

The Vital Relational Functions (VRFs)

There are some key ways to be in relationship with a child that contribute positively to the development of a significant relationship and to the development for the child of a healthy sense of self. These are known as the Vital Relational Functions (VRFs), sometimes called the Vital Adult – Child Regulating Functions (VA-CRFs). They are drawn from the teachings and findings of some leading commentators on emotional, psychological and child development (Sunderland¹ 2003/2006/2007; Kohut² 1984; Stern³ 1998).

These skills, when provided within a significant relationship with an adult, will provide a relational basis for a child's emotional, social and neurological development.

Attunement Validation Containment Soothing

Remember to demonstrate these essential tools as part of your general way of being with the child.

- **Attune: Be alert to how they are feeling:** demonstrate attuning to their emotional state showing you can catch how they feel through facial expression, body language, gesture, noises: ah, oo, oh, mm, eek etc. **Demonstrate that you understand the intensity, pitch, pace, volume, expansiveness or spatial experience of the child's emotional state.**
- **Validate: Be alert to the child's experience: validate their perspective/experience/feeling.** This needs to happen before you move to help them regulate it. This is the beginning of being able to think about feelings. Avoid reassuring, persuading otherwise, contradicting.
- **Containment:** Be alert to how they are feeling: demonstrate containment. Show that you catch and understand the pitch/intensity/quality of their feeling or mood and that you can bear it. Make their deep distress, raging anger or painful sorrow a survivable experience. **Catch it, match it and digest it by thinking about it and offering it back, named, in small digestible pieces.** This will make bearable the strongest emotional state. This shared experience builds trust for the child: in you, in adults and in the world. **Be alert to how they are feeling: demonstrate emotional regulation by soothing and calming their distress.** Catch the emotion, match it and help the child to regulate the feeling up or down. They need to experience being calmed before they can do it for themselves. You will be communicating the capacity to regulate emotional states by modelling how to do it.

Develop a positive significant relationship

- **Set the emotional tone** of your engagement with the child – avoid being pulled into a feeling by the child's state. Know how you want your engagement to be. Consciously act to develop that.
- **Separate out the behaviour the child uses from the child him/herself** in your response: continue committed contact with the child even as you stop the unacceptable behaviour.

Adopt a helpful attitude: PLACE

Your attitude to the child or young person is key. Dan Hughes⁴ spells out the key features that can help children grow a healthy sense of themselves. He suggests these 5 qualities make up the best background atmosphere for emotional learning – PLACE:

P=Playful

L=Loving

A=Accepting

C=Curious

E=Empathic

Check for yourself: Which of these is hardest for you? Does it change according to the child? Or to the level of support you experience?

Bringing a 'Detective Columbo' stance can be very helpful: musing aloud about what might be going on for the child, showing real interest and curiosity about their reaction or behaviour- seeing it as unique to them and something you really want to understand or find out about.

SOURCES

¹Sunderland, M. (2006) What every parent needs to know Dorling Kindersley

²Kohut, H. (1971) The Analysis of the Self International Universities Press; (1977) The Restoration of the Self NY International Universities Press

³Stern, D. (1998) The Interpersonal World of the Infant Basic Books

⁴Hughes D. A. (1998: 92) Building the Bonds of Attachment- awakening love in deeply disturbed children pub Aronson New Jersey; London