



Safe Families

---

## **Trauma Informed Support: A Therapeutic Parenting Approach**

---

An overview to help you gain an understanding of how children, parents and carers can be better supported through a trauma informed approach.



---

*Therapeutic Parenting is an approach which helps Safe Families volunteers to gain an understanding of how children, parents and carers can be better supported through a trauma informed approach.*

---

Therapeutic parenting is based on several models, often used by parents and carers of children who have experienced trauma.

The guide explores the different kinds of trauma children may experience and the impact this has on their brain development and consequently their behaviour.

Additionally, it explains parenting strategies that can be used for children who have experienced developmental trauma and explores the impact of caring for challenging children on parents and carers' mental health and well-being.

### **What is Developmental Trauma and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE's)?**

Developmental Trauma and ACE's are both terms used to describe the impact of early adverse experiences that can happen within the child's important relationships.

These include

- Verbal, physical, sexual and emotional abuse or neglect
- Parental separation or separation from mother or main care giver
- Household mental illness, domestic violence or alcohol or drug abuse
- In utero trauma
- Poverty and deprivation

### **How does Developmental Trauma impact on the child?**

---

Any child who has lived in an environment where the trusted adults have not been able to meet their emotional and physical needs, and any child who has suffered separation and loss from their family can suffer developmental trauma.

---

Developmental trauma is a set of problems that can affect all areas of the child's development.



Trauma experiences have lasting effects on children's brain development and results in children developing several unhealthy coping strategies

### **Brain Development (Understanding Fight, Flight and Freeze)**

In a traumatic environment a child's brain does not develop as it should.

Trauma affects the part of the brain called the **amygdala** which sits in the limbic part of the brain. It is the part of the brain that is responsible for the 'fight, flight and freeze' response.

#### *Five Important Things to Note about Fight, Flight or Freeze*

1. It has evolved as a survival mechanism, enabling people and other mammals to react quickly to life-threatening situations.
2. It is triggered when a person perceives a danger or threat and sets off a series of reactions including releasing the stress hormones cortisol and adrenaline into the blood stream.
3. These stress hormones are designed to give a person energy to survive - by either running away (flight), fighting (fight) or playing dead, freezing and hoping the threat will go away (freeze).
4. However, this part of the brain becomes extremely sensitive to stress in children who have experienced trauma and it becomes easily triggered.
5. The amygdala becomes like a faulty smoke detector which is triggered even when there is no smoke or any real danger or threat.

The child becomes easily tipped into fight flight or freeze. They may become angry, violent and aggressive, or run away - sometimes putting themselves in more danger, or they may withdraw and seem to refuse to engage.

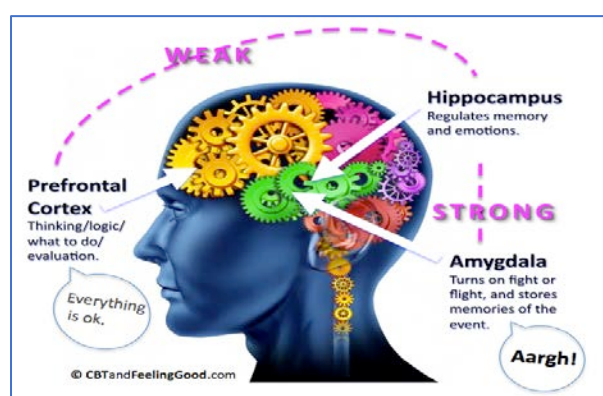
These responses are not within the child's control and although they can be challenging, Safe Families recognises them as a stress and anxiety response.

Additionally, when the fight flight and freeze response is triggered, the stress hormones block the access to the prefrontal cortex part of the brain which is

responsible for the ability to reason, be rational, make good decisions, be able to forward plan, and impulse control.

The emotional response is immediate, overwhelming, and out of measure with the actual stimulus because it has triggered a much more significant emotional threat.

At the same time, while the children are in this stress response, they are unable to think clearly or be reasonable about their behaviour.



## What is Therapeutic Parenting?

---

*Therapeutic Parenting is a highly nurturing style of parenting, and is based on principles of building safe, strong relationships that combine affection and comforting along with clear behavioural expectations and routines.*

---

Therapeutic parenting was developed for and is often regarded as being exclusively for traumatised children who have been fostered or adopted. But this isn't always the case.

The approach also works for any child who may have been exposed to trauma, or who has high anxiety.

It uses different strategies to standard parenting which supports and understands children with high cortisol levels and helps them to make new pathways in the brain.

Therapeutic parenting encourages parents and carers to use the three R's to help their children. (Dr Bruce Perry)

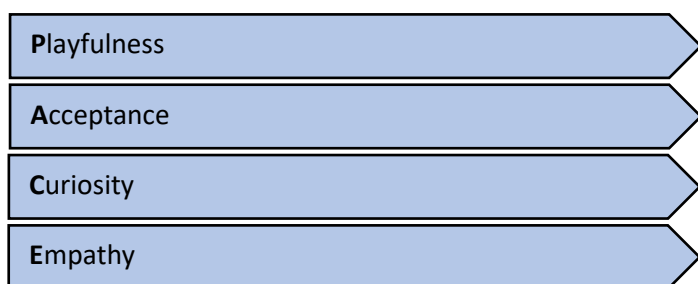


- Regulate – helping their child to regulate (reduce stress levels) and calm their fight/flight/freeze response.
- Relate – relating and connecting with their child through an attuned and sensitive relationship
- Reason – supporting their child to reflect, learn, remember and articulate.

### How can we help?

Therapeutic Parenting uses PACE as an attitude to help children who have experienced trauma.

We can use PACE as a way of approaching the child. (Dan Hughes)



**Playfulness** - Being **playful** means being light-hearted and interested in the child when you talk to them. It means having fun and expressing a sense of joy in the child.

**Acceptance** - Unconditional **acceptance** makes the child feel safe. Accepting the child for who they are, shows them that you accept their wishes thoughts and feelings underneath their outward behaviour.

**Curiosity** - Being **curious** is wondering about the meaning behind the behaviour of the child, and lets the child know that you understand them as well as helping them to understand themselves.

You could say things like: 'I wonder why you are so angry today?' or 'I wonder if you are feeling wobbly today because you fell out with your friends yesterday?'

This is better than asking why the child is behaving in a certain way – they usually don't know or can't verbalise their feelings.



**Empathy** - Showing **empathy** is the most important thing you can do for the child; it underpins the Therapeutic Parenting approach and it shows them that you understand.

To understand the child's needs you need to put yourself in their shoes.

To show empathy you could say something like: 'I can see that this is hard for you'

This shows the child strength, love and commitment.

**PACE is an attitude not a strategy, and is a way of thinking, feeling, communicating and behaving that aims to make the child feel safe.**

PACE helps reduce levels of conflict and helps us to see the strengths and positives of children that lie underneath the more negative and challenging behaviour.

### **What is Compassion Fatigue?**

**Compassion Fatigue is sometimes referred to as 'blocked care' and refers to the feeling parents and carers may feel of being numb, suppressed and defensive when caring for children who present with distressed behaviour.**

Stress and trauma can suppress a parent's ability to sustain loving feelings and empathy towards their child.

Parents and carers brains can become equally affected by the effects of the child's trauma and they can become sensitive to stress and the fight flight or freeze response.

Parents and carers speak of the relentlessness of the daily caring task, as a result of working hard to meet children's complex needs - leading to a lack of physical and emotional space in their lives.

They can be left feeling exhausted, ground down and burnt out, isolated and alone.

In order to begin the process of unblocking the parent's or carer's brain they need to feel safe, understood and not criticised for the feelings they have.



Safe Families recognises the importance of listening to parents and carers in a non-judgemental way.

Self-care is also recognised as an essential and fundamental requirement to help parents and carers avoid compassion fatigue and continue to be able to look after their children. It is part of the foundation of therapeutic parenting which relies on empathic support and self-care.

## **Conclusion**

We know that as a Safe Families volunteer you can have a substantial and positive impact on the families you support.

By using a *trauma informed approach* to support families and by providing a listening, non-judgemental ear, you are directly addressing some of the impact of *compassion fatigue*.

Having an *attitude of PACE* when looking after children helps us to see their strengths and positives and helps to make children feel safe.

**Thank you for your time and support for our families.**

If you would like further information about Therapeutic Parenting, please contact Fiona Eve who is our Safe Families Therapeutic Parenting Coach.

Email; [fionaeve@safefamilies.uk](mailto:fionaeve@safefamilies.uk)

Mobile; 07384 897733