

## Behaviour as language

How do we understand what our child's behaviour is trying to tell us?

How do we parent our child when we/I don't understand what they are saying?

Most of us base our parenting on how we were brought up in order to meet the emotional needs of our children and set boundaries for them. This works fine when parenting birth children, but with almost all adopted children the additional task of re-parenting is the challenge. If we are self-aware we are more likely to look for support for ourselves, and this becomes particularly important when we find ourselves feeling negative about our children.

The emotional gaps in our child's development make it hard for them to function in a world that has not given them the foundation tools. It also may make it hard for us as parents to understand their needs.

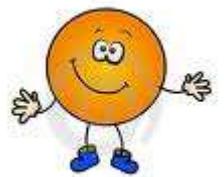
How can we as adoptive parents begin to create an attachment with our children and become attuned to their emotional state?

We have gained wisdom from Dan Hughes, who talks about PACE.

The **P** is for PLAYFULNESS

Children cannot feel the pain of shame when they are laughing. Humour helps to regulate strong emotion. Humour shows acceptance.

(See separate hand-out which talks about 'shame'.)



The **A** is for ACCEPTANCE

Our children need to feel their parent accepts their current emotions and stage of development. It is important your child does not feel condemned, criticized or rushed. It's OK if you are helping them with tasks that you might consider they should be old enough to do for themselves, for example, telling them every day to use the bathroom, helping them clean their teeth or to put their shoes on. It is a chance to re-parent and they can eventually move on. Responding to a furious child by commenting 'I can see you are really angry' tells them you accept their right to show that emotion – it is unconditional acceptance.

## The C is for CURIOSITY



A good way to demonstrate this can be by guessing. Instead of being blunt with your child or telling them you know how they feel better than they do, you could try saying, for example, "I wonder if you felt sad because it reminded you of..." This is non-confrontational and not intrusive. It also allows you to make mistakes. In this way we can begin to help our children make connections between how they feel and what they have experienced. Timing is important: sometimes when a child is angry you cannot talk to them and have to wait until they have calmed and are able to hear you.

## The E is for EMPATHY

This allows us to show our children that we validate what they are feeling and that their feelings are important to us. We may not like our children's feelings but they are real to them. For example when your child arrives home from school and they begin talking about how other children have hurt them or been mean to them, rather than asking what they had done to other children, it would be more helpful to your child to respond by using comments such as 'It seems like you've had a really hard day.'

Parents have found that using the PACE approach opens channels of communication and helps begin to give children the experience of someone hearing what it is like to be them. Once children feel heard, it becomes more possible for them to see themselves through your eyes. This means they are no longer stuck in the traumatized place of silently seeing themselves as bad and offers them an alternative to using a language of unhelpful and sometimes harmful behaviour to try and break the silence that no one understands.

There is no such thing as a quick fix when we are trying to get alongside our children's pain and confusion. This can often be very hard for parents, especially if you don't feel heard yourselves, or perhaps don't have a sense that others care about you. It helps to remember that no-one gets it right all the time and that it is OK to ask for support.

