4.3: Putting it into practice

Remember Max?

Remember Max who arrived at the Intervention Centre and silently went about barricading himself into a corner using the reading corner pillows?

For the purposes of this case study we will describe Max’s attachment pattern as disorganised attachment. A pattern that arises when a child is in a relationship where the adult is frightening to the child and often the adult is frightened of the child. Max’s behaviour in the classroom could be described as him needing to be in constant control at all times and he would be verbally and physically aggressive. So how was Max feeling? Anxious, fearful and unsafe.

Max’s fear meant that he needed to make sure he was in control. To do that he would be mean to others, provoking them, hitting them, knocking their belongings onto the floor. Max’s angry and aggressive behaviour was hiding his anxiety and allowed him to ‘control’ the teacher. Max’s participation in activities was overridden by his anxiety and hypervigilance.

How will we support max?

“I can’t explore the world. I am too busy ensuring I am safe,” (Golding et al., 2013). There are many strategies that while they are targeted to a specific child’s needs, they are effective strategies from which all children can benefit. Highly
effective teachers will probably be already employing many of the strategies suggested as a matter of course and just need to be made aware of the purpose of these in relation to individuals like Max who need specific attention, care and lots of reassurance. Suggestions may include:

- Ensure predictable, consistent routines.
- Provide ‘sanctuary’ – a safe space to retreat to when feeling overwhelmed. For Max this would mean making sure there were extra pillows, so his barricaded corner could remain intact.
- Teach calming routines (ensure these are doable and appropriate).
- Give lots of teacher attention. Have a concrete object that represents time with the teacher so Max knows he can use these to access teacher attention if it is not possible to do so immediately. For example, clothes pegs or Unifix blocks or cards (teacher time owed) work well as visuals to swap for teacher attention time.
- Preferred activities first, followed by non-preferred activities.
- Genuine praise and encouragement.
- Give Max an element of control (or the illusion of control). For example, he can choose which tasks to complete first, where he will sit, what pencil/pen he wants to write with or he can negotiate from the choices given how much of the task he will complete (none, not being an option).
- Small, small steps. Be patient.
- Can you imagine what it must be like to be Max? Put yourself in his shoes.

Sam is having trouble at school

Remember that much of classroom behaviour management assumes that children know how to do relationships. It is assumed that children know and understand how to respond to authority, respect, trust and obedience when in fact the child with trauma is often wired to respond to mistrust, cruelty and survival.

Information snippet one

Sam is a nine-year-old boy in your class. It is the start of term and Sam is being disruptive in class. He often yells out in class at other students, refuses to attempt or complete set tasks and throws his equipment to the floor, finding it hardest to concentrate and do his work in Maths and English.

He has been aggressive with other students in break times sometimes pushing, hitting, threatening to punch and swearing. He is often noticed to raise his voice with teachers on playground duty, often resulting in arguments. Sam has been suspended twice and is sent to the principal’s office almost daily. At the Principal’s office Sam is observed to be calmer. He has spoken to the Principal about his parents – becoming quite upset and tearful discussing this topic.

Why is Sam behaving like this?

Thinking functionally about Sam’s behaviour, firstly the problematic behaviour needs to be defined in observable and
measurable terms. What does Sam’s behaviour look like? It looks like hitting, throwing equipment to the floor, yelling at other students etc. Next, what are possible antecedents or triggers for this behaviour? So, what is or in this case could be, happening immediately before the problem behaviour? Perhaps he has been told to complete a writing task, or Maths task, he may have asked to join a game and been told that he was not welcome, or teachers or peers may move into his personal space. Finally, consequences or what happens immediately following the problem behaviour? What do the adults do? He is sent to the principal’s office, suspended, and probably frequently withdrawn from the playground (detention of some sort).

What is the possible function of Sam’s behaviour? Is it to access or escape?

Speculate now, based on the information provided, what possible setting events may have impacted Sam. So, what factors beyond the school gate, would need to be considered by the teacher to lessen their impact in the classroom? Sam could be tired, hungry, anxious and worried (for example he may be worried for the safety of someone at home when he is at school).

To lessen the likelihood that the loud and aggressive Sam will appear, in what ways can the teacher alter or take away the antecedents or introduce new antecedents? Also, change the consequences or introduce new ones? In other words, what antecedent and consequences intervention strategies could be employed?

The goal of the antecedent and setting event strategies is to prevent the challenging behaviour from happening. Examples could be: provide breakfast, class munch and crunch time (fruit for sharing just after class begins), parking bay (quite time, time-in, quiet corner) where the child can go as a transition to participating immediately upon their arrival at class.

Consequence strategies withdraw or alter what is currently happening after the challenging behaviour and is maintaining it or supporting it to continue. The goal is to reinforce desired behaviour. Thinking functionally, consequence strategies
are positive and encourage the replacement behaviour. The focus is on increasing appropriate behaviour. Examples could be: praise regularly, non-preferred task (small chunk of work) followed by a preferred task (drawing, reading, computer time), requesting a break (break time card/timer), time with teacher.

Information snippet two

At the parent-teacher interview, you learn that Sam’s parents have split up recently and that he has been living with his maternal grandmother since the start of term. Sam’s mother tells you that there has been domestic violence in the house and Sam may have witnessed some of the verbal and physical aggression. Sam’s mother tells you that his grandmother finds it hard to set limits with Sam and is afraid of his aggression. Sam’s mother is happy for the school guidance officer to speak to Sam’s mental health team for more information.

What needs are going unmet for Sam?

Having thought functionally about Sam’s behaviour and come up with some setting event and antecedent intervention strategies and some consequence-based intervention strategies, now consider what needs could be going unmet for him. Do you think he would feel safe? Would he feel secure and trusting of the adults around him? Does Sam know that anyone at school truly cares about him? Who will be Sam’s key person?

Sam must feel safe so that he can begin to participate in school life. For Sam to feel safe, a relationship needs to be built with a key adult who gets to know Sam and understands he is a child with complex emotions who requires unconditional support. What can the teacher do to meet these needs? How will safety, relationship building, emotional needs and discipline be addressed? Will Sam need to be taught a replacement behaviour and other social skills? What is Sam’s level of maturity? Sam needs reliable and consistent routines that focus on keeping people safe. There needs to be a planned response for critical incidents. Perhaps there are small group activities targeted at those children who require more intensive social skilling. Explicit teaching of desired behaviours – never assume that a child knows what the desired behaviour looks like – break the behaviour down into steps and then model and practise and reinforce the behaviour. The best time to do this, is when the child is not being disruptive. See chapter five for social skilling as part of social-emotional wellbeing.

Sam like Max is controlling and spends his time checking on others around him to ensure his safety. How is Sam feeling? Do you think he copes well with stress? Would a busy, stimulating classroom help Sam or hinder his ability to be calm?

The picture so far...

Sam needs to feel safe and secure. He needs a key person to build a relationship with him and be an advocate for him. Interventions to alter the antecedents and the consequences as well as lessen the impact of setting events, can be made to classroom environment to lessen the likelihood Sam will be disruptive in the classroom and playground. Predictable, structured days are needed with opportunities provided for Sam to escape or access (depending on the
function of his behaviour) using appropriate behaviour. Therefore, a replacement behaviour and some social skills will need to be taught to Sam. Clear links will need to be made for Sam between his behaviour and the consequence and it is important that calm and consistent discipline be implemented to avoid confrontation and ‘battles’. Co-regulation demonstrated by adults will help Sam to manage his emotions.

Sam this morning…

Sam was suspended last week and has arrived at your classroom looking irritable and tired.

He walks into class and does not make eye-contact with you when you say hello to him. You notice that as soon as he sits in his seat he puts his head on the desk.

The first lesson for the day is Maths and all the kids have taken out their Maths books, except for Sam. What do you do?

**Plan:** How are you feeling at this point? Is Sam in his ‘window of tolerance?’ Are there any early warning signs? Any safety issues? What antecedent strategy can you implement? What can you do immediately to lessen the likelihood of an emotional explosion? You may move close to Sam and use a whisper to tell him that he can have 10 minutes in parking bay before he needs to begin his Maths. He might be given a piece of fruit to eat while he is having 'calm' time (an antecedent and setting event strategy).

**Prompt:** How will you respond to Sam not taking out his book? How can you do this without escalating his behaviour? Think about where you will stand, what your body language looks like, check your tone of voice, what words will you use? You might move to Sam in parking bay and tell him when he goes to his desk after he has completed five of the 10 Maths operations he can have 10 minutes drawing time (a consequence strategy).

**Pause:** How will you know if your prompting has worked? What will you be looking for? Sam will move to the parking bay (in his own time – don’t be pushy) and when his time is up or when he is ready, return to his desk and begin his non-preferred task. He will appear less agitated and will demonstrate fewer aggressive behaviours.

**Push-off:** How will you know when to move away from Sam? How will you do this? Each child is an individual and this is why it is critical to know your children well. It may be that you move away straight away. It may be that you sit on a chair beside Sam for a while and then ‘lap’ the classroom assisting other students and then come back to Sam. You might teacher from behind Sam’s chair and then gradually move away to check student work. It is unreasonable to expect that Sam will behave perfectly all of a sudden. He will be aggressive, he will refuse to follow instructions and he will continue to have emotional outbursts. The teacher’s job is to lessen the frequency, duration and intensity of this behaviour as best they can.

Children like Max and Sam that have a type of attachment at the most severe end of the continuum, disorganised attachment, are amongst the most concerning to teachers. Behaviour management strategies that are typically used are rarely effective with children like Sam and Max because they live in a state of dysregulation and fear where survival is paramount, and adults cannot be trusted. Praise and acknowledgement for example are often perceived by the child
affected by trauma as ingenuine adult remarks. Therefore, building connections is the first step to helping the child feel safe and secure. It is from this ‘felt safety’ foundation that trust can be formed. Trust is the foundation of their readiness to learn and they learn best implicitly, through the interactions with you and watching you closely. Everything you do as a teacher is modelling to them and they are learning by watching.

**Childhood trauma: What every teacher needs to know [1 min 15 sec]**

Watch this video on what every teacher needs to know about childhood trauma.

**Reflective questions**

1. Name the four types of attachment.
2. What is the name of the theorist attributed with Attachment Theory?
3. PACE stands for Playfulness, _____________, Curiosity and_________________.
4. What is the main purpose of setting event and antecedent strategies?
5. List some typical feelings of the child with trauma.

**References**