

# Trauma & impacts on behaviour

## A Guide for Foster & Kinship Care Practitioners

### Purpose:

This module supports practitioners to guide carers in understanding children's behaviour through a trauma- and attachment-informed lens. It strengthens practitioners' capacity to explain complex theory in accessible ways, support carers to respond with safety and predictability, and recognise the relational and nervous system needs underpinning behaviour.

The practitioner role is positioned as one of containment, translation, and alignment, supporting carers to remain emotionally available while navigating uncertainty and complexity.

## Understanding Trauma & Attachment

### Theory and Practice Knowledge:

Children's behaviour reflects how their nervous system has adapted to experiences of stress, loss, or inconsistency, particularly when adult support was limited. Trauma shapes how safe children feel in their bodies and relationships, influencing attachment patterns and narrowing their window of tolerance. Behaviours that appear challenging often represent attempts to restore safety rather than intentional defiance, and can shift over time within predictable, emotionally available care.



### Practitioner Guidance:

- Support carers to understand behaviour as communication shaped by nervous system capacity rather than choice or intent.
- Translate theory into simple, practical explanations that reduce blame and increase confidence in responding to children's needs.
- Reinforce regulation and predictability as foundations for learning, connection, and behaviour change.
- Guide carers to prioritise connection, reduced demands, and repair during moments of distress.
- Attend to carers' emotional load and regulation, recognising that practitioner-carer alignment is a protective factor for children's safety and wellbeing.

### Reflection Questions:

- How am I helping carers make sense of behaviour through safety and connection rather than control?
- Where might my own urgency or system pressure be narrowing space for regulation or reflection?
- How am I supporting carers to stay emotionally present when behaviour feels rejecting, chaotic, or overwhelming?
- What language am I using that either reduces or increases threat for carers?

### Relevant Statement of Standards:

Standards a, b, c, d, g, h, k

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## Trauma different for children

### Theory and Practice Knowledge:

Trauma responses vary, and the same experience can lead to different behaviours depending on a child's age, temperament, and support. **Heightened reactions, increased need for control, difficulty accepting comfort, or regression often reflect attempts to restore safety rather than intentional behaviour.** Children may test relationships through clinging, withdrawal, or rejection as they seek reassurance about safety and permanence, making consistent, emotionally available care a key protective factor.

### Practitioner Guidance:

Support carers to interpret behaviour through a **safety and regulation lens** rather than as intentional defiance. Guide carers to prioritise predictability, emotional availability, and reduced demands during periods of heightened stress or regression. Reinforce that relationship testing is a communication of need, and that consistent, calm responses build safety and trust over time.

### Reflection Questions:

- What changes in behaviour are you noticing, and what might your child be needing underneath them?
- When your child reacts strongly or pulls away, how can you respond in ways that increase safety and predictability?
- What helps your child feel most settled, reassured, or connected during times of stress or change?

## Window of Tolerance

### Theory and Practice Knowledge:

The window of tolerance is the range in which a child's nervous system can regulate, connect, and access cognitive and relational capacities. Trauma can narrow this range, leading to rapid shifts into hyperarousal or hypoarousal in response to relatively small stressors. When a child is outside this window, behaviour is governed by autonomic survival responses rather than executive functioning. Regulation and reduced demands are required before learning, reflection, or behaviour change. Repeated experiences of co-regulation within predictable relationships support gradual widening of the window over time.

### Practitioner Guidance:

Support carers to recognise signs of hyperarousal or shutdown and respond by reducing demands and prioritising regulation through predictable, calm, and relational responses. Reinforce that learning and behaviour change are most effective once the child is back within their window of tolerance, and that repeated co-regulated experiences widen this window over time.

### Reflection Questions:

- How do you notice when your child is becoming overwhelmed or shutting down (hypoarousal)?
- What helps your child return to a calmer, more connected state?
- When demands are reduced, what changes do you notice in your child's behaviour or engagement?

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## Neurodivergence & Trauma

### Theory and Practice Knowledge:

Children with neurodivergence may experience heightened sensory processing and nervous system reactivity, increasing vulnerability to overload during change, transitions, or social demands. Trauma can further amplify sensory sensitivity, emotional dysregulation, and communication difficulties, with behaviour reflecting attempts to cope rather than non-compliance. Trauma-informed, neuro-affirming practice prioritises environmental adjustment, reduced demands during stress, and regulation before expectation to support safety and engagement.

### Practitioner Guidance:

Support carers to interpret behaviour through a sensory and nervous system lens rather than as intentional non-compliance. Guide carers to reduce demands during periods of overload and adjust environments to support regulation and predictability. Reinforce clear communication, acceptance of neurodevelopmental difference, and regulation before expectation.

### Reflection Questions:

- When does your child seem most overloaded by sensory input, change, or social demands?
- How do you notice your child showing signs of overwhelm, and what helps them settle?
- What environmental or routine adjustments make it easier for your child to feel safe and regulated?

## Circle of Security

### Theory and Practice Knowledge:

Circle of Security model describes a child's need to move between exploration and returning to an adult for comfort, protection, and regulation. Experiences of stress, loss, or inconsistent caregiving can disrupt this movement, leading to behaviours such as clinging, avoidance, or heightened emotional responses when relational safety feels uncertain. These behaviours reflect adaptive attempts to assess caregiver availability rather than resistance to connection, and can soften over time with predictable, emotionally available care.

### Practitioner Guidance:

Use the Circle of Security visual with carers to support shared understanding of a child's need to move between exploration and comfort-seeking. Guide carers to map behaviours onto the circle and respond with predictable availability, supporting safe movement between independence and connection. Reinforce that calm presence, clear limits, and emotional attunement strengthen attachment security over time.

### Reflection Questions:

- When does your child seem most ready to explore, and when do they need comfort or reassurance?
- How do you respond when your child clings, pulls away, or reacts strongly?
- What helps your child feel confident that you are available when they need to come back?

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### Specialist Resources & Further Reading:

- Porges, S. W. (2011). *The polyvagal theory: Neurophysiological foundations of emotions, attachment, communication, and self-regulation*. New York: Norton.
- Ogden, P., Minton, K., & Pain, C. (2006). *Trauma and the body: A sensorimotor approach to psychotherapy*. New York: Norton.
- Schore, A. N. (2012). *The science of the art of psychotherapy*. New York: Norton.
- Corrigan, F. M., & Hull, A. M. (2015). Recognition of the window of tolerance and its clinical application. *Journal of Psychotherapy Integration*, 25(2), 83–93.
- Siegel, D. J. (1999). *The developing mind*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Circle of Security International. (n.d.). Circle of Security Parenting and practitioner resources.
- National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN). (n.d.). Child Welfare Trauma Training Toolkit.
- Blue Knot Foundation (Australia). (n.d.). Trauma-informed practice resources for professionals.

### Self-Care Reminder for Practitioners

Supporting carers around attachment and relational behaviour can activate strong emotional responses, particularly when children reject care or test availability. Notice your own reactions, pace, and regulation when working with carers, and use supervision or peer reflection to process complexity and maintain perspective. Caring for your own nervous system supports clarity, emotional availability, and the capacity to model the relational safety you are encouraging in others.



### Remember:

- Behaviour during overwhelm reflects a child's need for safety, not a lack of willingness or skill.
- Supporting regulation first creates the foundation for engagement, learning, and behaviour change.
- Calm, predictable adult responses are a key intervention in widening a child's capacity to cope over time.
- Adjusting expectations during distress protects connection and supports longer-term emotional wellbeing.

### Support Options:

- Internal reflective supervision
- Peer consultation groups
- Employee Assistance Program (EAP)
- Trauma-informed counsellors or wellbeing coaches

 **“Self-regulation develops through repeated experiences of co-regulation.”**  
— Bruce Perry