



Relational Policy

Author: Christie Cavallo

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Section 1: Policy rationale

One of the core principles of the Thrive Approach is that the adult–child relationship is vital when developing the child’s social and emotional skills essential for life and learning.

Humans are a social species and babies first learn about themselves through the eyes of their caregivers, in other words, the experience reflected back from the caregiver to the child initiates the child’s experience of who they are. Children are naturally meaning-making beings; they make sense of the world through their experiences.

When children experience safety in their relationships they open up to new learning; when they experience a threat to their safety they mobilise themselves for responding to danger and/or prepare to shut down if the conditions are overwhelming and they lack the resources to respond.

In Thrive, we teach that all children need to have the experience of an adult providing them with a secure base and calming them when they are physiologically dysregulated. We describe this as meeting Being needs by being a co-regulator.

We also teach that all children need to have experienced having older wiser others (secure bases) to depart from to explore the world, while knowing they can retreat to this secure base in order to refuel, share experience and regulate in the face of danger or threat. We describe this as meeting Doing needs by being a co-adventurer.

Finally, we emphasise that all children need adults who ‘lend their brains’ to children to help them make sense of the complex and often incoherent information all around them. Adults help to organise children’s experiences, develop their capacity to reflect and support them to make mental representations of themselves in relationship with others and the world by holding the child’s mind in their mind and reflecting this back to the child. We describe this as meeting Thinking needs by being the co-constructor of meaning.

Section 2: The relate–rupture–repair cycle

Inevitably there will be times when there is a break in the nurturing connection between the adult and child. For example, if the adult is tired, busy dealing with something else or is emotionally unavailable due to a major life event, and so on. While we might do our best to minimise these breaks in connection, when they do happen, they can be repaired, and learning can come from this experience.

Research scientist Suzanne Zeedyk shares with us that “making up is more important than messing up.” Dr Zeedyk refers to the everyday scenarios where relationships between two people go through a rhythm of relating (in relationship), a rupture happening in the relationship and then making a necessary repair to the rupture in order to return to relationship. The repair not only rewires patterns of behaviour; it also establishes trust. This is known as the relate–rupture–repair cycle.

When we look at each element of relate, rupture and repair, we examine the specific skills we, as adults, can use to help support these interactions with the children we work with.



Relate

The 'relate' phase refers to the times in a relationship when we feel connected and attuned with one another, things are going well, and we are making efforts to maintain this positive and mutually beneficial relationship. In this phase, we are effectively building a bridge of connection between ourselves and the other person. Caregivers and their infants start building this bridge before the baby is born and continue to build it after birth and throughout the child's life.

In the relate phase of the cycle, the adult can monitor their own emotional state and can regulate themselves physiologically, relationally and cognitively to be optimally present and accessible for the child. The adult can connect with the child and focus on their needs being met. The adult is present and can contain the child's emotional experience for them. The connection between the two is reciprocal.

Rupture

The 'rupture' phase refers to those times in a relationship where there is a misunderstanding or misattunement, in other words, when we don't get it right for the other person and we feel like the relationship experiences a setback. At this point the bridge of connection might feel weakened or more vulnerable. Although we might think of ruptures as being problematic and therefore to be avoided where possible, in fact, they are an inevitable part of any relationship. They become a crucial component in the relationship when the rupture is subsequently repaired because this helps to develop the child's resilience.

Ongoing attunement between the emotionally available adult and the child will inevitably move through different phases, being at times fully synchronised and all-encompassing and at other times disconnected and misattuned.

When a rupture happens, it is likely that we will see the child's behaviour change. The child no longer feels the presence of the adult as supportive or alongside them, and their nervous system quickly reacts to the withdrawal of these cues of safety with survival responses of fight, flight or freeze. These are associated with distressed behaviours we describe in Thrive as passive or non-problem-solving behaviours.

If an adult is able to stay regulated themselves, they will be able to notice subtle changes communicated by the child, stay attuned to the child and repair the rupture effectively with compassion. Conversely if they are triggered and become dysregulated, they won't be able to attune to the child and this could also trigger them into further dysregulation. It is therefore important for adults to be aware of their triggers and possible reactions and have access to ways they can stay regulated in challenging circumstances. It is important that ruptures in the relationship are noticed so they can be repaired. If the adult is unable to or does not notice the rupture then it can't be repaired. This is a lost opportunity to build the child's capacity for relationship and regulation.

Repair

The 'repair' phase of the cycle involves correcting the misunderstanding or misattunement of the rupture by trying to share understanding of intentions, feelings, thoughts and actions in order to come back into a relationship. The repair part of the cycle is an essential



component of healthy growth, boosting our resilience and helping us to cope with challenges by giving us greater trust that difficulties can be resolved.

The emotionally available adult becomes aware that there is a misattunement between him/herself and the child. The adult is able to deal appropriately with their own reaction, in that moment, to stay regulated and is then able to reach out to the child and repair the rupture in their relationship. The adult may do this by apologising and reaffirming the attuning and validating stance, and by demonstrating acceptance, curiosity and empathy to the child.

In this situation the adult has the capacity to stay steady and regulated in the presence of the dysregulated child. By repairing the relationship, the child's arousal state can settle and the relationship can continue in an attuned way. The adult must always repair the relationship, not the child.

Section 3: PACE and the Vital Relational Functions

To support the rhythm of this cycle in Thrive we use the stance of PACE and the communication skills of the Vital Relational Functions (VRFs).

PACE is the acronym used by psychologist Dan Hughes to describe the optimal adult stance when working with children to reduce stress, enhance connection, promote safety and engender the learning of new social and emotional skills.

- **Playfulness:** sensitive and appropriate playfulness helps the child feel safe and promotes positivity
- **Acceptance:** unconditionally accepting the child makes them feel safe, secure and loved
- **Curiosity:** genuine and non-judgemental interest in the child helps them become aware of their inner life
- **Empathy:** demonstrating compassion for the child and their feelings supports the child's sense of self-worth The VRFs represent the key techniques that we consciously apply in relationship.
- **Attunement:** matching the energy of the child with non-verbal, prosodic, energetic and behavioural communication
- **Validation:** acknowledging the validity of the feelings the child is experiencing
- **Containment:** predictability, routine and experiencing safety and security both relationally and environmentally
- **Regulation:** transforms what was too much to bear alone into an experience that can be tolerated together.

Section 4: The Nurture–Structure Highway

Both nurture and control (structure) are crucial to the healthy development of the child, supporting the child to be themselves while being able to adapt sufficiently to fit in socially with others. However, where nurture and control are taken to the extremes, they can have a negative effect.

Parent educators Jean Illsley Clarke and Connie Dawson (Illsley Clarke and Dawson 1998) created the model of the Nurture–Structure Highway to help adults maintain an appropriate balance. In this model both nurture and structure are continuous (the road). It



is important to stay on the road of reasonable levels and not swerve off into the ditches or hard shoulder of extremes.

This Nurture–Structure Highway model provides a way of helping adults consider the best possible support for the child (staying on the road) and how to avoid veering off into the extremes. It is helpful in making the distinction between negotiable and non-negotiable rules and is particularly useful when discussing boundaries and rules.

Coming to an agreement about non-negotiable rules can contribute positively to children’s safety and will support consistency for all staff at the setting.

Select 5: THRIVE at Southwater Infant Academy

At Southwater Infants, staff have received training which enables them to:

- Understand that behaviour is a communication of an unmet need.
- Imagine into the emotional need being communicated by a child and use this as an opportunity to support the child's emotional learning, the development of their self-awareness and the widening of their window of tolerance
- Understand and use the PACE (Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity, Empathy) model and VRF’s (Vital Relational Functions- Attune, Validate, Contain, Regulate) when supporting children.
- Understand the THRIVE developmental model and each of its strands (Being, Doing, Thinking, Power & Identity, Skills & Structure).
- Understand and use the Relate-Rupture-Repair cycle.
- Understand the Nurture-Structure Highway and recognise how this supports a consistent approach to boundaries and rules.

At Southwater Infants, we recognise and understand that there are times in school when children may be brought into new or less well developed relationships such as transitions, unstructured times, supply cover or PPA and as a result staff are planned and prepared for these events. Relationship building is an integral part of our THRIVE and PSHE curriculum and is planned to support all children’s relationships, especially at the start of a new academic year.

At the start of a new year, children are involved in setting the rules and routines within the classroom through establishing class charters and revisiting how to demonstrate the academy’s behaviour and learning values. The academy’s values underpin our behaviour policy, which is embedded across the academy. Children are able to articulate and identify the values and refer to these when discussing both positive and negative behaviour choices.

Our behaviour policy is values led, sets high expectations, establishes and maintains clear boundaries and rewards positive behaviour. Our aim is to be proactive rather than reactive- to foster a positive environment where children exhibit a sense of commitment and pride in the academy. We recognise that there are, on occasion, times that mistakes can and will be made. The children are learning their way in the world and may need help and guidance. At Southwater Infants,, our aim is to be proactive in supporting children to learn from mistakes and take ownership of their own choices. This may mean accepting consequences for these actions. We use a restorative approach to resolving and repairing conflict and tackling challenging behaviour. We do not welcome punishments that set out to humiliate or belittle a child. All consequences have a learning outcome and aim to teach children that there are



always repercussions for poor choices and inappropriate behaviour. Our goal is to help the children learn to make informed and positive decisions and to choose a better way.

If a member of staff is triggered by a child's behaviour, they recognise the need to seek support from a trained THRIVE practitioner in a non shaming and non judgemental way to enable them to return to repair the relationship.

Section 6: Managing behaviour relationally: The Thrive Approach

The best form of behaviour intervention acknowledges and enhances the positive. At Southwater Infants, we strive to demonstrate a relational approach to supporting social and emotional development and behaviour based on the following six principles:

1. We understand behaviour communicates unmet needs and can separate the child from their behaviour.
2. We understand that each developmental stage has a range of typical behaviours which provide opportunities for adults to role-model and explicitly teach appropriate behaviours.
3. We provide containment, predictability and routine to build a sense of safety in the emotional and physical environment.
4. We encourage children at our academy to become accountable for their actions and the impact they may have on themselves and others, promoting a solution-focused approach to changing future behaviours.
5. We keep in mind that we are the adults and the children are still growing, learning and developing.
6. We seek to restore relationships and change behaviours rather than punish the actions a child may have taken. Although this does not exclude the use of sanctions, we seek the most appropriate way of supporting children to develop robust stress-regulation systems and therefore the skills of self-control, empathy and emotional management.

Supporting behaviour

All staff will:

- take time to recognise and record positive behaviours and attitudes and reward success
- try to catch children doing the right thing and enhance this
- engage in establishing the non-negotiable and negotiable rules at the start of the academic year and re-visit these regularly and at least half-termly
- focus on the values, rights and responsibilities of the academy when establishing these boundaries in conversation with children
- remind children that their actions impact on others and that they have a responsibility to safeguard others' rights
- seek both resolution and learning when dealing with incidents
- consider how our actions and words help and give children time and space to resolve the situation
- keep in mind that children benefit from a clear structure (containment) within which to learn
- use sanctions only as a form of appropriate, proportionate and positive intervention
- keep in mind that any sanction used is to resolve rather than escalate a situation whilst preserving the dignity of all involved.



- keep in mind that sanctions must be applied compassionately and in a fair and consistent way

Positive rewards

At Southwater Infants, all members of staff recognise, model and celebrate the academy values at all times around the academy through informal and specific praise. Wherever possible, children's best efforts will be celebrated through praise and display.

We praise and reward children for good behaviour in a variety of ways:

- Teachers congratulate children through written and verbal feedback.
- Teachers give children a variety of agreed in class rewards e.g. stickers, marbles in jars.
- Teachers give 'awesomeness' wristbands to children who demonstrate excellent behaviour choices
- Staff recognise and celebrate the children who have received wristbands
- Children who have consistently demonstrated Exemplary Gold level behaviour over a period of time (linked to the academy values) have their name written into the 'Gold Book' kept in the staff room.
- Every half term, the children with their names in the Gold Book are celebrated in a special Headteacher's Assembly.

Sanctions/consequences

At Southwater Infants, we recognise that there are, on occasion, times that mistakes can and will be made. The children are learning their way in the world and will need help and guidance at times. At Southwater Infants, our aim is to be proactive in supporting children to learn from mistakes and take ownership of their own choices. This may mean accepting consequence for these actions.

At Southwater Infants we use a restorative approach to resolving and repairing conflict and tackling challenging behaviour. We do not welcome punishments that set out to humiliate or belittle a child. All consequences have a learning outcome and aim to teach children that there are always repercussions for poor choices and inappropriate behaviour. Our goal is to help the children learn to make informed and positive decisions and to choose a better way. If a child does make poor choices, whether it is deliberate or unintentional, we seek to repair this rupture. We describe this as 'distressed behaviour' rather than 'challenging behaviour' because we understand that the behaviour is communicating a level of need within the child.

Emergency situations

At Southwater Infants we have the following strategies:

- Ensure the child/ren involved are safe
- Thorough investigation of incident
- Clear communication with parents
- When ready, conversations with child/ren
- Follow up plans in place to repair relationships



Partnership with parents & carers

At Southwater Infants, we work as a team to support the children in our setting as they grow and develop socially and emotionally. We actively promote a partnership with parents/carers and other agencies, where appropriate. Our family link worker is also available to support parents and carers, providing advice, a listening ear or signposting families to where further support and help can be found. Parenting workshops are also available where parents and carers may need additional support.

Communication

At Southwater Infants, we adopt the following strategies designed to help parents/carers to understand and support children to be accountable for their actions. We encourage our families to focus on positives and develop skills to change unacceptable behaviour rather than punish the actions taken by the child.

- Praise the good choices
- Celebrate what went well
- Develop understanding that it's okay to make mistakes
- Discuss next steps to repair any broken relationships
- Communicate whether there needs to be a consequence and through respectful discussion choose what this might look like.

Supporting staff

Dealing with a child demonstrating distressed behaviour can be upsetting. It is okay to feel upset and to feel hurt. If you feel that you are getting angry when dealing with an incident, withdraw, give yourself space and time, and seek support during and afterwards.

Managing distressed behaviour when you feel angry can escalate the situation. Avoid arguments and negotiations once a sanction is imposed but continue to give clear choices about further conduct.

Members of the SLT are available at all times to support staff, and take a proactive role in looking after the wellbeing of the staff team.