



Early Adversity and Classroom Behaviour - How to Best Respond

NCESE Annual Conference
Friday September 5th 2025
Presented by Sharon Duthie



1



Australian Childhood Foundation acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the traditional custodians and owners of this land and waters. We pay our respects to their Elders past and present and to the children who are their leaders of tomorrow. We acknowledge their history and living culture and the many thousands of years in which they have raised their children to be safe and strong. We recognise and accept it is the oldest continuous living culture in the world and that their sovereignty has never been ceded.



2

Our Purpose



Love has the power to prevent and heal abuse.

At Australian Childhood Foundation love is an action, a daily effort to build positive relationships that keep children safe and help them heal.

We provide counselling to children and carers. We teach adults to understand how they can help children to heal from the trauma of abuse and violence. We stand up for children, and young people's rights to safety. We act to ensure every child gets the love they need.



3

Safety



The content of this training can evoke strong emotions and may stir up personal experiences of trauma.

Please be mindful of your own wellbeing during this training and if you need support please ask the facilitator.



4

Session Roadmap



- Making SPACE for Learning framework
- Understanding early adversity
- Classroom behaviour as communication
- Multiple lens' to understanding behaviour – a polyvagal theory and shame lens
- Safe relationships are key
- How we respond matters



5

Warm up



Mindful movement



6



7

Making SPACE for Learning

This model is training program developed by ACF for educators and school staff. This program aims to support schools to better understand and meet the needs of children who had experienced trauma, significant disruption or disadvantage.

MSFL translates neurobiological evidence related to trauma and considers principles and strategies to support students social/emotional wellbeing and relationships at school.

Please see the Making SPACE For Learning Resources for this session

8

Interpersonal Neurobiology

A child's brain develops through relationships with others. The quality of these relationships shapes children's brain development.

- Is primarily a theory and practical working model which describes human development and functioning as being a product of the relationship between the body, mind and relationships - "relational neuroscience."
- Importantly it tells us about how our brains and bodies connect to form internal working models of relationships
- We are meant to connect, our brains are set up for survival and to attach to caregivers. A child's brain develops in relationship with others
- The quality of relational right brain to right brain interactions in childhood influence our development in all areas of life

9

Culture

Australian Childhood Foundation

"Culture can act as a protection against risk and harm for children and young people. Cultural connections can serve as sources of resilience and can moderate the impact of stressful circumstances on social and emotional wellbeing at an individual, family and community level."

Zubrick

Culture is the relationships that influence and shape your development of:

- A sense of safety and belonging
- Connection to others
- Our beliefs and perceptions about the world, others and our identity.



10

Australian Childhood Foundation

Adversity and the impact of trauma



11

What Do We Mean by Early Adversity?

Australian Childhood Foundation

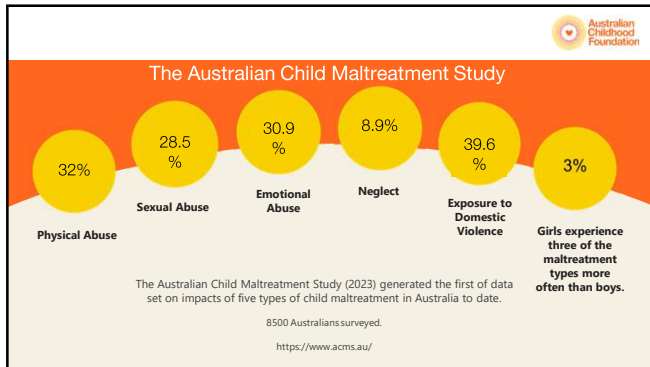
- Interpersonal abuse, neglect, family violence
- Loss, displacement, poverty, disadvantage
- Chronic stress, discrimination, racism
- Parental substance misuse, mental health

Adversity isn't just "big events." It also includes chronic, relational and identity-based harm.

What else can you think of?



12



13

Activity

Please bring to mind a child you work with who has experienced adversity.

Australian Childhood Foundation

14

Trauma can impact all elements of student's development: brain, body, memory, learning, behaviour, emotions and relationships.

Australian Childhood Foundation

15

What we know about trauma and children



- Children are left with **needs** that in the moment of hurt, pain and fear are left unfulfilled
- How **children live in their bodies** and communicate with their bodies when impacted by trauma, i.e. arousal
- **Relational expectations** and participation is often affected by trauma impacts
- **Shame** can develop and most attempt to avoid this feeling
- **Meaning making** – the way children who have experienced trauma make sense of who they are, and how to be with others is influenced by what happened to them

16

Unmet needs



The residue of trauma becomes an experience of unmet needs for children.

Children are left with needs that in the moment of hurt, pain and fear are unfulfilled. These needs stay activated ready for available relationships to respond to them, see them and gradually help them to be met.

These needs are physiological, developmental, and interpersonal, requiring relational investment and presence in order to be resolved

"It is like they are on a loop hoping that their needs for safety, attention and validation that were not fulfilled will eventually find at least one relationship in the present that meets these needs consistently over time."

Dr Joe Tucci



17

Meaning making



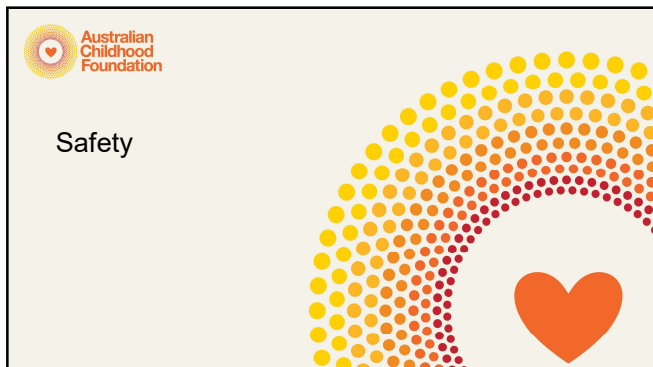
Meaning-making is how children interpret and make sense of their experiences.

As children grow, they will show us in a variety of ways how they make meaning. We can see this through their behaviours - the way they move, the postures they take on, the pictures they draw, the stories they tell, the questions they ask or don't ask, the expectations they have for the future. Meaning making is distributed amidst their bodies and minds and happens at all levels of consciousness.

- This interpretive process shapes how children see themselves, their safety, and their place in relationships and the world.
- Children stay alert for threats, shaping their worldview around safety and protection.



18



19

Safety principles

Safety is embedded in our physiology
Safety is a relational experience
Trauma is a deep violation of a child's sense of safety

"The removal of threat is not the same as the presence of safety."

Dr. Stephen Porges



20

Polyvagal theory



"The removal of threat is not the same as the presence of safety"

Dr. Stephen Porges

As a result of the work of Stephen Porges and the Polyvagal Theory, we understand physiology as it gives rise to states of both safety and threat, and how we transition from one to another

This work explains neuroception as a way that neural circuits of the brain distinguish between whether situations or people are safe dangerous or life threatening. The detection of this triggers neurobiologically determined pro- social or defensive behaviours.

"Trauma can replace patterns of connection with patterns of protection."

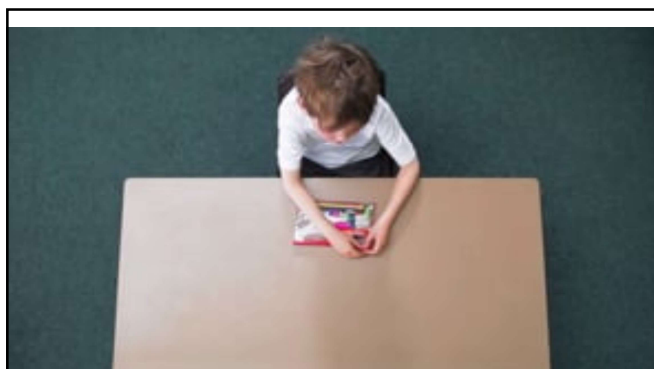
Deb Dana, Author & Practitioner



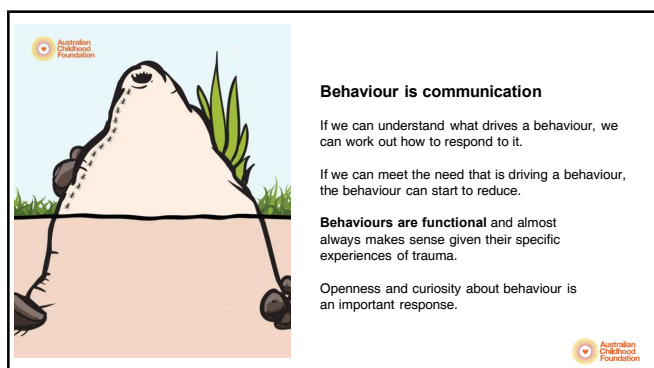
21



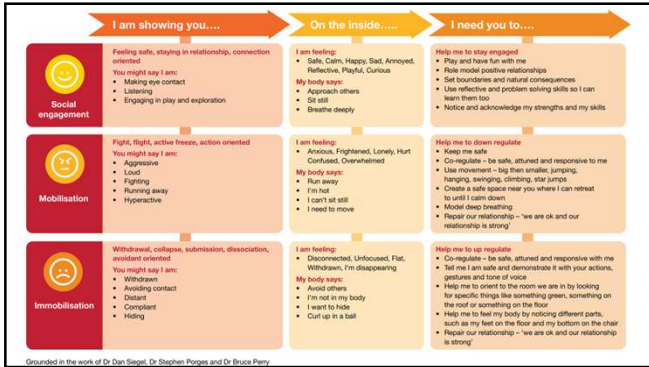
22



23

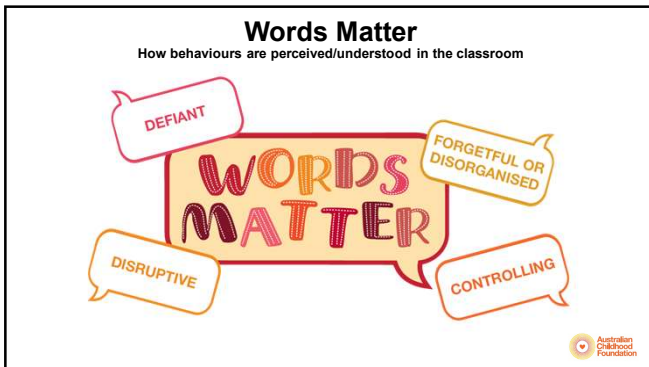


24



25

26



27

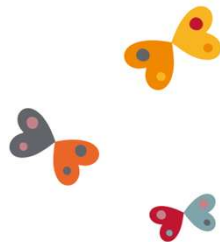
Activity



Think of a student you drew earlier, please use the **Words Matter Resource** to consider what may be happening underneath the surface for the student.

- How might we support the student, or the networks around the student, to have a deeper understanding of the behaviours?
- And how might we respond to the student with these new understandings?

Please turn and talk



28

Shame



Shame sits at the heart of trauma.

- Children may internalize "I am bad" - leading to behaviours like difficulty accepting responsibility, struggling with feedback, avoiding situations where they might fail.
- Shame relates to unmet needs for worth and acceptance.
- Many students carry shame that isn't theirs — transferred through abuse, neglect or exclusion.
- It extends the social pain that interpersonal violation afflicts.
- If praise or success feels unsafe, they may push it away.



29

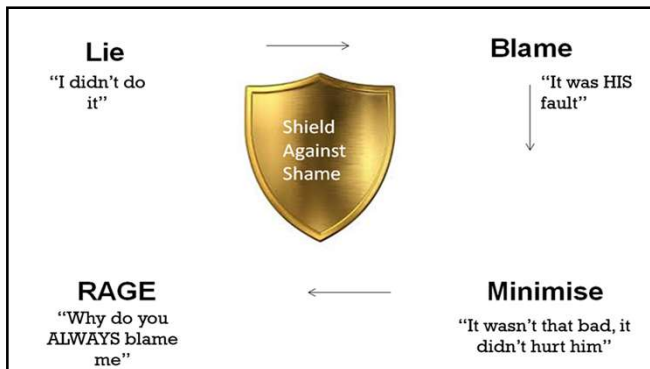
Children and young people who have experienced relationships that have rejected, shamed, abandoned or violated their sense of safety may attempt to shield themselves from any event, mistake or relationship that seeks accountability. Historically children with these experiences have not experienced safety, acceptance or a nurturing responses, and therefore to be accountable is unsafe.



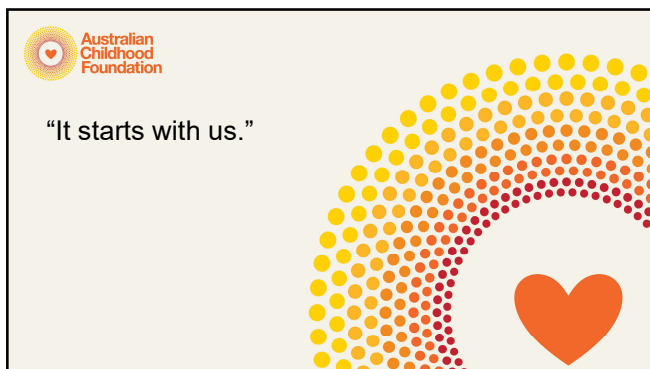
The Shield of Shame



30



31



32

Relationships shape our sense of self and safety

- Relationships are the most important factor in our development and in healing from experiences of trauma
- Secure relationships are central to how a student experiences themselves and others

An illustration of a woman with a ponytail hugging a young child from behind. The illustration is in a simple, line-art style.

33

It starts with us



- Significant, safe adult relationships transform challenging behaviour not by controlling it, but by reducing the student's need for self-protection in the first place.
- Attunement is micro-moments of connection: tone of voice, gentle eye contact, proximity, following the child's pace.
- When a child feels seen, safe, and valued, their nervous system can downshift from survival into learning and connection.
- Over time, this rewires expectations of others and builds the capacity for self-regulation in the classroom and beyond.
- Every rupture and repair strengthens trust.



34

Reflection



- What was the last conversation you where you felt truly seen and understood?
- What was that experience like for you?
- How did you know you had been seen?
- With these answers in mind consider what it is like to be on the other side of you...

Please turn and talk



35

Safe relationships influence behaviour

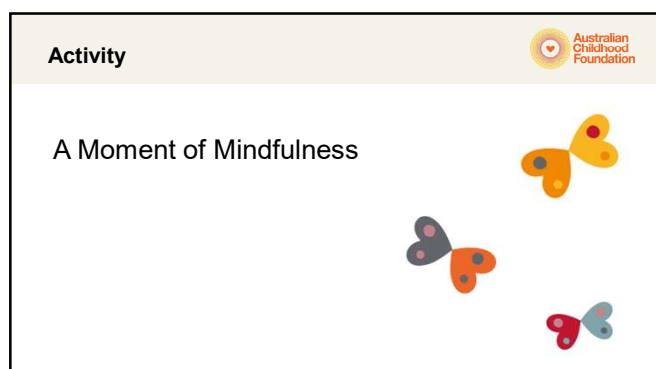


When a students past says...	A safe relationship can show...	Effect on behaviour...
"Adults leave or let me down."	Teachers greet me warmly every day, even after I've had a bad day.	Builds predictability → reduces anxiety-driven outbursts.
"My feelings are too big for others."	A safe adult stays calm and patient when I'm dysregulated.	Provides co-regulation and reduces time of overwhelm.
"I'm bad/I don't belong."	My teacher notices and values my strengths.	Erodes shame → increases motivation and participation.
"I can't trust anyone."	My wellbeing teacher keeps their promises and follows up	Repairs trust → lowers defensiveness.

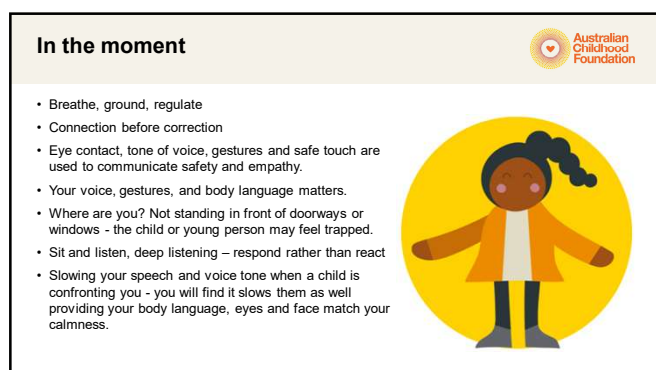
36



37



38



39

Ways to respond

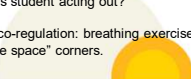
Educators and schools that offer safety, predictability, connection, and hope support children to heal. With consistency, empathy, and a strengths-based outlook, teachers can help children flourish despite adversity.

- **Build Safe, Predictable Relationships**
Consistency: Greet students warmly, maintain clear routines, and reliably follow through on what you say. This creates trust and psychological safety.
- **See Behaviour as Communication**
Understand that "challenging" behaviours may reflect a child's survival response

Ask yourself, "What might this behaviour be telling me about the student's needs or stress?" instead of "Why is this student acting out?"

Integrate regular routines for co-regulation: breathing exercises, brain breaks, movement breaks, mindfulness, and "safe space" corners.





40

Ways to respond

- **Be Flexible and Adjust Expectations**
Offer choices, breaks, or alternative tasks when students seem overwhelmed.
- **Affirm Strengths, Agency, and Belonging**
Regularly highlight a student's strengths and contributions, no matter how small.
- **Work with Families and Support Systems**
Partner with wellbeing/support staff, psychologists, care teams and families to coordinate care.
- **Respect cultural differences in histories and healing**
- **Trauma expressions as behaviours that challenge** are varied, and each child will present with different needs.





41



Compassionate responses

"It is through compassionate responses that trust is negotiated. Compassion moves into spaces that threat leaves behind when it is no longer needed. First it is compassion for the other, followed closely by compassion for self."
(Tucci, Mitchell, Tronick and Porges, 2024)

- Compassion turns off old patterns of self protection
- Compassion leads to growth, recovery and healing
- By helping children to learn to practice self-compassion (I am worthy) we help dislodge shame-based beliefs – such as you are worthless, defective, bad and unlovable.

"Compassion is the antidote to danger, fear and mistrust."



42

Hope as a resource

Hope is a form of knowledge that results from the integration of neuroscience, practice wisdom and embodied experience.

Hope Lives in the Small Moments

Extended periods of regulation aren't necessary to create new patterns. Micro-moments accumulate and shape our biology. They are fundamental to becoming a more regulated human.

© 2020, Deb Dana, LICM®



Australian Childhood Foundation

43

Making SPACE for Learning



Australian Childhood Foundation

44

**Thank you for learning together today,
and your ongoing commitment to
supporting children!**

Sharon Duthie
Senior Consultant
sduthie@childhood.org.au

childhood.org.au
1300 381 581



Australian Childhood Foundation
childhood.org.au

45
