

Behaviour as a Communication of Need

Understanding distressed behaviour

A fundamental principle of Thrive is that beneath every behaviour is a feeling, and beneath every feeling is a need. As Thrive practitioners, when we see a child or young person behaving in a distressed, dysregulated or defensive way, we realise that their distressed behaviour is communicating that they have an unmet need. Our priority is to meet the underlying unmet need rather than focus on the behaviour. We use the Vital Relational Functions (VRFs) and the stance of PACE (playful, accepting, curious, empathic) to meet these needs and develop positive relationships with children and young people. The relational approach, alongside an understanding of behaviours facilitated by Thrive-Online[®], supports us to identify and meet the underlying needs communicated by behaviour and to therefore address behaviour in a sensitive and meaningful way.

To understand the concept of behaviour as a communication of need, it can be helpful to look at behaviour as a symptom or signal of what is happening underneath. We can do this using the metaphor of a house that it is on fire. Picture the outside of a house, then imagine that you start to see smoke billowing out of the roof, doors, and windows. The smoke would signal to you that the house was on fire. It is likely that you would then call the fire service to put out the fire and it is likely that the fire service would later investigate what caused the fire to ensure that it didn't happen again.

When we apply this metaphor to children's distressed, dysregulated or defensive behaviours, we think of the smoke as the behaviour, the fire as the feeling underneath the behaviour and the need as the cause of the fire. In other words, the behaviours are the way that the child outwardly communicates how they are feeling inside because of a particular need that they have.

When a child is behaving in a distressed, dysregulated or defensive way, what we see is the signal that something is wrong; we see the smoke. If we simply try to get rid of the smoke by only addressing the behaviour, we will not put out the fire, or find out what caused it. Instead, we put out the fire by supporting the child with their difficult feelings. We do this by attuning to the feelings they are having, validating these, containing the experience for the child, and helping the child to regulate (using the VRFs), showing that we accept what they are feeling, empathise with their experience and are curious about them (PACE).

Remember, accepting the child and validating their feelings is not the same as accepting the behaviour. As adults we need to communicate that while we do not accept the behaviours, we do accept the validity of the feelings that the child is communicating through the behaviours.

Once the child is calm and regulated, adults can use other cognitive and relational strategies to help the child develop an understanding of the needs behind their behaviour – the cause of the fire – so that they are able to modify the behaviour themselves and find other ways to meet their needs. This means that we do not have to rely on the use of sanctions to modify the child's behaviour and instead create opportunities to help the child learn and process what is happening for them.

To support the child with developing this awareness and to increase the likelihood of them finding more healthy and socially acceptable ways to behave, we need to adopt the stance of being tough on the behaviour yet gentle with the child, remembering that in order to learn new ways to behave children need lots of practice and repetition.

Right-time needs communicated through behaviour

When we develop an understanding of children's right-time development, we can anticipate particular behaviours at specific times, since children will have specific needs related to the developmental tasks that they are learning at that time. This knowledge helps us to respond to the behaviours with genuine empathy and acceptance, and support the child to develop the skills in more healthy ways. For example, you could anticipate that children might oppose or break rules at Skills and Structure (ages 7–11) whilst they navigate the developmental task of 'understanding the need for rules'. Knowing this means that you can meet the opposition with empathy and understanding and help children to understand why we have rules, rather than simply applying sanctions when they oppose them.

Reparative needs communicated through behaviour

While we expect some behaviours at particular developmental stages, we are also likely to observe some children and young people exhibiting potentially more extreme distressed behaviour with more frequency than others. This is often due to earlier experiences of not having their needs met by the adults around them (developmental interruptions). These children are likely to be more sensitive to threats in the environment, less able to form trusting relationships and have a reduced capacity to adequately and appropriately cope with the stresses of everyday life.

Key time needs communicated through behaviour

There are key times in our lives when any one of us might experience something that leads us to behave in a distressed, dysregulated, or defensive way. Key times are times of change, loss, or significant life events. As adults, we might be able to anticipate these key times in children's lives (for example, transitions, staff leaving, local or national events), or we may not know what a child is experiencing to cause them to behave in a distressed way. If we always remember that behaviour is a communication of need, we can be sure to respond to the child or young person with the appropriate level of sensitivity, empathy, and compassion.

Responding to behaviour

Using PACE and the VRFs

Our response to any of these communications of need is always the same: we respond to children's distressed behaviour when we see it, as well as working with children longer-term to develop their understanding and meet their social and emotional needs.

Here is an example scenario of how an adult might respond to a child in the moment. The adult recognises that the child is expressing strong feelings and needs through their behaviour, and then supports that child by meeting the need behind the feeling.

Scenario:

Mustafa is in Year 4. They have learnt to manage being left out by other children by withdrawing from all relationships, including those with adults at school. They spend a lot of time on their own.

The observed situation:

- Joe has told Mustafa (again) that Mustafa can't play football at break with them and their friends.

The behaviour (what you see):

- Mustafa looks down and is silent.

The feeling and need behind the behaviour (what you consider):

- Imagine into what Mustafa is communicating through their non-verbal responses.
- Imagine into Mustafa's world and consider how they might be feeling after being excluded. What needs might Mustafa have that are not being met?

Using the VRFs and PACE (what you say and do in the moment):

- Observe Mustafa and move to a respectful space where you can connect with them; this might be very close to Mustafa or it might be standing further away in a space where you can see each other.
- Notice how Mustafa communicates their feelings as you move into the space and adjust your position accordingly.
- Begin to **attune** to Mustafa's emotional state. Use calm breathing, gentle touch if appropriate, and make soft sounds of 'aaaawww', 'oh dear' and 'mmmmm' rather than using words and sentences.
- Continue to observe Mustafa's responses. When appropriate, begin to use words to **validate** the experience for Mustafa. Do not expect them to join in with any responses yet. You can say things like: "Oh dear." "They don't want to play with you again." "Your head is down." "You are not looking at anyone." "This must be horrid for you." "It looks like your heart is hurting." "I imagine you are feeling very sad."
- This will help to **regulate** Mustafa and enable them to connect and communicate with you when they are ready.
- Provide **containment** through the predictability of your responses and by letting Mustafa know that you are there alongside them and will help them to sort through their feelings.
- Continue to observe Mustafa. When their low energy state begins to rise and they connect with you, stimulate this connection and bring them into relationship with you.
- Continue to demonstrate curiosity, empathy and acceptance towards Mustafa and if appropriate, add playfulness to your interactions. Adopting this stance of PACE will help you to develop a positive and supportive relationship.

Supporting Change

This small scenario demonstrates the feelings that might arise when a child's need for connection and belonging are not met. It shows the core emotional development that can happen when an adult sees that the need has not been met and finds a way to meet it by connecting with the child and developing a relationship with them. This emotional development will help the child learn that they are not on their own in the world and can begin to trust that an adult will see what is going on for them and will meet their need. Learning to trust an adult is extremely important to the child's social and emotional development. This interaction will begin to change the child's life for the better.