

## Creating safety – supporting the social engagement system

<p><b>Environment</b></p> 	<p>A safe environment is paramount. Consider physical, emotional and cultural safety. Is the environment free from violence and abuse, responsive to physical and emotional needs and inclusive of cultural needs. Also ensure the environment considers the sensory needs of the child. Spaces that have too much stimulation - loud noises, bright lights, strong smells or too many pictures on the walls can be overwhelming for children experiencing trauma. Understanding the child's individual needs and providing enough sensory stimulation for growth but not too much so that the child is overwhelmed is the key. Remember safety is an individual experience. What seems safe for one person may not be for another.</p>
<p><b>Proximity</b></p> 	<p>Consider the child's need for closeness or space. Each child is different. Take into account the context, your relationship and the developmental age of the child. Being attuned to the child will help you to navigate what the child needs. If a child is dysregulated always remain within the line of sight of the child, unless your safety or the safety of others is at risk. Remember time in rather than time out. Any direct contact with the child should be initiated by the child.</p>
<p><b>Eye contact</b></p> 	<p>Eye contact is an important aspect of social engagement and enables feelings of connectedness and validation. Eye contact can be threatening though to a child who has experienced trauma as their social engagement system is usually on high alert. Consider ways to engage with the child using minimal eye contact. Chatting while driving along in the car, creating art or shooting hoops is a great way to engage the child in conversation and is less threatening than sitting face to face. Remember, each child is different so be guided by the child.</p>
<p><b>Facial expressions</b></p> 	<p>Children who have experienced trauma can often have trouble reading facial expressions and will often interpret expressions as anger or disappointment. Be aware of your facial expressions when engaging with the child. Aim for contingent facial expressions that look to mirror the child's inner experience – this conveys empathy and helps the child to understand themselves and feel heard. When the child is regulated, look for opportunities to assist the child to develop emotional literacy by using cards/games that match faces to feelings.</p>
<p><b>Tone of voice</b></p> 	<p>Prosody is the rhythm, pitch and tone of the voice, like when a mother alters her voice to soothe her baby. Tone of voice can have a powerful impact on a child's sense of safety. In situations where a child is dysregulated, consider the tone and pitch of your voice. A soft and gentle voice is more likely to deescalate an overwhelmed child.</p>
<p><b>Posture and gestures</b></p> 	<p>Consider your posture and gestures. How you approach the child will determine how safe or unsafe they may feel. If your posture is puffed up with your shoulders back, the child may read you as defensive and primed to fight. A posture that is strong, yet open and welcoming will help to calm the child. The child's implicit memory system may interpret certain postures or gestures as threatening, so stay attuned to the child and again be guided by them. Mirroring (whilst staying within your window of tolerance) is also important. Mirroring can convey empathy and a sense of feeling heard and this will help with coregulation.</p>