them in their joy or pain. For example, a seven year old is over-the-moon because of their awesome unicorn drawing, then we tune in by showing our delight back to the child. Or, if a child is really angry, we tune in by using fewer words, being empathetic and speaking calmly. We also apologise for any misattunements (this apology is called interactive repair), as there can be long-term harm to children from lack of interactive repair and misattunement.
- **Containment:** This means staff being able to deal with and empathise with the child's intense feelings (e.g. rage, power plays, terror, distress) without things getting out of hand. Self-awareness is key in this – we must know own triggers and how to manage our own emotions. That's because adults who are calm and fair, develop stronger relationships in the medium and long term.
- **Boundaries:** We communicate school rules in an empathetic way. We recognise where children are in their emotions in a non-judgemental way, whilst also framing boundaries. For example:
  - "I notice that you are upset right now. Very upset. But we don't do that here."
  - "It's OK to be angry, but it's not OK to hurt other children."
  - "We do not kick each other. At school, we always have kind hands and feet."



### 3. Regulate

**The regulate strand is about helping children to return to a calm state when they are upset, angry or anxious. In other words, it's about supporting a child when they are in crisis – or soon will be in crisis.**

We use strategies specifically designed to bring down stress hormones in vulnerable children (e.g. from toxic to tolerable level). This enables the child to feel calm, soothed and safe. These approaches trigger positive chemicals in the brains of children which can reduce risk of stress induced illness – now or later in life.

Our eventual aim is that the child will have the ability to self-regulate. However, we recognise that for children who have experienced trauma, we may need to model and support regulation for some time. Working alongside the child to regulate is called co-regulating.

#### **Talking with the Child**

A powerful way to helping children to regulate is to simply discuss what is bothering them. When children feel understood and have empathy shown to them, toxic stress levels can reduce. Furthermore, regular empathic listening helps children to build good, healthy relationships later in life.

- Just listen: Sometimes staff will just use prompts to allow the child to talk (e.g. “Go on...” “I see... Tell me more...”), but sometimes we will just let the child speak and just listen.
- Affect labelling: This means putting the child’s feelings into words, e.g.
  - “When that happened, it looked like you were very frustrated by it.”
- Mental state talk: This means talking about emotions, thoughts and intentions, for example:
  - “I know, I know you are so cross with Sam for taking your pencil. Not a bit cross, but very cross. I know.”
  - “You feel I really don’t understand you and I just don’t hear what you are trying to get me to understand.”

#### **Other examples of how we support children to be regulated**

- **Individual plans:** These set out what the child’s triggers are, what we can do when hyper aroused or needing to avoid fight, flight or freeze states. They tell us who the child can go to, when they can go and where the person is.
- **Adult communication:** Staff reduce stress triggers by avoiding defensive voice, gestures and body language. Also, they use straightforward language and simple sentences.
- **Individual alternatives:** This is having a range of options for children to discharge feelings in a more socially acceptable way. For example, running it off, ripping, pummelling it out in play-do, sensory activities that include heavy muscle work.
- **Regulation / safe spaces:** Areas of class with fiddle toys, stress balls or even a tent.
- **Teaching stress regulation:** Such as mindfulness, yoga breathing, peer massage.
- **Using nature to connect with living things:** This can be playing in a mud kitchen, stroking an animal, kicking up leaves. These all have a neurological benefit.

## 4. Reflect

The reflect strand is about helping children to process the event(s), to learn from it and to look to the future. In other words, debriefing that happens after the event or sometimes during the event (e.g. an ongoing episode of being taken into care).

Without time to reflect, raw unprocessed trauma can stay raw and unprocessed. This can result in just more and more challenging behaviour. Children need time to 'unpick' what happened. Reflection gives children chance to:

- ✓ Process events (i.e. make sense of what happened).
- ✓ Use and understand the language of their emotions.
- ✓ Understand their thoughts, feelings, reactions and sensations in their body.
- ✓ Identify new options and strategies.

Because of the need to process trauma, we help children reflect on troubling incidents with a supportive, non-judgemental adult. Oughtibridge staff are empathetic listeners – they do not lecture and they do use mental state talk.

### Examples of our approaches to help children reflect on events

- Restorative conversations: This is a way of looking at triggers, how we felt and what we could do differently next time.
- Big Empathy Drawings (especially if a child pours out their heart to a staff member).
- Emotion clouds
- Sand play therapy
- Emotion cards
- Staff using **WINE**:
  - Wonder: Staff wonder how the child is, what they are feeling, what they are thinking, e.g. "I wonder if something happened to upset you at playtime..."
  - Imagine: Staff try to imagine what the child is going through, e.g. "I imagine that must have been worrying for you..."
  - Notice: Staff show that they notice certain behaviours. This is done in a non-confrontational way, e.g. "I notice you're walking around pretty fast..."
  - Empathy: Staff try to show empathy for what the child has experienced, e.g. "No wonder you feel like that."

*"Reflection is more than just noticing what one feels..."*

*"It's an effort to also make sense out of feelings"*

Hauser