

# Personal, social and emotional development in the early years: a handbook for practitioners

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National Centre for  
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## Early Years in Mind

Early Years in Mind is a free online network for early years practitioners. It provides easy to read and easy to use guidance on supporting the mental health of babies, young children and their families. The network was developed by mental health experts at the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families and resources are created with our participation team and a variety of organisations with expertise relevant to the early years.

The network aims to:

- Share learning, practical advice and co-designed resources rooted in attachment theory and relevant to current policy developments
- Highlight practice that supports children and families who have been marginalised and experience societal inequalities
- Promote a healthy, supported and connected workforce

For anyone working in healthcare, social care or childcare settings, attachment theory and relational practice offer an invaluable approach to working with babies, young children and their families. It can help practitioners to both support relationships between parents and carers and their children, and to build nurturing relationships with children themselves.

[Join the free Early Years in Mind network.](#)

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# 1. Introduction

## Who is this guide for?

This guide is for early years workers, managers and practitioners from the wider early years sector.

## Why have we created this guide?

Statutory guidance for the [Early Years Foundation Stage \(EYFS\)](#) was reformed in 2021. Its purpose is to: set the standards that all early years providers must meet to ensure that children learn and develop well; ensure children are kept healthy and safe; and ensure that children have the knowledge and skills they need to start school.

[Personal, social and emotional development \(PSED\)](#) is one of three prime areas within the EYFS but it connects the whole curriculum. According to the EYFS, 'children's personal, social and emotional development (PSED) is crucial for children to lead healthy and happy lives, and is fundamental to their cognitive development'. PSED is divided into 3 areas: emotions, sense of self and relationships.

The reforms are all about early years practitioners spending time with children in this way, rather than tied up in paperwork. This is because it is the interested, playful and consistent adult that makes the biggest impact on a child's development in all areas. This guide is intended to be a practical and reflective resource to enable practitioners to support the healthy PSED of children in their settings.

## What is our approach?

Our work in the Early Years and Prevention department at the Anna Freud Centre is informed by Attachment Theory and we recognise that young children learn about their emotions and how to manage them through their relationship with important adults around them.

You will find that the tips we give in this guide centre around your relationship with children, their families and yourself i.e. self-reflection. This also means reflecting on these relationships in their cultural context, understanding how wider societal structures impact PSED in the early years, and considering how your own worldviews may impact your practice.

This approach is also mirrored in the EYFS, which says 'underpinning their personal development are the important attachments that shape their social world. Strong, warm and supportive relationships with adults enable children to learn how to understand their own feelings and those of others' to start school.

## How does this guide work?

There will be a brief section of theory with practical tips incorporated throughout, which we hope you find helpful. Some of this might be new information or you are probably doing lots of this already – either way, please do have a go at the reflective exercises that follow each section. These are intended to deepen your practice and will be useful to work through individually, with a supervisor or in peer groups.

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## 2. What is PSED?

PSED can be thought of as three building blocks - emotions, sense of self and relationships - which contribute to a child developing in the early years. Though PSED is a separate prime area in the EYFS, it is a foundation that connects the whole curriculum - through positive relationships with adults, children learn what their emotions are, how to regulate them and how relationships with their peers work. By establishing solid and positive relationships with young children, you are helping them in all the prime areas.



### Reflective exercise 1

Think of a child in your setting who struggles with relationships with their peers. Reflect on:

**How you have already interacted with this child to cultivate a positive relationship with them**

**How you might use your relationship with the child to role model regulating emotions**

*Tips - children use their whole bodies, senses and full range of communication and spoken (and unspoken!) language to let us know how they are developing. You can do the same and communicate with children with more than just words. For example, you could describe an emotion by showing a child where you feel it in your body - 'I feel a bit angry and I feel it in my belly and my cheeks feels hot'. Always build trust with parents and carers and discuss any plans with them.*

## 3. PSED and attachment

When we talk about 'attachment' we are referring to the psychological theory first proposed by John Bowlby in the mid to late 20th century.

This theory suggested that humans were evolutionarily primed to relate to others and that the way we relate to others is set in our early lives. These relationship patterns were organised into 'styles' and a huge field of research and therapeutic work on trying to understand more about these 'attachment styles' and consequences and applications of these has been happening ever since.

You can read about these 'styles' or broad classifications which are based on an experiment called the Strange Situation (a situation created in a laboratory where a baby is briefly separated from caregivers and their reaction was observed) below.

**1. Secure attachment:** most people (60-70%) are securely attached. In the Strange Situation this looks like:

- The child being able to actively explore the environment
- The child being distressed on separation from the parent or carer
- The child responding positively to the parent or carer
- The child being wary of strangers
- The parent being consistently responsive to the child.

**2. Insecure avoidant attachment:** it's estimated that 20-25% of the general population have this type of attachment pattern. In the Strange Situation it looks like this:

- The child puts their attention on the toys in the absence of the parent or carer
- The child is avoidant of the parent or carer on reunion
- The parent rejects the child's signals, especially for bodily contact
- There is a channelling of distress away from the parent-child interactions.

**3. Insecure ambivalent attachment:** it's thought that up to 10% of the general population can be classified as Insecure Ambivalent. Behaviours that show this in the strange situation include:

- The child protests on separation from the parent or carer
- The child is angry with the parent or carer on reunion
- There is an inconsistent parental response to the child's signals.

**4. Disorganised attachment:** This pattern of relating was classified in the early 1980s and describes about 14% of the general population. In the strange situation these infants:

- Had no strategy for separation
- Displayed contradictory behaviours
- 80% of maltreated children show signs of disorganised attachment.

Although attachment theory is based on many cultural universals, parts of it are skewed towards a Western middle class parenting ideal. So, it's important to consider the wide range of cultural backgrounds that families will come from and how this may influence your perception of a child's behaviour.

## Reflective exercise 2

Think about a child who matches each of the attachment styles and reflect on the following questions:

**How would you describe the way the child relates to adults?**

**How would you describe the way they relate to their peers?**

**Do you have concerns about the child and why?**

**What approach would you take in building a relationship with this child?**

*Tips - we can have different attachment styles in different relationships. When you are observing children, remember that different children will respond differently to the same situation and the same child might respond differently in various situations. A useful time to observe children is at transitions like the beginning and end of day, free flow play to group times, naps/meal times, and coming inside after being outside. You might want to plan transitions where possible according to children's needs, for example, through home visits, providing photos of setting and staff, settling in visits, and planned transitional support to new rooms. Always build trust with parents and carers and discuss and plans with them.*

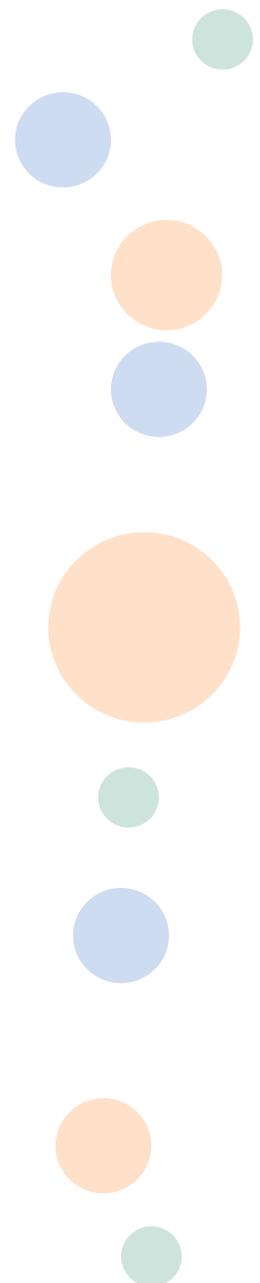
## 4.1 PSED for two year olds

For each age, please reflect on what your best hopes for them would be in terms of their PSED. For example, in terms of their relationships, how independent they are, and how they might use their bodies to communicate.

	How the world looks to them	Sense of self	Grown ups
2 year old	<p>For our 2 year old, they are the centre of the world. Their experience is mostly marked by physical sensations, and feelings like happiness, excitement and sadness are felt with the whole body. They are developing new skills all the time, which makes the world a really exciting place, but sometimes an overwhelming place too.</p> <p>The 2 year old loves their special people very much, and although they notice and understand when others are upset or worried, they can't yet really imagine the world from another's perspective. For most of the time they are not able to use their understanding of others to control their impulses.</p> <p>The 2 year old's sense of time is not like ours, being able to hold on and wait is incredibly difficult. This makes caring for them a highly specialist activity!</p>	<p>Our 2 year old knows who they are, and will respond to their name. They will have a strong sense of what they like, who they love and who to go to for comfort. One of their developmental tasks is to develop their own individual sense of identity. Their language development mirrors this emotional development with the move from referring to themselves by their name, to "me" and then to "I". The 2 year old experiences feelings very powerfully, and will need help from adults to manage their emotions.</p>	<p>By now, our 2 year old will have a well established knowledge that loved grown ups come back. They can be helped when missing parents or carers by being reminded who is collecting them, and what that adult is doing while not with the child, as well as what the child will be doing while they are apart. Our 2 year old's fast developing understanding of language means adults can help them feel safe by letting them know what to expect and when. The 2 year old child will be experimenting with how they can assert themselves and this can look like contrary or oppositional behaviour at times. Children at this age are starting to use pretend play and can use imaginary games and stories to bring their powerful feelings from 'real life' into the arena of play where they can explore their strong feelings and their relationship with their parents in a manageable way for the whole family.</p>

*Tips - manage your expectations because children will naturally display contradictory behaviours and that's ok! Also, we have noted that there is a wide range of behaviours that come under the umbrella of 'typical' but it's important to understand that children develop at different rates. You may need to provide some children with a bit more help and others might just need more time to develop a skill.*

Other children	Main preoccupations	Ways to manage emotions
<p>At 2, children are interested in other children and are beginning to play 'with' rather than only 'alongside' others. However since they are not yet able to follow rules without help, they will need an adult to show them how to do joint play, and help manage turn taking and so on.</p> <p>The 2 year olds limited capacity to manage their impulses mean that peer relationships as we think of friendships are still a little way off.</p>	<p>At this stage of emotional development a key task is separating from parents, both physically and emotionally. For example, being able to settle at nursery and make good relationships with adults there. This helps with a second key task, of establishing a sense of individual identity separate from their parents or carers. A way we can see this happening are the ways our toddler starts to assert their own needs and wishes more. Children's worries at this time also reflect these developmental tasks.</p> <p>Our toddler's newfound separateness can make them worry about losing their loved people. This might be seen in very clingy or even negative behaviours (such as biting or hitting out) which keep grown-ups close, as well as communicating the toddler's upset, worried or scared feelings.</p>	<p>Children at 2 manage their worries in physical ways. Disruptions in sleeping, eating and toileting can often echo changes, worries or difficulties in the family. Children may start to assert strong aversions to things, people or places, which can be a way to manage a fear of loss as well as the need to assert their developing independence. Young children use play to try out their developmental needs and achievements, as well as their anxieties. Games about hiding, surprises, saying goodbye and coming back are all very popular with this age group.</p>



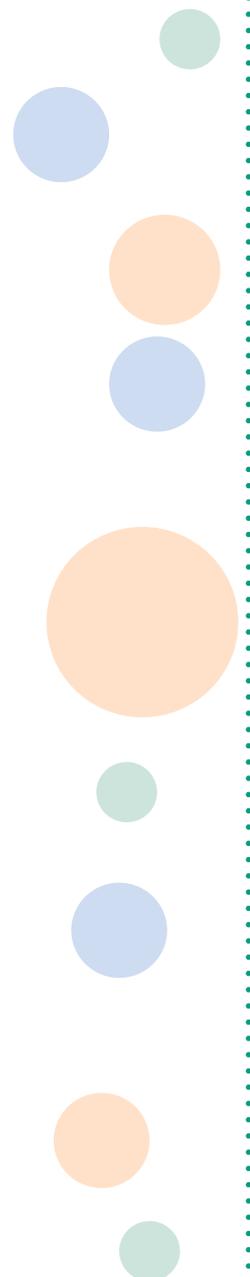
## 4.2 PSED for three year olds

For each age, please reflect on what your best hopes for them would be in terms of their PSED. For example, in terms of their relationships, how independent they are, and how they might use their bodies to communicate.

	How the world looks to them	Sense of self	Grown ups
<b>3 year old</b>	<p>Our three year old's world has changed a lot in the last year. Now, they have more of a sense of time and can understand a bit more what is now, what was before and what is later (though its often hard to wait!). This means the world can be a bit more organised, with the young child sorting their experiences of the world in an increasingly ordered way. The world is still marked by strong emotions and these remain rooted in the body, though the 3 year old is starting to be able to name some feelings. Our 3 year old is also becoming more aware of other people's feelings, although it is still difficult for them to imagine those feelings being different from their own.</p>	<p>The 3 year old is increasingly interested in who belongs with who, who is the same and who is different. There is a lot of curiosity about gender, how families are different and how people look. This interest underpins the child's sense of self – for example: "Abi has a daddy like me!"</p> <p>They are exploring their sense of themselves as children who can do more grown up things, like use the toilet and share with friends, while at the same time still being a very young child who becomes ashamed very easily and needs a lot of care and encouragement from the adults around them. Talking with the 3 year old about the story of their day, or week, or life, helps them put these different experiences of feeling grown up and younger together into a story of themselves.</p>	<p>Friendships are starting to form and children are exploring their own personalities as they find they play more with some children than others. Children will still need help to enjoy shared play, but are increasingly able to manage the skills of turn taking and sharing.</p>

*Tips - manage your expectations because children will naturally display contradictory behaviours and that's ok! Also, we have noted that there is a wide range of behaviours that come under the umbrella of 'typical' but it's important to understand that children develop at different rates. You may need to provide some children with a bit more help and others might just need more time to develop a skill.*

Other children	Main preoccupations	Ways to manage emotions
<p>Our 3 year old can feel proud and pleased of their achievements, for example in self-care. They can also worry about suddenly feeling very young and feeling powerless and ashamed. For example, when our 3 year old does something that adults don't like, and is 'told off', this reminds them that they are still small and this can produce very intense feelings of shame.</p> <p>To prevent shame becoming overwhelming, our 3 year old needs adults to set firm but gentle boundaries. As the child's world open up and they start to navigate new experiences such as pre-school, playdates and new relationships with adults and children, they still need the consistency and safety of their special adult to return to their parent, carer or key person.</p>	<p>Our 3 year old can feel proud and pleased of their achievements, for example in self-care. They can also worry about suddenly feeling very young and feeling powerless and ashamed. For example, when our 3 year old does something that adults don't like, and is 'told off', this reminds them that they are still small and this can produce very intense feelings of shame.</p> <p>To prevent shame becoming overwhelming, our 3 year old needs adults to set firm but gentle boundaries. As the child's world open up and they start to navigate new experiences such as pre-school, playdates and new relationships with adults and children, they still need the consistency and safety of their special adult to return to – their parent, carer or key person.</p>	<p>At 3, the child still displays their feelings through their body, so disturbances in sleep, eating and toileting can all express an emotional difficulty. Children at this age are also able to show you (very effectively!) when they are feeling angry, scared, sad or happy. They do this through their behaviours but also with their developing language skills. Talking with children about feelings in a simple way helps give them another way to express their emotional needs from a young age.</p> <p>Worries about being powerful or powerless are increasingly managed by taking on imaginary roles, such as a superhero, story character, or animal (puppies and kittens are helpful as cute, little creatures that also have claws and teeth!).</p> <p>Children can take to an extreme of this divide and deny any feelings or experiences of vulnerability or independence</p>



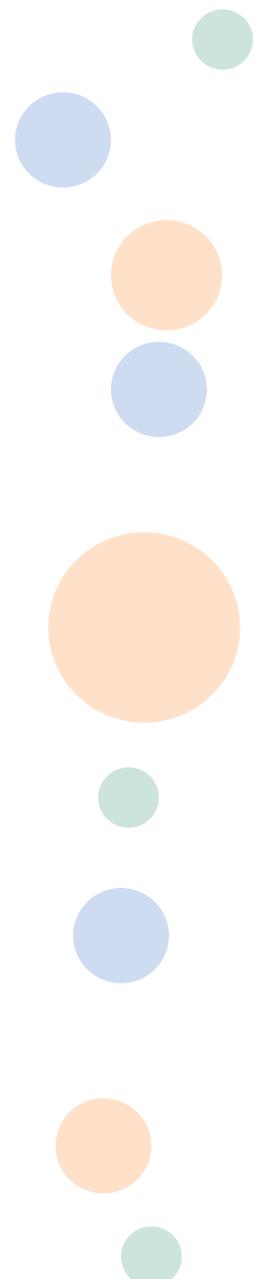
## 4.3 PSED for four year olds

For each age, please reflect on what your best hopes for them would be in terms of their PSED. For example, in terms of their relationships, how independent they are, and how they might use their bodies to communicate.

	How the world looks to them	Sense of self	Grown ups
<b>4 year old</b>	<p>Our 4 year old is well rooted in where they belong. They thrive on routine and this allows them to feel safe enough to increasingly explore the world further, through relationships and activities outside the family. They have developed impulse control to a level where they can wait for short periods but will need help with this. They will still need to see and hear an adult giving them an instruction, as they still use their body as the main way to express and communicate their feelings.</p>	<p>Our 4 year old has a strong sense of self and is developing increasingly sophisticated in the layers of their identity. For example their sense of who they are includes who they are linked to (their family), where they live and where they go, but also what they do or can do. For example: "My name is Tony, I live with Daddy and I can ride a bike".</p>	<p>At 4 years old, children have a sense of self that sometimes results in strong feelings and a desire to help out, or assert their own choices. Children of this age are beginning to understand the language linked to emotional states, which can be helpful for adults to model to them when they 'act out' due to frustration. Our 4 year old may act out extended sequences of household activities in their imaginary play, showing that they have been observing the grown ups around them.</p>

*Tips - manage your expectations because children will naturally display contradictory behaviours and that's ok! Also, we have noted that there is a wide range of behaviours that come under the umbrella of 'typical' but it's important to understand that children develop at different rates. You may need to provide some children with a bit more help and others might just need more time to develop a skill.*

Other children	Main preoccupations	Ways to manage emotions
<p>Children at this stage of life are interested in other children and, depending on individual personalities, are able to enjoy group play such as chasing and running as well as adult supported activities like singing or shared craft.</p> <p>Our 4 year old will be drawn to some children more than others and this is the start of early friendships. 4 year olds are echoing the adult voices they are hearing as part of their development.</p> <p>They can deliver the messages they have heard about themselves to others with great seriousness and intent. Children are beginning to develop a sense of right and wrong but it is easier to tell others than to apply it to the self at this stage of development.</p>	<p>The emotional developmental task for the 4 year old is to start transferring the capacities they have developed in their close family relationships into group settings – to learn to be part of a group. Along the way, our 4 year old will have to tolerate feeling left out, and will probably leave others out, as they start to learn how to manage being part of a group outside their immediate family. This relational achievement is gradual and only possible when the child is very secure in their primary relationship with their parents or carers. Although challenging, group life also brings with it new and exciting types of play, learning and relationships.</p> <p>In order to manage this move, the child needs to build up resilience, confidence and some positive self-esteem. Our 4 year old child loves people paying them attention and giving them praise for their newly developing skills.</p>	<p>Whilst developing these new and important social and emotional skills, the child learns from those around them and can use the 'voice' of adults to bolster themselves as they work out how to 'be' in their expanding social world. We saw earlier how a 4 year old can be very indignant when they see a child behaving in a way that they have been struggling with themselves. By taking on the adult's voice, the child manages their worries about being unsure, meeting adult expectations and the fear of displeasing their special adult. This early bid for independence can be seen in a range of behaviours where the 4 year old strongly asserts their will – or extreme distress and opposition when this is prevented.</p>



## 5. When might extra support be needed?

Children might need some extra support for their PSED if there are particular situations at home that might be challenging for example, unresolved family conflicts.

Children may also have additional needs such as:

- Autistic Spectrum Conditions
- Developmental delay
- Cerebral palsy
- Down's syndrome
- Visual impairment
- Hearing loss or implants

This list is not exhaustive, and families can face multiple needs at once. You can read the government's [guide for early years settings on the support system for children and young people with special education needs and disability](#) for further information. When a child has additional needs, they may need to access PSED in different ways, which might include organising assessments and referrals. If you are working with a child who has an additional need, you will be well supported by your manager and the family in how best to support them in the setting.

Children might also experience Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), which are frightening, shocking or overwhelming experiences which happen in a child's life before the age of 18. Adversity can happen to any child at any point in their childhood. Adversity in childhood impacts on mental and physical health in adulthood. Safe and supportive relationships help children recover from ACEs. ACEs include:

- abuse – emotional, physical or sexual
- neglect
- domestic abuse
- loss from death, illness or separation
- parental alcohol or substance dependence
- having a parent in prison
- parental mental health difficulties.

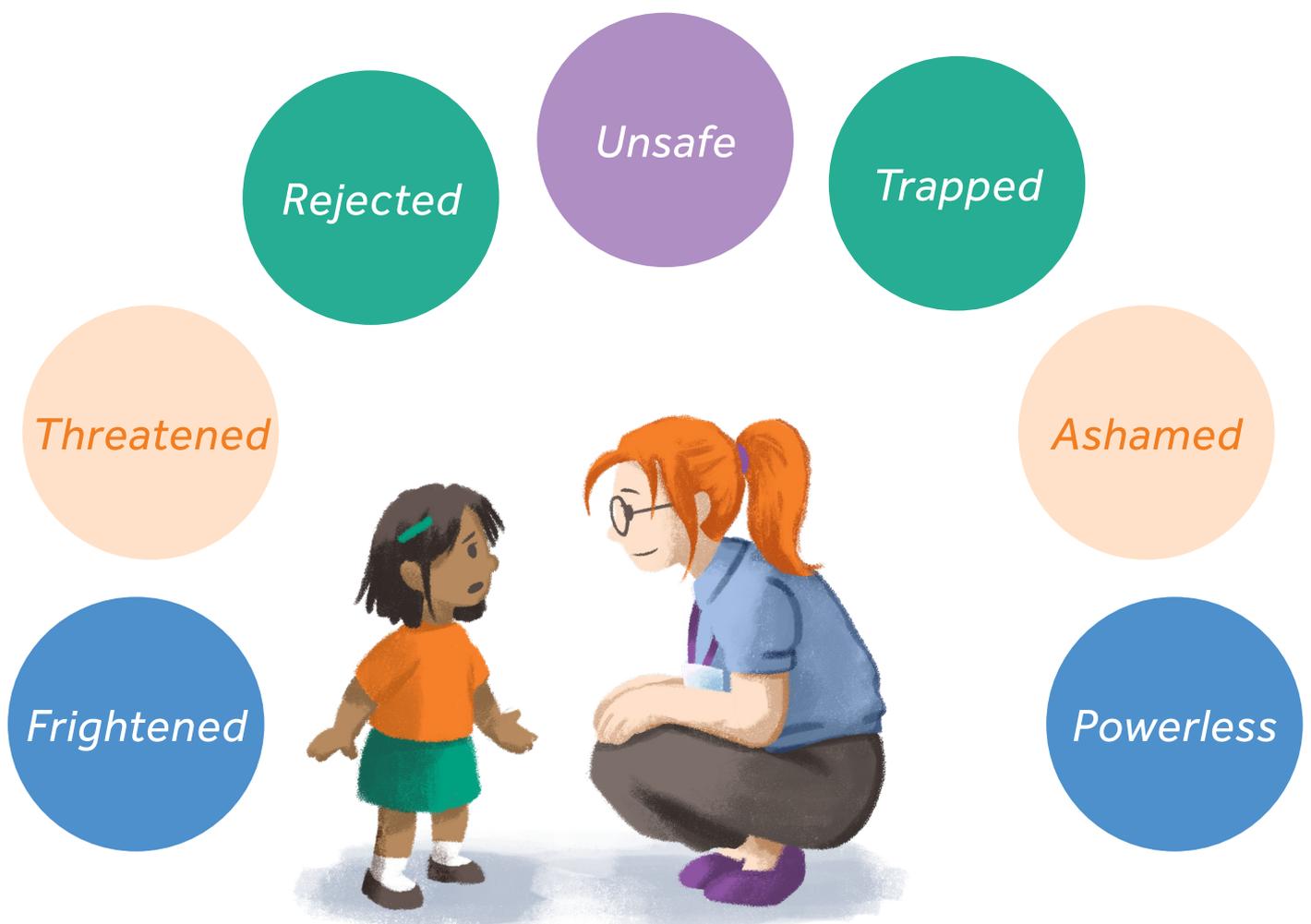
It's important to reflect on what trauma means because a difficult circumstance of experiencing an ACE does not necessarily equal trauma. Trauma is a person's response to a stressful event or series of events that are overwhelming. Trauma is not the occurrence of the event in itself. We all know from our own experience that bad things happen, and often we can manage them – this is resilience.

What makes an event traumatic is the way an individual experiences the event. People will react in their own way to the same situation, due to their unique history. A sudden or unexpected event is more likely to be experienced as traumatic because the person wasn't prepared for it. When we think about young children, they are less able to hold future events in their minds, meaning that many events can be experienced as sudden and unexpected. This explains why young children are highly vulnerable to being traumatised by ACEs.

## Reflective exercise 3

Trauma can make a child feel frightened, threatened, humiliated, rejected, abandoned, invalidated, unsafe, unsupported, trapped, ashamed and powerless. For each of these words, think how this might look for a particular child. For example, a child who is frightened might find it hard to separate from familiar adults or children who are unsupported might seem content playing alone. For example, if they build a tower of bricks, they may not feel the need to show an adult what they have created.

*Tips – don't forget to think about ACEs and trauma in a social context. Early years settings do not exist outside of wider societal structures. It is therefore important to be aware of how inequalities and discrimination affect families. For example, racism is traumatic and a child might display signs of trauma because they have experienced racism. Increasing levels of poverty with the cost of living crisis may also influence how a child presents. It's important to reflect on these wider issues and not to jump straight to assuming something has happened at home.*



## 6. Working with families

Early years practitioners do a fantastic job of working with parents and carers. Making strong relationships with families is what helps young children settle into the setting and be able to make the most of the relationships and learning on offer there. Early years practitioners can be a huge source of support to families and provide much needed encouragement and advice as children move through the setting.

Every family is different, and as such early years practitioners might need to use different techniques to engage different families. Sometimes there is a perception that families struggle to engage or are hard to reach but it might be that we need to adapt our approach instead.



Taking the time to build a trusting relationship with a child's family makes a huge impact on their PSED. This is particularly relevant for identity formation. What children experience and learn in their first few years will begin to shape how they are as an adult so it's crucial that practitioners understand how families from some cultural, racial or ethnic backgrounds may experience early years settings differently. Here are just a few examples:

- If a nursery isn't able to communicate to parents or carers who don't speak English as their first language, important messages about their children may be lost or miscommunicated.
- Concepts of childcare differ between cultures and communities. Some families, including some migrant families, might not have been made aware of the support on offer in the early years. This may mean that outreach is necessary to engage with families and build trust.
- Women of colour, and particularly Black mothers, have poorer mental health outcomes and worse experiences in maternity care. These experiences may go on to impact how families interact with early years settings, so it's important to be aware of this context.

Some early years staff and settings may need to educate themselves on different family structures to ensure all families are treated with equal understanding and respect. These family structures might include extended family caregiving within or between households based on cultural or religious values, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, non-binary, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+) parenting structures.

## Reflective exercise 4

Ask yourself the following questions:

**How do I respond to the same behaviours by children from different backgrounds?**

**Do I find myself gravitating to certain parents and carers more than others? Why?**

*Tips - to help see the world through the eyes of the child, you could ask 'how do the children in my setting describe themselves and their family?' and 'who do children say is important to them?'. As a group exercise with staff, you could ask 'in what ways does our early years setting reflect a range of cultural identities?' and 'how do we use play materials, books, instruments and food to help children learn about different cultures?'*



# 7. Strategies to support healthy PSED

## Emotional containment

This means providing an invisible net around the child and their feeling so they are not too overwhelmed by their emotional experience. You are probably doing many of these things already:

- **Empathy:** this is the capacity to imagine what someone else's feelings might be and how it might feel to have those feelings yourself. Empathy means really putting yourself 'in their shoes'. By taking an empathetic stance towards children who need support, you are showing the child that they have their own thoughts, feelings and experiences that another person can understand, which means that these perhaps overwhelming emotional experiences can be made sense of. This might make the child feel less isolated and alone.
- **Touch:** this is one of the earliest ways to connect with a child and make them feel less overwhelmed. Not all children will want or need a big cuddle, some may need a shoulder squeeze, help putting on their coats that allows for a short hug, some might want to hold hands. The unique sensory needs of each child will be clearer to those who know them best
- **Voice:** the tone of your voice and rhythm of it has a big impact on how a child can feel. With children who need help with managing their emotions, using a calm and even tone can help give them a sense of being supported with no sudden shocks or surprises that will further dysregulate them.
- **Co-regulation:** Children who are in states of fear can be helped to have their physiological systems calmed down by being close to an adult who is in a calm state themselves. Encouraging the child to be alongside the adult as they do a simple activity the child can join in with can help reduce a child's states of high arousal caused by fear and distress.
- **Mirroring:** When a child is distressed, it can be very difficult for the adults around them to see. What is helpful for the child is not to be told that nothing is the matter, but for the adult to mirror back to the child what they think the child might be feeling. This gives the child an experience of an adult recognising what they are feeling, which can make them be able to tolerate that feeling a little more. This is a form of validation.
- **Consistency:** keeping the routine the child is used to going is an important aspect in supporting a distressed child. A consistent, safe and predictable environment is a significant source of comfort and help.



## Reflective exercise 5

Take a moment to do some deep breathing. If you are able to, place one hand on your belly and one hand on your chest and breathe deeply. You can close your eyes if you feel comfortable. Feel your belly rise and fall as you breathe in and out and notice the sensation of your breath on your nostrils as you breathe.

This is a way of regulating your nervous system and you can role model this with children to help them regulate themselves if they are feeling overwhelmed.

*Tips - keeping yourself regulated through breathing also goes a long way. You could frame breathing exercises in a child friendly way. For example, Tell your little one to imagine they are smelling a flower, breathing in deeply through the nose and out through the mouth. Smelling flowers is one of the easiest breathing exercises to master, and a good starting point for your child. Or, Have your child blow out the candles on a make-believe birthday cake, drawing a deep breath in through the mouth, and blowing it out strong through the mouth as well.*



## Repairing disputes with

### 2-4 year olds

Here are some tips for resolving disputes:

1. Speak to the child when the child (and practitioner) is calm and can listen – ‘let’s go and sit on a bench together and have a think about what just happened’
2. State the issue without blame or attribution - ‘Ade is sad because the toy he was playing with got taken away very suddenly’
3. Invite the child into finding a solution – ‘what can we do to make Ade feel better?’
4. Repeat the solution (when a workable one has been found) and encourage the child to carry it out – ‘I will help you to take the toy back to Ade, and stay with you as you play to help us all have a turn’
5. Refer back to the successful solution later on – ‘I was so impressed with your good ideas about how to help Ade feel better today’

Think about the above strategies and if there are any particular ones that you struggle with, consider why this might be.

*Tips – it’s helpful to reflect on what you find challenging in relation to disputes and conflict. It might be that you’ve had an experience which makes conflict resolution more challenging for you. This doesn’t have to be a problem but it’s useful to have an awareness about it so you can be proactive about building your skills in this area. You may want to reflect on this with peers or with a manager or supervisor.*

## Watchful waiting

Children aged two to four are on a very steep path of development, they change rapidly in short amounts of time. If you have a question about a child’s social and emotional development, it is helpful to employ watchful waiting, a process of keeping an eye on the child over time to see if concerns continue or get worse. Through watchful waiting, you will see whether whether the child continues on their developmental path without further difficulty. Watchful waiting is used ahead of direct therapeutic or social care intervention.

**When would we use watchful waiting?** We would start to use watchful waiting if we had any questions or concerns about a child’s development. The first step is to share your thoughts with colleagues and a manager and then decide what form of watchful waiting you are going to take and how long for before reviewing the original concerns.

**What does it look like?** The way you pay attention can be varied. Some people use observations, some use weekly discussion about a child, some check in with parents and talk about how the child is doing generally. You might do a combination of all of these. In any situation you will be considering the child in the context of their current developmental stage. The awareness and noticing of the child by you and other staff is the most important thing.

**How does it help the child?** Watchful waiting can help a child in the following ways:

- It gives the child an experience of an adult noticing something is different and being curious about what it might be. Children will benefit from this even if the attention is indirect.
- It allows all the child’s needs to be considered by a safe and consistent adult/s
- It doesn’t interfere with the child’s developmental processes
- It encourages reflective practice which is linked to better outcomes for children.

## Reflective exercise 6

What do I already do in terms of watchful waiting?

Which new strategies could I incorporate?

*Tips – in any situation, consider the child in the context of their current developmental stage and remember that development isn't just about chronological age as there are many factors that could influence 'typical' development stages.*

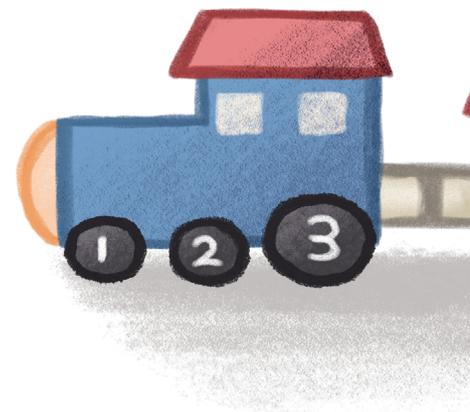


## Having sensitive conversations with parents and carers

You may find yourself in the position where you need to have sensitive conversations with parents and carers for example, if a child's behaviour noticeably changes and they become uncharacteristically withdrawn, aggressive or anxious. Don't worry! Although it might sometimes feel overwhelming, here are some suggestions about what you can do to prepare for the conversation, in the conversation and after the conversation.

### Pre-conversation

- **Build a trusting relationship:** it's really important to take steps to build trusting relationships with the parents and carers at your setting right from the beginning. This can change the way in which they will respond to you if you later bring up a concern with them about their child. They will be more open to a conversation with you and view you as a person who wants to help them and collaborate with them.
  - **Observations:** it's really helpful to document observations to focus on and take in often complicated sequences of behaviour and communicate them to colleagues so you can build a picture of a child's development. This doesn't mean constantly writing notes but can be useful if you have concerns about a child and wish to explore this further with colleagues and/or parents and carers. Observations are descriptive (behaviours, body language and speech), short (a record of a sequence of behaviour or 'snapshot' in time), and focussed (the emphasis is on the child rather than the group).
- **Share any concerns with your team:** It is helpful to have as much information as possible about the child to hand, and discuss this with your team, before bringing your views to a parent or carer. Through this discussion, you might decide that there are safeguarding issues or that it might be helpful to monitor the situation for a while longer. This might also help you to reflect on your own understanding of what is going on. You might think about how these concerns are making you feel, or look at how certain elements of your experience and training could be influencing your point of view.
  - **Plan what you will say to parents and carers:** prior to the meeting, think about what you are going to say and have clear examples to illustrate your concerns. Where English is an additional language for the family and you think you need an interpreter to support a full conversation, talk to your manager about how to book this service. When giving your opinion, try to base your views on specific examples of what you have seen, and describe in clear terms how these have informed your worry about the child.



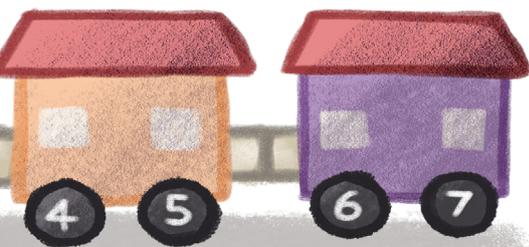
## In the conversation

- Ensure you have considered the environment - it might be ok to have a check in at the setting gates or it might be appropriate to book a room and have privacy.
- Communicate effectively and use clear language not jargon! Remember your body language is also a form of communication so be friendly and open in your interactions.
- Pay attention to, any emotional responses the parent or carer may have to your concern. They might also be completely open to having a conversation with you and see you as a supportive presence who can work together with them on any issues. On the other hand, you might worry that they may view you as critical or think that you are blaming them and holding them responsible. With this in mind, it could be helpful to tell them that you understand and empathise with their experience of the problem at the very start of the conversation, before you launch into expressing your own view on it or offering advice.

- Be respectful, remember they are the expert on their child. Here are some handy phrases to help you do this:
  - We would really appreciate your help with a question we have about X
  - This is something we've noticed at nursery/ children's centre. Is this something you've noticed at home?
  - I wonder whether you had notices X at all and is there anything that seems to make it better/worse from your experience/ expertise?
  - It's not unusual for children when there's significant change for this to impact their behaviour.
  - Would it be helpful to talk about this again?
  - This has been our experience of X but we appreciate this may not be your experience. What are your thoughts and do you have any questions for us? It's of course ok to go away and think about it and we can have further conversations.

## After the conversation

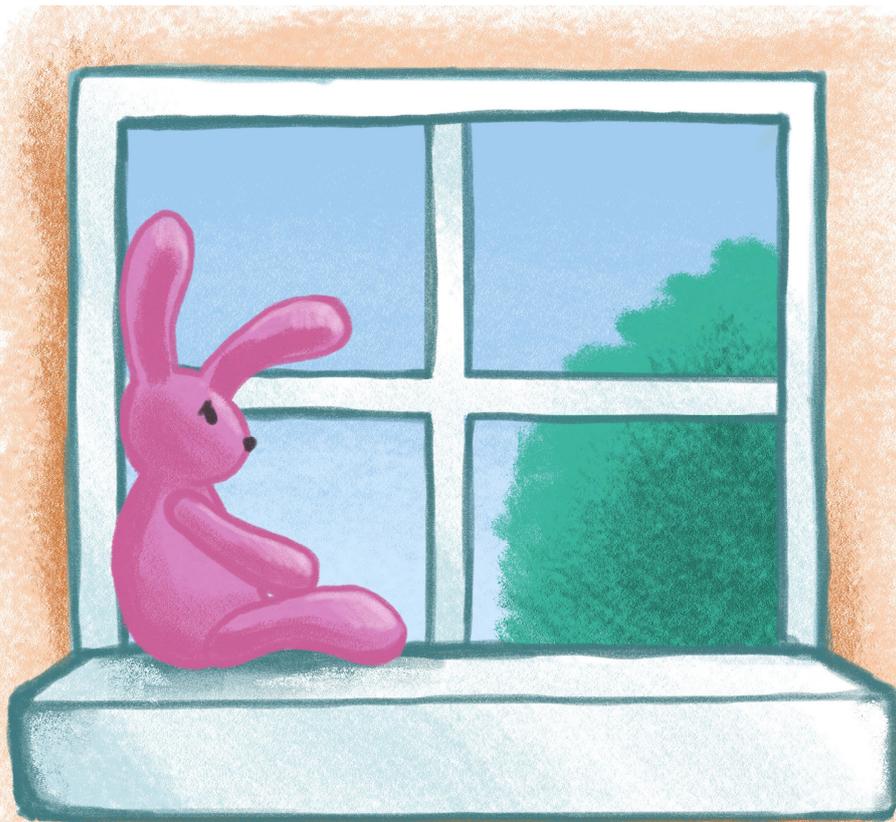
- If other professionals are to be involved following a concern, support the parents and carers through any resulting anxieties and keep them informed along the way, including if there are safeguarding issues.
- Keep record of any additional information that may have come out through the conversation.
- If the conversation was tricky and took an emotional toll on you, use the support systems in place and look after yourself (see next section)



## Reflective exercise 7

Put yourself in the shoes of the person you have been talking to and try to imagine what they might think and feel in relation to what you are saying. Does doing this mean you might want to adapt what you are saying or how you are communicating?

*Tips - pay attention to, any emotional responses the parent or carer may have to your concern. They might also be completely open to having a conversation with you and see you as a supportive presence who can work together with them on any issues. On the other hand, you might worry that they may view you as critical or think that you are blaming them and holding them responsible. With this in mind, it could be helpful to tell them that you understand and empathise with their experience of the problem at the very start of the conversation, before you launch into expressing your own view on it or offering advice.*



## Good nutrition and physical activity

The EYFS says that through adult modelling and guidance, children can be supported to learn how to look after their bodies, including healthy eating, exercise and managing personal needs independently.

Children learn best when they are healthy, safe and secure and it is part of your responsibility as set out in the EYFS, to promote good health to children and where meals are provided, ensure that they are healthy balanced and nutritious.

There is a growing body of evidence relating to diet and nutrition, which shows that healthy eating is not only good for our bodies but can also have a significant impact on our mood and mental wellbeing. Physical activity in children has also been shown to be particularly important for PSED and is vital for their all-round development enabling them to pursue happy, healthy and active lives. Gross and fine motor experiences develop gradually throughout early childhood, starting with sensory explorations and the development of a child's strength, co-ordination and positional awareness through tummy time, crawling and play movement with both objects and adults.

It is important for early years practitioners to understand the link between looking after our bodies and PSED and to ensure they are supporting children to learn about this and develop their skills in this area. Children of this age will mimic the food choices they see around them so you, as early years practitioners, are in a great position to help children make healthy choices and understand where food comes from.

## Reflective exercise 8

How might you take into account different cultures when considering healthy eating?

*Tips – when you are celebrating different cultural and religious occasions such as Diwali, Christmas and Hanukkah, talk to children and their families about what food they eat to celebrate and mark these occasions.*



## Looking after yourselves as practitioners

Caring for young children can be an emotionally demanding role. Those powerful and passionate feelings shown by two- to four-year-olds are also felt on some level by those who work with them, and this can lead to increased feelings of stress. This is before you add in all the other pressures and responsibilities you might be juggling in your work and personal life. It's normal when under pressure and feeling stressed to have thoughts such as, 'this is too much, I can't cope' or 'it's unfair, someone should be helping me.' These thoughts can lead us to feel irritable, anxious or angry, and our bodies let us know something is wrong through our physical sensations such as our hearts racing, faster breathing, becoming sweaty, or getting a headache. These physical sensations can lead us to behave in particular ways, for example shouting or arguing, eating more, drinking more or struggling with sleep. It's important to note that people experience stress differently.

Here are some things that might help you process stress and promote wellbeing:

**Reflective practice:** this is about taking the time to consider how each child is getting on within the context of the setting. This means reflecting on your own work as a practitioner. For example, how you engage with each other and parents and carers as well as just the children. There can be so much hustle and bustle in the early years and it can be helpful to take a step back and think about the bigger picture. There might be formal structures to facilitate this reflection or it might be over a cup of tea with peers.

**Reflective supervision:** this is the regular meeting between you with your manager/supervisor whether alone or in a group, where emotional reactions and responses to work with young children are considered without judgement. This is a formal set up and your setting will need to support you with this.

**Develop a 'listening culture':** it's up to everyone to help develop a 'listening culture' within a setting. You can do this verbally through open-ended questions, paraphrasing and leaving silences. Non-verbal techniques are through eye contact and open and relaxed body language. Listening is important because:

- It nurtures respectful and confident relationships between colleagues, and creates positive environments that staff want to work in.
- It may reveal inequalities. It helps practitioners to find out and understand the realities that others face and can help them to reflect on their own practice to make sure settings are fully inclusive.
- It contributes to quality improvement in early years settings and provides opportunities for ongoing evaluation and responsiveness.

## Reflective exercise 9

Think back to a time when you felt stressed and reflect on the thoughts, feelings, physical sensations and behaviours you experienced and displayed. Make a note of them. Next time you notice of them happening, it might be a clue that you need a break or some support. It's helpful to identify this early on rather than waiting till things get too much.

*Tips - our sense of wellbeing is made up of many interconnected factors from our family, friends, work, health and social contexts. It's important to keep this in mind if you start to notice that you're feeling stressed, and to give yourself a break, as you are juggling pressure from many different sources.*



## Risk and safeguarding

A child whose PSED is at risk needs us to respond quickly and effectively. Risk is held in a team, and as such this section of the unit highlights how to work with others around children who need support. When a child needs extra support with their PSED, we should consider whether other agencies have a part to play. Vulnerable families often need the input of more than one agency to improve outcomes for everyone in the family. All risk must be managed in the context of safeguarding according to the latest government guidance: *Working Together to Safeguard Children* (2018). This means:

- Protecting children from maltreatment
- Preventing impairment of children's health or development
- Ensuring the children grow up in circumstances consistent with the provision of safe and effective care
- Taking action to enable all children to have the best outcomes.

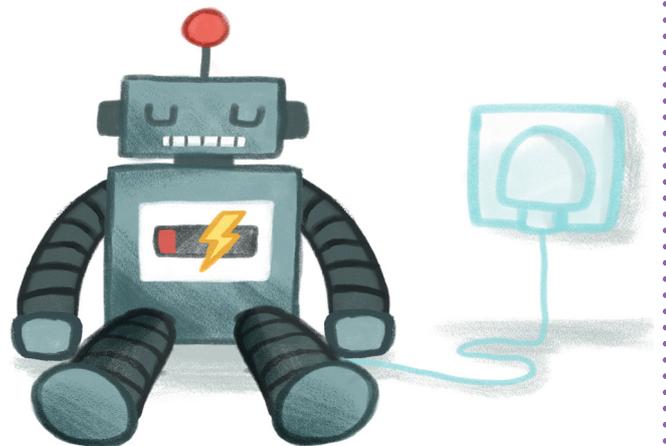
Why are risk assessments important?

- To prevent harm
- Ensure appropriate actions are taken and updated
- 

## Reflective exercise 10

It's important to be self-compassionate in difficult scenarios around safeguarding. Sometimes you can feel guilty if you are making a referral to children's social care for example. We are often harsher towards ourselves so if you are feeling critical towards yourself, imagine a colleague in the same situations asks for your advice. How would you support them? You might notice that you are kinder to them than you are towards yourself.

*Tips - give yourself a break and try to respond to yourself in the same way you would with a colleague.*



## 9. Resources

The following resources have been recommended by the Early Years in Mind team at the Anna Freud Centre:

[Early Years in Mind, the Anna Freud Centre](#)

– a free online network for early years practitioners.

[Development Matters](#) – non-statutory curriculum guidance for the EYFS (please see p42-58 for the section on PSED).

[What is attachment?](#) – a guide from the Anna Freud Centre for early years workers on using attachment ideas in their day-to-day practice.

[Attachment in early years setting](#) – video from Education Scotland on attachment as part of their Pre-Birth to Three multimedia resource

[Early years staff wellbeing](#) – a resource for managers and teams from the Anna Freud Centre

[How to write better observations in the early years](#) – tips from Family about observations and how they are one of the most powerful tools you have for understanding children in your care.

[Working in partnership with parents](#) – a round-up of PACEY's resources to help you confidently connect and engage with parents and carers to encourage and develop children's learning

[Running a group for babies or toddlers and their parents and carers](#) – a guide from the Anna Freud Centre for early years professionals

[Raising concerns about a child with parents and carers](#) – a guide for early years practitioners from the Anna Freud Centre

[Eat better, start better](#) – guidance from Action for Children on healthy eating in Early Years Settings

[What to feed young children](#) – NHS guidance on what to feed young children

[Example menus for early years settings in England](#) – Government guidelines to complement the activity in this unit

[Children who eat more fruit and veg have better mental health](#) – tips from research from the University of East Anglia Health and Social Care Partners

[UK Trauma Council](#) – provides information and training on trauma related to children and young people

[Safeguarding and child protection in nurseries](#) – everything you need to know provided by the National Day Nurseries Association

## 10. Additional references

- Story stems: Hillman, S., Hodges, J., Steele, M., Cirasola, A., Asquith, K. & Kaniuk J. (2020). Assessing changes in the internal worlds of early- and late-adopted children using the Story Stem Assessment Profile (SSAP). *Adoption & Fostering*, 44(4):377-396. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0308575920971132>
- Healthy eating: Adan, R., van der Beek, E. M., Buitelaar, J. K., Cryan, J. F., Hebebrand, J., Higgs, S., Schellekens, H., & Dickson, S. L. (2019). Nutritional psychiatry: towards improving mental health by what you eat. *European Neuropsychopharmacology: the journal of the European College of Neuropsychopharmacology*, 29(12), 1321–1332. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euroneuro.2019.10.011>

## About the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families

### Who we are

Anna Freud National Centre aims to support the mental health and wellbeing of children, young people and their families. The Centre runs the Early Years in Mind free online network for early years practitioners.

Our network provides easy to read and easy to use guidance on supporting the mental health of babies, young children and their families and supports staff with information and resources.

The network was developed by mental health experts and shares practical and clinical expertise, and advice on using attachment-informed practice.

Join our free [Early Years in Mind](#) learning network today.

Our Patron: Her Royal Highness The Princess of Wales

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