



ASPIRE: Lifeskills Learning Centre

CO-REGULATION AND RELATIONSHIPS POLICY

Context

ASPIRE: Lifeskills Learning Centre is an independent autism-specific secondary provision providing education for students aged 11 – 19 with an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP).

Our students have various needs alongside their Autism, including social communication and sensory processing difficulties, learning and behavioural issues including dyslexia, dyspraxia and ADHD. Many of our students have complex mental health needs including depression, attachment difficulties and trauma.

These difficulties can often mask anxiety and fear based on school and expectations regarding behaviour and conduct.

At ASPIRE: Lifeskills Learning Centre, we see positive and negative behaviour as a communication of need, and when an appropriate response is offered, positive outcomes follow.

We strive to validate the feelings and needs of the young person and model and teach how to communicate these acceptably because we all feel anger, disappointment, anxiety, confusion and excitement.

Vision

We aspire to develop confident, successful learners who become responsible citizens and effective contributors in their adult life.

Values

Within the ASPIRE community we;

1. Value every member for their strengths, skills and uniqueness.
2. Respect others' values, thoughts and ideas
3. Believe that everyone has the right to opportunities that enable them to achieve success.
4. Understand that respect, cooperation and commitment underpin daily practice throughout our learning environment.
5. Encourage positive partnerships through effective communication.

Safeguarding

Safeguarding is at the heart of everything at ASPIRE: Lifeskills Learning Centre. Transparency and collaboration between the learning centre, families, other professionals and external agencies ensure our community is safe.

ASPIRE: Lifeskills Learning Centre is a safe, caring, happy and positive community dedicated to supporting the individual special needs of all our young people. We work to improve learning and social behaviour effectively so that our students can make the right choices in the wider community and move forward with society.

We are committed to safeguarding and promoting every student's physical and emotional welfare both inside and outside the learning centre premises. We implement a whole-school preventative approach to managing safeguarding concerns, ensuring that the wellbeing of students is at the forefront of all action taken.

This policy sets out a clear and consistent framework for delivering this promise, in line with safeguarding legislation and statutory guidance. However, safeguarding is a human response based on clear, safe, and transparent relationships that seek mutuality and sustainability. Safety is a right. For clarity, our approach, based on a profound understanding of our students and the social contexts they experience, is - **if it doesn't seem right, it probably isn't: REPORT IT - RECORD IT.**

Our community's safety is confirmed by:

- Creating a culture of safer recruitment by adopting procedures that help deter, reject or identify people who might pose a risk to young people.
- Teaching students how to keep safe and recognise unacceptable behaviour.
- Identifying and making provision for any student subject to abuse.
- Ensuring that, the Head Teacher, SLT and all staff members understand their responsibilities under safeguarding legislation and statutory guidance, are alert to the signs of young person abuse and know to refer concerns to the DSL.
- Ensuring that the Head Teacher, SLT and any new staff members and volunteers are only appointed when all the appropriate checks have been satisfactorily completed.

Co-regulation

Co-regulation is defined as “warm and responsive interactions that provide the support, coaching, and modelling that young children need to understand, express, and modulate their thoughts, feelings and behaviours.” ([Murray et al 2015, 14](#)). In order for an autistic child to be able to self-regulate, co-regulation has to occur. It is the bridge to self-regulation.

Kelly Mahler, OT, explains co-regulation in this simple way:

“Co-regulation is what we're all born requiring when we enter this world. We all require the assistance of someone in our world to step in and help us meet our body's needs, to meet our regulation needs, whether it's a nervous system regulation, or maybe it's also to meet our survival needs, like offering us food and warmth, etc. That co-regulation process is what happens when our caregiver steps in and helps us meet our body's needs, whether it's for regulation or survival.”

There is a continual back and forth process between caregivers and support personnel and an autistic person, which is what co-regulation is all about. This interaction is necessary to build an understanding of what is going on in the body, leading to interoceptive awareness. In order to self-regulate, a person has to understand what their body signals mean and then seek out what they need in certain moments for regulation and comfort. Individuals also need repeated experiences of co-regulation from a regulated adult before they can begin to self-regulate.

Self-regulation is the process of managing oneself. It is influenced by external factors in the environment along with internal factors. A person needs to manage both their physical and emotional needs. Examples of physical needs are hunger, thirst, toileting, and feeling tired. If a person is struggling to self-regulate, behaviours of concern may happen such as anxiety or meltdowns. It may be difficult to process emotions, sit still, and focus. When dysregulated, it's often hard to participate in activities.

Adults may have to act as the external nervous systems for autistic individuals who are experiencing stress and anxiety. When adults co-regulate with individuals, they can demonstrate that they are safe and also that the adults are safe people to go to when stressed. When dysregulated people are met with support and empathy, they will be able to better regulate themselves over time.

Autism, Attachment and Trauma

Autism

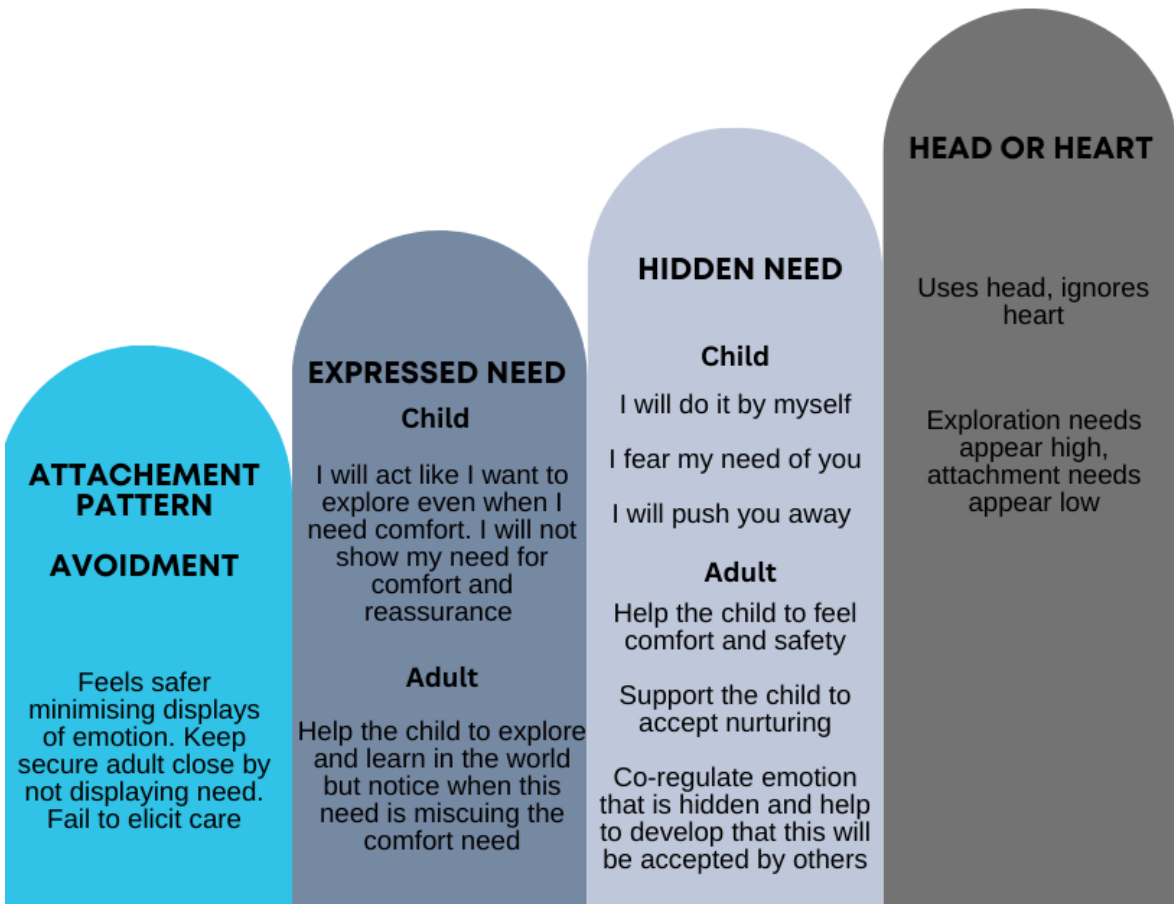
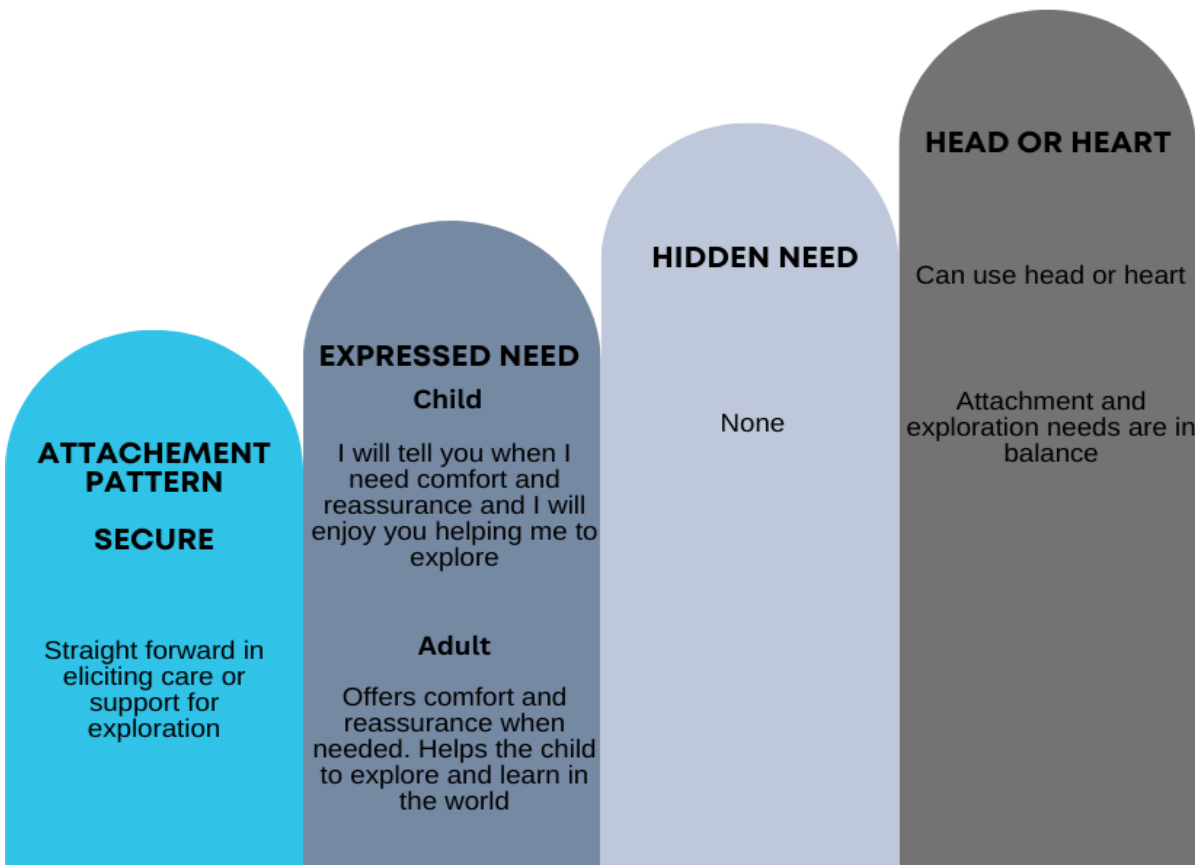
All of our students will have Autism diagnosed on their EHCP; this will typically coincide with a co-occurrence of one or more of the following: ADHD, ODD, Social Communication Difficulties, Mental Health needs, and Sensory Processing difficulties.

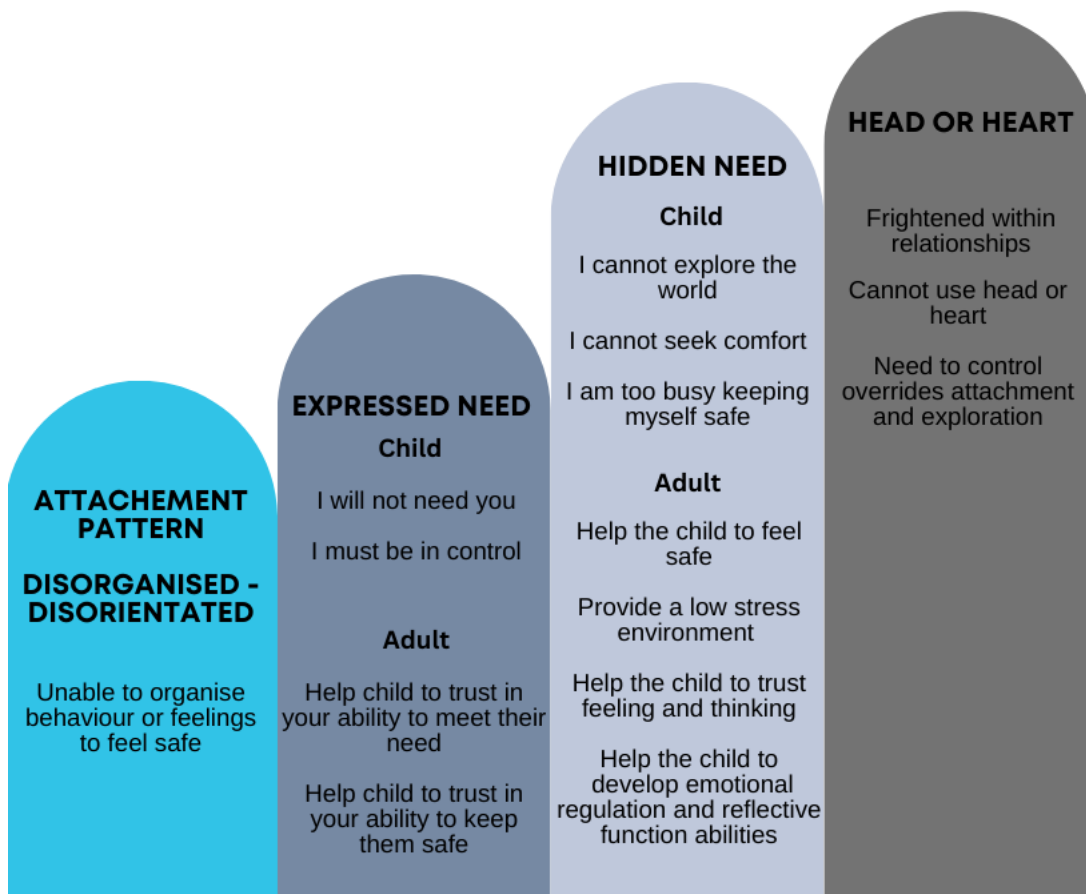
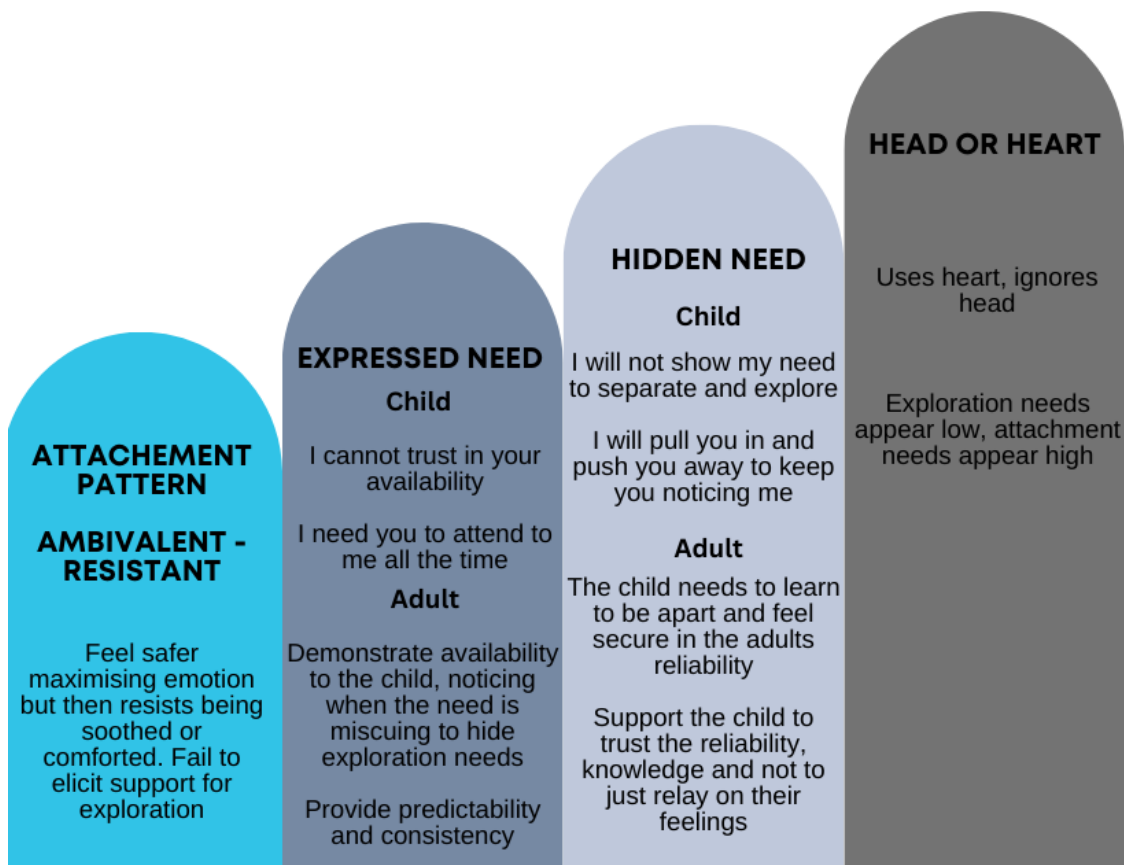
ASPIRE: Lifeskills Learning Centre is sensitive to these needs and makes all reasonable adjustments to ensure these students succeed within our community.

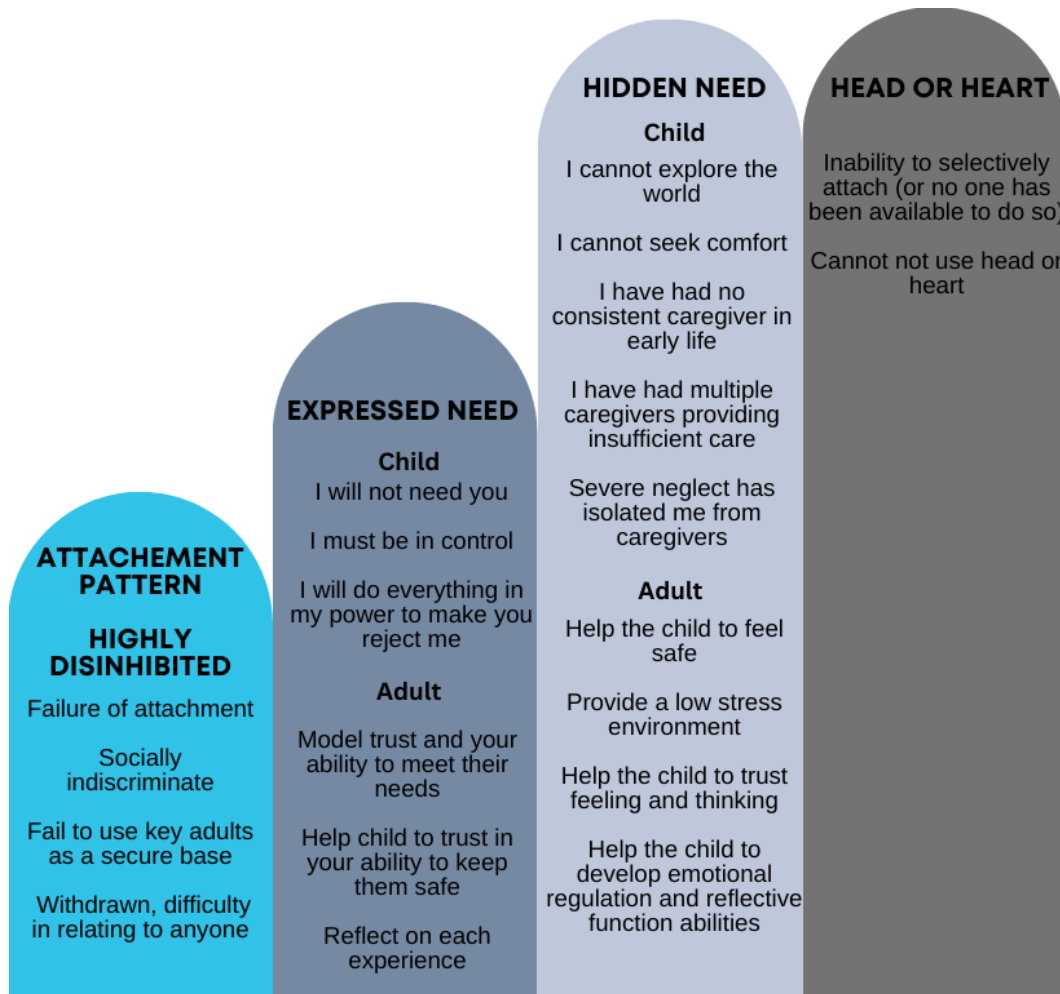
Attachment

Some of our students have a diagnosed attachment disorder, and others' EHCP will indicate an attachment need.

Our students require connection before correction. Positive relationships are at the heart of everything we do.







Secure Base Model (www.uea.ac.uk)

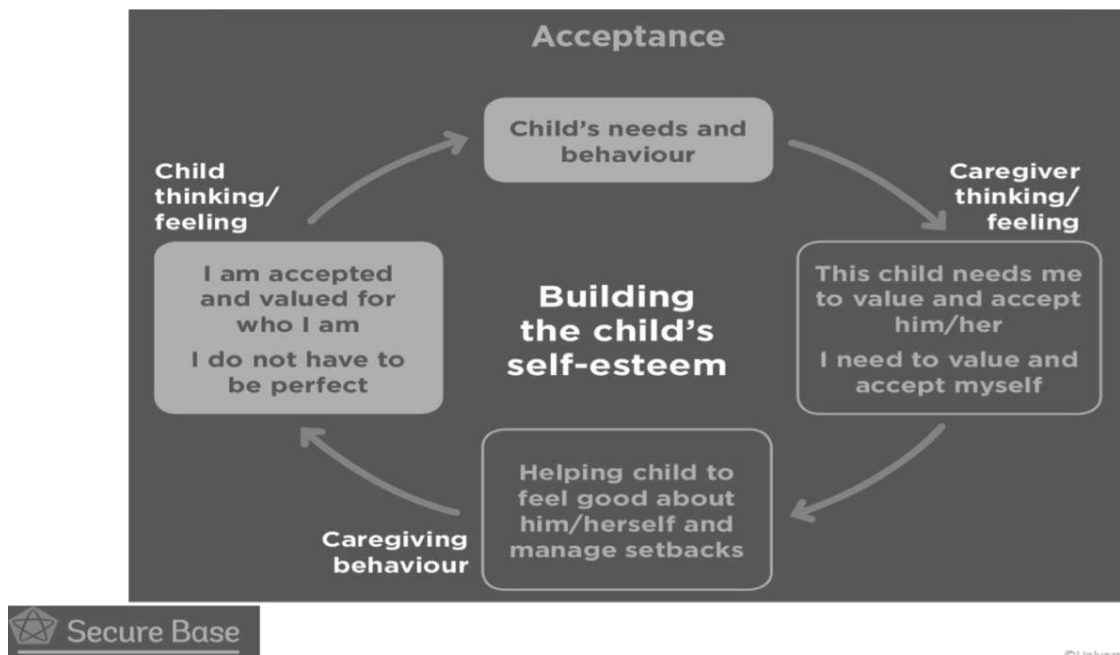




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Trauma: “If you can’t say it, you behave it.”

An emotional response to something that was an overwhelmingly painful and stressful event where there was no one to help you.

Hyperarousal of unprocessed trauma means minor experiences become major emergencies.

The most effective protective factor when working with trauma is emotionally available adults showing unconditional positive regard.

Quality Relationships = Quality Development

Protect, Relate, Regulate, Reflect

(Trauma Informed Schools)

Student Expectations (non-negotiables)

All students must demonstrate a desire to engage in school and the ASPIRE community. High expectations regarding behaviour and conduct are taught, modelled, and then adhered to, to enable the students to realise their potential and keep our community safe.

The code of conduct includes:

- Being kind to each other
- Making good choices
- Taking part in lessons or planned activities when possible
- Completing tasks to the best of their ability.

Staff Expectations – Providing Good Attachments/Emotionally Available Adults

This is a critical part of the process as only truly invested staff who understand ‘Why’ can hold space and be positive community members.

The adults who **CHOOSE** to want to work within this community **MUST** be able to:

- Have feelings/empathy/respect, as well as intellect
- Show integrity
- Be a role model and enrich the lives of others
- Be polite and gentle even when faced with extreme stress and adversity
- Have a firm but not rigid moral compass and principals
- Want to know why
- Be social and have a good sense of humour
- Be a self-reflective and critical practitioner
- Show unconditional regard and care even when being the target of transference/behaviour

Staff at ASPIRE: Lifeskills Learning Centre should strive to foster transparent and nurturing relationships with the students, making them emotionally available to work alongside the young people in our care. The routines and boundaries of the Learning Centre are designed to make the students feel safe and secure so a mutual level of trust can develop - to enable re-engagement in learning academically, emotionally and socially. Gentle challenges are offered to build resilience and confidence in students.

How we can support co-regulation:

1. **Build a trusting relationship** – Co-regulation happens with a trusted adult. A person needs to feel safe and respected.
2. **Understand and regulate our own states** – We have to practice self-care in order not to become overwhelmed or burnt out. Take breaks, exercise and do things to nurture and restore your own well-being.
3. **Use visuals to support co-regulation** – Create individualised visuals to support a person’s needs. Add in “I feel” and “I need” to visuals to support pairing emotions with co-regulation and self-regulation needs.
4. **Use daily tasks and routines to facilitate co-regulation** – Tasks and routines can be great opportunities for social engagement.
5. **Delve below the water line** – All behaviour is viewed through a judgmental lens, but the meaning we assign to behaviours we observe is often not correct. Try to understand the “why” of behaviour that you see. Be curious and ask questions.
6. **Be proactive** – Don’t wait until a person is overwhelmed before co-regulating; do it all the time to help a person feel regulated and safe.
7. **Simplify language, reduce demands in times of dysregulation** – When dysregulated, it’s harder to access thinking skills. Reduce demands, use a calm voice, talk less (or not at all) and use visual supports when needed.

Core Professional Competencies to be developed through training, experience and supervision:

(Some taken from TC Practitioner competencies framework, Dr Chris Nicholson)

Detailed understanding of the role of young people in their care:

- To fully understand the boundaries of their role and its place within the community and wider organisation.
- To fully understand the outcomes the role is designed to achieve.
- Can show developing insight into the young people in their care based on their individual and unique life stories and current reality.
- Provide response and understanding to the young people within the context of the community and beyond.

Using and establishing boundaries (relational, behavioural, community):

- Develop an awareness and capacity to regulate boundaries.
- Able to own and use their authority appropriately with a balanced and planned approach (know why and long-term outcome).
- The ability to SHARE authority with all members of the community.
- Understand and recognise the significance of space and time and how to use this effectively.
- Be able to build, test and maintain transparent and positive relationships with young people and the wider community.

Professional Observations:

- Be able to accept 'not knowing' and allow time for understanding to emerge.
- Be able to make observations about behaviour, mood, and interactions and report on these observations written and verbally (solution-focused, demonstrating function and understanding of both positive and negative behaviour/outcomes).
- Be able to base opinions on detailed evidence gathered over time, identifying a journey of intervention to consolidate learning and enable positive outcomes.
- Always looking for the function of attachment behaviours and enabling the need to be met through positive and appropriate means.

Communication Skills:

- Can communicate in a clear and direct manner
- Methods of communication that are suitable and accessible for the young person can be adopted.
- Doesn't tell others what to think but provides opportunities for understanding to emerge, develop, and grow.
- Understands that all behaviour is conscious or unconscious communication and strives to interpret this and meet the underlying need.

Use of self:

- Is sensitive, approachable, emotionally available, attuned and receptive.
- Can monitor and recognise the feelings evoked by others and link these to underlying issues of the young people (transference)
- Is genuine, congruent and authentic (reliable, honest, predictable)

Ability to work reflectively:

- Is aware of own strengths and weaknesses.
- Is self-reflective and self-aware (knows why they are working here)
- Can recognise when things have worked well and when things haven't.

Can contain behaviour (anxiety, aggression, withdrawal, omnipotent):

- Can cope with 'not knowing'
- Can tolerate and manage stress within personal/professional limits
- Can notice and sustain feeling difficult feelings (transference) long enough to try and understand where they come from and how to help.
- Can contain their own anxiety/feelings.

Environmental setting conditions:

- Can use daily living tasks and relational exchanges as opportunities for learning.
- Takes pride in their working environment.
- Teaches young people to take pride in their learning environment.

All staff must undertake and engage in group (team meetings) and individual supervision. Clinical supervision should be conducted if appropriate and required by a suitably qualified person.

P.A.C.E (Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity, Empathy (Dr Dan Hughes)

1.1 Playfulness

This is about creating an atmosphere of lightness and interest when you communicate. It means learning how to use a light tone with your voice, like you might use when story telling, rather than an irritated or lecturing tone. It's about having fun, and expressing a sense of joy.

Having a playful stance isn't about being funny all the time or making jokes when a young person is sad. It's about helping young people be more open to and experience what is positive in their life, one step at a time.

Sometimes a troubled young person has given up on the idea of having good times and doesn't want to experience and share fun or enjoyment. Some young people don't like affection or reject hugs. A playful stance can allow closeness but without the scary parts.

1.2 Acceptance

Unconditional acceptance is at the core of the young person's sense of safety.

Acceptance is about actively communicating to the young person 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, their inner life. The young person's inner life simply *is*; it is not *right* or *wrong*.

Accepting the young person's intentions does not imply accepting behaviour, which may be hurtful or harmful to another person or to self. The adult may be very firm in limiting behaviour while at the same time accepting the motives for the behaviour.

One hopes that the young person learns that while behaviour may be criticised and limited, this is not the same as criticising the young person's *self*. The young person then becomes more confident that conflict and discipline involves behaviour, not the relationship with parents or staff.

1.3 Curiosity

Curiosity, without judgment, is how we help young people become aware of their inner life, reflect upon the reasons for their behaviour, and then communicate it to their parents, therapist or key staff. Curiosity is wondering about the meaning behind the behaviour for the young person. Curiosity lets the young person know that the adults understand.

Young people often know that their behaviour was not appropriate. They often do not know why they did it or are reluctant to tell adults why.

With curiosity the adults are conveying their intention to simply understand *why* and to help the young person with understanding. The adult's intentions are to truly understand and help the young person, not to lecture or convey that the young person's inner life is *wrong* in some way.

Curiosity involves a quiet, accepting tone that conveys a simple desire to understand the young person: "*What do you think was going on? What do you think that was about?*" or "*I wonder what...?*"

You say this without anticipating an answer or response from a young person.

1.4 Empathy

Empathy lets the young person feel *the adult's* compassion for them. Being empathic means the adult actively shows the young person that the young person's inner life is important to the adult and he or she wants to be with the young person in their hard times.

With empathy, when the young person is sad or in distress the adult is feeling the sadness and distress with them and lets the young person know that.

The adult is demonstrating that he or she knows how difficult an experience is for the young person. The adult is telling the young person that they will not have to deal with the distress alone.

The adult will stay with the young person emotionally, providing comfort and support, and will not abandon them when they needs the adult the most.

The adult is also communicating strength, love and commitment, with confidence that sharing the young person's distress will not be too much. Together they will get through it.

The Environment

A community with shared values and moral compass, based on mutual respect and understanding (because you are all worth the investment).

A community that gently challenges whilst asking 'why'?

Growth of all parties and celebrating success and achievement with authentic praise from people with authentic and meaningful relationships.

The routines and environment within the Learning Centre have been carefully designed to support the individual needs of our young people. We aim to provide a relaxed, supportive and nurturing environment. The routines within the Learning Centre are designed to provide boundaries and structure to enable our young people to feel safe and alleviate the stresses and anxieties of the unknown.

Transitions and change are carefully planned and supported.


The six principles of Nurture:

- **Young people's learning is understood developmentally**
- **The importance of Nurture for the development of wellbeing**
- **All behaviour is communication**
- **The environment offers a safe base**
- **Language is a vital means of communication**
- **The importance of transition in young people's lives**

(The Nurture Group Network)

POLICY REVIEW STATEMENT

This policy will be reviewed every year or earlier should legislative change or other event require it.

SIGNED: 

POSITION: DIRECTOR

POLICY DATE: May 2026

REVIEW DATE: May 2027

FOR & ON BEHALF OF ASPIRE: Lifeskills