Creating a trauma sensitive classroom

https://edpsy.org.uk/blog/2023/creating-a-trauma-sensitive-classroom/

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Over the last 2.5 years I have held a specialist role in my Local Authority which centred upon supporting and imbedding trauma-informed practice with another service.

This blog can also be read with the companion piece: Using the Applied Trauma Responsive Classroom observation schedule.

The journey towards trauma informed practice

As part of this role I have been on an immersive journey with trauma-informed practice. I have had to develop my understanding of the research, literature, projects and applied practice to be able to offer the most effective support I could. I think that when we consider trauma-informed practice we must view this as a journey, it is not as simple as deciding we are going to become trauma-informed, it involves us reflecting and reconsidering our practice across many different facets. This journey takes time, resources, and commitment from members at each level of an organisation.

Our school staff have demonstrated incredible resilience throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated difficulties with staffing, traumatic incidents and supporting cohorts who have missed out on their education. When supporting staff, I continue to hear common themes of being overwhelmed and overstretched, yet these staff are often eager for further support to meet the needs of their children. Schools want help and resources to respond to trauma, but do schools currently have the capacity to enter a reflective journey akin to that I have described above? Ever the pragmatic realist, I wanted to offer education staff a simple and accessible way to apply trauma-informed approaches in the classroom. I am very aware that by supporting staff to support children, we are only focussed on one facet of a trauma-informed approach, nonetheless I feel this is a valuable starting point.

The Applied Trauma Responsive Classroom Model (ATRCM)

The ATRCM was created as a practical model to support classroom staff sequence their approaches and interventions with students in a trauma-responsive way. I had noticed that sequencing as a concept is often overlooked in responding to trauma,

considering at what point we offer support and if this support is meeting the current needs of a child.

The ATRCM offers a framework to respond to a progressive set of needs, both through the visual model (*figure 1*) and an additional observation and planning schedule.
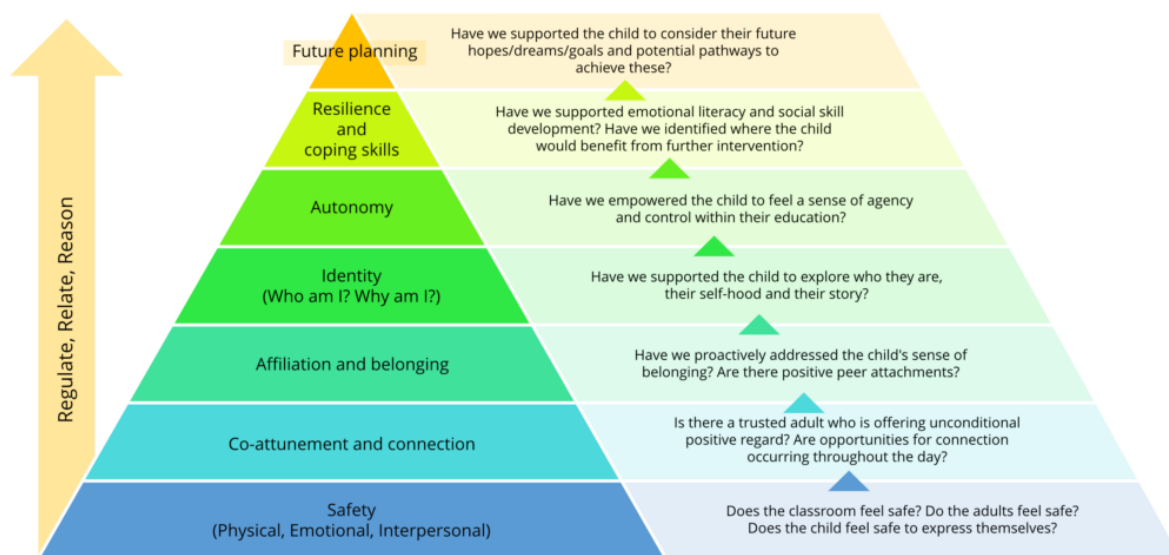
Figure 1: The Applied Trauma Responsive Classroom Model (ATRCM)

I developed the ATRCM by operationalising some of the brilliant research, theory, and literature I had been immersed in during my time considering trauma-informed practice. It was inspired by The Trauma Recovery Model (Skuse and Matthews, 2015) which is now becoming more widely used to meet the needs of children involved with the Youth Justice System.

I have found much of the literature and approaches written by Karen Treisman, Louise Bomber, and Kim Golding essential in developing my understanding and these have had a significant influence over the current model. In addition, I drew on the following theories to contribute to the model:

- Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943) which offers the most well-known model of sequencing at different levels of need.
- Borba's building blocks of self-esteem (Borba, 1989) notably form the basis for some of the Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) training. I felt aligning with this well-used model which also talks about meeting needs sequentially, would be helpful to build on an existing language.
- Bruce Perry also suggests a sequence of responses that will support a child to learn, think and reflect within his 3 R framework (Perry & Ablon, 2019). Perry's 3 Rs run alongside the model.

I hope that the ATRCM can offer an operational framework, which education staff can use to apply the exciting and inspiring trauma-informed theory and resources that are already available to them.

I want the model to be freely available, to enable schools to consider, adapt and build their trauma responsive practice as part of the steps they may like to take on their trauma-informed journey.

[access a high quality version of the ATRCM Model](#).

Using the Applied Trauma Responsive Classroom observation schedule

https://edpsy.org.uk/blog/2023/using-the-applied-trauma-responsive-classroom-observation-schedule/

The model is intended for use in a sequential manner, starting at the bottom and building resilience by considering our approach with each layer in turn.

We want to use the model to consider how we are meeting those needs of the children and young people we are supporting. You can access the model here and read the companion blog about the journey towards creating this model. The layers are as follows:

1. Safety

Safety is the foundation layer; this is because we understand that a child must first feel safe to move to building trusting relationships and connecting with others. If a child's previous trauma or adversity has impacted their sense of safety, it is vital we start our interventions here.

2. Co-attunement and connection

These come after a child feels safe enough to begin to build trusting relationships within their education setting. This is important because attachment research demonstrates that children learn to manage their emotions through processes of attunement and connection with reliable caregivers. People impacted by trauma and adversity are more likely to struggle with self-regulation and require a focus on co-regulation to help overcome this.

3. Affiliation and belonging

These can emerge once connections have been established. Children whose needs for belonging are met within their education settings tend to be happier, more confident and a perform better academically (Riley, Coates & Allen, 2020)

4. Identity and a sense of self

This can develop most effectively once a child feels they belong. Children who have experienced adversity and trauma often require additional support to explore their

self-hood and consider their identity within the safety, security and connections that have been built.

5. Autonomy

Autonomy or a sense of control is built upon our selfhood. Once a child has a sense of who they are and what they want, we can support them to overcome helplessness and offer opportunities for influence.

6. Resilience and coping skills

Emotional literacy and social skills are best addressed once the previous layers have been considered. At this point learners should be more able to reflect and integrate new learning for skill development.
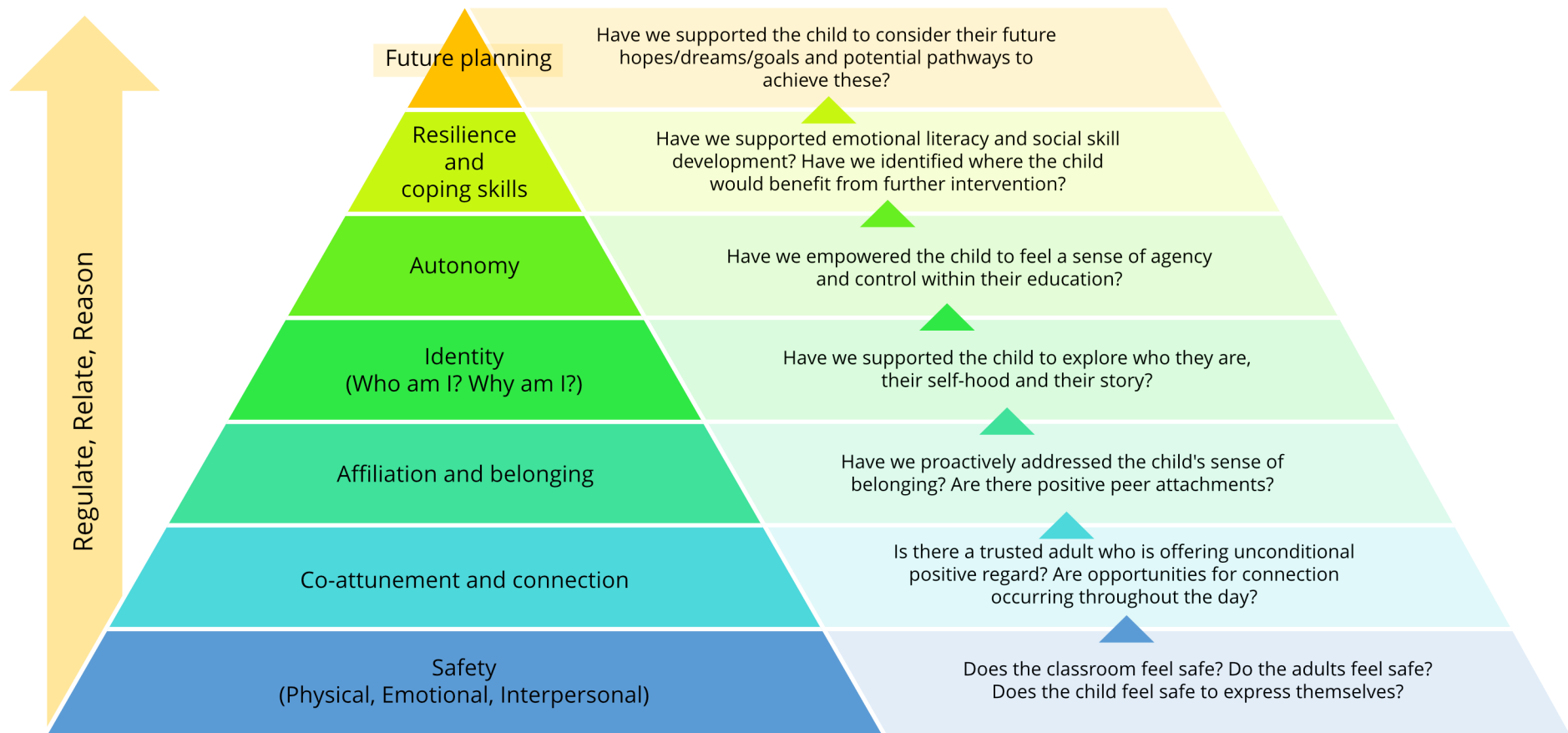
7. Future planning

This is the final layer, as this is where we would hope children would have the confidence and skills to move towards successful independence.

The ATRCM observation and planning schedule

[The observation and planning schedule](#) offers a framework to consider appropriate intervention and practice across these 7 layers. Through observations and conversations with those around a child or young person, you can consider the questions in the 'is the child?' column. I'd advise making notes in response to these questions and any further relevant information in the observations space provided below.

To consider the environment, approach and how to apply appropriate sequenced support, the 'have I?' column offers some examples of positive practice across the areas of need. It is advisable to consider these, and where this is not current practice, to add this to the planning space provided below. The schedule can serve as a working document, with observations and planning reviewed periodically. You can access the planning and observation schedule here.

Carter, J (2023)

Regulate, Relate, Reason

Future planning — Have we supported the child to consider their future hopes/dreams/goals and potential pathways to achieve these?

Resilience and coping skills — Have we supported emotional literacy and social skill development? Have we identified where the child would benefit from further intervention?

Autonomy — Have we empowered the child to feel a sense of agency and control within their education?

Identity (Who am I? Why am I?) — Have we supported the child to explore who they are, their self-hood and their story?

Affiliation and belonging — Have we proactively addressed the child's sense of belonging? Are there positive peer attachments?

Co-attunement and connection — Is there a trusted adult who is offering unconditional positive regard? Are opportunities for connection occurring throughout the day?

Safety (Physical, Emotional, Interpersonal) — Does the classroom feel safe? Do the adults feel safe? Does the child feel safe to express themselves?

ATRCM Observation and Planning Schedule

Area of need	Is the child?	Have I?
1. Safety	Settled and calm or showing signs of anxiety?	Ensured the exit is clear, visible, and not blocked?
	Aware of what to do if they cannot cope in the physical environment?	Started the lesson by explaining the content, what is coming next? Explored a safety plan with them?
	Showing signs of hypervigilance?	Ensured I am aware of any triggers or past traumatising situations that may be impacting?
	Able to have adequate personal space and the option for privacy from peers?	Am I working in a trauma-reducing way by considering the physical space, my communication style, the content of the work…
	Does the child know what to expect from the lesson?	Considered if the child needs something extra i.e., a transition object, a comfort object
Safety observations and plan		

ATRCM Observation and Planning Schedule

Area of need	**Is the child?**	**Have I?**
2. **Co-attunement and connection**	Constantly seeking out attention from others, or avoiding attention?	Considered what this behaviour might be communicating, and used appropriate attachment-based strategies to support?
	Fearful of new/unknown adults?	Prepared the child for any change in adults, using a one-page profile or similar?
	Able to name or seek out a trusted adult within the setting?	Considered who the child could build a key adult relationship with, and prioritised time to build this relationship?
	Showing unusual attachments to staff?	Invested in a relationship with this child using a consistent, predictable, reliable approach? Have I demonstrated explicitly that I am keeping this child in mind when they are not around?
Co-attunement and connection observations and plan		

ATRCM Observation and Planning Schedule

Area of need	Is the child?	Have I?
3. Affiliation and belonging	Able to have their own learning materials/record book?	Given the child their own equipment, i.e., workbook/tray, that they can decorate and is kept in classroom, so they feel 'kept in mind'.
	Able to see their name displayed somewhere current as part of the community?	Made sure the child knows everyone's names, interests, and what they do? (i.e., one-page profiles to take away for adults)
	Able to say how they contribute towards the school community?	Demonstrated specific examples of how children can contribute to the school community and allowed additional opportunities for this connection?
	Able to name at least one specific adult they would go to with any concerns/thoughts/feelings?	Invested in a relationship using CPR (consistency, predictability, and reliability?)
	Having difficulties in peer relationships?	Considered how to support peer relationships within education, i.e. paired working, group working, friendship groups, mentoring…

Affiliation and belonging observations and plan

ATRCM Observation and Planning Schedule

Area of need	Is the child?	Have I?
4. Identity	Aware of their own interests/likes/dislikes?	Explored 'all about me' activities and encouraged class members to share these with one another?
	Aware of their strengths and needs, their unique qualities, and have communicated this to a trusted adult?	Ensured child has a safe space to consider their own qualities and used this as an impetus for further connection and communication?
	Able to explore their sources of influence and consider their own narrative?	Offered opportunities to explore their sources of influence, i.e., genograms, family maps/drawings, discuss role models in a safe space?
	Able to give an accurate self-description to trusted adults?	Supported accurate self-description through genuine, personalised, and specific feedback/praise/communication? Assessed if there is a further need for intervention related to selfhood?
Identity observations and plan		

ATRCM Observation and Planning Schedule

Area of need	Is the child?	Have I?
5. Autonomy	Given opportunities for choice and control within the daily classroom rituals?	Given periods of time where choices can be made by children? Considered the power dynamic between adults and children in the setting and what this is communicating?
	Given the support and space to feedback to their school community?	Enabled the child to be involved in a feedback process and aware how to give anonymous/safe feedback.
	Aware of their rights and responsibilities within the school community?	Involved children in a collaborative creation of a rights and responsibilities charter for the classroom?
	Able to communicate what they want from their education/classroom experience?	Explored activities to establish the child's views? i.e., ideal classroom drawing
Autonomy observations and plan		

ATRCM Observation and Planning Schedule

Area of need	Is the child?	Have I?
6. **Resilience and coping skills**	Displaying signs of anxiety, restlessness, or emotional regulation issues in the classroom?	Considered an emotional literacy assessment and intervention? Used relational skills to explore what is going on for this child today?
	Able to express where they are emotionally at today, either verbally or through alternative means?	Explored different ways of emotional expression with this child and chosen one together? i.e., scaling, colour, visuals…
	Showing enjoyment in education or presenting as disassociated?	Explored their competencies/skills/goals and used a strengths-based approach (i.e., motivational interviewing, solution-focussed questions, PATH)
	Able to tell you what strategies they use when they feel overwhelmed/heightened/distressed?	Helped the child to implement their own de-escalation strategies? i.e., calming box, safe spaces, mindfulness, mindful meditation, or opportunities for independent or co-regulation?
Resilience and coping skills observations and plan		

ATRCM Observation and Planning Schedule

Area of need	Is the child?	Have I?
7. Future planning	Aware of their own strengths and skills?	Made explicit their strengths and skills? Given opportunities for activities focussed on these, i.e., competency profiling?
	Able to communicate their future hopes/dreams/goals?	Offered a safe space/process to explore future hopes/dreams/goals alongside a supportive/trusted adult?
	Aware of their next steps/the pathway that they are going down to move towards their goals?	Co-created a future plan which prioritises the child's voice and views? Considered person-centred planning approaches (i.e. PATH)
	Able to advocate for themselves and their wishes?	Considered alternative ways to support expression of wishes where there are barriers? Ensured the child has an advocate in the setting?

Future planning observation and plan

ATRCM Observation and Planning Schedule