

P.A.C.E

Playfulness • Acceptance • Curiosity • Empathy

A trauma-informed approach by Dan Hughes • DDP



PACE was developed by Dr Dan Hughes, clinical psychologist and founder of **Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (DDP)** — an attachment-focused approach originally created for children who have experienced early relational trauma, neglect and abuse.

PACE is not a technique. It is an **attitude** — a way of thinking, feeling, communicating and behaving that makes a child feel safe. It is modelled on secure parent–infant relationships and is guided by neuroscience and attachment theory.

PACE is central to DDP-informed practice and is used by therapists, carers, foster and adoptive parents, residential workers and education practitioners across the world.

THE FOUR ELEMENTS OF PACE

Playfulness

A light, warm, story-telling quality in how we engage — even during difficulty.

Playfulness is not about making jokes at inappropriate moments. It is a quality of warmth and lightness that signals to a child that the relationship is safe, that conflict is temporary, and that there is still room for joy. Playful moments reduce shame, lower defences and allow closeness in ways that serious interactions cannot. For children who have experienced trauma, discovering that an adult genuinely enjoys their company can be profoundly healing.

In practice: Use a story-telling tone rather than a lecturing one. Find shared moments of humour. A light, playful response to a small transgression can defuse tension and preserve the relationship far more effectively than a serious correction.

Acceptance

Accepting the child's inner world — their feelings, thoughts and perceptions — without judgement.

Acceptance is unconditional — but it does not mean accepting harmful behaviour. It means accepting the feelings, wishes, thoughts and perceptions that underlie the behaviour. When a child's inner world is accepted rather than judged, they feel safe enough to explore it. Shame reduces. Defences lower. This is the foundation on which everything else is built. Without acceptance, curiosity and empathy cannot take hold.

In practice: When a child says 'I know you hate me,' resist the urge to correct it. Accept the feeling first: 'It sounds like it really feels that way — that must be awful.' Acceptance of the feeling opens the door. Correction of the belief, before acceptance, closes it.

Curiosity

Non-judgemental wondering about the meaning behind the behaviour — not the behaviour itself.

Curiosity shifts our focus from what a child is doing to why they might be doing it. This is not curiosity about facts — it is curiosity about the child's inner world: their feelings, thoughts, motives and experiences. When an adult is genuinely and non-judgementally curious about a child, that child begins to understand themselves more deeply. The behaviour makes sense in context. Shame loses its grip. The child becomes an explorer of their own inner life rather than a prisoner of it.

In practice: 'I wonder what was happening for you when...' or 'I'm curious about what it felt like...' signals to the child that you want to understand, not condemn. This single shift — from responding to behaviour to wondering about its meaning — changes everything.

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Empathy

Feeling with the child — communicating deep compassion for their experience.

Empathy means communicating that you understand and share in a child's emotional experience — that their feelings make sense given what they have been through. For children who have experienced trauma, feeling genuinely understood by an adult is often a new and profoundly healing experience. Empathy does not solve the problem. It makes the child feel less alone with it — and a child who feels less alone is a child who can begin to heal.

In practice: Match your affect to the child's emotion before you redirect or problem-solve. A child who is distressed cannot hear logic. 'I can see how upset you are — that makes complete sense' must come before anything else. Regulate before you educate.

WHY PACE WORKS — THE NEUROSCIENCE

Trauma and the brain

Children who have experienced early relational trauma develop nervous systems wired for threat detection. Their brains prioritise survival over connection. Behaviours that look like defiance, indifference or manipulation are often the brain's trauma-response system doing exactly what it learned to do.

PACE works by communicating safety at a neurological level — through tone, rhythm, warmth and attunement. When a child feels genuinely safe with an adult, the survival brain quietens and the learning brain becomes accessible.

Regulate before you educate

Dysregulation is not a choice. When a child is in a state of threat, the higher brain functions needed for reasoning, reflection and learning are simply not available. Attempting to reason with a dysregulated child is neurologically futile.

PACE — particularly Empathy and Acceptance — is a co-regulatory tool. The calm, attuned presence of a PACE-ful adult helps a child's nervous system move from survival mode into a state where connection and learning become possible.

“PACE is about helping children feel felt.”

Dan Hughes

For children whose early experiences have taught them that the world is unsafe and adults are unreliable, a PACE-ful relationship is not a supplement to the work. It is the work. Relationship heals what relational trauma damaged.

Understand first. Connect always. PACE everything.

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