

'LITTLE PEOPLE MATTER' - TIME TO CHANGE OUR THINKING ON 'CHALLENGING BEHAVIOUR' IN THE CLASSROOM



Scotland's Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) Conference takes place on the 25th and 26th of September in Glasgow.

In the first of our Sunday Herald articles on ACEs, Jenn Knussen, Headteacher of Pitteuchar East Primary School, Fife, writes about the powerful impact of trauma-informed teaching.

Six years ago, an unexpected moment changed the way I approached my role as a Headteacher in a primary school. I experienced a sudden insight that fundamentally changed my thinking about the phrase 'challenging behaviour'. It came from my growing understanding of trauma-informed teaching. And it was an insight that unsettled me.

Reflecting on nearly 25 years in teaching, I realised that every incident

where a child presented as 'challenging' had been motivated by a single emotion within that child: distress. What I was seeing wasn't 'challenging behaviour'. It was 'distressed behaviour'.

Once I had that understanding, my reactions to children's behaviour changed. I now know this kind of shift to be common. Adults are better able to support a child when they recognise distress. Our initial response to a 'challenge' is to win it, and to prevent that challenge from recurring. In contrast, our reaction to 'distress' is to offer comfort. Once a child experiences comfort, and comes to expect it, relationships, trust and connections remain undamaged. This understanding of children's behaviour is now fundamental to the way I lead my school.

More importantly, it is the way my whole staff team now approaches teaching. The phrase 'challenging behaviour' is no longer used in our school. We talk about 'distressed behaviour'. I am hugely grateful to my colleagues for their compassion and open-mindedness in the early days of that shift. This was five years before the term 'ACEs' began to be widely adopted in this country. But our shared insight allowed our language, as a school team, to change to a language of connection and compassion.

As our understanding of the driving nature of distress upon behaviour deepened, colleagues began to ask, "What has happened to this child?" Colleagues became curious, not about a child's history, but about the positive impact that occurred when



**Jenn Knussen,
Headteacher of Pitteuchar
East Primary School, Fife**

a child experienced calm comfort, a quiet place to regain their dignity, reassurance that any rupture in relationships could be repaired. Trust comes through repair. Our school team places a high value on the trust our children and families have in us.

As in every aspect of

learning, children make 'mistakes' with their behaviour. They need coached and supported, in the same way they would be if they made mistakes in literacy or numeracy. You don't see many public displays in classrooms of how children are doing in core subjects, but it is a different story when it comes to class charts of behaviour stickers. Our school team was relieved to abolish these. The best reward our children can receive is thanks and approval, nurturing their feeling of belonging.

We work hard to let the children know that they matter. Yes, it can be hard to remember who is getting a kitten or who has a wobbly tooth. But we know this is important to a child, so we make a fuss. Little things matter, just as little people matter.

As the nation becomes more aware of adverse childhood experiences and how to mitigate their impact, I recall the uncertainty at the start of my school's journey. Experience has cemented our resolve. The ACEs movement is strengthening the way we work, and word is spreading. I am hopeful.

Find out more about making Scotland an ACE Aware Nation at

www.aceawarescotland.com

