

Responding to Serious Case Reviews by stretching soft and non-technical communication skills and providing education about Toxic Stress and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

Introduction

This continuing professional development paper will bring valuable resources to colleagues by providing access to an online evidence based and actionable **trauma-informed psycho education approach** known as Mindful Emotion Coaching and Adverse Childhood Experience awareness (MACE). The approach can be used to:

- improve professional's wellbeing and functionality through developing skills and capabilities in insight, emotion intelligence and self care
- improve communication between professionals across multiagencies
- further enable a person centred approach to working with children and families
- improve outcomes for children and families

Taking a trauma-informed approach can stretch soft and non-technical skills. It is particularly relevant to highly stressful situations such as those where there are safeguarding concerns.

www.mindfulemotioncoaching.co.uk

Context setting

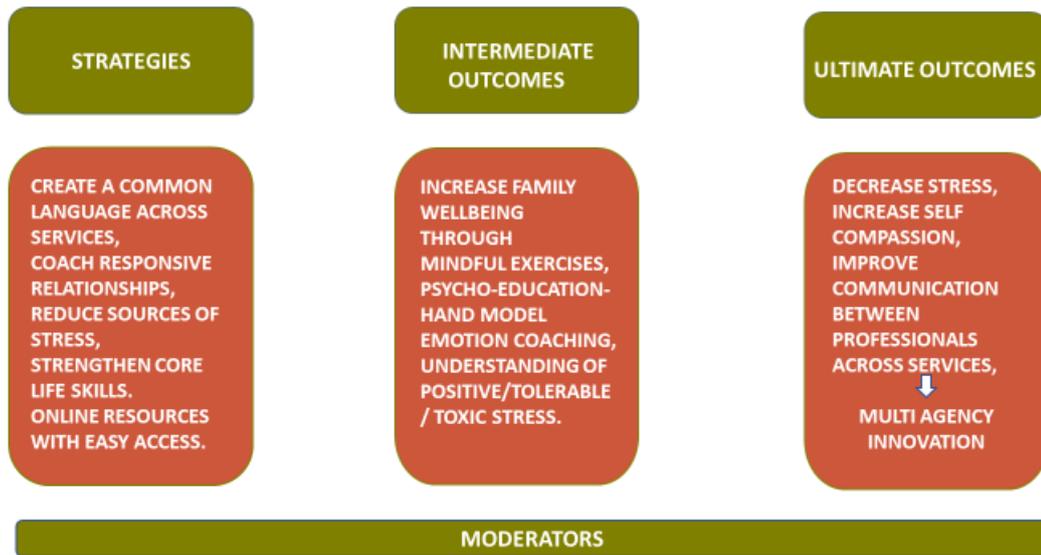
Serious Case Reviews following the death of Victoria Climbié in February 2000 have found failings in how agencies communicate and work together to safeguard children and young people. Most recent findings have highlighted the importance of recognition of the impact of ACEs on children ([NSPCC, 2019](#))*.

Shoba Manro Holly (social worker) and Dr Sarah Temple (GP) first started to put the MACE approach together in 2010, basing their thinking on Professor Eileen Munro's Review of Child Protection, the anticipated changes to Working Together statutory guidelines and the SCIE (Social Care Institute of Excellence) document Think Child, Think Parent, Think Family.

In 2015 EHCAP and Bath Spa University were awarded a contract that enabled further collaborative development of the MACE approach through the [Public Health \(Somerset County Council\) funded Emotion Coaching Project](#)*. In 2019 the MACE approach has been rolled out in Essex (www.cultureofkindness.co.uk) and in Hampshire through the safeguarding and looked after children's team (www.emotioncoachinghampshire.co.uk).

MACE is based on three scientific concepts to Improve Outcomes for Children and Families as evidenced by Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University. The evidence base is explained in detail through links at www.emotionintelligence.co.uk .

Theory of Change



The change model works together with high quality, accessible training materials and a robust evaluation process.



In the boxes below are short summaries of parts of the MACE approach. For further information and to develop your skills in using this approach go to www.mindfulemotioncoaching.co.uk

Professor Jack Shonkoff, Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University talks about the biology of stress and the effects of toxic stress on human development particularly during pregnancy and the first two years of life. [Click here for his 2018 lecture](#) or go to www.emotionintelligence.co.uk for links.

Positive Stress response is a normal and essential part of healthy development, characterised by brief increases in heart rate and mild elevations in hormone levels.

Tolerable stress response activates the body's alert systems to a greater degree as a result of more severe, longer lasting difficulties, such as the loss of a loved one, a natural disaster, or a frightening injury. If the activation is time limited and buffered by relationships with adults who help the child adapt, the brain and other organs recover from what might otherwise be damaging effects.

Toxic stress response can occur when a child experiences strong, frequent, and / or prolonged adversity- such as physical or emotional abuse, chronic neglect, caregiver substance abuse or mental illness, exposure to violence, and/ or the accumulated burdens of family economic hardship- without adequate adult support. **This kind of prolonged activation of the stress response systems can disrupt the development of brain architecture leading to difficulties with emotion regulation and executive function**, affect immune systems, hormonal systems and how our DNA is read and expressed. In other words it changes how our cells work together.

What are ACEs and how do they relate to toxic stress?

ACEs stands for Adverse Childhood Experiences. These experiences can include things like physical and emotional abuse, neglect, caregiver mental illness and household violence. The more ACEs a child experiences the more likely he or she is to suffer from behaviour difficulties, mental health difficulties, heart disease and diabetes, poor academic achievement, and substance abuse later in life.

Experiencing many ACEs, as well as things like racism and community violence, **without supportive adults** can cause what's known as toxic stress. This excessive activation of the stress response system can lead to long term wear and tear on the body and brain.

ACEs affect people at all income and social levels, and can have serious and costly impact across the lifespan. Where we have run a modified ACE questionnaire with staff groups at workshops 30-50% of staff say they have experienced 4 or more ACEs. **No one who has experienced significant adversity is irreparably damaged** though we need to acknowledge trauma's effects on lives. By reducing sources of stress, providing core life skills needed to adapt and thrive we can prevent and counteract lasting harm. <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/ACEs>

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

Early exposure to stressful or traumatic experiences can cause an over activity of the stress response and this can increase risk for learning and behavioural difficulties as well as increasing risk of health difficulties in adulthood such as heart disease and stroke. Link to [The biological effects of childhood trauma, Bellis and Zisk 2014](#) *.

The first major ACE study examined relations between the number of ACEs reported by more than 17,000 adults in the USA and their current health. It found that the more ACE types that individuals reported, the greater the risks of their health-harming behaviours (eg smoking, sexual risk taking) and both infectious and non-communicable disease. Link to [Felitti VJ, Anda RF, Nordenberg D, et al.](#) *. Almost two thirds of participants reported having at least one ACE and 16% reported having four or more. Adults with an ACE score of 4 or more carried a 1.6x greater odds of reporting diabetes in adulthood compared with adults with a score of zero, 1.6 x likelihood of severe obesity and 2.2 x likelihood of Ischaemic Heart Disease, 4.6 x greater odds of reporting depressed mood in the last year, 4.7 x greater odds of ever having used illicit drugs, 10.3 x greater odds of ever having injected drugs and 12.2 x greater odds of ever having attempted suicide.

In August 2017 The Lancet published a paper funded by Public Health Wales and produced by The College of Health and Behavioural Sciences, Bangor University, Wales. Link to [Professor K Hughes , Professor M A Bellis eg al](#) *. In this international systematic review and meta analysis risk estimates for individuals (age 18 or more) with at least four ACEs were compared with those with none.

In 2018 a [Commons Select Committee, UK Parliament](#) * published evidence relating adversity and trauma suffered in childhood to a range of problems in later life.

[Professor Mark Bellis](#) * published again in The Lancet in September 2019 -'Life course health consequences and associated annual costs of adverse childhood experiences across Europe and North America: a systematic review and meta analysis'. This second paper was funded by the World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe and the findings suggest that a 10% reduction in ACE prevalence could equate to annual savings of \$105 billion and that rebalancing expenditure towards ensuring safe and nurturing childhoods would be economically beneficial and relieve pressures on health-care systems.

*For references go to www.emotionintelligence.co.uk

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The Hand Model -an accessible metaphor for emotion regulation created by Professor Daniel J Siegel and described by him in The Whole Brain Child, pages 62-63. Mind Your Brain © Inc 2015.

In this metaphor, the part of the brain that governs emotion is represented by the thumb and acts like an accelerator. The thinking part of the brain acts as a brake on emotions and is represented by the finger tips. When the thumb is 'reactive' and the fingers pushed up we have 'Flipped our Lid'. When the thumb is calm and the fist is closed (representing motorways of connections between different areas of the brain) we are responsive. This is when we make our best decisions. **When our lid is down and we are interacting with others who also have their lid down we make our best collective decisions and choices.**

We can learn to calm the reactivity of our brain through emotion coaching techniques and mindful exercises. This is also referred to as Vagal Tone. The vagus nerve travels from the brain stem to key organs in the body, doing things like lowering heart rate and breathing rate and is activated by stimulation of the pre frontal cortex – for example by naming the experienced emotion.

www.thehandmodel.co.uk

Professor John Gottman is an American psychologist who has studied human relationships for decades. His original research where he describes Emotion Coaching was looking at parenting styles- we have adapted this to relationship styles in human communication generally.

The four parenting (relationship) styles Gottman describes are : Emotion Coaching Style, Dismissing Style (often motivated by a desire to fix eg don't worry, you'll be fine), Disapproving Style (often motivated by a desire to control or regain power) and Laissez Faire Style.

John Gottman's five steps of Emotion Coaching:

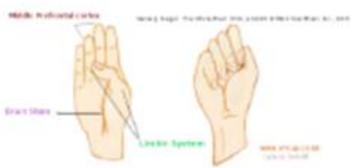
1. Tune in.
2. Connect with the people around you.
3. Recognise feelings and empathise with them.
4. Validate feelings – try to define and label them.
5. Problem solve and where necessary impose limits.

Emotion coaching is about building and enriching relationships. The problem solving comes last – after you've talked about your feelings.

<https://emotioncoaching.gottman.com>

This is an example of a resource developed by teaching staff in a Primary School Setting. The text was adapted and used in lanyards worn by all adults in the school.

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STEP 1 – Recognise, Understand, Validate and LABEL the feeling

Look for physical and verbal signs of the emotion being felt; Take on the child's/young person's perspective; Use words to reflect back child's emotion and help child/young person to label emotion

"You seem angry to me" or sad, upset, fed up etc....

"I can see you are feeling (angry)."

Affirm and empathise with the emotion; Allow to calm down

"I would feel (angry) if that happened to me"

"I get that you are (upset)"

"I can understand you're feeling (sad) "

Anger Joy Surprise Fear Sadness Disgust

STEP 2 (lid is down) Problem Solving and Limit Setting

All Feelings are OK, Not all behavior OK (use behavior policy of setting if necessary/appropriate):

"Can you remember what happened to make you feel like that?"

"It's OK to feel like that but It's not ok to behave like that?"

"Can you think of a different way to deal with your feelings?"

"What could you do differently next time?"

"Would you like to talk to someone further about how you are feeling?"

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Concluding comment

By enabling conversations about the science of stress and offering psycho education tools that build skills in those areas of brain function most likely to be affected by exposure to toxic stress, we can create an environment where professionals develop insight into their own emotional reactivity particularly in highly stressful situations where they are working with children and families who have experienced significant intergenerational adversity.

“Understanding the mechanics behind how we communicate and the influence of emotions and contextual environmental issues (such as stress) on behaviour were key learning outcomes for all professionals. All professionals talked about the impact of toxic stress. It also made them more ware of the importance of being emotionally literate and how that could impact on their work”. Hampshire Project 2019
www.emotioncoachinghampshire.co.uk

Reflection

Reflecting on what you have read here, are you able to think of ways you could incorporate The Hand Model into your work with children and families? Thinking about Child Protection Medicals and Child Protection Conferences you have been involved with, can you think of a situation where referring to the neuroscience of stress might support improved communication between professionals and families and between professionals across services?

* Access our evidence base online at www.emotionintelligence.co.uk
Access our learning community through www.mindfulemotioncoaching.co.uk

Report authors:

Dr Sarah Temple MRCGP, GP Yeovil, Somerset, Dr Kate McCann MRCPCH, Consultant Community Paediatrician, Taunton, Somerset, Cynthia Condliffe, Designated Nurse, Hampshire, Antoinette Davey, Medical Researcher, Exeter University

Correspondence: sarah.temple@nhs.net

Conflicts of interest

Dr Sarah Temple and Antoinette Davey are both Directors of the social enterprise EHCAP Ltd www.ehcap.co.uk

15 December 2019