



World Awareness for Children in Trauma (WACIT)



Supporting Vulnerable Children in Schools



This document will guide you through the process of identifying potential problems a child maybe having, which in turn will give you the understanding to help them and make their life a happier one to live through enhancing their self-esteem, sense of value and contentment.

By Frances Sage



All children are individual, some are quiet - some are not, some get on well with others – some do not, and there are others who are far more active, who can't not sit still or show the same level of focus to tasks, who seem like they require the constant attention of those around them. Such children are often thought of as naughty, as children that are purposefully deciding to act in these ways, and whom could stop acting in these negative ways where ever they choose.

But for some children, this is not the case, as they cannot help or control their behaviour. As much as a child can be born with a disability that can be seen, there are children who can also be born with disabilities which are not visible. These hidden disabilities can effect a child's concentration, friendships, behaviour, emotions and far more.

Although children suffering these hidden disabilities cannot help their behaviour, they can be helped to control it. Though support and guidance, they can be shown how to recognize and adapt their behaviours. This process can take time, but with support they can make their energy work for them, thus changing them from a child who is always in trouble to a happier child who can work and socialize well with others.

Is there a child you are concerned about?

Through your involvement with children as a teacher you will have been faced with difficult situations, maybe of challenging behaviours either needing your direct involvement or requiring you to provide a greater amount of support for a child, so that they may function at the same level socially and emotionally as others around them?

A child with a normal level of emotional well-being has the ability to live a full and creative life with the flexibility to deal with ups and downs.

These children:

- *Understand themselves*
- *Know how to relate to others*
- *Are aware of what they are feeling and thinking*
- *Can take part in a group and settle differences in a positive way*

BUT, there are also children who cannot control their feelings, which creates barriers to building and maintaining friendships, and weakens their ability to learn.

These children may:

- *Be withdrawn or isolated*
- *Be disruptive and disturbing (i.e. shouting out)*
- *Be hyperactive or impulsive*
- *Have immature social skills or display challenging behaviors*
- *Find the skills needed for concentration, paying attention, and following rules hard to learn*
- *Find listening to and remembering instructions difficult*
- *Be unaware of others' feelings*
- *Be happy on their own and seem uncomfortable in the company of others*

As a teacher of a child displaying emotional and / or behavioural problems, you may feel helpless to support them or feel that their behaviour has in some way been caused through your interactions with them. You should not feel like this. There are children who just cannot function behaviourally or emotionally in the same way as those around them. They do not choose to act in the way they do. They cannot help it and neither is it your fault.

These children need to be understood and supported in a different way than others of the same age.

Profile Building

Introduction

it is important to look behind the problem behaviour a child is displaying and try to understand the reasons for it. You will be able to do this by building a profile of the child and their behaviour.

At all times

- Take written notes of any observation or conversation you think is important, including what you have seen, heard, and what your thoughts were at the time. These notes are very useful in building the child's profile and you will need them later.

NOTE: Any information written down about a child must be kept in a safe and secure place. Remember, this information is to help you discover the best way to support the child, it is not for any other purpose or anyone else to read.

remember

- Remain mindful of discovering that any of the following risk factors could be the core reason for the child's behavior.

Risk factors include:

- Parental substance abuse
- Domestic violence
- Parental criminality
- Physical abuse (i.e. hitting, kicking, taking belongings)
- Persistent or severe neglect
- Emotional abuse (i.e. name calling, insults, offensive remarks)
- Poverty related factors
- Homelessness
- Discrimination (i.e. exclusion from social groups, subject of malicious rumours)

All of the above are forms of abuse or trauma, in which the child is hurt by another person in a way that causes significant harm, and which may well have an effect on their development and well-being.

to ...

- Assess and make notes about the child's likes, strengths and potential. Whilst looking for the core problems will help you to build an effective support plan, by knowing the child's strengths you will be able to make these strategies personal to the child.
- Assess the child for their IQ (intelligence) age, their emotional age, as well as their actual age by comparing the behaviour you observe to that of others of the same age. If this does not fit, match the observed behaviours to children of other ages to find the 'best fit' group.

Profile Building

Step by step

Observe

Start by observing the child from a distance. Take your time. You should observe the child at different times of the day and week in different settings (such as the classroom, playground, and at meal times) which will enable you to create a detailed picture.

☒ *Ask yourself:*

- *Does the child have problems understanding the emotions of others?*
 - *Does the child struggle to control their own emotions?*
 - *Does the child show strong feelings of shame or anger?*
 - *Does the child have delayed or patchy emotional or social development? (i.e. seems to be acting younger than other children of the same age)?*
 - *How do they display their emotions and behaviour non-verbally?*
 - *Does the child know their behaviour is wrong?*
 - *Does the child have a reason for their behaviour?*
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Discuss

Once you feel that you have a good understanding of the key problems the child is experiencing or displaying, it is then time to speak to the child themselves.

Some children find it hard to talk about their feelings and emotions. In these situations, talking during play or informal discussions may help the child relax and talk openly about their problems with you.

The Golden Rules for discussions with children:

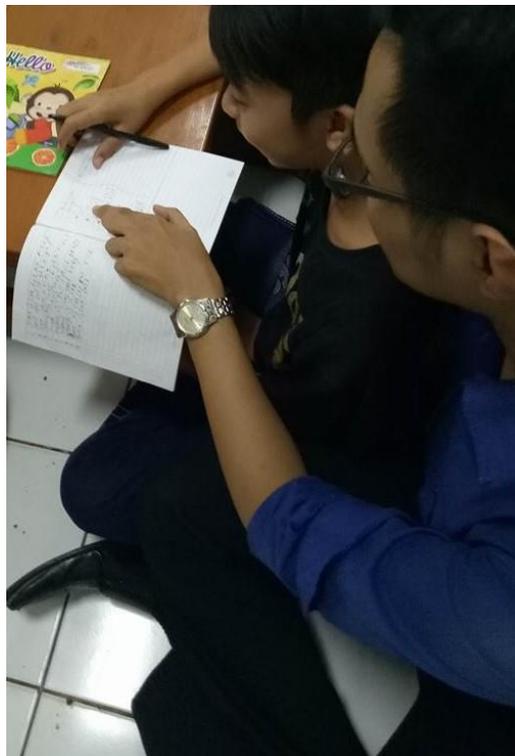
- ☐ * This should be done in a quiet place where no one can over hear your conversation, and should be away from distraction for yourself and the child.*
 - ☐ * When talking to a child in these situations, you must try to avoid using unnecessary or repetitive questions and also try to avoid using leading or closed questions. This style of questioning could either make the child withdraw and become frustrated or lead them to giving your answers to your questions which may not be accurate.*
 - ☐ * You should also be aware that the child may tell you about an abuse or trauma they have suffered. If this does happen, you must not promise the child confidentiality about the information they have given, and it must be explained that the information has to be shared but only with the appropriate people to help keep the child safe.*
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Discover

The third stage of profile building is to discuss your concerns with the other people involved in the child's life. This could be parents, extended family, other teachers and support staff, carers or community leaders.

Invite all the relevant people to one meeting together. This allows everyone to share their stories and to discuss their concerns surrounding the child's developmental / behavioural / emotional problems. By holding a meeting such as this you will be able to discover if the child is showing the same problems elsewhere (such as at home or in the community). It will also be possible to find out how others understand approach the problems (i.e. attitudes towards the child, and/or have used strategies to deal with the child's behaviour, which may have worked.

NOTE: It may be necessary for you to hold this meeting without certain people. For example, if you have discovered that the child is suffering parental neglect, then it may be advisable for the parent not to be at this first meeting until you decide an appropriate care plan.



Assess

Now is the time to piece together all of the information you have gathered.

It is important to break down your notes into different areas (such as emotions, behaviour, development) which in turn will help to identify which areas the child needs support, as well as areas which they show potential or excel in. When faced with a problem behaviour, it is easy to forget what a child is good at!

☐ *When completing this task, ask yourself:*

- *What is the child's attachment like to their carers?*
- *What is their family and social stability like?*
- *Where do their educational achievement and attainment levels stand?*
- *What are their friendships like, i.e. can they make and keep friends?*
- *What coping strategies do they use, are they effective, and how do they relate to other children of the same age?*
- *Are any of the risk factors still happening to or around them?*
- *Do you feel the child has the skills and resilience to deal with strong feelings and negative experiences (such as frustration, anger, failure or hurt)?*
- *Has the child used skills successfully in other problem situations in the past?*
- *Does the child have positive role models in their lives?*

NOTE: You may have found that the child has different views of what is happening to them to that of their parents or other carers. This does not mean the child is wrong or lying. Children view their social and emotional situations in a different way to adults. Therefore, do not discount what the child has said, because it does not fit with the rest of your findings. This is actually the most important information you have gathered, as it has come straight from the child themselves.

Understanding the child

The outcome of profile building will lead to the identification of the specific areas in which the child is having problems.

Now that you have this knowledge, it is important for you to understand how these problems are affecting and impacting on the child's life. Only then can you best understand them and form a support plan for the individual child.

Imagine you are the child that you have profiled:

You are trying as hard as you can to be good, you want to have friends, you want to be loved, you want to achieve your goals and have people feel proud of you. But, however hard you try, you feel like you are being put down, pushed away and are disliked because of the things you have said or done. Although you felt these were right for the situation, they seem to have upset or annoyed the others around you.

Imagine using all of your effort focusing on making others happy through the things you do and say, only to get it wrong every time and not understand why. It becomes frustrating and makes you feel very sad.



Children with emotional, behavioural or developmental problems can feel like this. As they think that situations going wrong around them are their fault, they start to believe that they must be a naturally bad person, as no matter how hard they try, others always end up upset or angry. Believing this, children are unlikely to seek help by themselves. In fact they may have given up trying to be good altogether, stopped caring about others and their feelings.

As a teacher caring for children, you must remember it is never too late to help. It is never too late to show that you care.



Setting the foundations for support

Behaviour and emotions are areas where we expect so much from children, but teach so little. For most children this is sufficient, but the child you have assessed is going to need your nurturing and guidance.

By providing the child with the stability of clearly laid out expectations and rules for their behaviour, while you are forming your longer term support plans, will help them to become more settled and responsive.

Make the child feel valued, at ease, content, happy, and useful. Take an interest in the child's interests, give them support when needed, encourage effort and independence, talk and listen to the child, and take account of what they say, enable the child to feel confident that they can make mistakes without criticism.

It is crucial that you help the child to raise their self-esteem and start to feel good about themselves, valued and socially worthwhile again. If children feel successful and competent, they will be more willing to try out new ideas such as the support and strategies you plan for them. You can do this by providing praise and encouragement, and by showing the child how much you value and respect their ideas. Give them time to talk, listen and respond to what they say, honor your commitments to them, give them choices and the responsibility in decision-making.

You should also clearly lay out what the consequences will be as a result of a particular behaviour. Use this to encourage positive behavior (such as helping another child or focusing on a task), as well as discourage negative behaviour (such as name calling). Promotion of positive behaviour is very important. These should be consistent and fair, which will encourage them to reflect on and to take responsibility for their own behaviour.

It is important to know that children benefit from three different ways of learning, often having one preferred style. So, if one does not seem to be working, maybe using another or merging two may work better for the child:

- Visual (seeing): Learning through looking, observing and using visual memory enables children to understand and behave effectively in the world around them (i.e. by copying the actions of others).
- Auditory (hearing): Learning through listening to and discriminating the sounds (such as conversation or tone of voice) a child hears around them, builds concepts, and helps them to express their needs and responses effectively.
- Kinesthetic (doing or moving): Children use active exploration to learn about their surroundings. This learning style needs careful planning and provision to enable children to move in a safe, yet inspiring environment.

Creating your support plan

The aim of your support plan should be to:

- Equip the child with the knowledge, skills and understanding they need to develop personally and socially by themselves
- Help them to develop confidence, responsibility, and make the most of their abilities
- Help them to develop good relationships, and to respect the differences between people

To help a child reach these goals, it is not necessary for you to create a plan which requires you to work directly with the child, just them and you. Although in these situations you do need to set time aside for you both to talk, say how you are feeling, share your thoughts and give each other feedback on the day or week you have had.

It may actually be more effective for you to select from the discreet strategies below, which can be used in the actual environments in which the child is experiencing difficulties.

This approach can prove beneficial, as many children with emotional and behavioural problems understand the theory of the correct ways to display behaviour and emotions, but are unable to apply this knowledge to the real situations they find themselves in.

You being there ready to help at the very moment the child needs the support, will be the greatest aid to helping their development.



NOTE: At all times keep focused on the identified problem which you are giving support for. It is easy to become distracted into wasting time, or talking about smaller side-issues or emerging new behaviours rather than working on the core problem. If you get drawn into reacting to these diversions, the child may feel better in that moment as the feelings of the original behaviour have been diluted, however, this will not help you support the child effectively and in fact may interfere with the support you are trying to give.

Support Strategies

Not all of the following may be relevant or helpful. Read though them all, and select the ones you feel will best help you with the child's behaviour you have identified that needs supporting.

Always remember the difference in the three age areas that one child can display (IQ, Emotions, Actual Age) and which you should have discovered through building the child's profile. This will allow you to communicate with the child at a level they can understand and respond effectively to.

Stay calm:

Calmness, predictability and certainty are key skills to model. Listening to the child's viewpoints and allowing them the right to reply is a powerful tool in defusing a situation. If you apologise when you are too hasty in a judgement, you give a significant message to children showing them that adults too can make mistakes. It takes more than one person to have an argument, so if you refuse to be drawn in and do not compete for the last word, you can quickly reduce the heat in a difficult situation. It is always preferable to reflect with the child after the crisis and when they are calm – but not leave it long enough, by which time they may have forgotten the incident.

Developing social and emotional skills:

Find ways to build a positive relationship. You could greet them in the playground at the beginning of the day or wave goodbye at the end. You could sit and eat with them at lunchtime, look for ways to acknowledge good behaviour, and praise / reward / celebrate achievement. You also need to remember to praise the *absence* of negative behaviours, which can be hard to notice, but really important for the child. When working with the child after an incident involving a problem behaviour, you could help them to reflect on how they can put the situation right, use stories and role-play to teach social skills, and encourage inclusion in social situations by planning the support you will give in advance.

Using rewards to encourage good behaviour:

- These can be anything from smiling or thumbs up to certificates, treats, or responsibilities.
- Rewards can also be given as verbal praise either in front of others (public praise), or in a one-to-one situation (private praise).
- Positive feedback and praise encourages and promotes good behaviour.
- Rewards do not need to be material, they can be small and symbolic, but mean a lot more to the child.
- For this reason, children can take part in co-selecting the appropriate and proportionate rewards with you.
- Other important adults need to be consistent in this plan, and neither ignore nor change the goals and rewards, as this would confuse the child.

- Rewards must be proportionate to the child's age and developmental capacity: a young child or child with learning disability, for example, may need an immediate kind of reward rather than wait for a week to add their daily rewards, which would be more appropriate for an older child.

Give choices, not ultimatums:

Giving the child choices will help them to see the link between their actions and the effect they have on other people. By doing so, they are encouraged to take responsibility for their own actions and are more likely to be learning or developing social and emotional skills. Offering choices means that the child does not feel backed into a corner, thus reducing the likelihood of conflict. This can be achieved by saying things like 'I've asked you to stop disturbing your friend, they are trying to think about their work. If you choose to continue, then you will have to move over near the window. It's your choice'.

Supporting children with concentration and behavioural difficulties:

Make instructions clear and simple, give short precise directions and allow the child time to process the information. Use visual prompts, make and keep a structured timetable of daily plans, give meaningful praise with reference to what the child is being praised for, and use rewards to encourage good behaviour. Be consistent and calm in applying rules and routines, give consequences immediately for poor behaviour, think ahead about situations that may become difficult and how they might be managed, and prepare the child for changes well in advance. For example, instead of 'sit over there and carry on from yesterday', you could say 'I would like you to sit in the space next to the window, open your book at the last piece of work, and complete the work on that page'. Watch the child and when they have completed your instructions (in this case started working in the right place) give verbal praise, acknowledging that they have done as required. You may say 'thank you for doing as I asked, that was wonderful, I look forward to reading your work'.

Giving instructions to children with attention problems:

Use the child's name to gain their attention, establish eye-contact and pause. Give your instruction simply and clearly, ask for them to repeat you instruction, so you can be sure they have heard and understood you, give the child a chance to do it. Thank them and repeat the instruction, if necessary. For example 'Morgan, would you please write one more paragraph and then show me your work' followed by 'Morgan, so what are you going to do for me?' then 'well-done, I look forward to seeing your work'.

Talking to a child who has emotional or behavioural problems:

When talking to the child about a behaviour or incident that has occurred which needs addressing, the most important thing to do is maintain a nurturing relationship, as children suffering these problems are likely to take any criticism as further rejection. Make sure you always show them you care, even when talking about negative behaviours. Remember '*It is important to look behind the problem behaviour a child is displaying and try to understand the reasons for it*'. You could start your conversation with 'I didn't like what you did, because (say why) I care for you and am here with you to help you work through it'.

'I' statements:

Using 'I' statements is a powerful way of showing how you feel about the child's behaviour without seeming to criticise, blame or threaten them. Keep calm and focused. In using 'I' statements you can describe the behaviour, say how it makes you feel, say why you feel like this, and say what you would like to happen. For example, instead of saying 'you're the worst child I have ever met', you could say 'when you are interrupting instead of listening, I feel upset because I can't explain what I need you to do properly. I need you to listen, so that you can understand and do a good job'.

Partial agreement:

This involves acknowledging the child's point of view, as well as repeating what it is you want them to do. For example, 'I understand that you want to sit next to your friend, but I need you to work with someone else on this', instead of 'no, you can't sit with your friend'.

Blocking an argument:

This strategy absorbs the argument instead of making it worse. Agree with the truth in a statement, for example: 'Yes, that's true. I was angry yesterday', or accept the other person's feelings or point of view by saying 'I can see you're angry. Maybe it does seem unfair to you'.

Dealing effectively with challenging behaviours:

Sometimes it can be useful to allow a situation to cool down or to defer an issue until later. This is helpful, as others around see that you are in control, it gives you time to understand each other's feelings and it is more likely that you can retain a positive relationship. If needed, you could use such phrases as: 'It looks like we can't sort this out now; let's fix a time to talk about it' or 'wait there please, I'll be with you in a minute. I just need to finish what I am doing'.

Effective problem-solving with the child:

Work on finding a solution to a problem together. It may involve you offering a choice: 'I would like you to However, I can see it is a problem for you. What about....?' or inviting a view from the child: 'What do you think we can do?' for you both to work on.

Support Network



Once you have decided on the most relevant strategies you are going to use, you should once more hold a meeting with the relevant people you spoke to in the discovery stage of the profile-building, to discuss the support you will be giving and how you mean to carry this out. This step is very important, as the child needs consistency throughout their life in all the environments they are in.

You should also be aware and make it clear that it will take time for this support to work and see the positive changes in the child. There will be times where the child will go back to their original behavior, but you should not give up. Nor should you stop after a short-term improvement, as the child needs time to embed the changes and to generate them in other situations too.

For anyone (child and adult alike), change is hard to get used to, but with persistence it is worth it in the end.



World Awareness for Children in Trauma (WACIT)

For further information on the activities of the **World Awareness for Children in Trauma (WACIT)** programme,
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