

Supporting Students' Social and Emotional Wellbeing through 'The Thrive Approach'



Dear Parents / Carers,

Over the course of Terms 2 and 3, there have been various items included in the school newsletter about our newly introduced Student Wellbeing program – *The Thrive Approach*. Each instalment provides information about the various components of this program. Most recently, the focus was on the use of 'PACE': Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity, and Empathy' and the importance of maintaining an attitude of PACE whenever you are with a child. This week's focus is on the **Vital Relational Functions (VRFs)** which are a cornerstone of this program.

Please note, the information provided are excerpts from Module 2 of the Thrive on-line site.

The Vital Relational Functions

There are some key ways to be in a relationship with a child that contribute positively to the development of a significant relationship, and to the development for the child, of a healthy sense of self. These are known as the Vital Relational Functions. In Thrive, we use the Vital Relational Functions to communicate to children that we are genuinely interested in them, that we care about them and that we can help them to feel safe. We can think of the VRFs as 'what we do' to put PACE into practice. The four ways of relating are: attunement, containment, validation and regulation.

Attunement: Being alert and responsive to the feelings and experience of the other.

To attune to a child's emotional state, we recognise and reflect how they are feeling through our facial expressions, body language, gestures and noises.

We do this to show that we understand the intensity, pitch, pace, volume and spatial experience of the child's emotional state.

The metaphor of music is helpful for understanding attunement.

Ask yourself:

"What is the musical energy being presented by the other?"

"How can I use my voice and body to tune into and mirror that music?"



Containment: *Showing that you can see, understand and bear the feelings and experience of the other.*

We demonstrate emotional containment by catching and matching the pitch/intensity/quality of the child's feeling or mood and showing that we can bear it.

We also help the child to digest their experiences/feelings by thinking about them and offering them back in named, small, manageable pieces.

This helps to make their deep distress, raging anger or painful sorrow a survivable experience.

Validation: Showing that you understand the experience/perspective of the other and recognise the validity of their feelings.

We provide validation by putting words to the child's experience in a way that names what the child is going through and how they might be feeling. For example, if you are with a child who has been left out of a game in the playground, you might say to them:

"It's really hard when someone you get on with leaves. It's sad to see them go."

This needs to happen before you move on to help them regulate it. This is the beginning of being able to think about feelings. We avoid reassuring, persuading otherwise, or contradicting the child.

Regulation by calming and soothing, or stimulating:

Bringing the other into a calm place where they are available for social interaction by soothing and calming their distress or arousing their interest if they have shut down.

If a child is hyper-aroused, we soothe and calm the child's distress using our words, tone of voice, breath and body language. Alternatively, if a child is hypo-aroused – that is, withdrawn or shutdown – we need to gradually engage their interest to bring them into a state where they are able to respond to us. It is important to remember that children need to repeatedly experience being regulated before they can do it for themselves.

It is important to incorporate the VRFs into your general way of being with children. Although we separate them into four distinct ways of relating for the purpose of explaining them, in practice, you will find that they overlap and that you move back and forth between them. This will foster positive relationships that strengthen your ability to provide the best level of support to the children in your collective care.



The changing role of the adult

A child's ability to gain competence in the developmental tasks of each phase depends upon the quality of the relationships between the child and significant adults.

A baby will only feel safe, special and have their needs met if they are loved and cared for physically and emotionally by an attuned, responsive and well-resourced adult.

Likewise, a child will only be able to develop their skills, morals and values and learn the importance of rules if the adults around them provide them with appropriate structured learning opportunities, if they support them in their learning and if they are authentic and honest.

As these examples illustrate, the role of the adult in supporting children's social and emotional development changes as children progress through the stages and their needs change over time.

"It is not about finding the right set of rules to manage the behaviour; it's about finding the right set of relationships.

You manage behaviour by focusing on the adults' behaviour, because it is adults' behaviour that affects how children feel and behave." (Thrive Trainer)

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