



Iceberg Model trauma-informed guide

Strengthening relationships to promote healing

Introduction

Relationships are critical to children and young people's growth and development. In fact, children and young people need relationships just as much as they require food, water, and shelter. It is important to know that children's early relationships have life-long impact on many aspects of their later functioning including how they see themselves, others, and the world. Children and young people who have experienced trauma and who did not have the opportunity to form nurturing relationships during their early childhood often find it very challenging to build and maintain healthy relationships.

Tip of the iceberg (what we can see)

Some children and young people who have not experienced nurturing relationships during early childhood can demonstrate a range of behavioural challenges including trying to avoid relationships, using aggression or other behaviours designed to keep people 'at a distance', and running away. Other children and young people with histories of trauma may become preoccupied with relationships and may appear overly 'clingy' towards their caregivers.

What is happening underneath the surface?

There are many reasons as to why children and young people who have experienced trauma find relationships challenging. Caregivers' understanding of what is happening beneath the surface plays an important role in supporting children and young people to develop their ability to form trusting, supportive relationships.

Internal working models

Internal working models are a set of beliefs that children and young people develop based on their experiences. Relationships with caregivers strongly influence whether a child or young person will develop a positive or negative internal working model. Children and young people who experience consistently loving and nurturing care develop beliefs that they are good, capable and worthy of love and care. Through their interactions with their caregivers, they learn that relationships are satisfying and dependable, and that the world is generally a safe and predictable place. Children and young people apply their internal working models to new relationships and experiences. Given this, children and young people with positive internal working models approach new situations and relationships confident in the knowledge that they are likeable and worthy and that relationships are supportive and worthwhile.

Conversely, children and young people who have been harmed by previous caregivers can develop negative internal working models. It is important to understand that in the absence of other explanations that may be too complex for them to understand, children and young people often blame themselves for the harm they have experienced and begin to feel that they are bad and deserve to be hurt. When caregivers behave in ways that they are unavailable, unpredictable, or frightening in their interactions with the child or young person or if they struggle to understand what the child or young person needs, the child or young person can develop a negative working model where they believe:

I am... bad, not good enough or unworthy

Relationships are... unavailable, undependable, or scary

The world is... unpredictable, unsafe confusing.

Children and young people with negative working models apply these beliefs to new relationships. That is, the internal working model becomes the child or young person's expectation of relationships and the world. This means children and young people who have been harmed by caregivers have therefore learned not to be reliant on relationships as they believe that future relationships will be similar. Once this is understood, the child or young person's behaviour that appears to be actively pushing a caregiver away makes more sense as they expect to be hurt in relationships and are attempting to avoid relationships to keep themselves safe. Whilst these behaviours might make the child or young person feel safer in the short-term, it prevents many of their needs from being met by their caregiver.

At times, negative internal working models may lead children or young people to become fixated on relationships as they expect them to end. These children and young people may have a constant drive to stay close to their caregivers to ensure they do not leave them as previous caregivers have done so. Not surprisingly, these children and young people may struggle with any separations from caregivers, including to attend school or to sleep on their own.

Strategies to promote healing

Caregivers' self-care and wellbeing

Caring for children and young people with adverse childhood experiences can be both rewarding and exhausting. Caregivers should take the time to think about their own support network. It is important for caregivers to have professional and/or personal support so that they can stay physically and emotionally available to the child or young person they are caring for.

Be attentive and communicate unconditional care

Caregivers should not withdraw attention or care from the child or young person when they are 'doing the wrong thing' (for example, refusing to engage with a child until they apologise, sending them to their room or giving them the 'silent treatment'). These strategies are unhelpful for children and young people who have been harmed because they confirm what the child or young person already fears - that relationships are unstable; caregivers are unreliable, and they are alone in the world. In addition to causing the child or young person distress, these strategies are likely to escalate their behaviour as their needs remain unaddressed.

This does not mean that caregivers cannot be upset or need a moment to themselves. However, it is important for caregivers to explain what is happening or be clear about what needs to happen rather than allowing a child or young person to guess (and apply their negative internal working model about relationships). For example, say *“I need to take a moment because I’m upset. But I still care about you, and we can talk more in a minute”* or *“I didn’t like that and I’m feeling sad right now. I need a minute to myself. But I still think you’re a good kid and I am looking forward to going to the park with you later.”*

Listening and talking to the child or young person

Caregivers should take the time to listen and talk to children and young people in their care. Ongoing interactions between caregivers and children or young people create opportunities for caregivers to learn more about the child or young person including what makes them sad, worried, angry, or scared. Children and young people can slowly begin to reveal what is really going on underneath the surface for them and what they need through words, rather than behaviours.

Notice what makes the child or young person feel special and cared for

All children and young people are unique and have their own personal likes and preferences. Caregivers should strive to pay attention to times when the child or young person seems particularly relaxed or connected with them and see if they can identify activities, places or experiences that seem to prompt positive feelings for them. For some children or young people, this may be obvious, like being curled up on the couch with the caregiver reading a story or watching television together. For others it might be a little tricky to identify, like being in the same room but doing different activities or being outside working on some practical things together.

Encourage the child or young person to accept comfort and support when they are upset

Having a nurturing, empathic and affectionate caregiver can be soothing and calming to a child or young person who is distressed. It also shows the child or young person that they can rely on their caregiver to be their ‘safe base’ when they feel upset, which in turn will help the caregiver to build a relationship with the child or young person. Some children and young people may take longer to feel comfortable with offers of comfort, but it is important for caregivers to keep offering, nonetheless (while respecting the child or young person’s decision to accept it or not).

Provide care to the child and young person based on their needs and not their chronological age

Often children and young people who have experienced harm have delayed emotional development, it is important to interact with them at their emotional level. When angry, sad, anxious, or frightened, children and young people are likely to regress and further struggle to behave in an age-appropriate or ‘mature’ manner. During these times of emotional distress, it is especially important to interact with children and young people in a manner that corresponds with their emotional level and to adjust expectations accordingly.

For children and young people struggling to separate from caregivers, it is important to explain in detail what will happen during the separation and after reunion. Some children or young people may benefit from a ‘transitional object’, such as a small toy, that they can use for comfort when they are separated from their caregivers. Other children and young people may be soothed by being reassured by their caregivers that they will still think of them during the separation and that they look forward

to reuniting with them and enjoying an activity or meal together. Over time with such reassurance, children and young people will learn to trust that they can depend on their caregiver and that their relationship is continuous, and they will begin to tolerate separations and ruptures better.

Offer relationship repair

It is inevitable for there to be times when the relationship between a caregiver and a child or young person is strained. This can happen during separations (attending school, respite care or contact) or when there are disagreements or misunderstandings between children and young people and their caregivers. These experiences are called relationship ruptures because they temporarily disrupt the feeling of being connected to each other. Every relationship has ruptures and when repaired, they can help build stronger relationships.

Children and young people who have been harmed often experience multiple ruptures without effective repair, so it is important that they are offered opportunities for repairing relationships with their caregivers after every rupture, big or small. Relationships can be repaired by acknowledging that something difficult has happened, showing affection and care for the child or young person's experience (*"wow, that must have been hard for you"*), apologising and forgiving. At times, it can be powerful for caregivers to apologise to children and young people if they have behaved poorly. This communicates to children and young people that they are worthy of an apology and models that everyone makes mistakes. For example, say *"I lost my temper because I am tired. I am so sorry I got angry. I will do better tomorrow"*. It can also be helpful for caregivers to ask children or young people if they would like to spend some time together to 'make up'. If children or young people decline this invitation, caregivers can tell them they are looking forward to spending some time together when they are ready.

Be patient with the child or young person's progress

Children and young people who have been harmed have a lot to overcome. Their physical, emotional, social, and cognitive development may be delayed, and their progress is likely to be slow. This can be frustrating, especially when caregivers believe that they are giving the child or young person a lot of love and effort. By being patient, having realistic expectations for the child or young person and focusing on the small successes and achievements, caregivers can manage their frustration and stay committed to caring for the child or young person.

Caregivers should take time to reflect on and notice the small successes that they have achieved with the child or young person together. It is also important to think about how much the child or young person learns from the way their caregivers show them care and affection and respond to them during tough times and setbacks. Over time, these positive interactions will begin to challenge a child and young person's negative beliefs about themselves and relationships, and as their internal working models improve, so will their behaviour.

Additional considerations when providing care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people

It is important that caregivers develop an understanding of the child or young person's cultural background to strive to create a culturally safe and inclusive environment to strengthen their relationship with the child or young person and to continue to offer repair opportunities, including when a rupture occurs. Approaches towards engagement and tailoring ways of working together in a culturally safe way, considers the unique needs of the individual, empowers, and promotes the right to self-determination.

In addition to the strategies mentioned above, the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people need to be understood within the context of historical, political and systematic disadvantages and the ongoing overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in the child protection system. When caring for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, caregivers should ensure that they have received appropriate training and support from their caregiver support agency or the relevant departmental staff.

When Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people are cared for by non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander/non-Torres Strait Islander caregivers, it is important that the caregivers consider and are mindful that some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children or young people may experience culture shock which can in turn impact on their ability to form and maintain relationships.

When caring for and thinking about the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, additional factors that may contribute to their needs and behaviour need to be considered. These include cultural and intergenerational trauma caused by harmful practices associated with colonisation such as forced dispossession of land and Country, forced suppression of culture, the Stolen Generations, assimilation policies, and systemic racism and oppression. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families may also hold broader notions of wellbeing that include spirituality, community, and interconnectedness with land that must be recognised and supported.

Caregivers should also understand that connection to culture, Country, kin and family are highly important for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people therefore assisting the child or young person to maintain these relationships may help strengthen their own relationship with the child or young person.

Additional considerations when providing care for children and young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds

Children and young people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) background also have cultural templates and concepts of relationships which may differ from the caregiver's own understanding of relationships. Therefore, it is important for caregivers to receive additional information, training and support from their caregiver support agency or relevant departmental staff when caring for children and young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Caregivers can also connect with local CALD organisations to continue to enhance their understanding of the child or young person's cultural background and the impact of it on their worldview.

Iceberg model in action

Ivy in family-based care

13-year-old Ivy tends to push her caregiver away. She ignores invitations to do activities together, rolls her eyes and makes sarcastic comments when they try to talk with her, and wants to do everything for herself.

Ivy's caregiver listens to the messages underneath this behavior - *"I need to keep you away or you'll let me down. I can't rely on you or anybody else. The only person who really cares about me is me."*

Ivy's caregiver responds by gently persisting with invitations to do activities together focusing on Ivy's particular interests, paying attention to her likes, buying foods and household goods she prefers and continuing to offer caregiving support in a way that acknowledges Ivy can do it for herself if she wants to.

Ethan in Residential care placement

4-year-old Ethan wants to be with his residential care worker all the time, struggles to separate and likes to sit in her lap and be rocked despite being too big to be held.

Ethan's residential care worker listens to the messages underneath this behavior - *"I want to be close with and special to you. I have to be the center of your attention, or you'll forget about me."*

Ethan's residential care worker responds by consistently welcoming and meeting his needs by helping him feel connected while they are apart (telling him a story about an 'invisible string' that joins them or drawing a smiley face on each of their hands) and supporting him to learn how to do things independently with no expectations (*"let's practice doing up a button. I am going to sit right here next to you while we do that. Let me know if you need help"*).

If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact your case worker for further support.