

The Thrive Approach: who is it for?

The Thrive Approach is for any adult who works with children and young people or any adult who has a child and is interested to help them get the best out of life.

The Thrive Approach clearly describes the emotional and social learning that happens in the child's most significant relationships. This social learning happens in a developmental way. The first three years are key to the foundation of emotional regulation. The good news is that changes can happen after that with concerted, repeated attention within a significant relationship. Emotional and social learning never stops for us as humans. We are emotional, social animals born in relationship and seeking relationship throughout our lives. Thrive shows you how to use your relationship with the child to contribute to the healthiest development that is possible. This is true at any time for any child at any point in their development. It is always possible to fill any learning gaps if you know what to do and how to do it. Thrive shows you how.

How is emotional regulation developed?

The experiences that are shared between the caring adult(s) and the child (first as a baby, then infant, then toddler) literally shape the brain. The repetition develops a network of neurological pathways in the brain that make the links between the brain stem (that controls bodily reactions to stress), the limbic system (that is the emotional centre of the brain) and the frontal cortex (the thinking brain) to give the child access to three levels of emotional regulation: physical, relational/emotional and cognitive.

A baby is completely dependent on an attentive, responsive care-giver to mediate their experience of the world. Strong sensations (bright lights, sudden loud noises, sharp strong touch, harsh words, hostile looks, foul tastes, disgusting smells, hunger, thirst, invasive experiences) are experienced as survival threats and the child's instinctual brain circuitry causes the body to react to them in the best ways available: some version of flight, fight or freeze. This might be limited to crying, screaming, going red in the face and sweating for a little baby or running away with arms flailing for a toddler or dropping to the ground sobbing for a three year old or literally freezing unable to react. These are called 'discharge' behaviours - they are reflex ways the body attempts to discharge the energy that has built up in the child.

So the way the care-giver responds to these strong experiences in these early years shapes the baby's experience of the world on a continuum that runs from gorgeously merged, trustworthy, enjoyable and wondrous to, at worst, inattentive, harsh, hostile or punitive. These repeated experiences shape, in turn, the neurological pathways that make up the child's stress management system. The way the child is helped by the care-giver in these early years (<0-3/4) to manage these emotional storms is key. Any strong sensations that are received as a survival threat by the baby's sense receptors, trigger the discharge behaviours. Over time these reactions become patterns of behaviour. So the way the adult responds to the child's emotional storms defines the child's options for behaviour. Until secure access to thinking about emotions (and thinking whilst in the experience of a strong emotion) is in place, the child may find herself driven by reflex actions or reactivity, with fight, flight or freeze.

So Thrive helps you to know what to do and how to respond so that the child develops other options for their behaviour - other ways to manage those strong emotions. In particular it gives the child ways to express safely those strong emotions so that they can get on with others and get on with learning.

Why might children need the Thrive Approach?

Thrive can be helpful then for:

- All children- as a guide to the relational and life experiences that will contribute positively to enhancing their emotional and social skills, emotional well-being and emotional literacy
- Children whose early life experiences have not equipped them to manage their strong sensations and emotions well. These children might be under-achieving, or causing concern because of their behaviour or seem to be at risk because they are just not managing life well
- Children who have had 'good enough' experiences in their early life but who suddenly experience hurtful, frightening, shocking or strange life events. For example, a sibling might get a life-limiting disease, or a parent may have work in another country for an extended period, or the child might have a serious accident, or their sister might be assaulted, or a change in family circumstances might result in neglect or abandonment. A bereavement, a redundancy, a depressive episode in a close relative, the death of a grandparent: life happens and when these life events happens we all return to our most basic needs.

So, most of us, if not all of us, would benefit from the Thrive Approach to help us through those times.