



Relationship Policy

Reviewed: 20.09.2023 | Next date for review: 01.09.2024

Rationale

At Running Deer, we recognise that people from all backgrounds access the school, both as staff members and as students, and we believe that at our school there are 'No Outsiders' because we are all different and we are all equal. We draw strength from our diversity as a group, and use this to ensure the best possible outcomes for all, recognising that people will have different strengths and different needs. This policy sets out how we will nurture the interactions and relationships between us all.

We are committed to a Trauma and Mental Health Informed ethos that maximises the protective factors of school, by creating an environment of safety that has strong, positive and supportive relationships between everyone at its heart. This requires staff and adults, who support the young people at Running Deer, to understand the impact of emotionally regulated and available adults, who can provide calmness and containment of young people, their parents/carers, or each other.

All staff are responsible for adhering to positive practise that promotes a student's ability to engage in, and access, their learning. This is based on the understanding that students best achieve, develop, and reach, their true potential when staff are fair, flexible, trustworthy, respectful, and model positive relationships. It is the expectation at Running Deer that all staff, regardless of role, act in this way.

Visions and Values

In the September of 2023 staff undertook a significant piece of work to reflect on our core values as school staff. We looked at our motivations for doing the job, both external and intrinsic, and what we as staff got from the job. We sought to recognize that the reasons we work at Running Deer have as much to do with our sense of well-being as it is to support the student's well-being. The outcome of this was the mantra PARK; Purposeful, Attentive, Respectful, Kind. We felt that these words summed up how we needed to be with ourselves, other staff, and students.

We committed that we would also be:

Purposeful- In our actions, always willing and able to account for what and why we are doing something.

Attentive- To the students and their needs, to our colleagues, and to the school. Taking personal responsibility for what we see and acting upon it.

Respectful- To treat everyone as we'd want to be treated. to remember that we are caring for someone's loved one. We will apply the same level of care to others as we'd expect to be shown to our own loved ones.

Kind – we know that at Running Deer there can be times that challenge, physically and emotionally. We know that sometimes we need to have challenging and difficult conversations. We should also approach each other with kindness.

Application and Practice

"The ability to form meaningful relationships is fundamental to mental health and happiness. It's the quality of contact we have with other people that is arguably the most important determining factor in our quality of life. We can only truly develop ourselves through relationships with others" (TISUK 2019)

"Just one emotionally available adult in the school, community or home can make all the difference" (TISUK 2019)

Therefore, our school is invested in supporting the very best relational health between:

- Parent(s)/carer and child
- Student and student
- Student and school staff
- Parent/carer and school staff
- School staff
- School staff and senior leaders
- Students, parent(s)/carer and other agencies
- School staff and external agencies

Our community adopts relational and educational practices which protect, relate, regulate and reflect as follows:

Protect:

- Our school aims to increase 'safety cues' in all aspects of the school day for our students and each other, for example through designed and timetabled interventions that create opportunities for the emotionally available adults to be alongside our students across the school day. These include, but are not limited to, sandplay and art therapy.
- An 'open door' policy for informal discussions with parents/ carers.
- We aim to increase our staff's understanding in nurturing attachments and the PACE approach (Hughes, 2015). This means that our students are met with a warm emphatic, playful and curious staff team that will enable them to move out of flight/fight or freeze and into relationship and trust. We are committed to regular staff training and development.
- As a school we ensure that interactions with students, their families/carers, other agencies and each other, are socially engaging and not socially defensive.
- Punitive approaches are not being used under any circumstances in response to students' behaviour, challenging or otherwise, such as the use of harsh voices, shouting, isolating, secluding, denying curriculum access, withholding food, and shame-evoking behaviours (which are proven to be damaging psychologically and neurologically). Fixed term exclusions will only be used in extreme circumstances where other options have been exhausted (see Exclusions Policy).
- All members of our school aim to interactively reflect and repair occasions when they themselves move into defensiveness.
- Our school staff adopt ways of developing relationships and understanding of our students, their families/carers, and each other. Holding at the heart of our approach is relationship as

the key to personal, social and emotional development (as well as academic achievement) for our students.

- Our school staff adjust their expectations for our students, their families and carers, in accordance with their developmental capabilities and experience of traumatic stress. This sometimes involves removing vulnerable and traumatised students in a kind and non-judgemental way from situations they are not managing well. As a staffing team we are also able to do this for each other.
- The use of a robust debrief system. De-briefing opportunities are available in several ways for staff and students to assist them in managing situations that have caused or may cause distress, we look to develop this through inter/multiagency links:
 - This may be done as a restorative conversation, involving visual prompts, for example to enable students to understand what has happened and why, who this has affected and how, and to help them to reflect then to begin to repair.
 - This may be a meeting between the student, parents/carers, and pastoral staff, to debrief about the incident, considering what happened and why, who was affected and how, and to consider ways to move forward, with supported plans in place.
 - This may be an after-school discussion, for example as a team of staff, to consider what happened, why, and look at ways forward
 - This may be a formal de-brief meeting with involved staff to look at protocols and procedures in more detail
 - An incident debriefing meeting assists people, particularly staff and students, to overcome the effects of an incident by:
 - Talking about what happened
 - Expressing how they feel as a result of the incident
 - Identifying any individual stress reactions (i.e. physical, emotional, thinking, behavioural)
 - Identifying some ways of dealing with stress reactions,
 - If appropriate, independent referrals can then be made to outside agencies and professionals (such as Education Support Partnership, which offers individual support, information and counselling to staff 7 days a week/ 24 hours a day).

Relate:

- A whole school approach and commitment to enable our students, families/carers and staff to see themselves, their relationships and the world positively, rather than through the lens of threat, danger or self-blame.
 - This will be through:
 - developing trusting relationships between all parties,
 - open communication,
 - positive feedback,
 - training for staff to act as emotionally available adults for our student,
 - supporting families to access support and outside agencies,
 - implementing therapeutic interventions for students,
 - the clinical supervision provided for staff,
 - line manager 'check-ins' with staff,
 - a transparent staff appraisal process.
- Our school provides everyone with repeated relational experiences (alongside emotionally available adults) to support everyone to move from 'blocked trust' (not feeling psychologically safe with anyone) to trust, and from self-help to 'help-seeking'.

Regulate:

- As a school we use evidence-based interventions that aim to repair psychological damage and brain damage caused by traumatic experiences, through emotionally regulating, playful and enriched interactions.
- In our school the emotional well-being, and emotional regulation, of staff is treated as highly important to prevent burn-out, stress-related absence, or leaving the profession through stress-related illness, secondary trauma and/or feeling blamed or under-valued.
- We recognise that sometimes staff may need 'time out', for example to go for a short walk, or to have a 'change of face' for the student for the staff member's own wellbeing, giving time to take the space they need to reflect and rejuvenate which supports the release of natural anti-stress and pro-social neurochemicals (opioids and oxytocin).
- Relational interventions specifically designed to bring down stress hormone levels (e.g. from toxic to tolerable) in vulnerable children, enabling them to feel calm, soothed and safe. These may be through sandplay or art therapy, through talking with a named emotionally available adult, through physical activity, through work with our therapy animals, or another sensory or wellbeing intervention.

Reflect:

- The adults in our school feel confident to develop relationships with students, their families, and each other, and to have the courageous conversations about their experiences so far.
- Our school promotes the exploration of conversations with our students that helps to make sense of their life, to develop a language for their emotions and a narrative that makes sense of their experiences and how they feel. We support our students to understand their thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations and reactions, and in doing so enable them to identify and explore new options and strategies for ways forward with their challenges.
- We are committed to staff development and training to help children move from 'behaving' their trauma/painful life experiences, to reflecting on those experiences.
- We have a positive behaviour management policy based not on punishment and sanctions, but on resolution and interactive repair (e.g. restorative conversations).
- Within the context of an established and trusted relationship with a member of staff, students are given the means and opportunity to symbolise painful life experiences through images as well as words, as a key part of 'working through' these experiences. Means include the provision of different modes of expression, e.g. art/play/ music/sand/emotion worksheets/ emotion cards.
- We are committed to staff training and development in the art of good listening, dialogue, empathy and understanding (instead of asking a series of questions/ giving lectures).

References

TISUK (2019) *Trauma and Mental Health Informed Schools and Communities Delegate Programme Handbook*
 Hughes, D. (2015) *Creating Loving Attachments: Parenting with PACE to Nurture Confidence and Security in the Troubled Child*

Contact Running Deer

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Appendix

The PACE Approach (Dan Hughes)

PACE stands for PLAYFULNESS, ACCEPTANCE, CURIOSITY, EMPATHY.

Playfulness – an open, ready, calm, relaxed and engaged attitude.

'When children laugh and giggle, they become less defensive and more reflective. Playfulness can help keep it all in perspective... It can also diffuse a difficult or tense situation when the parent has a touch of playfulness in his or her discipline.'

Acceptance – unconditionally accepting a child makes them feel secure, safe and loved

'Actively communicating to the child that you accept the wishes, feelings, thoughts, urges, motives and perceptions that are underneath the outward behaviour. It is about accepting, without judgment or evaluation, her inner life. The child's inner life simply is; it is not right or wrong. The parent may be very firm in limiting behaviour while at the same time accepting the motives for the behaviour.'

Curiosity – without judgement children become aware of their inner life

'Curiosity involves a quiet, accepting tone that conveys a simple desire to understand the child: "What do you think was going on? What do you think that was about?"'

Empathy – a sense of compassion for the child and her feelings

'The adult will stay with the child emotionally, providing comfort and support... The adult is also communicating strength, love and commitment, with confidence that sharing the child's distress will not be too much. Together they will get through it.'

More information can be found at <https://ddpnetwork.org/about-ddp/meant-pace/>