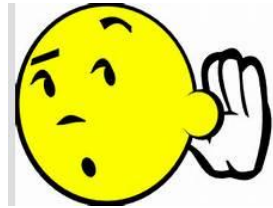


Developing Resilience with Looked After Children

Attending to the child – Being attended to is an experience that is essential for the poorly attached child to learn security, form healthy attachments and ultimately to develop resilience. We need to watch the use of the ‘attention seeker’ phrase and re-frame what we see in light of what we know about the child’s background. This child has a vulnerability because their basic human needs were not met at an early stage of development.

We attend to the child by:

- Use of physical contact (touch)
- Eye contact
- Smiles
- Laughter
- Facial expressions &
- Movements



We can ‘attend to the child’ by mirroring their non-verbal communications, by noticing what excites/interests this child, what makes them fidget, feel uncomfortable and how does he/she cope with failure.



Wondering Aloud – is a concrete expression of giving the child the experience of being attended to. In ‘wondering aloud’ we are attempting to put into words what might be going on inside the child’s head, for example, ‘I wonder if you are feeling quite happy with yourself for doing that piece of work as I noticed your smile when you got that star!’ We do need to remain open to the fact that you may be wrong.

This type of observation helps the child develop mentalisation, which is the capacity to interpret what is happening inside itself and with the external environment. Mentalisation develops by experiencing someone else articulating and making links about what might be happening- out loud. It enables the child to make sense of themselves and to understand what others faces and behaviours mean. This is the origin of empathy and is a prerequisite for self-control and self-regulation.

Children with attachment difficulties have a poor sense of self and therefore they become dysregulated very easily, they are not able to identify and differentiate between different sensations, states and feelings. They do not know how or when to move between states and therefore are not able to self-calm. Before you can self-soothe/calm you need the experience of another giving you feedback on your thoughts and feelings, which is the start of sensory and emotional literacy. This then builds awareness of our self and others and then we can start to self-regulate and ultimately develop our resilience levels.

Using Emotion Coaching Techniques: Emotion Coaching is a practice for supporting children and young people to identify their emotions, recognise that they are normal and create strategies to manage them. It is important that LAC who often experience strong and varied emotions (including separation anxiety, shame, fear, anger, mistrust, rage, panic) are supported to manage these emotions appropriately. This will enable them to focus upon their education and enhance their achievement.

Emotion coaching is based on the assumption that emotions drive behaviour. Saarni (1999) stated that without the ability to identify the specific emotion that one is experiencing, choosing an appropriate and effective strategy to alleviate this state will largely be inadequate. Emotion coaching does not involve discussing the circumstances where emotions may have come from or addressing the underlying causes of emotions. It is about identifying and managing the emotions 'here and now'. Here are the following strategies that can be used within the school and home setting:

1. **Listen.** Pay attention to the child or young person. What are they doing? What are they saying? What are they trying to communicate to you by their words and/or behaviours?
2. **Name the child's emotions.** "Luke, I can see that you are very frustrated. Is that right? Yeah. You are really frustrated."
3. **Validate the feeling.** "It makes sense that you are frustrated. You want to go to your friend's house now but there isn't time before dinner. Are you feeling angry with me for not letting you go now?"
4. **Address the poor behaviour.** Emotion coaching doesn't mean letting children get away with inappropriate behaviour. In fact, setting and enforcing clear limits and consequences is an important strategy to help Looked After Children regulate their emotions. "It is okay to feel angry and I know you were looking forward to hanging out with XXX. But it is not okay to throw all your books on the floor. You can take some time to calm down. Then please pick your books up off the floor and put them back on the shelf before dinner. If you choose not to pick your books up then you are choosing to not go over to Veronica's tomorrow."
5. **Work together to come up with different ways to deal with those feelings.** At a later point you can process what happened. "Next time you feel that frustrated with me what could you do differently? What could you have said? Seeing your friends is really important to you and I understand that. Family dinner is really important to me. What could we do different next time to avoid this conflict?"

Teaching Self-Regulation: The capacity to regulate our emotions and reactions is built during the early years of life and is directly linked to our level of resilience. This capacity is known as 'affect regulation'. Positive affect regulation depends upon an attuned attachment relationship with a well-regulated care-giver. Children with affect dysregulation have a reduced capacity to control their feelings and states and they have difficulty managing strong emotions, leading them straight to react with no time to think.

Regulating Arousal Levels – consider how many 'clues' the child might need to know in relation to what's going on in their bodies and how they are feeling.

- They need **vocabulary** to describe these states and feelings and
- Then the **tools** to take control of states and feelings, for example to notice they are feeling annoyed and then to take steps to calm down.

For children who have not experienced attuned attachment relationships we need to name the behaviour that shows arousal levels are rising. 'You are rocking in your chair and I wonder are you feeling a little worried?' We then need to help them match the behaviour with a possible feeling and trigger...'is it because we are starting maths? We wonder aloud with these children and comment to help develop self-regulation; 'you seem happy', 'you look really sad', 'I think you might be angry with me because we had to stop our activity', 'I noticed you asked to go to the toilet as soon as the lesson started, I think you may be anxious about writing tasks, could I be right?

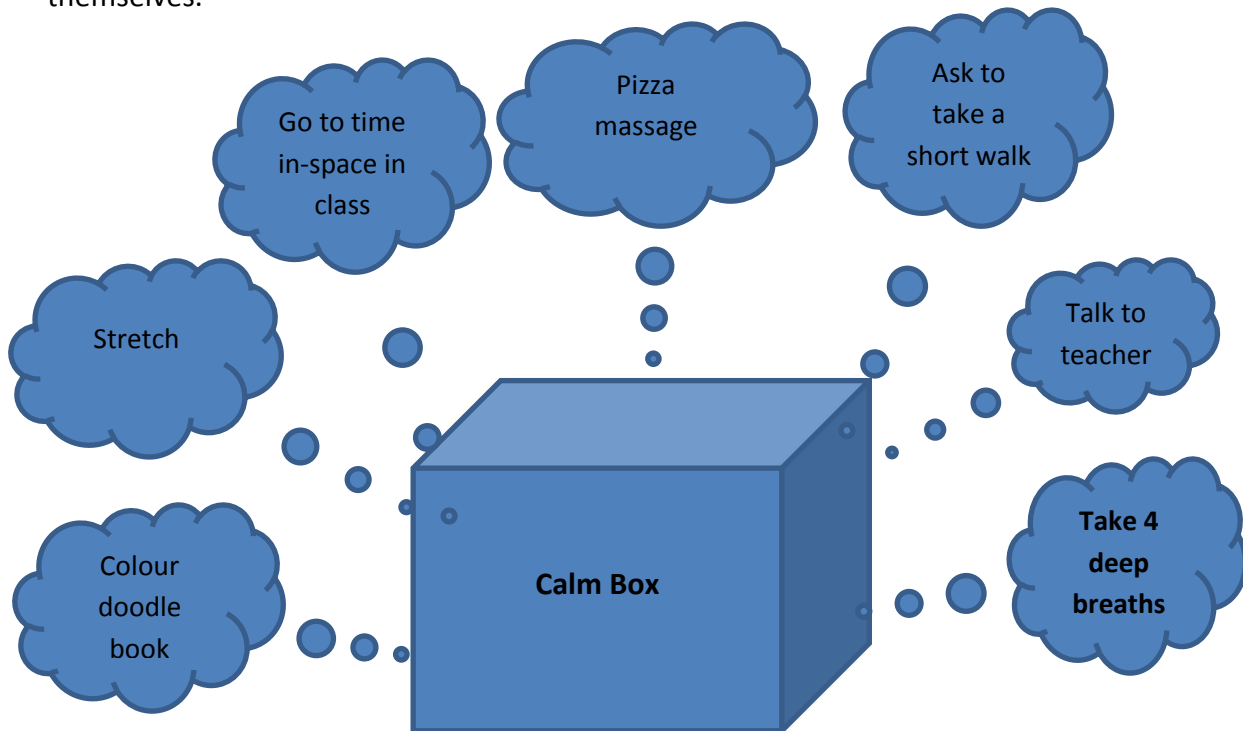
Once we have identified the behaviours and possible triggers we then need to help these



children learn and use tools to soothe themselves. We try to help them see their feelings as manageable and to understand that they can control them. We are helping them to learn that all feelings whether positive or negative can be tolerated and managed and to understand that feelings move on and change. We provide emotional holding/containment, 'you're very cross right now because

you really wanted to continue on the computer. You probably wish time could go on and on. Time does go quickly when we are enjoying an activity, it is annoying to stop when you are happy, but we will have time again later/tomorrow/next week'. We provide a commentary of verbal and nonverbal behaviours, explain what we notice to help the child organise their thinking and to learn to regulate their feelings and behaviours over time.

A nice intervention is **'The Calm Box'** – working with an adult the child chooses the activities that they will try to use when they notice that they are becoming upset/over excited/nervous/angry etc. We then direct them to select an activity when they become aroused, over time we encourage them to discreetly select a self-soothing activity for themselves.



Working together with these children we help them internalise this process themselves, they learn to become aware of their own internal states, their feelings and then to choose an appropriate activity to self-soothe/calm. Many of these self-soothing tasks can be done discreetly and over time the other children would not even notice the child engaging in their self-soothing task. Being able to apply self-soothing tasks at appropriate times is a key component of developing resilience in Looked After Children.