

Holding Space for Emotions

A Guide for Foster & Kinship Care Practitioners

Purpose:

This module aims to support practitioners to help carers understand and respond to children's emotional dysregulation. It provides guidance on co-regulation, repair after conflict, and connection-first strategies, and equips practitioners to coach carers using trauma-informed, consistent, and reflective approaches.

Theory and Practice Knowledge:

Emotional dysregulation in children is often linked to early trauma, loss, or instability affecting the nervous system.

Stress is held in the body before thinking or language, showing up as intense emotions, withdrawal, aggression, or difficulty calming. Behaviour is best understood as communication, with co-regulation more effective than immediate teaching. Trauma-related responses are often disproportionate, frequent, and slow to settle. Consistent, supportive adult responses build regulation, attachment, and resilience.



Practitioner Guidance:

- Support carers to view behaviour through a nervous system lens rather than a behavioural one, reinforcing that dysregulation reflects stress, not defiance.
- Coach carers to prioritise connection before correction and to focus on regulating themselves first, as calm is transferred through presence.
- Normalise ruptures in relationships and emphasise repair as a core therapeutic process rather than a failure.
- Encourage the use of simple, consistent language and predictable responses during moments of distress, and support carers to reflect on what helped or hindered regulation once everyone is calm.
- Reinforce that consistency and emotional safety matter more than perfection.



Reflection Questions:

- How do I notice my own emotional responses when observing carers managing dysregulation?
- In what ways do I support carers to focus on co-regulation rather than quick fixes?
- Am I noticing when carers are overwhelmed, and how do I guide them in self-regulation?
- How effectively am I modelling trauma-informed language and strategies in home visits?

Relevant Statement of Standards:

Standards a, c, g, h

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Understanding Big Feelings

Theory and Practice Knowledge:

Emotional dysregulation occurs when a child's nervous system is overwhelmed, with behaviour expressing feelings before thinking is available. This can look like sudden intense emotions, disproportionate reactions to small triggers, withdrawal, aggression, or freezing. From a trauma-informed lens, **behaviour is communication rather than defiance**, and the goal is co-regulation, not immediate teaching or problem-solving. Simple metaphors, such as an overflowing cup, can help carers understand why small triggers lead to big reactions.

Practitioner Guidance:

Support carers to distinguish dysregulation from typical tantrums by observing verbal and non-verbal cues. Encourage calm, empathetic responses with reduced demands during high intensity moments, while exploring which behaviours are triggering for the carer. Role-play can support carers to recognise early signs of dysregulation and practise effective responses.

Reflection Questions:

- What early signs indicate a child is becoming dysregulated?
- How do you distinguish between normal developmental behaviour and trauma-related reactions?
- What strategies have you found effective for noticing and responding to early signs of distress?

How is this different?

Theory and Practice Knowledge:

Developmental behaviours are age-appropriate, improve with maturity, and usually settle quickly with support. In contrast, trauma-related behaviours are often more intense, repetitive, and longer-lasting, triggered by situations that may seem minor to adults. From a nervous system perspective, **children who have experienced threat or instability may have heightened stress responses**; their reactions are survival-based rather than intentional. The "sensitive smoke alarm" metaphor is a useful way to explain how smaller triggers can activate big responses.

Practitioner Guidance:

Teach carers to compare the intensity, duration, and frequency of behaviours against developmental expectations, while exploring how early trauma can impact neurodevelopment and stress responses. Support carers to respond based on the child's developmental rather than chronological age, and to notice patterns and potential triggers so they can better anticipate situations that may overwhelm the child.

Reflection Questions:

- How do you identify behaviours that are trauma-related versus developmentally appropriate?
- What triggers or patterns have you observed in the child's behaviour?
- How does understanding these differences change how you respond?

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Planning for Big Emotions

Theory and Practice Knowledge:

From a trauma-informed perspective, short, familiar narratives and grounding scripts support regulation by reducing cognitive load for both the child and the carer. In practice, **consistency and predictability are stabilising** for children, particularly during moments of distress. Non-verbal communication—such as tone, posture, presence, and proximity—often carries more regulatory impact than words, making how support is offered as important as what is said.

Practitioner Guidance:

Encourage carers to develop simple, predictable grounding scripts tailored to the child's needs, using few words and a slow, calm delivery during moments of dysregulation. Support carers to reduce demands, adjust or simplify scripts if they feel overwhelming, and review what was helpful after incidents to strengthen consistency and effectiveness over time.

Reflection Questions:

- Which scripts feel natural for you to use in moments of big emotion?
- How do you use my body, voice, and presence to convey calm and safety?
- How do you adjust my approach if a script seems too much for the child?

When carers are triggered

Theory and Practice Knowledge:

From a nervous system perspective, carers' own stress responses can be activated by children's big emotions; feeling triggered is normal and does not indicate failure. **Co-regulation** occurs when a calm adult supports the child to settle through steady presence, tone, and body language rather than words alone. In practice, children learn emotional regulation by observing and borrowing from adults, making the modelling of calm far more effective than instruction in moments of distress.

Practitioner Guidance:

Teach carers to **recognise signs of being triggered**, such as anger, panic, helplessness, or the urge to withdraw, and to use pause strategies like slow breathing, softened posture, and a lowered voice. Support learning through role-play of co-regulation techniques, including coming to the child's level and using minimal, reassuring language. Encourage reflective practice to help carers understand their own triggers and strengthen strategies for maintaining regulation.

Reflection Questions:

- How do you notice when you are triggered, and what helps you pause?
- Which co-regulation strategies feel most effective for you and the child?
- How do you maintain boundaries while modelling calm and presence?

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Repair after conflict

Theory and Practice Knowledge:

From an attachment- and trauma-informed perspective, ruptures are inevitable in caregiving relationships, and repair is how trust and safety are restored (Bowlby, 1969; Tronick, 2007). Repair shows children that relationships can survive conflict. Self-compassion in carers supports regulation and reflective capacity, which are essential for effective repair (Siegel, 2012; Hughes, 2017). In practice, repair is brief, genuine, and connection-focused, naming the adult's part, acknowledging impact, and offering reassurance rather than revisiting behaviour in detail.

Practitioner Guidance:

Support carers to repair with themselves as well as with the child, recognising that high standards, shame, and fear of judgement can make mistakes feel unsafe, particularly for carers with their own trauma histories, and requires psychological safety to enable reflection. Practitioners model compassion through curiosity, validation, and steadiness, reinforcing that compassion is not about excusing behaviour but creating safety to reflect, repair, and grow.

Reflection Questions:

- How do you respond to mistakes or moments of overwhelm?
- What steps can you take to repair the relationship when the child is calm and receptive?
- How can you approach repair with presence and compassion without over-explaining?

We don't need a fix it response

Theory and Practice Knowledge:

From a neurodevelopmental and attachment-informed perspective, children need to feel understood and validated before problem-solving can be effective. "Fix-it" responses, such as minimising or rushing to reassure, can unintentionally disrupt connection and increase distress.

In practice, **holding space and slowing the interaction supports nervous system regulation**, creating the conditions for learning and collaborative problem-solving once the child is calm..

Practitioner Guidance:

Encourage carers to prioritise empathy, validation, and presence rather than rushing to solutions, reinforcing that slowing down is a powerful regulatory tool that supports nervous system settling and emotional safety. Strengthen this practice by providing clear examples of connection-first language and using role-play to help carers practise applying these responses confidently and consistently in real-life situations.

Reflection Questions:

- How often do I rush to "fix" problems for children?
- How can I slow down and hold space for the child's feelings?
- Which strategies help me stay present while emotions are high?

Holding Space to Emotions

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References

- Blue Knot Foundation. (2020). Practice guidelines for trauma-informed care and service delivery.
- Australian Childhood Foundation. (2021). Making SPACE for learning: Trauma-informed relational practice frameworks.
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- Hughes, D. A. (2017). Building the bonds of attachment: Awakening love in deeply troubled children. London: Jessica Kingsley.
- Siegel, D. J. (2012). The developing mind. New York: Guilford Press.
- National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN). Coregulation and trauma response toolkits.
- Harvard Center on the Developing Child. Serve and Return & stress regulation frameworks.

Self-Care Reminder for Practitioners

This work can be emotionally demanding and may stir practitioners' own stress or fatigue. Taking time to pause, reflect, and seek support helps maintain steadiness and clarity. Using the same principles offered to carers, slowing down, noticing triggers, and staying connected, supports your own regulation. Caring for yourself is not an extra; it is essential to sustaining compassionate, reflective practice.



Remember:

- Connection comes before correction; presence and calm are the most powerful regulatory tools.
- Behaviour is communication—observe both verbal and non-verbal cues and respond to the nervous system, not the behaviour alone.
- Pause, slow down, and model calm through your tone, posture, and breath, especially during high emotion.
- Repair matters more than perfection; authentic repair and reflective practice build safety for both children and carers.

Support Options:

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

“Children do not learn regulation from being told to calm down; they learn it from being with someone who is calm.”

— Dan Siegel