

Webinar accompanying booklet

# How Troubled Children Heal

(age 5 to 18)

Key listening skills and interventions



# Key Listening Skills for Connection

- 1 Empathy heals. In contrast, giving lectures to children/teenagers shuts them down.
- 2 Children and teenagers don't want to be fixed, they want to be listened to and understood, for you to hold in mind their mind.
- 3 Empathy heals. In contrast, asking questions with no empathy, brings disconnection.
- 4 Cut the clutter of unnecessary words, don't talk in paragraphs. Often a few words are far more powerful.
- 5 Ask open rather than closed questions. The latter take children/teenagers away from what they are feeling (Closed questions are those which require a yes or no answer).
- 6 Don't ask 'Why' Questions. They take the child/ teenager into thinking what you are asking them to think about and away from what they are feeling in the moment.
- 7 Don't use words which are too small for their big feelings.
- 8 Don't get confluent with their small words for their big feelings.
- 9 Support the completion of half said things.
- 10 Don't assume you know what a child/ teenager is feeling about something unless they are telling you. If they aren't telling you, ask them. Be curious about the meaning they have given to life events. Never infer meaning. If they don't tell you, ask them. 'Will you help me understand...?'
- 11 Troubled children and teenagers (and some parents) are not in the habit of thinking psychologically, so they react rather than reflect. Support mentalisation to enable to them to reflect rather than react.
- 12 Troubled children and teenagers are not in the habit of reflecting on or communicating about their inner life, so they need help with that. Use pictures, images, tell them stories to convey your empathy and to widen vocabulary of mental states.



# Adverse Childhood Experiences study: scored in terms of the number of the following experiences

## Personal

- Emotional abuse (humiliated/sworn at/put down/insulted)
- Emotional neglect (feeling unspecial/not important/not loved/not supported)
- Physical abuse (push, grab, slap, throw things at you)
- Physical neglect (not enough to eat/dirty clothes)
- Sexual abuse
- Being bullied
- Multiple moves

## Family members and home environment and neighbourhood

- A family member depressed/mental illness
- Loss of a parent or parent separation/divorce
- A family member being addicted to drugs or alcohol
- Witnessing domestic violence
- A family member in jail
- Poverty
- Violent neighbourhood
- Racial trauma/any discrimination



# Adverse Childhood Experiences study

As the number of ACEs increases so does the risk of physical illness



- Heart attacks/Strokes
- Cancer
- Type 2 Diabetes
- Chronic lung disease
- Autoimmune disease
- Sleep disturbances
- Eating disorders
- Headaches
- Obesity
- Asthma
- Irritable Bowel syndrome
- Early death

*So ACEs are implicated in the 10 leading causes of death in the western world (Burt, 2001)*

As the number of ACEs increases so does the risk of mental illness and attachment issues



- Poor educational attainment
- Learning difficulties
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Conduct disorders
- Addictions to drugs/ alcohol/smoking
- ADHD diagnosis
- Violent behaviour
- Domestic violence
- Unemployment
- Teenage pregnancy
- Troubled relationships
- Attempted suicide

Research found that 97 percent of children who have no learning difficulties or behaviour problems have had no adverse childhood experiences. The other 3 percent is accounted for by neurodiversity.



*Burke NJ, Hellman JL, Scott BG, Weems CF, Carrion VG (2011)  
The impact of adverse childhood experiences on an urban  
pediatric population. Child Abuse & Neglect 2011; 35: 408–13*

*2015 Summit – Adverse Childhood Experience and Toxic stress  
A Public Health Crisis Nadine Burke Harris et al 2015  
(The Area Health Education Center of Washington State  
University) (Burke et al 2011) (Burke Harris 2009)  
(Brown et al 2009) Felitti 2016 (Fox et al 2015)*

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# Sentence Stems for Reflective Conversations with Children and Teenagers



## WINE (I wonder, I imagine, I notice, empathy)

- **I wonder if...** (e.g. it felt like no one understood you).
- **I imagine...** (e.g. that was horrible when that happened).
- **I notice...** (e.g. how you perked up when you said you felt close to your brother).
- **I felt moved when you said...** (e.g. for years you thought you were to blame for the abuse. But now you realise you were not to blame and you feel freed from a terrible burden).
- **That sounds...** (e.g. painful because you were all on your own). [empathy]
- **This is my drawing about what you said** (show drawing).
- **I respect you for...** (e.g. your courage).
- **Will you help me understand x?...** (e.g. what it was like for you when your mum went to hospital?).

After voicing your curiosity, e.g. 'Will you help me understand' always follow up with **empathy** e.g. 'So when you Mum went to hospital your say you felt terribly lost and alone. I can understand that. So painful, as I know how close you are and how much you feel supported by her.' (This should not be simply a parroting of what they said but showing that you have understood the main emotional themes in their response).

# Having a rich language for feelings and mental states



Language for the pain of loss

Language for missing and yearning

Language for alone/loneliness

Language for feeling rejected/abandoned

Language for emotionally numb

Language for harsh inner world

Language for bleak inner world

Language for feeling desperate

Language for catastrophic disappointment

Language for hurt

Language for regret

Language for shock

Language for feeling trapped

Language for fear/anxiety/terror

Language for anger/rage

Language for jealousy

Language for feeling raw/exposed/vulnerable

Language for feeling broken

Language for shame

Language for feeling used/abused

Language for wanting to keep people out

Language for unsafe/safe

Language for mistrust /trust

Language for alienation

Language for despair

Language for hopeless/defeated

Language for overwhelmed/exhausted

Language for feeling powerless

Language for feeling like you're nothing/scum

Language for not belonging

Language for bottling up feelings

Language for cutting off from feelings

Language for worried about Mum/Dad

Language for meaninglessness

Language for emptiness

Language for desolation

Language for self-hate

Language for feeling worthless/invisible/  
not valued

# Stages of Emotional Development

## Stage One

Emotion experienced as sensation (so feelings are 'behaved' rather than thought about).

Many emotions cannot be thought about or put into words. The pain of un-named/un-thought negative feeling is transformed into bodily symptoms, neurosis, action against self or others, (e.g. hitting out, eating disorders, panic attacks, agitation, self-harm, aggressive outbursts) or transformed into passive behaviours: "doing nothing, agitation, over- adaptation, incapacitation." (Eric Berne).

**Adult response: Help the child to move from sensation to awareness by modelling putting words to feelings. Use Mental State Talk/ Asking to talk as the child. Don't expect them to come up with words for feelings. Remember they are pre- awareness.**

## Stage Two

Primary emotions are at times accurately labelled (e.g. sad/cross/scared) while other emotions are labelled inaccurately within the limited vocabulary the child knows. Defences are labelled e.g. "Unfair" "School's rubbish." "It's stupid." as opposed to the feelings underneath the defences.

As a result the child moves from intense feeling into cutting off (freeze) or 'behaving' their feelings (fight/flight/challenging behaviour)

**Adult response: Help the child to keep in mind the defence and the feeling underneath the defence e.g. "I can see you are really cross about what happened and I can imagine that another part of you is really hurting about it too." Keep labelling feelings to enable the child to start to think about his feelings on a deeper level and more accurately.**

## Stage Three

Feelings regularly labelled accurately. More in depth emotional states can be thought about.

The child is able to talk about his feelings on a deeper level and reflect on more complex self-states. S/he may show some ability to think about feelings that co-exist "I hate my brother, but I also feel hurt because Mum seems to like him far better than me."

**Adult response: Use a richer vocabulary and images for feelings when talking to the child (e.g. shock, let down, not belonging, feeling on the outside, feeling torn apart) so they reflect on deeper level and begin to embrace more subtle nuances of emotional states.**

## Stage Four

**Theory of Mind Skills/ Capacity for Mentalisation.**

Able to reflect on the mind of another person. Can consider intentions at times and think about when a feeling expressed by the other person might be a defence against core underlying feelings that are too painful to bring into conscious awareness. "I hate x for bullying me. But I guess he must have been really hurt by someone in his life, to call me names like that."

**Adult response: Praise for their capacity for reflection and join the child in their reflective process.**





## Mentalisation

- Thinking about feeling.
- Feeling about thinking.
- Thinking about thinking.