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Palace Fields Primary School

# An A to Z of a Nurturing Environment

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# An A to Z of a Nurturing Environment

Inspired by the "Resilience Alphabet" -developed by Martha Simpson and Philip Wong, this A to Z of principles and values I think are an important tool to a nurturing school environment.
Supporting and safeguarding our children's social and emotional development will be even more important as we help them return to school during the current coronavirus pandemic.

**A is for Attunement**
Attunement is fundamental to creating a sense of connection and being in sync with a child. Most children with healthy attachment histories have learnt about themselves, others and the world through the manner in which they and a caregiver initiate and respond to cues. When children have lacked this experience on a consistent basis, we need to actively create attuned cycles. These begin with attentiveness, where we actively watch, look interested and wonder aloud about the child's actions. We need to encourage invitations for interaction through active listening, pauses and descriptive commenting. Finally, we must respond to the child's invitations using verbal acknowledgement and positive body language. Any game or conversation which allows for waiting and taking turns will promote these cycles of "serve and return" and open the door to richer interactions which involve collaboration and problem-solving.

**B is for Belonging**
Cultivating a sense of belonging is crucial not just for those children who have encountered adverse experiences, but also those from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds and of course those with additional and complex needs. School needs to be a place where they feel included and valued. A good starting point can be how we greet them in the morning. Some may benefit from dedicated time to talk about the night before, chat about their interests and hear how happy we are to see them. Capitalising on opportunities to praise their views and celebrate their achievements can help to show that everyone in the class has positive qualities and special talents. Creating situations where they can make choices, tell personal stories and

demonstrate their skills and interests will also help to strengthen their sense of identity and allow the peer group to relate to each other in a deeper and more meaningful way.

**C is for Co-Regulation**

Young children learn to regulate their emotions through the sensitive and consistent response of a caregiver. However, some of the children in your class will have higher levels of reactivity to stress and have developed physical methods of self-soothing which do not easily fit into the established rules and routines of school. What they need is for members of staff to act as co-regulators. They need us to stay calm, so that we do not trigger their fight/flight/freeze response when they encounter a stressor. They need us to connect with their feelings and put their inner experience into words before we can expect them to reflect upon and change a behaviour. This is the "Name it to Tame it" principle. They also need us to model and support them in applying regulation techniques, as co-regulation is the pre-requisite for later self-regulation.

**D is for Developmental**

Looking beyond chronological age and considering a child's developmental stage is an essential component of a nurturing approach. Adverse experiences disrupt the normal achievement of developmental milestones. An 8 year old child may have the emotional age of a 4 year old, due to their "downstairs brain" being far more developed and active than their "upstairs brain". We have to be realistic about how well they can inhibit their impulses, plan their response, reflect on situations and relate to others; particularly if they have lacked consistent experience of a co-regulating adult for learning these skills. Adapting our expectations not only allows us to take a more compassionate approach, but also places more emphasis on modelling and teaching rather than setting unrealistic expectations and punishing failure.

**E is for Empathy**

Children who have difficulty understanding and managing powerful emotions do not simply need our sympathy; our ability to "feel for them". What they really need is for us to walk in their shoes, connect to what is going on inside them and ultimately help to regulate their response. We can use phrases such as "*I know this is really hard for you*", "*I don't think of you as a bad person, but I know you might feel that way*" and "*I understand that you're angry with me for saying that*". If we

do not take time to "feel with them", we run the risk of the child burying their feelings or becoming overwhelmed by toxic shame. We must also take opportunities to connect with the child's emotional experience during positive situations, such as "*When I see that big smile on your face, I can tell that you're proud of yourself and it makes me so happy*".

**F is for Flow**

While a nurturing approach aims to provide the optimal conditions for learning and achieving, we need to think beyond academic experiences. Opportunities to achieve "flow" – the state in which a child is completely absorbed and engaged in a rewarding activity – have clear benefits for their well-being. If the activity is sufficiently motivating and challenging, it can create a great sense of achievement and may help to diminish the impact of more difficult times during the day or week. Much like a sensory diet, we can schedule flow activities into the child's timetable based on their personal interests. These might include jigsaws and puzzles, building models, writing a story, engaging in sports, researching a specialist topic on the internet, etc.

**G is for Guide**

When it comes to learning, some children may find it hard to get started to a task without initial modelling and prompting. This may involve talking them through the first question in a step-by-step manner, providing a worked-out example or emphasising the beginning and end of the task using a visual checklist. When children's brains are flooded with emotions, they will lack the capacity to plan and organise their response to a learning task. We can act as a scaffold by helping them to set clear goals, providing practical resources such as word banks or hundred squares as working memory shortcuts and demonstrating how to manage their belongings with checklists or Social Stories. This level of guidance can contain the child's emotions and enhance their readiness for learning.

**H is for Humour**

Some of the children in your class may be constantly looking out for danger and interpret neutral facial expressions as signs of anger or disappointment. They need to know that we like them and want to have fun with them. We need to be truly expressive with both our verbal and non-verbal communication. Our eyes, our smiles and the modulation of our voices can be

used to create a sense of playfulness. We can create opportunities to laugh together by telling jokes and stories, being silly and reacting in an animated way to the child's own attempt at humour. We must not discount the power of games, which are typically designed for younger children – for those students whose developmental age is younger than their chronological age, these may be the best way of calming their nervous systems and leaving a positive imprint on their memory of the day.

**I is for Integrated**

It's important that we recognise all the different parts of a child and help them to see themselves as integrated beings; particularly as some may be susceptible to shame over their behaviour and perceive themselves to be "bad" and deserving of punishment. We can talk about or draw their different parts – happy, proud, hard-working, angry, sad – as a means of challenging all-or-nothing thinking and gradually developing their sense of control over which parts they can actively tap into or cope with. Integrated can also apply to the team of staff around the child. There should be opportunities for reflection and supervision, which include class teachers, key adults, the school SENCo, pastoral coordinator, relevant members of senior leadership, etc. We also integrate the views of the young person, parents, caregivers and external agencies and professionals.

**J is for Joy**

Play is one of the most joyful experiences for any child – a chance to engage in intrinsically motivating and pleasurable activities. It provides space for creativity, self-expression, social engagement and language associated with thoughts, feelings and actions. Play may be the first thing a child needs upon arrival to school, in order to cope with the stress of the transition. Scheduling playtime throughout the day can help to regulate emotions and allow recovery from challenging and draining learning tasks. The use of a toy, puppet or imaginary scenario can provide safe and predictable methods of interaction and enable teaching about abstract or sensitive subjects. Some children may play happily on their own or alongside others, but need active modelling and social coaching ("*I love how you waited for your turn. You were so patient*") to help them initiate and sustain playful interactions with peers.

**K is for Keep in Mind**

There can be understandable anxiety or frustration when a child does not feel that a preferred adult in school is keeping them in mind; particularly if this has been an inconsistent experience elsewhere. We can be mindful of the need to communicate that we are still thinking of the child even when we are not around. This can involve explicit phrases such as "*I haven't forgotten about you*", "*I'll be back to check on you in two minutes*" and "*When I saw that on TV, it reminded me of you*". Transitional objects, such as a keyring, photograph or small teddy bear, can be a concrete method of instilling this principle. Older children may like the concept of an invisible piece of string, which ties them to a key adult during a separation, while younger children may enjoy games such as peek-a-boo and hide-and-seek as a means of strengthening their understanding permanency.

**L is for Language**

How we speak with and about the young people in our classrooms will contribute significantly to their overall participation and well-being. Descriptive commenting during play can provide a language model and expand vocabulary. Short, simplified and literal language may enhance the child's understanding of instructions and directions. When we wonder out loud about the emotions evoked by a situation, this can help them to recognise and process these feelings; enabling them to use language rather than actions to express their feelings at a later stage. Reassuring messages and affirmations should also be part of the everyday language of a nurturing environment – "*You are safe here*"; "*All of your feelings are ok*"; "*You are trying really hard*"; "*You're getting better at this*".

**M is for Modify**

Differentiation is part and parcel of any classroom, but it is particularly necessary for those children and young people who require a more nurturing approach. We can help to reduce executive functioning demands by breaking down tasks into smaller steps, shortening and repeating information and using visual cues and concrete materials to help demonstrate a concept or skill. Language plays a key role here as well, as we can use metacognitive statements to scaffold the child's thinking. For example, we can connect with prior experience by asking "*When/Where did you see something like this*

*before?*" and examine their methodology by asking "*How did you get that answer?*" or "*What would happen if you did this?*". We also need to consider how motivating the task is. Incorporating pictures or references to the young person's personal interests may make the task more meaningful and help to make concepts more tangible.

**N is for Nearby**

Some of the children we work with will have had times in their lives when their needs were not consistently met or the attention they received was erratic; the balance of "serve and return" was thrown off for one reason or another. They will therefore have lacked the experience of healthy dependency, which is a prerequisite for the later development of independence. Some may need us to get alongside them more often - as a means of keeping them in mind and co-regulating their emotions - and be more explicit with when we will return following a temporary separation. Others who are sensitive to our proximity will benefit from indirect methods of instruction and feedback and tasks, which allow them to start or finish without individual support. The same principle applies to relationships with peers. Some children may need us to model how to contribute to group activities, while others may need benefit from specific and structured responsibilities, which help to reduce the likelihood of misinterpretations or conflicts with their classmates.

**O is for Optimism**

One of the fundamental tenets of a nurturing approach is creating positive experiences. We need to recognise and promote the child strengths as often as possible. Depending on what is comfortable for them, this can be through specific compliments or non-verbal gestures such as a thumbs-up. There should always be more of a focus on effort (e.g. "*You're taking your time and looking really carefully at each question*") as opposed to the quantity of work completed. Concrete and practical evidence of a child's success can be collected in a scrapbook or special box. This can include photographs, stickers, certificates and post-it notes from staff. Such evidence is particularly important for those tough days, where negativity or low confidence can be buffered by references to better times and reminding the child of how they coped with challenging tasks in the past.

**P is for Predictable**

A nurturing environment is one that has high levels of structure and routine. A visual timetable may be on the wall or above the whiteboard, but how often do we actively refer to it when preparing children for changes in activity or routine? Some may need an explicit verbal reminder or countdown in order to anticipate the change. Others may need a more individualised schedule, which they can check with an adult. Clear labelling of areas for specific resources and equipment will help to create a sense of order. When their normal routine has to be postponed due to a visitor coming to the classroom or a substitute teacher taking the class, we need to communicate the reasons for the change in advance and explain or show what will be different. Pupils moving to unfamiliar secondary settings may benefit from a map of the school that identifies key areas or a virtual tour that they can view in their own time.

**Q is for Question**

Maintaining a curious mindset, especially in the face of concerning behaviour, underpins the principle that a child's actions are communicating an underlying need. Instead of thinking "*What is wrong with you?*", we can think "*What happened to you?*". Our ability to reframe a child's presentation is the key to prioritising relational practice over behaviour management. Attention-seeking becomes connection-seeking. Manipulative behaviour becomes a survival habit that kept the child safe elsewhere. A lack of respect for the authority of staff becomes understandable mistrust of adults based on prior experience. By asking questions and actively looking beyond behaviour, we can identify unmet needs and consider how we can provide a more nurturing response.

**R is for Repair**

All relationships have tricky moments where the cycle of attunement breaks down and a rupture occurs. Learning that ruptures can be repaired is an essential component of healthy development. However, there will be children in your class who perceive a falling out as a permanent break in the relationship; one which cannot be fixed and which you have no desire to fix. Our repair of ruptures will involve active listening and validation of the child's emotions. When the child is no longer significantly dysregulated, we can offer an alternative perspective using calm and simple language, acknowledge and

apologise for our contribution to the rupture and discuss a different way of handling the situation in the future. We will also need to model repair for peer relationships. This might involve an individual or group discussion, role-play or a visual Social Story, which considers a range of possible intentions and healthy ways of moving on from conflict.

**S is for Safety**

When the areas of the brain devoted to survival have been regularly activated, a child may have lacked opportunities to exercise their "upstairs brain"; thus, they have repeatedly responded to a state of fear at the expense of exploration, thinking and reflecting. Within a nurturing environment, it is vital to establish safe spaces (or "nooks") where they can go to feel calm and contained. This might be a sensory room that all children can access or a more personalised space, which can be named and decorated by the child. There should be an agreed signal or method of communication for when this space needs to be used and discussion with the child about the type of activities or resources available. In addition to visual structure and routine, we also need to identify safe adults in school. Some children may need a dedicated member of staff who can greet them on arrival to school and check in with them frequently during play and work. Others may simply need the security of a trusted and available adult who they can go to during less structured times of the day.

**T is for Transition**

For those children who experience emotionally-based school avoidance, they may need a gradual approach to attendance where they meet a key adult at the beginning of the day and engage in a structured and calming activity. As school breaks and longer holidays approach, marking off dates on a calendar can help to count down to the transition and temper past feelings of loss and change. When going on school trips or participating in unfamiliar whole-school events, a visual approach (such as pictures of the setting and the adults who will be there, an advanced copy of the schedule of activities, etc) can help them to know what to expect. We should be mindful of the sensory overload of dress-down days, DVD parties and play rehearsals – some children may need more breaks and opportunities to "escape" these situations with a trusted adult when necessary.

**U is for Understand**
When a young person has experienced difficult relationships and transitions, it's important that we show our understanding of their thoughts and feelings. This is not to say that we tolerate inappropriate behaviour – but If we speak or act in a way which judges the young person's inner experience, this can result in shame which is a barrier to attachment and social engagement. "*When you refused to sit in your seat, you were actually letting me know that you were sacred*" is an example of how we can accept the emotions underpinning a behaviour. Acceptance and empathy act as a shield against shame.

**V is for Voice**
How do we give young people opportunities to express their thoughts and feelings? Some may like the chance to talk at designated meet-and-greets with a trusted adult, while others may prefer to show us their views through writing or drawing. How do we give them the experience of choice and control, when these factors may have been missing at an earlier time in their life? Instead of arranging generic relaxation activities, we could ask them for their preferences and find out what works for them and why. When drawing up plans to support their needs, how do we incorporate their lived experience? Besides the bullet points about what, when and how we will do things for the child, we also need sections on what they do well, what they want us to know and how they can help themselves when playing or working independently.

**W is for Wiggle**
An important aspect of emotional regulation is physical activity. Throughout the school day, we can schedule "brain breaks" and experiences, which activate the vestibular and proprioceptive sensory systems. These can be opportunities for walking, dancing or drumming to musical rhythm, star jumps, jogging-on-the-spot, chair and wall push-ups and even short jobs or responsibilities that involve some type of "heavy work". Practical learning tasks, which allow for manipulation of concrete objects and different textures can also provide much-needed stimulation for those children who are sensitive to movement.

**X is for fleXible** (yes this is a bit of a cheat for "X"!)Given the powerful impact of stressors both inside and outside school, a young person might have a "good day" on Tuesday but act very differently on Wednesday. They may respond well to a

particular strategy or approach on one occasion and then find it less comforting or regulating at a different time. We need to be flexible in how we relate to the young person. If they struggle to follow a rule, we have to consider if they are ready to follow the rule at a given time. This is the drawback with zero tolerance approaches as they too often expect consistent and perpetual adherence to rules; when some children are biologically disadvantaged as a result of previous toxic stress. On some days, we may have to throw our plans out the window and focus on instilling safety and supporting emotional regulation.

**Y is for You**

It may seem as if some problems are more within the remit of CAMHS or other professional services. But with long waiting lists and short-term models of service delivery, they can't provide the kind of day-to-day support found within a nurturing school setting. You are the intervention. You are the change. Your relationship with a young person is more powerful than any individual strategy, resource or therapy session. How you greet them, look at them, listen to them, speak to them and support them will create opportunities for development and growth. Warm and positive conversations throughout the day with staff in the reception area, canteen, playground and lunch-time clubs can also provide powerful doses of therapeutic interaction.

**Z is for Zen**

This final letter is all about relaxation. This might include scheduling time for belly breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, calming music, yoga poses or visualisation techniques. School staff also need to pro-actively reduce stress so that the chances of a fight/flight/freeze response are minimised. This requires us to think preventatively and lean on some of the other letters in the A to Z. During occasions where the child becomes dysregulated, our own response needs to be Zen – simplifying our language, maintaining a calm tone of voice, keeping our distance and slowing our movements can help to prevent us from being perceived as a threat and causing a spike in stress.