

## Brook guidance on creating a safe learning environment

### Purpose of this guide

This document guides you through Brook's approach to creating a safe learning environment within education sessions; the importance and context of doing so and hopes to support facilitators with practical suggestions of implementing best practice.

### Why a safe learning environment is crucial in PSHE

A safe learning environment is important when teaching PSHE so children and young people can learn and develop. We hope children and young people can use their PSHE education to improve their own health and wellbeing now and in their futures. In order to explore skills and challenges effectively this must be done in a safe learning environment, where participants feel comfortable to share ideas and explore values. PSHE lessons cover issues which relate to children and young people's lives and go beyond the classroom, supporting their personal growth. Some topics or activities can trigger emotional responses. Equally some PSHE lessons will cover difficult, upsetting or controversial events or issues. To do this healthily and effectively for everyone this needs to happen in a safe learning environment. Children and young people may have questions about events or topics that they want to talk to adults about and PSHE lessons can offer opportunities to do this in a safe environment.

### The importance of Trauma Informed PSHE

Research indicates that childhood adversity and trauma can impact children and young people's health outcomes, including mental health outcomes, immediately and in the long term. There is also a growing body of evidence that where children and young people also experience protective factors this impact can be reduced and health outcomes improved through employing a sensitive Trauma-Informed approach.

Brook recommends the professional guide "Adversity and Trauma-Informed Practice", written collaboratively by Young Minds, Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families and Body & Soul, to further aid your own understanding and facilitation. Local training is available in Cornwall and the Isle of Scilly through Headstart Kernow and Trauma Informed Schools UK.

### What should I be aware of as a facilitator?

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) can create trauma and adversity for young people and children and can occur via a range of experiences, including (but not limited to):

- Physical, sexual, emotional and financial abuse or neglect.
- Having a family member in prison
- Addiction to drugs or alcohol within the family
- Bereavement
- Witnessing domestic violence

The above experiences may have an instant impact on the individuals, as a long lasting trauma, or may be something that resurfaces at a later date, in the form of

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), or both. Individuals may also face overlaps in adversity and trauma. Facilitators need to be aware that all children and young people are individuals and may not respond in a way that professionals or adults expect and that these reactions will be different for everyone.

Trauma-Informed Practice gives facilitators some tools to support creating a safe environment for those they are teaching and themselves. It ensures school is a safe space for children and young people through open communication, transparency and trustworthiness in all teachers and adults. This approach allows children and young people to understand that their feelings and opinions are being heard and respected, while knowing they can access help through pastoral or student support teams. The practice itself aims to minimise distress through prior planning and recognising content or activities that could trigger or mirror past trauma.

***“Adversity and trauma-informed practice is designed to enhance, and work alongside, existing safeguarding protections, policies and measures for children and vulnerable adults”***

(Adversity and Trauma-Informed Practice)

Practitioners need to be aware that not all adversity and trauma will be known to school or the individual and there may be unintentional reactions or triggers, including for the facilitator. Therefore we need to be implementing best practice, through always preparing lessons and interventions as though someone who has trauma or experienced adversity on the topic is in the classroom.

### **PACE and Emotional Coaching**

Insights from Trauma-Informed Approaches, including PACE (Playfulness Acceptance Curiosity Empathy) and emotional coaching, provide a framework for our responses where behaviour could be seen as negative or challenging.

PACE is a way of thinking, communicating and behaving with a traumatised child that aims to make the child feel safe and focusses on the whole child not just their behaviour. It enables adults to see strengths and positives that are underneath potentially negative and challenging behaviours. In practical terms it can allow facilitators to pause and unpack what is causing the negative behaviour, focusing on the young person or child's experience, rather than automatically turning to punishment or sanction. We will explore this further in the 'How can adverse reactions be supported?' section.

Emotional coaching's main principle is that nurturing and emotionally supportive relationships provide the optimal context for positive outcomes and resilience for children and young people.

The five essential steps of Emotion Coaching:

- Be aware of the child's emotion
- Recognise the child's expression of emotion as an opportunity for teaching and learning
- Listen with empathy and validate the child's feelings
- Help the child learn to label their emotions with words

- Set limits when you are helping the child to solve problems or deal with upsetting situations appropriately

Using these five steps helps children and young people to understand different emotions, why they occur and how to handle them in the future.

### Creating a safe learning environment

A safe learning environment is crucial to delivering good PSHE. PSHE topics go beyond the classroom and the very content of PSHE aims to support children and young people's personal growth. In order to support you in effectively creating a safe learning environment for PSHE delivery within your school or educational setting we have divided the process into four stages. What to do at the:

- Start of the term/year
- Before the lesson
- Structuring the lesson
- During the lesson

### Start of term or academic year

Key concepts within a Trauma-Informed Approach should extend across the whole school; working to ensure your school is a safe place for children and young people. As facilitators we need to be as aware and informed as possible before delivery; regular trainings updates, supervisions and staff team de-briefs are vital to maintaining best practise. Some things to consider at the start of the academic year and/or term, in order to create a safe learning environment would be:

- Explore and feel confident about your educational setting's values around delivering PSHE topics and how they can be reflected in the lessons and PSHE curriculum more widely. Does the school have a position statement or school ethos to work from?
- Be aware of school policies and government guidance which facilitators should be working to and communicating to children and young people within PSHE lessons
- The PSHE team should try, where possible, to anticipate concerns or questions from parents and carers regarding the topics taught as part of this curriculum. Allowing transparency of the curriculum topics, lesson approach and also opportunities to ask questions for parents and carers can be really helpful.
- What pastoral support is available within school but also in the wider community which you may wish to signpost young people to within PSHE lessons? Your school may have a mentor or counsellor who could be made aware of the content of the lessons in case of an increase in children and young people choosing to access their service.
- The opportunity to consult with the Pastoral Team and wider staff team about particular concerns, areas of need or safeguarding issues which have arisen that could aid in promoting and maintaining a safe environment should be taken (confidentiality should always be maintained within these conversations).
- Based on conversations with colleagues and the needs of your educational setting, you should think about sequencing of lessons to best meet the needs

of your children and young people. For example, you may choose to move a lesson earlier in the academic year because an incident has happened in the school community and you wish to use this as a learning opportunity.

- Are there any outside organisations who you could ask for their support in delivering part of the PSHE curriculum? There can be large benefits in part of the PSHE curriculum being delivered by other organisations, who bring their expertise on specific topics and become another trusted adult for children and young people to ask questions to. Please make sure these organisations are reputable, follow safeguarding procedures and can show you high quality lesson plans and resources before delivery.
- How can the lessons be fully inclusive and reflect those that are being taught and the wider community, taking into account differentiation where needed?
- Make sure the lesson content and topics are of a developmentally appropriate level, this needs to be thought about in terms of developmental stage rather than age for those with SEND. Using the CIOS PSHE curriculum will guide you on when it is appropriate to discuss certain topics or content and the PSHE association has 'Education Planning Toolkits' which can further support this decision.
- Take some time to think about the importance of potentially changing your approach to teaching these lessons or differentiating between you teaching style in PSHE lessons as opposed to the rest of your timetable. It can be challenging for young people and facilitators alike to go between a PSHE subject and more academic lessons, and may mean thinking about behaviour management and how you will answer tricky questions. Some may find it helpful to acknowledge and explore this with the children and young people, explaining that these are 'different' lessons than others in some ways and we all need to work together to make them fun, safe and engaging.

### Before the lesson

Creating a safe learning environment should be the starting point for each lesson. Facilitators may choose to spend a whole lesson exploring this concept with a group, revisiting elements throughout the academic year and have an agreed group agreement displayed in the classroom for the group to reflect on and add too.

- Have you thought about your values and experiences regarding this topic? Does this throw up any challenges which you may need to speak to a colleague about?
- Be fully prepared for the lesson you are delivering and ensure you have reliable information and quality resources for the topic. Turn to other staff if you require support or guidance, and allow for upskilling where possible.
- Be as aware as possible of any specific needs of the children and young people in the class you will teach, this may also require speaking with the Pastoral or Support team on the content of the lesson and the need for additional support, and make adaptations and differentiate accordingly.
- Ensure you are aware of the school's Safeguarding Policy, what it means for you and those you are delivering to, and who you can turn to for support or guidance if an issue does arise. There should be time to feedback any notable instances, regarding individuals, to the designated safeguard lead, school

SENCO or Pastoral Team, allowing for further monitoring where relevant. There may also be key government guidance related to the topic to be aware of.

### Structuring the lesson

- Clearly introduce the topic, referencing the aims and objectives of the lesson at the beginning, allowing time for those participating to understand what will be discussed and how this may impact on them individually. You may feel acknowledging the potentially challenging nature of the content of the lesson is helpful.
- Finding out young people's starting points and what they already know about a topic is important for challenging misconceptions and creating a relevant lesson. We learn about PSHE topics from a host of different sources and so as facilitators we need to be aware young people and children will bring this to the lesson, but we should not assume prior knowledge. This assessment may happen with an opening activity or before the lesson to inform how you structure the content and this should be creative if possible.
- Factor in smaller group work or pair discussions, as well as whole group work, to allow young people to explore their feelings in a less exposing way. This also means the facilitator can pick up on comments or issues and be asked questions more easily and confidentially.
- Allow time for reflection and questions throughout and upon closing the lesson. Be prepared that these questions may be tricky or awkward, but remember the importance of young people having a safe space to get accurate answers from an adult. As the facilitator, do not feel ashamed to say you do not know an answer and that you will come back to them after some research yourself. Allowing children and young people to see your own acquiring of knowledge, may encourage and promote their own. You may choose to give the option for an anonymous questions box to aid confidentiality.
- Where appropriate the facilitator should provide balanced information involving different viewpoints to develop critical thinking skills on a topic. Part of this may be supporting young people to assess where this information is from and how reliable and trustworthy it might be, especially with online content.
- Distancing techniques should be employed throughout the lesson. This means we are not making young people share their personal experiences with others, which may potentially be traumatic or challenging. We can use case studies, scenarios or videos to potentially explore a topic instead.
- Allow time for signposting to relevant agencies and support available within and outside of your setting.
- The facilitator should have a chance to reflect on how they felt the lesson went and if there is anything they would alter when they next deliver. Ideally feedback should also be sort from the young people or children about what they enjoyed or would wish to improve. This could then be fed back to the school team, offering any support or guidance they may have garnered from this delivery, for future lessons.

## During the lesson

- The facilitator should communicate that creating a safe learning environment is a joint endeavour, so though the facilitator will set the tone, young people and children all play their part.
- Establish safety and boundaries within the lesson. This happens through creating 'ground rules', explaining confidentiality and being clear on the structure of the lesson.
- Keep lessons confidential within the context of safeguarding. Explain to the group that we do not share any personal or private experiences of ourselves or others, staff and students alike, though signpost to where they can do this after the lesson.
- Be aware of the confidentiality policy within your setting and communicate this to the group. It is important to make the distinction here between young people choosing to share a personal goal, feeling or idea, rather than personal information or an experience. So for example, it would be appropriate for a young person, if they feel able, to share their personal hopes for their future career, however it would not be appropriate to share their personal history of an abusive online relationship with the group.
- Explain that the children or young people have the right to feel safe throughout the lesson, with regards to their own emotions and wellbeing, and if they need to leave at any point they may do so, without having to give an explanation to peers. The lesson should be adequately staffed to facilitate this.
- Be aware of the reactions of those participating throughout and support appropriately (see "How can adverse reactions be supported?" for further guidance.)
- Be prepared to hold boundaries on behaviour and feel empowered to shut down inappropriate questioning or comments. If, for instance, a derogatory comment is made towards an individual or a protected characteristic, this should be met with a prompt explanation of why it is not acceptable to use such language, referring back to the group agreement or ground rules. This should be seen as a learning opportunity in the first instance, however, if an explanation does not deter language, then you should follow school policy on such behaviour. We must remember that part of creating a safe learning environment is the facilitator being able to manage the environment and make it safe for all.
- Try to create a non-judgemental environment, where ideas and contributions are encouraged and are not ridiculed or mocked. If unhealthy ideas are communicated these are challenged positively where possible or followed up after the lesson with further interventions.
- Facilitators should attempt to be as inclusive as possible to make this a safe learning environment reflective of the wider community. This includes using inclusive language (e.g. partner rather than assuming sexuality), using diverse case studies and examples and challenging misconceptions where needed.
- Make lessons relevant to young peoples' lived experience where possible, especially considering the online world and how this relates to the topic.
- The facilitator should be alert to safeguarding and support needs and follow policies and procedures if an issue arises.

## Creating a group agreement or ground rules

An important element in creating a safe learning environment is agreeing a group agreement or ground rules for the lesson, in order to set boundaries clearly and help children and young people feel able to share feelings and explore values. It can support setting positive expectations for behaviour and a framework for challenging derogatory or discriminatory behaviour or comments. A solid and collaborative group agreement or group rules helps manage discussions where young people hold strong views supporting the safe exploration of different opinions. It can be an important place to explain confidentiality within the lesson and your school or education policy on it.

You may choose to link to your school's code of conduct/ethos for behaviour expected from those participating, for both staff and students, to the group agreement or ground rules. Ideally creating a group agreement or ground rules would be a collaborative process with the young people and children, which could then be reflected on in each subsequent lesson. The group agreement or ground rules should be appropriate for the groups' developmental stage e.g. replacing 'respecting others' with 'being kind to others' if more appropriate. Group agreements can be created by asking the group how they think they can explore the topics in a safe and respectful way; how they can best work together and support each other and how they can safely challenge any negative behaviour. Record appropriate responses on flip charts and then ask the group to sign their names to agree the 'rules'. The agreement is a helpful tool that can be referred back to should inappropriate behaviour materialise. This approach also gives ownership of the rules to the group.

For example, a group agreement may include:

- ✓ Be open but we won't talk about our own personal lives
- ✓ We will show everyone respect and not embarrass them or make fun of them in class or outside
- ✓ We will not assume we know what people think and feel or what's going on in their lives, we accept that everyone is an individual
- ✓ We will all take part and get involved in the lessons but we have the right to pass on an activity
- ✓ We will listen to each other
- ✓ We can ask the teacher any questions (nothing personal though!)
- ✓ We will try to use the correct language and not slang words, if we don't know what the right word is we can ask
- ✓ We can ask for help and support outside class if we need to
- ✓ Confidential
- ✓ Make it fun

## How can adverse reactions be supported?

By using a Trauma-Informed Approach we can better support young people and children to learn in a safe environment. This requires reframing the tendency to see adverse reactions as 'bad behaviour' requiring punishment, but instead focussing on the whole child, allowing the facilitator to reflect on what might be causing this

reaction. Not all reactions will look the same and should be supported individually. Some examples to illustrate this are:

- Laughter could be a sign of happiness, feeling uncomfortable, embarrassment or lack of understanding. Take time to speak to the individual to understand their emotions and then deal with this accordingly; is further positive explanation required?
- Trying to embarrass others could be a sign of a lack of their own understanding or discomfort about the topic. These moments should be first seen as learning opportunities, if appropriate, rather than automatically requiring punishment or sanction. Could any positive reinforcement be given to that individual or does the individual need to be removed for the safety of others? Removal from a lesson should be the last resort, after exploring other avenues of support or intervention; such as 1:1 support or moving the individual away from distractions.
- Withdrawing from the lesson could be a sign of past adversity or trauma, or may be that the child or young person is bored, uncomfortable or naturally 'quiet'. Speak to the individual to try and understand their emotions and apply adequate support. Are individuals aware they can leave at any point, for the sake of their own wellbeing? Do they know they can speak to these people within school if they have further questions at a later point?

Facilitators should take time to support individuals, utilising support staff when and where appropriate.

### **Signposting and safeguarding**

Ensure that lessons and delivery fall within the schools Safeguarding Policy. Children and young people should be appropriately aware of the policy and how it safeguards them, and that facilitators may need to seek further support if issues or adverse reactions occur. The PSHE association advises by making the lesson safe for individuals, where known, will help to ensure the learning is safe for everyone.

Always allow time for clear, appropriate signposting at the end of each lesson, this could include:

- Allowing time for individual questions with the facilitator at the end of the lesson or a later date.
- Ensuring the Pastoral Team, plus any other services available with the school, are highlighted.
- Local services available within Cornwall and Isle of Scilly are linked to.
- Reputable online services, such as Brook, Young Minds or NSPCC are mentioned.

### **Support for facilitators:**

Facilitators may, themselves, come across things that impact their own wellbeing and trigger past trauma. Schools should be aware of how they can support their staff, and also be mindful that with all ACE and trauma, it may not become apparent until the facilitator finds themselves in the situation.

Areas to be conscious of regarding facilitators:



- Are individuals struggling to help others with regards to trauma or adversity? Are they feeling overwhelmed, detached, or struggling with their own emotions? This could be a sign of the individual requiring extra support or a chance to remove themselves, safely, from the situation or delivery of that topic.
- Is adequate planning time given within school hours, allowing for a better work/home life balance?
- Does the school offer team building opportunities, to allow for staff to be aware of who they can turn to for support; be it within their classroom, year group, leadership team or pastoral staff?
- Does the school offer regular formal supervisions?
- Does the school link with any agencies who can offer outside support for individuals, such as a counselling or wellbeing support services?
- NAPAC (the National Association for People Abused in Childhood) offers support to adult survivors of all types of childhood abuse, including physical, sexual, emotional abuse or neglect. Support can be found on [www.napac.org.uk](http://www.napac.org.uk)

Allowing facilitators to explore and understand their own adversity and trauma, confidentially and safely, will allow for a consistent whole school approach. When supporting children and young people through adversity and trauma, it is best to know our own strengths and limitations; we support others best when we have the knowledge and feel empowered to do so for ourselves.

### Resource link

'Adversity and Trauma-Informed Practice: A short guide for professionals working on the frontline" by Rebecca Brennan, Dr Marc Bush and David Trickey, with Charlotte Levene and Joanna Watson.

<https://youngminds.org.uk/media/3091/adversity-and-trauma-informed-practice-guide-for-professionals.pdf>

### Useful websites to support safe spaces

Headstart

<https://www.headstartkernow.org.uk>

Trauma Informed Schools

<https://www.traumainformedschools.co.uk/>

PACE

<https://ddpnetwork.org/about-ddp/meant-pace/>

Emotion Coaching

<https://www.emotioncoachinguk.com/>