

## Behaviour as a Communicator of Emotion

Until our frontal cortex is formed and we can use language to explain how we feel and what we want, the only way we have of telling someone what is going on for us emotionally and what we need is through our behaviour. This is best understood with babies – when they are hungry, wet, excited or content they cry, gurgle with delight, giggle, wriggle, throw their arms up, shake, squirm, shout, look away and so on (**BEHAVIOUR**). The baby has no other means of getting their needs met or making contact with another which both are fundamental survival needs. If things have gone well enough, a dance of communication is ongoing between the adult and child (**ATTUNEMENT, VALIDATION, CONTAINING, CALMING and SOOTHING**). The mother/carer is closely attuned to the baby, getting information through her senses and observing the baby closely - reading the baby's pre-verbal ways of communicating. Through this process of observation and **IMAGINING** into the baby's world and then responding, the parent/carer supports the baby's emotional learning by externalizing what is going on for the baby and meeting them in this communication. S/he does this initially through little noises, touch and responding to the identified needs. Giving language to the infant's experience in the moment provides the repeated experience that forms the neuronal connections (white matter) within the fibrous corpus callosum. This forms the connection between experience, concepts and language that becomes cognitive capacity. As the carer matches language to the child's experience, the infant starts to make meaning of his /her experiences: **THINKING**.

If this has not happened sufficiently well for a child, they can only communicate what is going on for them through their behaviour. In order to build the parts of the brain that help us to be emotionally resilient and competent, adults need to work with the child in a very focused and repetitive way in order replicate the earlier missed relational experiences. The skills we use in Thrive to do this are the VRFs and Shining the Light on the behaviour.

**The following sequence is an example of beginning to support a child from Being through to Thinking:**

**1. OBSERVE THE BEHAVIOUR:** Alf has told Joe (again) that he can't play football at break with him and his friends'. Joe looks down and is silent.

**2. WHAT IS THE EMOTION BEING EXPRESSED THROUGH THE BEHAVIOUR?** Joe looking down and being silent – ask yourself 'how would I feel if I was excluded from others?' Ponder on it.

**3. USE THE VRFs:** "O dear ..." (attuning and containing in tone, stance and proximity to Joe) "they don't want to play with you again..... Your head is down .....you are not looking at anyone...". Very gently and quietly sitting beside child – (physical stance, proximity, breathing, touch) - "O dear O dear". **ATTUNEMENT, CONTAINMENT and CALMING** "Left out again ..... this is horrid for you ..... looks like your heart is hurting ..... on your own again .... Poor boy" **VALIDATING** the child's feelings.

**4. (later) SHINING THE LIGHT ON HIS DEFENSIVE BEHAVIOUR AND UNDERPINNING FEELING**

(how Joe has learnt to manage being left out and on his own – withdrawing from relationships. He spends much time on his own.)

“ When you are left out and others are unkind to you, you take yourself away – it looks like you shut down .... I imagine its just too much for a boy to manage..... I'm guessing it's better for you, when you have been hurt, to be on your own..... I've noticed that you are a boy who – when things go wrong – you prefer to be on your own..... I can see that is what works for you ....Poor boy – I am sorry you feel like that ..... I'm imagining it's a lonely life thinking no-one can help. .... I am just going to sit by you for a while .... (gently engaging with him through breathing, arm along his arm and so on)

**5. WONDERING IF** (maybe at another time): (lending your adult brain to develop thinking) “I am wondering if it would be helpful if I sat beside you (not as a question, but a statement).... when I see you on your own with your head down in the sort of way that says to me ‘Joe is not OK – he must be feeling all alone again .... things have gone wrong .... his heart is hurting and he is on his own with it. .... it must be like his whole body has closed up .... and gone a bit cold..... that he doesn't want people to see .... I wonder if that is what happens..... uummmm

...

Let's see if you can show me .... paint it/use the sand tray to show what it's like inside when you are upset... and all alone ....thinking no one can help..... I am going to sit beside you ... be with you.... It is not ok for a boy to have a hurting heart and be alone.....”

(Do the creative work that is closely focusing on the lonely behaviour, the way Joe has found of managing these unmanageable feelings. Use the VRFs and put words to the images, Joe's inner reality.)

**6. FINDING A NEW WAY OF MANAGING** (later and ongoing until change begins)

..... (when Joe is OK and not disregulating and you have a greater understanding of what it is like to be Joe when he withdraws - because he has shown you through working in the metaphor)

“I think I may have not seen you some of the times when you have felt alone - some times I have not had time to come over to you when I have seen you looking down and being on your own feeling hurt – sorry for that ..... but it looks like things got better more quickly when I have noticed that you are hurting and come over to be beside you just touching your arm ..... I've been thinking about that and wonder if – when you get that horrid sinking feeling in your chest, and go cold and think ‘no one will help me’ if you could come and find me/raise your hand??

When he manages this, this is the start of the new behaviour.

This is a moment of quiet celebration between the two of you because Joe has had a **feeling** as things have gone wrong ‘*I'm cold and my chest is sinking - I am lonely*’, has done some **thinking** about it ‘*ah yes, this is when I signal to Ms W that I am feeling alone with a too big feeling*’ and chosen a new **behaviour** ‘*I need to signal for help*’

This small scenario demonstrates core emotional development that will begin to change Joe's life for the better. He is learning he is not on his own in the world. He is beginning to trust that an adult will see what is going on for him and meet his need. Learning to trust an adult is life changing for this child as he comes to know the richness of human relationship.