

reflections

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EMPATHIC EDUCATORS AND OUTSIDE SCHOOL HOURS CARE

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Ongoing conversations with Lady Gowrie Tasmania (LGT) Outside School Hours Care (OSHC) educators have confirmed a shared and strong professional interest in developing effective strategies to support children's behaviour. Whilst I acknowledge this very real concern, I feel we often overlook a critical question; What do we know about the children who attend our services and of their lives away from us? Children's behaviours are shaped by their experiences yet, in our busy work environments we can find ourselves reacting rather than understanding, anticipating, preparing and responding.

Our work with children starts with building the strong relationships that enable us to bring the learning outcomes, principles and practice of *My Time, Our Place Framework for School Age Care in Australia* (MTOF) to

life. Strong relationships take time to achieve and for some children, who have experienced high levels of stress and trauma, there can be complex barriers to participation in our programs. With deeper understanding of how stress and trauma can affect children, I believe we can consistently and collectively work in ways that build trust and achieve connection.

Gowrie Training & Consultancy, through support from the Education and Care Unit, Tasmanian Department of Education, recently presented a forum focussed on behaviour for educators, teachers and leaders who work with school age children. I attended with a group of LGT OSHC educators and other educators from across Tasmania who, like me, were keen to gain a deeper understanding of the impact of our behaviour and

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actions on those of the children and young people we work with. Guest presenter, Trent Savill's opening address *Guiding Children's Behaviour for Connection: Providing Therapeutic Care* explored stress and trauma and attachment and considered how educators can effectively support children to develop.

Savill stressed that positive early experiences, where healthy and secure attachment to a primary caregiver is established, are critical to healthy emotional development. Infants who are consistently seen as delightful begin to see themselves as delightful and consequently begin to develop trust in adults. (Savill 2016, p. 12). This trust extends into the relationships they build beyond their primary care giver, eventually including, in some cases, relationships with their OSHC educators. Children who feel good about themselves and who trust adults are prepared to follow guidance and are able to meet reasonable expectations about acceptable behaviour.

Inconsistent or disengaged early experiences with primary caregivers, along with stressful or traumatic experiences, leads to ambivalent attachment, anxious-avoidant attachment and disorganised attachment (Bowlby, 1988). In the OSHC context, this results in children who can have negative perceptions of themselves, have limited or no trust in adults, are not prepared to follow guidance and are unable to consistently meet reasonable expectations about acceptable behaviour.

This indicates that educators need to develop deeper knowledge and understanding of the experiences of children in their care to build positive relationships with them. From this work, informed and skilled educators are better positioned to respond to behaviours with sensitivity, support children to manage their own behaviours and effectively guide children's behaviour when required.

Additionally, persistence and patience are essential professional attributes to supporting children's behaviour and are always strengthened when underpinned by sound developmental knowledge and familiarity with trauma informed practice. This manifests in reflective practice, incorporating daily professional conversations that inform decision-making, along with ongoing engagement in professional learning. Commitment to these actions not only strengthens educator capability, but also builds greater understanding and empathy. Empathic educators are committed to looking at triggers or reasons that underpin children's behaviour and utilising their growing knowledge about individual children to consider issues from the child's perspective. Consequently, there is a greater likelihood that educators will be able to effectively anticipate, prepare and respond.

Developing and sustaining strong relationships with families, carers and school-based colleagues is also critical to developing empathic understandings about children and for meeting their needs. Through sharing



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knowledge and insights, OSHC educators can together develop consistent and suitable approaches to supporting individual children across settings. Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, educators need to talk with the children themselves and where possible include them in decision-making. This lets children know they are valued and respected, which is essential to creating authentic inclusive environments for leisure and learning.

Child-centred OSHC services pay attention to creating safe, reliable and predictable environments. In safe environments all children can feel calm and cared for, and for children who have experienced stress and trauma safe environments offer opportunities to self-calm along with enhanced chances for positive connection with others. Reliable environments are populated with educators who are calm and responsive and who collaboratively engage in ongoing critical reflection that considers each child, the learning environment and their own professional actions. Predictable environments emerge when educators incorporate sensitive routines that are flexible enough to respond to the needs of all children. Routines that support the wellbeing of children in OSHC also include well-considered transition practices with partnering schools. Children carry the effects of their day to day and minute by minute experiences between settings, so developing and sustaining effective protocols for communication between settings is essential work.

Effective educators in OSHC services work together to achieve and maintain positive connections with all children and to support and guide them with their emotional development. Trent Savill advocates for Dan Hughes' PACE model as a framework for developing healthy attachment; Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity and Empathy (Hughes, D 2004). This relationship based approach to therapeutic care works to support traumatised children by helping them to regulate emotions and overcome challenges that influence their behaviour. The approach also resonates when working alongside other children as it focusses on the whole child as opposed to behaviour alone. Playful educators strive to create a light and spontaneous atmosphere. Accepting educators take on board and acknowledge children's emotions without accepting associated behaviours. Curious educators want to know what children are feeling and thinking. Empathic educators show children that they care.

Principle 1 of MTOP resonates strongly with the PACE model.

'Educators who are attuned to children's thoughts and feelings support the development of a strong sense of wellbeing and social competencies. Exhibiting qualities of fairness, humour, sympathy and understanding builds respectful and trusting relationships with children, families, colleagues and other professionals. Educators foster independence and initiative thereby nurturing children's agency and leadership skills'

(Department of Education and Training 2011, p. 11).

Childhood is a time for discovery and joy and skilled, confident and empathic educators are central to the best possible outcomes for all children in OSHC settings.

This author attended the *Guiding Children's Behaviour for Connection Forum*, presented by Gowrie Training & Consultancy, at the Professional Learning Institute, Glenorchy on 23 March 2019.

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