

# PACE

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## SUPPORTING CHILDREN WHEN BEHAVIOUR IS DRIVEN BY EMOTION

Some children have experienced trauma, loss, disrupted attachment or stress that feels too big.

When children feel unsafe, their behaviour is often driven by emotion rather than thoughtful choice. They need adults who stay calm and steady.

PACE helps children feel safe enough to learn and change.

### P - PLAYFULNESS

Many children who have experienced shame or rejection expect anger or criticism. A gentle tone and relaxed posture send a different message - you are safe with me.

Playfulness means bringing warmth and lightness to your tone and body language when it is appropriate.

Playfulness:

- Reduces defensiveness
- Lowers shame
- Keeps the relationship open during difficult moments

This might look like:

- A calm, friendly voice
- A soft facial expression
- Gentle humour when the child is settled enough
- Sitting alongside rather than opposite

### C - CURIOSITY

Curiosity means wondering about what is happening underneath the behaviour.

Challenging behaviour often communicates distress, fear or unmet need.

When adults move quickly to judgement, children feel misunderstood.

When adults stay curious, children feel seen.

Why it matters:

- Slows things down
- Reduces blame
- Encourages understanding

What it looks like:

- "I wonder if that felt unfair."
- Gentle questions
- Listening more than talking
- Understanding before giving consequences

### A - ACCEPTANCE

Acceptance means recognising and respecting the child's inner experience. Children need to know that their emotions make sense, even when their behaviour needs guidance. Acceptance does not mean agreeing with the behaviour. It means separating the child from what they have done.

Acceptance:

- Builds security
- Reduces shame
- Helps children feel valued

This might look like:

- Naming the feeling - "I can see you are really angry."
- Staying calm when emotions are strong
- Holding limits without rejecting the child
- Making it clear that the relationship remains safe

### E - EMPATHY

Empathy means showing that you understand how hard something feels.

When a child is overwhelmed, they borrow the calm of the adult. Your steady presence helps their body settle.

Why it matters:

- Builds trust
- Supports emotional regulation
- Helps children feel less alone

What it looks like:

- Steady voice
- "That sounds really hard."
- Staying emotionally present
- Helping the child move through feelings safely

### REMEMBER:

Children need both connection and boundaries.

Connection creates safety. Safety makes change possible.

Based on the PACE approach by Dr Dan Hughes

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