

# Exploring the Meaning that Lies Beneath Young People's Behaviour and Supporting Change

## Purpose

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For young people who have experienced trauma, behaviour is often their only tool for communication. These young people's behaviour tells us a story about what has happened to them and how it continues to impact them today. Trauma-based behaviour often serves important adaptive functions. The behaviour is made sense of in the context in which it first emerged at the time of the trauma. It allowed the young person to survive the threat and danger they were faced with. However, over time, it can become counter-productive. The behaviour might not serve any purpose any longer. It may stop young people from connecting with others. It may keep them feeling that danger is present even when it is not.

Understanding the meaning of young people's behaviour can provide insight into their hurt and what they have had to do to survive in the past in the face of pain, fear, confusion and rejection. It can help shape our understanding of what they need. Everyone who interacts with young people carries with them a piece of the puzzle that needs to be put together to understand how to reach young people, especially when they are engaging in behaviour that stems from their trauma but they are not aware of it.

The team of important relationships around young people, hold the clues to being able to see beneath the behaviour, to the needs of the young people that has stayed with them and continues to reverberate from their past. This network includes the Therapeutic Care Team, Therapeutic Specialist, other support workers, schools or vocational education professionals, family members and young people's friends and social group.

The more that the reasons for the behaviour are understood, the more effective the support that is offered to young people. Taking the time to understand, listen and learn is the key to developing intervention plans and responses that will ultimately be effective.

It is important to remember that interventions for young people do not set out to only stop or change behaviours. It aims to build deeper connections and trust with young people. This approach allows young people to experience and understand the depth of your care for them, while providing them with the opportunities they need to learn from feedback and the experience of the relationship you offer them. Our focus is to scaffold a network of relationships around young people from which they can experience trust and care, draw support and rely upon.

This resource has been developed to support professionals to unpack and plan how to respond to identified behaviours that are concerning, challenging and disruptive for young people in their search for safety, comfort and acceptance. It sets out a series of steps that can be taken by individuals or groups to identify possible meaning of behaviour and then develop trauma informed responses that aim to meet the unmet needs of young people from their past with the support of the relationships they experience in the present.

## Audience

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This tool can be used by anyone working with young people who have experienced trauma. It is a blank template that can be copied and completed as often as required.



## What you can do

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- Print off and complete this tool in conjunction with the Therapeutic Care Team, Therapeutic Specialist and/or other important adults in the young people's network. Make sure you complete all the columns because the responses that follow are more likely to support positive therapeutic outcomes.



- This process is not about finding out the truth. It is about trying to find possible ways to understand and explain the behaviour in the context of everything that you know about the young person and how they are in their relationship with you and others. It is like putting together clues with what you know about the young person now and what you know they have experienced from their past.



- There may be more than one way of understanding the behaviour that the young person engages in. This means that there are different options for responding. Do not get stuck on just one answer if it does not seem to make sense to you or others in the team around the young person. Try to be specific about what the young person has missed out in their past. Focus on patterns of behaviours as a way to understand what seems to be at the heart of the way that young people are reacting in the present.



- Keep your mind open to how young people understand and explain their own behaviour. They may not be able to have fully formed explanations. But even partial answers can offer important information to you about what is still hurting them.



- Acknowledge that the critical question on this tool is actually '**What does the young person need?**'. It is the central question that locates the basis for any response you offer them. Be as specific as you can be. Instead of saying this young person needs to feel safe, consider the circumstances and strategies that will help the young person to be and feel safe. The young person needs to know that an adult is never far enough away that they won't hear them if they are called. The young person needs to have a sense of control over their routines in the morning by choosing what they have for breakfast, the route they take to school and the way they say goodbye to the carer on their way out of the house. The more tailored your response to the needs of the young person, the more likely it will be that the responses will help in some way.



- Responding to behaviour in a trauma informed way asks something of us as professionals. It is important to reflect on what support we require to be able to provide a needs-based, rather than behaviour-based, response. Our orientation is not to react to young people's behaviour but lock into what they need and together with others find ways to meet those needs with support and attention.











- Don't give up. Young people have had good reasons to develop these behaviours. They will not let them go easily. They have helped them to survive. They have helped them hold onto any sense that they are loveable, worthy and able to be protected. We cannot convince them to let these behaviours go just by talking to them. They need to experience that they do not need the behaviours any longer. When that happens, the behaviours will change. Expect that some behaviours will take time to change.





	 <p>How do I/we describe the behaviour? When does it occur? What prompts it? How long does it last? What can prevent it?</p>	
	 <p>How does the young person describe the behaviour? How does the young person explain it?</p>	
<p>WHAT LIES BENEATH THE BEHAVIOUR?</p>	 <p>How does their body react when they are engaged in the behaviour?</p>	
	 <p>What do they appear to avoid by engaging in the behaviour?</p>	
	 <p>What feelings do they seem to have when they are engaging the behaviour?</p>	
	 <p>What do they seem to be thinking about when they engage in the behaviour?</p>	
	 <p>What do they believe to be true about themselves when they are engaging in the behaviour?</p>	
	 <p>What do they believe to be true about relationships with staff and others when they are engaging in the behaviour?</p>	



 What does this tell us about what they need right now?	
 What has been helpful for the young person in the past?	
 What has been unhelpful for the young person in the past?	
 What do I/we need to be able to respond to the young person? What can I/we do to be ready to respond?	
 What can I/we do to meet the young person's needs? Who will do what?	
 What changes will I/we begin to notice if our response to the young person's behaviour is helping them?	
 How will I/we know if we need to change some or all of our responses to the young person?	
 How will we acknowledge/celebrate small changes that the young person makes in relation to the behaviour?	