

PACE: A trauma-informed approach to supporting children and young people

PACE was developed by Dr Dan Hughes (a clinical psychologist specialising in childhood trauma) more than 20 years ago as a central part of attachment-focused family therapy. It was created with the aim of supporting adults to build safe, trusting and meaningful relationships with children and young people who have experienced trauma. The approach focuses on building trusting relationships, emotional connections, containment of emotions and a sense of security.

PACE is a way of thinking, feeling, communicating and behaving that aims to make the child feel safe. It is done by communicating the four elements of PACE together flexibly, not as a step by step process.

Using PACE helps adults to slow down their reactions, stay calm and tune into what the child is experiencing in the moment. It supports us to gain a better understanding of what the child is feeling. In tricky moments it allows us to stay emotionally regulated and guide the child through their heightened emotions, thoughts and behaviours. In turn, PACE helps children and young people to feel more connected to and understood by important adults in their life and ultimately, to slow down





their own responses.

Playfulness

Sometimes a child has given up on the idea of having good times and doesn't want to experience and share fun or enjoyment. Additionally, some children don't like affection or reject hugs. A playful stance can allow closeness but without the scary parts.

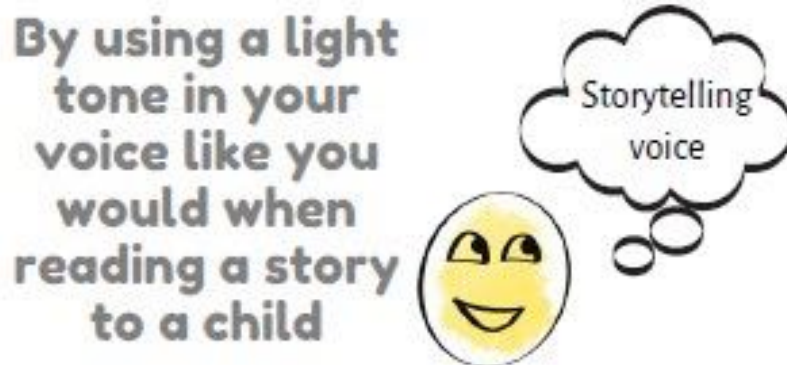
Playful moments reassure children and young people that their conflicts and separations with adults are temporary and will never harm the strength of their relationship.

A playful stance adds elements of fun and enjoyment to day-to-day life and can also diffuse a difficult or tense situation. The child is less likely to respond with anger and defensiveness when the adult has a touch of playfulness in their discipline. While such a response would not be appropriate at the time of major misbehaviour, when applied to minor behaviours, playfulness can help keep it all in perspective.



Ideas for how to incorporate playfulness:

- Use a light tone of voice, like you might use when story-telling, rather than an irritated or lecturing tone.
- Show with your eyes, eyebrows, smile that you are interested in what the child is doing and saying. Try and soften your facial expressions, and lower your body to their level, so not to tower over them.
- Make a game of getting organised; practise socialising using fun role-play; give the child a job during a busy transition.



Acceptance

Acceptance communicates that that the child's inner life is safe with you; that you are interested in it and will not judge or evaluate it. The child's inner life is not *right* or *wrong*, it simply *is*. Acceptance is at the core of the child's sense of safety.

Accepting the child's intentions does not imply accepting behaviour, which may be hurtful or harmful to another person or to self. You can limit the behaviour while at the same time understanding and accepting the motives underlying the behaviour.

Through acceptance, it's hoped that the child learns that while the behaviour may be criticised and limited, this is not the same as criticising the child's *self*. The child then becomes more confident that conflict and discipline focuses on the behaviour, not the relationship with adults nor their self-worth.



For example, a child may say “I know you hate me”. It is tempting to respond with “that’s not true” or “don’t say that” but this may leave the child feeling that you really don’t understand what it’s like for them. Instead, through using PACE we could respond with “I’m sorry you think I hate you, that must feel awful, no wonder you’re angry with me” or “I didn’t realise that you feel like that, I’m sorry it feels that way to you”.

Examples for how to express acceptance:

“I can see how you feel this is unfair. You wanted to play longer”

“You probably think that I don’t care about what you want”

“You were letting me know that you were really scared when you ran away from me”

“I can hear you saying that you hate me and you’re feeling really cross. I’ll still be here for you after you calm down”.

“I’m disappointed by what you did, but I know you were really upset. It doesn’t change how much I care about you”. **Curiosity**

Children often know that their behaviour was not appropriate. They often do not know why they did it or are reluctant to tell adults why. Curiosity, without judgment, is how we help children become aware of their inner life and reflect upon the reasons for their behaviour.

Curiosity is wondering about the meaning behind the behaviour for the child. With curiosity, the adults are conveying their intention to simply understand *why* and to help the child with understanding. The adult’s intentions are to truly understand and help the child, not to lecture or convey that the child’s inner life is *wrong* in some way.

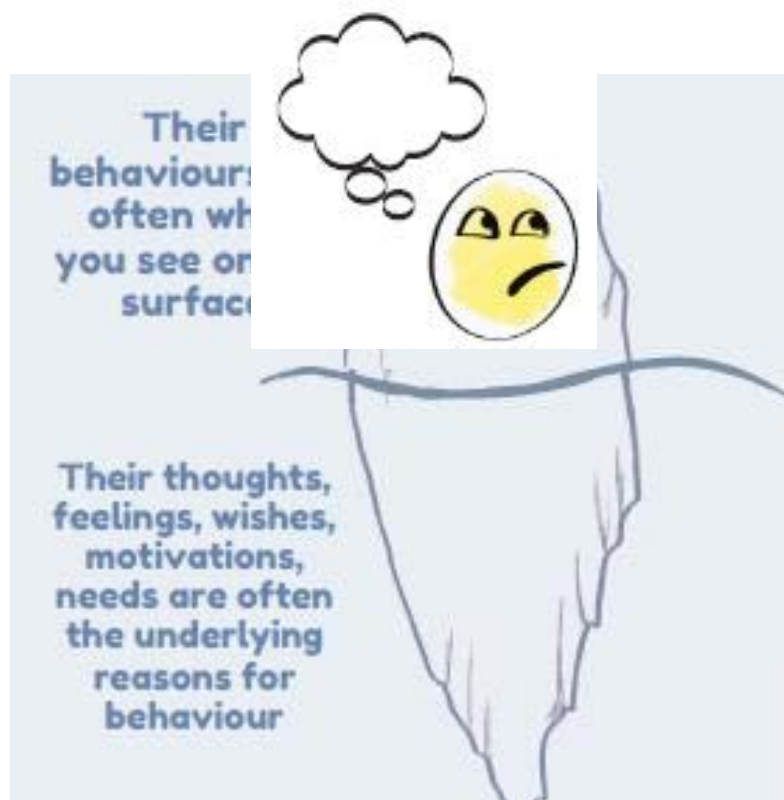
Curiosity must be communicated without annoyance about the behaviour. Being curious can, for example, include an attitude of being sad rather than angry when the child makes a mistake. A light curious tone and stance can get through to a child in a way that anger cannot.



As the understanding deepens, the child can discover that their behaviour does not reflect something *bad* inside of them, but rather a thought, feeling, perception, or motive that was stressful, frightening, or confusing that could only be expressed through their behaviour.

If an adult can stay curious about why the child is behaving as they are, the child and adult are less likely to feel cross or frustrated.

As the adult begins to understand the needs underlying the behaviours, the child's feelings about the behaviour may change, with less defensiveness and shame but more guilt, leading to less of the behaviour. With PACE, the child can let others start to see them, get closer emotionally and start to trust.



Being curious is different from asking the child, “*Why did you do that?*” with the expectation of a reply. It is not interpretation or fact gathering. It’s just about getting to know the child and letting them know that. It can be about having a conversation, almost with yourself, with the child in the room, without anticipating a response.

Examples of curiosity:

"I'm wondering if you broke the toy because you were feeling angry."

"I'm thinking you're a little nervous about going back to school today, and that's why you don't want to get ready this morning".

"I've noticed that you've been using a really loud voice, and if you're trying to tell me that you're angry with me."

"I'm a little confused. Usually you love going for a walk, but today you don't want to go. I'm wondering what's different about today".

"When she couldn't play with you today, I'm wondering if you thought that meant she doesn't like you."

Sentence starters -

I wonder if....

Could it be...?

I am trying to imagine....

Can you help me understand...?

Tell me if I'm getting this wrong...

It sounds like you might really be struggling with...

Is there a part of you that...

As you were talking I was starting to think that maybe...

Does this make any sense...?





Empathy

Being empathic means the adult actively showing the child that their inner life is important to the adult and that they want to support the child during their hard times. The adult is demonstrating that they know how difficult that experience is for the child. The adult is telling the child that they will not have to deal with the distress alone.

The adult is also communicating strength, love and commitment, with confidence that sharing the child's distress will not be too much for them. Together they will get through it.

It is about having compassion for the child and recognising that they are struggling to handle something difficult. It is about looking at the needs, motives and feeling underlying their behaviours, and recognising that they may be feeling distressed, hurt, annoyed, upset or so on.



Examples of empathy:

“You are SO upset about this right now. That must be really hard!”

“It hurt so much when she didn’t ask you to play. You were probably thinking ‘Why did she do that?’ It was a real shock for you.”

“You wanted to have another turn so badly. You were so excited about it and it’s so unfair that we ran out of time”.

“It seems to you like he hates you. That must be really hard. I know you like him a lot, so this is pretty confusing”.

“I know it’s hard for you to hear what I’m saying.”

“Me saying ‘No’ has made you angry with me. I get why you don’t want to talk to me right now”.

Sentence starters -

It sounds like it’s been really tough...

You have had lots of tricky times...

I am so sorry it’s been so hard for you...

I can’t even imagine how that was for you...

I really want to hear how it’s been for you...

That must have been so painful...

I think you are saying....

I think I get it.....

That makes real sense for me...

I think I am starting to understand now.....

I think you might be letting me know that....

If you had words for those feelings, I wonder what they would be....

Let’s make sure I’ve got that right....



“Thinking of your child as behaving badly disposes you to think of punishment. Thinking of your child as struggling to handle something difficult encourages you to help them through their distress.”



PACE in practice

As with anything, being PACE-ful in your responses to a child takes practice. It can sometimes feel like a counterintuitive way of responding and we won't get it right all the time. Keep practicing, and with time you will see the benefits of this approach!

Example 1 -

Emily asks Mum if she can play on the swings. Mum says she can't as they need to be home soon. Emily gets very upset and angry and starts yelling "that's so unfair, I hate you. You're horrible!!!!"

Typical response:

"Emily, don't be so rude!"

"Life's unfair!"

"I am not horrible and you don't hate me."

PACE-ful response:

"OH WOW [in an animated voice], you're feeling REALLY ANGRY [with a concerned expression]....you think I'm being mean by not letting you go on the swings when you really want to go...I'm saying no and you



really want to go and that feels rubbish...it's so frustrating when someone says we can't do something that we want to do!"

"I'm really sorry you feel that I hate you Emily that must feel awful - no wonder you're so angry and upset if you think I hate you! I'd want to scream and shout too..."

"It's rubbish that we can't do the things we enjoy right now...I'm missing the swings too...maybe we could all have a think about what other games we could on our way home..."

Example 2 -

Dad picks up Tom from school in the car. When Tom gets in the car, he asks him about his day. Tom has a really angry look on his face, swears at his dad, kicks the back of the seat and says "Shut up!"

Typical response:

Ignore Tom, and don't ask any more questions

"Right that's it, you're not going to the park later!"

"Don't you dare speak to me like that!"

"Only naughty boys swear"

PACE-ful response:

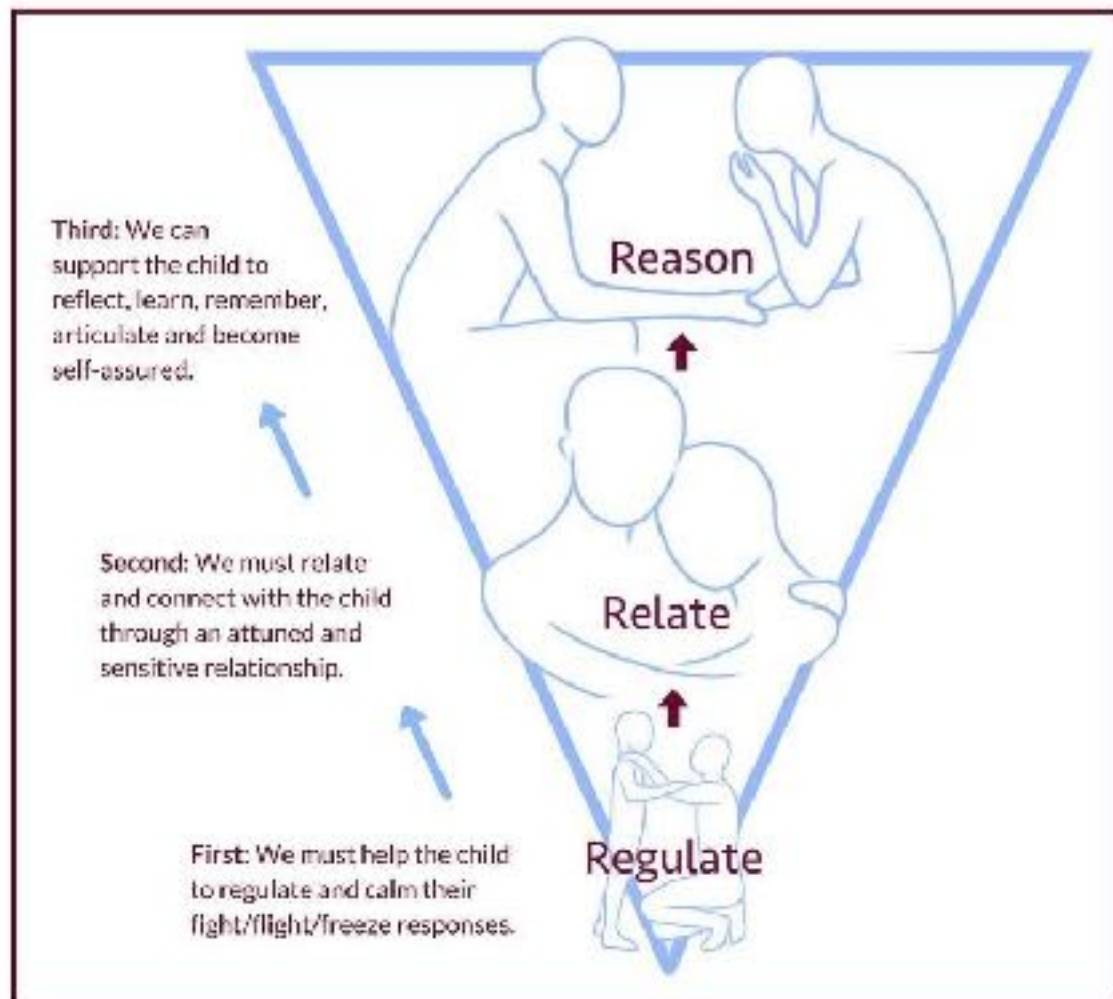
"Oh my goodness, I can see you're feeling really angry. I'm wondering if something happened in school that made you feel angry, or maybe you're annoyed at me for picking you up...Can you help me to understand what's going on?"

"WOW, I think you're trying to tell me that you're really cross. It can be really hard to feel that angry and not know how to let it out. I wonder if we could sing REALLY LOUDLY or run around the park to let out that anger?"

“Aww Tom, I’m wondering if you’re feeling frustrated that I picked you up in the car, rather than walking home like I said we would this morning? It can be really upsetting when someone says they’re going to do something and then they don’t can’t it. I wonder if we could go for a walk when we get home...”

Applying PACE to the ‘4 R’s of Responding’

Dr Bruce Perry, a pioneering neuroscientist in the field of trauma, has shown us that to help a vulnerable child to learn, think and reflect, we need to intervene in a simple sequence.



Heading straight for the 'reasoning' part of the brain with an expectation of learning, will not work so well if the child is dysregulated and disconnected from others.

1. REGULATE

Notice the environment - Do I need to step in? Do I need to take any immediate steps to ensure everyone's safety?

Notice the impact on you - Am I regulated, can I stay open and engaged? Am I becoming irritated, angry defensive? Do I feel useless? Do I need a break? Can I get back to being open and engaged? Can I be compassionate to myself?

Notice the impact on the child – What can I do to help calm them first?

2. RELATE

Once they are regulated, try and create meaning of their behaviour together. Have a real interest through curiosity and exploration, such as “I wonder what’s going on...? How come...? No wonder you... if...” Explore thoughts, desires, urges, motives underlying the behaviour.

How can you help them experience that you’re trying to get it? Try and get your body-language to match an approach of empathy and kindness.

3. REASON

Once you understand the reasoning behind their behaviour, you can respond to the behaviour - Do I need to do anything further, such as increase structure and supervision? Should I provide a consequence (that is logical), or has a natural consequence occurred?

4. REPAIR

Do I need to repair the relationship so that my child knows what has happened has not affected our relationship? Do I need to help my child repair a relationship with others?

PACE and the ‘4 R’s of Responding’ in practice –

Example –

You are in the supermarket with your son Josh, and bump into a friend. As you’re talking with your friend you notice that Josh is starting to become frustrated. He knocks over a jar from the shelf, which smashes onto the floor.

1. REGULATE

Notice the environment - As there is smashed glass on the floor, you likely need to address this first.

Notice the impact on you – You might be feeling embarrassed that this has happened in front of your friend. Remind yourself that you're doing the best that you can, and that you're a good parent. Remind yourself that your friend is likely only hoping that you and your child are okay.

Notice the impact on the child – Josh might be feeling embarrassed, shocked or scared. Try your best to remember that he might be feeling this way, and stay calm with him.

In a light tone, you could say "Oh WOW, that was a loud smash! Let's see if we can all take 3 big steps back so that we don't stand on the smashed glass and hurt our feet...Look how far it's gone! Do you want to hold my hand Josh?...I'm going to let out a BIG sigh because my body is all shaky after that loud noise.."

2. RELATE

Once you are at home, or in a calm and safe place, you can start to wonder about why Josh acted the way he did. It can help to think about this before you talk with Josh. Maybe he didn't know how to tell you he wanted to leave? Maybe he felt unsafe or didn't like the friend and wanted them to go away? Maybe he didn't like that you weren't paying attention to him? Whatever the reason, try and accept this rather than rationalise or reason with him. Try to have empathy for how he might have been feeling in that moment. Use your curiosity sentence starters to explore these ideas with him.

3. REASON

When you have an idea of why Josh acted the way he did, you can respond to the behaviour of him smashing the jar. A logical consequence to breaking something is either having to clean it up, apologise to the person whose item you broke, or pay for it to be replaced. As the jar was made of glass, it could be dangerous for Josh to clean this up.

Therefore, you could say: "Thank you for telling me that you didn't like me talking with my friend, it's really good for me to understand how you are feeling. It is really tough feeling that way and I'm sad that you felt so upset. When we break something of someone else's we need to make up for it. I know if someone broke something of yours you'd probably

Remember that they might be annoyed or upset at the consequence, and that is okay. You don't need to put in another consequence for how they have responded to the setting of a consequence.

You want to show Josh that you still care for him, love him and want to be with him. If he likes physical contact, you could ask for a hug or highfive. Or, you could ask if he wants to do something you both enjoy together? Try to use your words, body-language and actions in combination to express that you still care about him.

Dan Hughes - <http://www.danielhughes.org/p.a.c.e..html>

Beacon House      

<https://beaconhouse.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/The-ThreeRs.pdf>

Kim S. Golding, 2015 -

<https://kimsgolding.co.uk/resources/models/parenting-in-the-moment/>

Fife council –

<https://girfec.fife.scot/wp-content/uploads/sites/61/2020/06/PACESchool.pdf>

