



FROM CORRECTION TO CONNECTION

**PROVIDING CHILDREN WITH THE
OPPORTUNITY TO BEHAVE WELL**

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I started doing therapeutic work with children and young people in the child protection system about 12 years ago and my first 5 years of work mainly involved caring for traumatised children within residential care programs (group homes for children and young people who could not be placed in foster care).

After already experiencing some success working with at-risk youth out in the community, it was a bit of shock for me moving into a care-giving role in a residential setting. I suddenly found my attempts to connect with, nurture and guide these young people's behaviours were often met with great resistance, defiance and aggression. It did not take me long to realise that the simple behaviour management strategies we were expected to use (rewards and consequences), did not seem to work with most of the young people we supported. In fact, many of the behavioural issues we experienced emerged from the power struggles we experienced when trying to implement consequences for negative behaviour.

Even in the earlier stages of my career, I intuitively understood that the behaviours I was experiencing were pain-based and grounded in children's previous experiences of abuse and neglect, yet in the absence of any other behaviour management framework, I, my colleagues and the whole system around me continued to treat their behaviour as a choice. Although most of us could see that the only progress we ever made was through building relationships, we still continued to allow our need for **correction** to sabotage opportunities for **connection**.

At the time I believed, and most people still do, that "children do well if they want to", rather than what I now know to be true, that "children do well if they can"¹.

We viewed children's behaviour as a simple issue of compliance and we believed that children were somehow motivated to continue doing the wrong thing, even though they received consequences and there was often no obvious pay-off for their 'bad' behaviour. That is, we continued to tell ourselves that they were choosing to misbehave, even when it did not make any sense to us.

What I didn't understand back then was that being compliant is not as simple as just choosing to be compliant, but actually requires a whole range of cognitive skills, such as impulse control, cognitive flexibility, empathy, language-processing, social skills and frustration tolerance¹. On top of all of that, being compliant also requires that a young person trusts adults enough to hand over control to them². The children I support, often have few, if any of those skills, and have usually learnt quite early in their development that adults cannot be trusted, and that their very survival depends on them maintaining complete control over their relationships.

In 2006 I began my search for more effective ways to support children, and over the following years my understanding of children's needs and behaviours was completely turned around by the research and work of people such as Bruce Perry, Dan Hughes, Sandra Bloom, Allan Schore, Bryan Post, Bessel van der Kolk, Dan Siegel, Ross Green and Stuart Ablon. As my colleagues and I began to understand the impact of trauma and attachment on behaviour, it began to change the way our residential care programs engaged with young people and we immediately experienced better outcomes with the children in our service. We began viewing their aggressive outbursts as adaptive hard-wired survival strategies developed under conditions of overwhelming threat. We began viewing their resistance to connection and their need to control the people they got close to, as resulting from having care-givers in the past who had been unreliable, unavailable, neglectful or abusive. We began placing 'connection' before 'correction', as we realised that what these children needed most was a whole lot of nurturing, and for adults to patiently teach them the skills required to meet our expectations (over and over again), rather than just continuously reinforcing those expectations through punishment.

While we began achieving better outcomes in our program, we noticed that outside of our service, we were constantly struggling with a broader system that was still viewing and responding to these children as though they were choosing to be 'bad'. Based on this identified need, in 2008 my colleague Brett Sceats and I decided to start our own organisation, so that we could begin sharing this critical information with parents, carers and professionals within the broader system around us. This was the beginning of Complex Care.

Although Complex Care is primarily engaged to work with children on the more extreme end of the spectrum, the principal that 'children do well if they can' is universal, and over the last five years thanks to organisations like the Workforce Council, we've been able to start delivering this information to professionals in other areas such as the early childhood and education sector.

While it's not possible to fit all of the information I'd like to share into this article, I thought I might at least get down some of the core principles and strategies I've found most useful for making sense of and responding to behaviours.

1 LOOK FOR THE NEED BEHIND THE 'BEHAVIOUR'

If you are responding consistently to a child's behaviour with meaningful rewards and consequences and you are not seeing a fairly immediate shift in that behaviour, then it is likely that the child either:

- a. Lacks the cognitive skills required to meet your expectation,
- b. Does not understand why the expectation is important,
- c. Does not actually know what alternative behaviour they are required to perform,
- d. Does not feel safe handing control over to adults or directly cuing them about their needs, or
- e. Is not actually calm enough in the moment to be able to meet your expectation (has low frustration tolerance or is experiencing increased stress at that time)³.

2 STRESS SWITCHES OFF OUR THINKING BRAIN

As a child (or adult's) stress levels begin to rise, our brain automatically begins to rely less on the intelligent 'thinking' part of our brain (cortex) and more on the lower 'survival' parts of our brain (limbic and brainstem region). Under stress, our brain becomes increasingly geared towards responding to danger (not engaging in relationships) and our thinking becomes more simple, automatic, impulsive and defensive. The more threatened we feel, the worse our brain becomes at:

- a. listening to what people are saying
- b. engaging in problem-solving
- c. considering the consequences of our actions

As our survival brain begins to take over and scan for danger, we stop listening to what people are saying and become far more focused on how they are saying it – what their body language, facial expressions and tone of voice are telling us about their intent.

So if we want children to listen to us and make good decisions, we need to help them feel calm and safe. If we know that their brains are no longer listening to what we are saying, but are instead completely focused on how we are saying it, then we need to first focus on appearing calm and non-threatening. This will allow us to bring their thinking brain back on-line, and only then, can we attempt to teach them, i.e. creating connection before correction.

3 EMOTIONAL REGULATION IS A SKILL

Our ability to calm ourselves down is a skill, not a choice. Even as adults, we do not choose whether something makes us feel happy, irritated or out of control, though most of us have learnt ways of thinking and behaving that help us to calm ourselves down. We start to learn this skill through first experiencing co-regulation from our care-giver during infancy (having our care-giver soothe us and direct our attention away from our distress over and over again). If we do not experience enough of this support, we will be delayed in this area. Exposure to trauma, or major disruptions to our early attachment relationships can completely destroy our capacity to self-regulate. Even with all the right developmental

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experiences we may still struggle in this area, just like we can lag in any other areas of functioning (e.g., motor skills, social skills, working memory, etc.).

When we begin to view children's 'outbursts' or 'over reactions' as resulting from a lagging skill, it helps us to stop taking it so personally and to stop applying all this negative intent to their behaviour. We can then bring our focus back to teaching them to self-regulate, by helping them to become more aware of their feelings (monitoring their state), giving them strategies to self-soothe (modify their state), and by providing them with more appropriate ways to communicate their feelings (express their state).

Calmly reflecting back children's emotional states and regularly engaging them in mindfulness activities can support children to get better at tuning into themselves and monitoring their emotional states. Incorporating 'today I feel....' activities into a child's routine, where they take a moment to consider and share how they are feeling (practice naming their emotion or pointing to a picture such as an emoticon) can support emotional monitoring and appropriate expression of emotions.

If a child is more aware of their emotions and better at expressing them to others, it makes it a lot easier for them to start using strategies to modify their feelings. It is important to note, that not all children have learnt that they can bring their big emotions to adults and directly cue them for help with calming down. It is important that we remind these children over and over again that if they are feeling upset or experiencing 'big feelings' and need help calming down, they can come to us for connection and support (such as a hug).

Some of the most effective strategies for helping us to self-regulate work by tapping directly into our survival brain (brain-stem). Bruce Perry's research through the Child Trauma Academy has found that engaging in patterned, rhythmic, repetitive activities has a soothing effect on our brain-stem and helps us to feel calmer and bring our 'thinking' brain back on-line⁴.

Engaging children in activities such as dancing, drumming, singing, marching and bouncing, especially at heart-beat rhythms (around 80 beats per minute), can be used to support children through difficult transitions or situations during their day. This works in a very similar way to rocking or patting an infant on the back to calm them down, as it taps into associations made in our brain during our in-utero development³. If children are continuously supported by a calm adult to engage in these activities, they can learn to start using them independently to calm themselves down.

4 THE WAY PEOPLE LOOK AT US IMPACTS ON HOW WE FEEL AND BEHAVE

Think for a moment about how a relaxed parent and baby, who are both physically and emotionally healthy, gaze into each other's eyes. Every time a parent looks into their child's eyes with joy and delight, the child begins to learn that they are delightful. Their core sense of who they are is beginning to emerge and they are learning that they are good. In attachment literature this process is often referred to as an inter-subjective experience, the way we feel about ourselves in light of another's gaze, and how that influences the way we behave and gaze back at them².

If a parent provides a child with reliable, predictable, responsive care-giving, the child also learns that they can trust adults, and the world starts to look like a pretty great place. Children who have these experiences learn that they are good, worthy of love and that adults can be trusted, and they will take this security into their relationships with the rest of the world. Now if a child feels good, and trusts adults enough to hand over control to them, it becomes so much easier to behave and comply with adult's expectations, and you will probably find that people just want to keep smiling at them.

I work with children who have had a very different start to life; children with parents who have been overwhelmed, depressed, afraid, or angry. And as a result many of these children have learnt in light of their parents' gaze, that they are depressing, frightening, annoying, or sometimes that they are not even worth looking at. Even outside of the child-protection system, there are a whole lot of children whose parents might appear to be well functioning, but who for one reason or another have been emotionally unable to delight in their children. When children feel bad, they are more likely to behave badly, and when they behave badly, we feel stressed (because we take it personally), and we frown at them, raise our voices at them and we ever so subtly reject them. So they feel bad in light of our gaze and the cycle continues.

If we understand this cycle, we can begin to engage children in ways that maintain connection. Dan Hughes' PACE model (Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity and Empathy) provides a framework for developing healthy attachment in children². If we can consistently engage children with this approach, even when responding to stressful behaviours, we can keep their thinking brains on-line (so they can learn), we can attune to and reflect back their emotional experience (promoting empathy), and we can reduce their experience of shame, allowing them to feel good, and making it easier for them to behave.

These are just some of the important principles and strategies we can use to support the way we care for and respond to children.

If you are interested in exploring these ideas in more depth, you can visit our website at www.complexcare.com.au or contact the Workforce Council to enquire about what workshops we are currently running.

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