



The Relationships Element

“No significant learning can occur without a significant relationship.”

Dr James Comer

People who have positive relationships are more likely to feel happier with their lives and feel that they belong. Every adult in the school setting has a responsibility to understand the importance of positive relationships and how they impact behaviour. As professionals, it is our role to establish positive relationships with students and their families. They are essential for future success when supporting behaviour. Healthy relationships help students feel secure and supported, whereas unhealthy relationships can have a long lasting negative impact.

Is the support you give balanced with the challenge you set?

Consider relationships through the social discipline window (adapted from McCold and Wachtel, 2003). Thinking about the students in your class, consider the level of support paired with the level of challenge for each individual and how the ‘with’ quadrant can be achieved. This is where relationships are emphasised, a sense of belonging is achieved and students work within the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). Showing a belief in students along with the principles of a growth mindset is an important part of building healthy relationships with students.

S U P P O R T	TO <i>Punitive</i>	WITH <i>Relational</i>
	Feels pointless No development Boredom sets in Patronising	Feel understood and supported Taking a supported risk in learning Zone of Proximal Development Sense of belonging
	High Support and Low Challenge	High Support and High Challenge
	NOT <i>Neglectful</i>	FOR <i>Permissive</i>
	Feel left out Boring No growth or learning	Feels unsafe High risk without the support needed Damages self esteem
	Low Support and Low Challenge	Low Support and High Challenge
	C H A L L E N G E	

Toolkit



PACE Approach



Relationship Circles

Practical Strategies

- Employ **Unconditional Positive Regard**
- Use **Growth Mindset** language
- **Check in circles**
- 'Meet and Greet' each student at the door of the class, use their name
- Try the 2x10 approach
- Seek meaningful **student voice** in your classroom
- Be One Good Adult
- Support students to join in with group activities by finding the right role for them
- Use of Intensive Interaction (See NCSE TPL)

Students say...

Feeling safe and connected with school staff makes it easier to learn.

Offer options to make it easier to decide and when a student is having a good day, ask them how they would like to be asked, e.g. "Do you prefer yes/no questions, or 3 options, or to only use communication cards?"

Check in on why a student has missed school. It could be due to a stressful situation like a field trip or a task that feels impossible due to barriers. Checking in might give them the chance to tell you why.

If a student misses a class, please give them the notes/homework, don't tell them to find out from other students. This places extra social stressors on some students.



If you are offering support or checking in, try to avoid broad questions like "How can I help you?" This can be hard to answer if the student is already feeling stressed as it can be harder to articulate. Try saying: "Do you need a break?", "Do you feel uncomfortable?"

If you are giving advice, think about how this is delivered – is the student comfortable in the space and is it advice that they have asked for? Is the advice appropriate to their life and perspective?



Meet and Greet

A small change that makes a big difference

Making an effort to greet each of your students at the start of each day/lesson nurtures a sense of belonging. This simple strategy fosters a sense of individual importance for each student as well as contributing to a friendly and safe classroom culture. Research into positive greetings at the door have found that disruption was decreased while engagement in learning increased. The study found that up to one hour of learning time per day can be gained with this effective strategy.

2x10 Approach

The 2x10 approach is a relationship building strategy used to support hard to reach students. The idea is simple: a teacher or staff member spends two minutes per day, for ten consecutive days, engaging in casual, non-academic, problem-free talk. The goal is to foster trust and build a positive rapport between the student and adult, helping the student feel seen and valued. Research shows that those two minutes make a difference when the adult is consistent over ten consecutive schools days, so keep persevering and making that connection.

One Good Adult

The concept of one good adult is to ensure that students have an adult who they can turn to if they are in need.

The 'My World Survey 2' by UCD School of Psychology and Jigsaw (Dooley, O' Connor, Fitzgerald, O' Reilly, 2019) found that students who reported having one good adult tended to have increased self-esteem, better mental health, lower levels of depression and anxiety and higher resilience and optimism.

It is important to note that Third Year and Sixth Year students were more likely to report low perceived support from a special adult.

- ▶ **NCSE 2x10 Approach in Post Primary**
- ▶ **Making Sure Each Child is Known**
- ▶ **Rita Pierson: Every Kid Needs a Champion**
- ▶ **The Magic of Relationships with Dr Sonia Mastrangelo**

NCSE TPL



- Understanding Behaviour
- Pathways to Prevention
- Intensive Interaction
- Play as an Inclusive Strategy
- Promoting Positive Behaviour for Learning (Post Primary)
- Check and Connect (Post Primary)

Reflective Questions

- What would students say about your relationship with them?
- How do you promote peer relationships?
- When you were growing up, did you have one good adult to talk to when you needed support? What qualities did that person possess?
- Consider the following relationships in your environment: student to student, teacher to student and colleague to colleague.

PACE

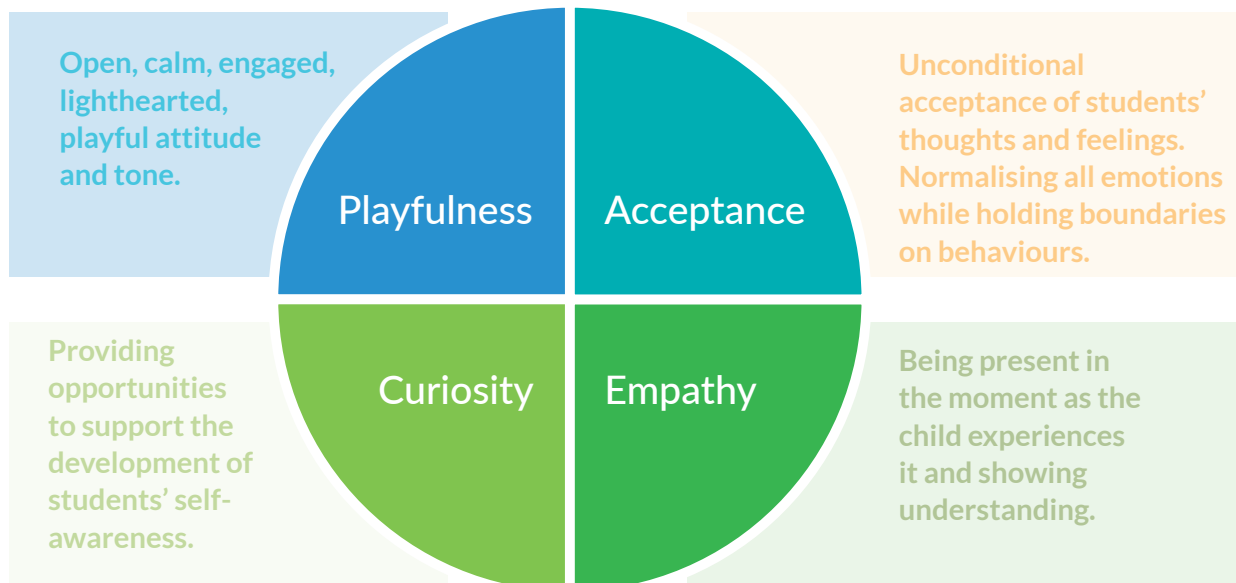
(Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity and Empathy)

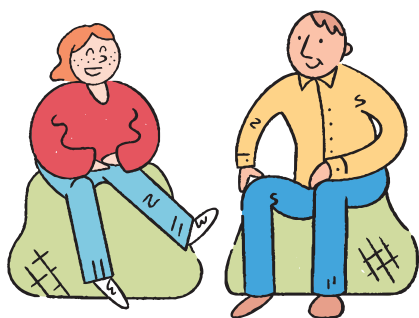
PACE is a way of thinking, feeling, communicating and behaving developed by the psychologist Dr Dan Hughes that fosters trust, emotional connection and meaningful relationships. It is a way of relating, a 'way of being', that focuses on how we communicate with students and how we communicate a sense of safety and security in our interactions.

PACE can be used to connect with many students and is particularly effective in meeting the needs of students who have experienced trauma or attachment difficulties.

The PACE approach communicates to students that adults hold them in unconditional positive regard and are accepting of all of their thoughts and feelings. It can also help adults to gain a better understanding of what the student is experiencing in the moment. When adults embrace the PACE approach, a student's self-awareness and skills to respond to their own stress is supported through co-regulation as well as nurturing the student's positive sense of self.

The PACE approach has four elements, **P** stands for playfulness, **A** for acceptance, **C** for curiosity and **E** for empathy, which can be used individually, in different combinations or sequentially.





Playfulness

A playful approach is not about being funny all of the time or not taking situations or students' emotions seriously. Instead, playfulness involves having an engaged attitude, open and calm body language and using a light-hearted or gentle tone of voice. This helps students to be more open and trusting of connections and positive experiences with adults. Being playful may involve communicating an interest through sharing activities with the student, being humorous or playing alongside them. While playfulness may not be appropriate at times of distress, playfulness can be helpful in communicating short reminders of an expectation in a non-threatening way. Responding with playfulness can also diffuse a tense situation that is beginning to develop, as shame or frustration that a student might feel in that moment can be reduced, preventing defensive responses.

Light tone of voice rather than sharp, irritated or authoritative tones.

Showing interest through non-verbal communication, soft expression, nodding, smiling, lowering your body to the student's level.

Responding verbally and/or nonverbally in animated or jovial ways.
Being flexible.



Acceptance

Acceptance begins by separating the student from their behaviour and by connecting with the student's feelings, thoughts or perceptions without judgement and without disregarding, or reassuring them away. Unconditional acceptance of the feelings or thoughts felt at that moment fosters a student's sense of safety. However, acceptance does not mean we always accept or agree with the student's actions or the student's interpretation of a situation. It is also important not to challenge or contradict the student's expressions of thought or feeling, even if those expressions are upsetting to hear. Rather, acknowledge and accept them with curiosity and empathy. In responding in this way, the adult communicates understanding and an acceptance of the student's right to show their emotions, while also communicating and supporting the student to recognise boundaries for behaviours at school and in daily life.

"I can see how you feel this is unfair. You wanted to play longer but the time is up. It's great you get a chance again tomorrow."

"I can hear you saying that you _____ and you're feeling _____."

"You were letting me know that you were really _____ when you _____."



Curiosity

Being curious in a quiet, accepting tone, communicates to the student that you want to understand what they are experiencing and that you are willing to support them. This genuine curiosity and willingness, helps the student to build awareness of and reflect on how they have responded and how this response may have been influenced by their thoughts or feelings. Adults can convey curiosity through phrases such as “I wonder if...” rather than asking the student “Why?” which places expectation on the student to understand, explain and communicate the reasons for their response. In communicating with curiosity we initiate calmer and more open conversation.

“Can you tell me a bit more about that?”

“When I was listening to you I was starting to think that... Does that seem right?”

“I’m wondering if you thought that...”



Empathy

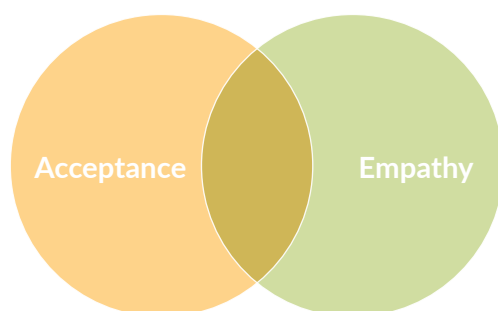
An adult communicating that they really understand a student and consider the student’s feelings important, can make a big difference to how that student can learn to cope with stress. Being empathetic, putting yourself in someone else’s shoes and allowing yourself to feel what they are feeling, being “with them” in the moment and carrying and containing their big emotions lays the foundation for connection. Being empathetic communicates to the student that we know how difficult an experience is for them and that they do not have to cope with this difficult experience or feeling alone.

“It sounds like it’s been really tough.”

“It seems to you like he hates you. That must be really hard.”

“I would find that frustrating too... when I feel frustrated I usually do _____ would you like to give that a try?”

Acceptance and Empathy



Used together, acceptance and empathy in how adults think, feel, interact and behave towards students is at the root of developing a sense of safety for students at school. Embracing just these two elements together, through non-verbal and verbal communication can be an effective and accessible way to begin using the PACE approach in your classroom.

"You must have been so scared and so you ran away. I was really worried about you too; it is so nice to have you back."

"I can see this feels too difficult to start right now... I'm going to get everyone else started, and then I am going to come back to you."

Further Reading



Dr Dan Hughes