

TRAUMA-INFORMED PE RELATIONSHIPS AT THE HEART OF PHYSICAL EDUCATION

According to Lisa Cherry (2023), “A trauma-aware approach seeks to provide an environment that means that when we are vulnerable, the environment we are in will aid recovery and healing and not add to it.” For front line physical education (PE) teachers, this means we need to focus on creating an environment in PE that will aid children’s recovery and healing and not add to their trauma or increase their sense of vulnerability. According to Serious Mental Illness Adviser (2020), being trauma informed means we recognise:

- the prevalence of adverse childhood experiences or trauma among all people
- that many behaviours and symptoms are the result of traumatic experiences
- that being treated with respect and kindness – and being empowered with choices – is key to helping people to recover from traumatic experiences.

In this article I would like to explore the following aspects of trauma-informed PE: what we understand by childhood trauma, what trauma-informed PE is, and what it looks like in practice. I will also signpost some tools that can help you to take a trauma-informed approach in your practice.

Understanding childhood trauma

Trauma occurs when children are exposed to events or situations that overwhelm their ability to cope with what they have experienced. These are known as **adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)**. They can range from big traumas, such as:

- being abused (physical, emotional or sexual abuse and emotional or physical neglect)
- having a mentally ill person in the home
- having a family member who is addicted to alcohol or drugs
- witnessing domestic violence
- losing a parent, i.e., through bereavement or divorce
- having a family member who is incarcerated
- neglect
- the effects of war

to smaller traumas, such as:

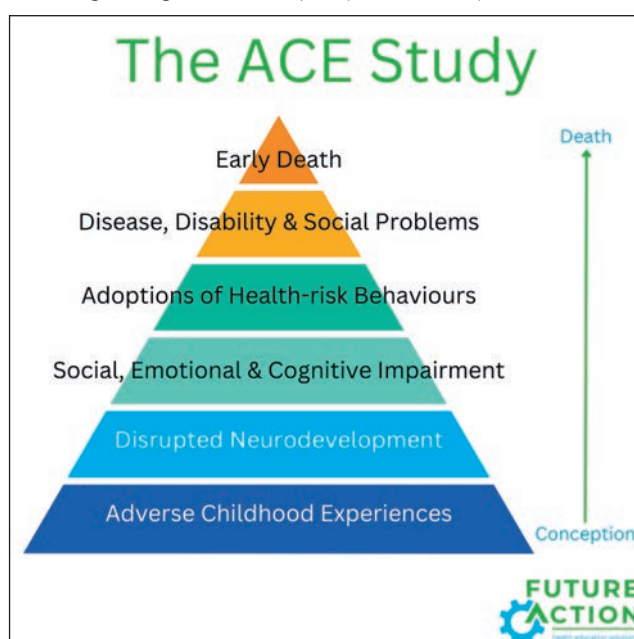
- moving house
- the birth of a new sibling
- failing an exam
- friendship issues
- illness or injury
- loss.

Several studies (e.g., Felitti *et al.*, 1998; Brown *et al.*, 2009; Bellis *et al.*, 2014) have demonstrated that just under one in two of us has suffered at least one ACE. On average, that is nearly half of a class. Figures may now be worse as, according to Professor Barry Carpenter, mental health in education professor (Youth Sport Trust conference, 2022), no one escaped the Covid-19 pandemic untouched in some way.

The key thing to remember is that all of us process trauma differently so what might have a significant impact on one person may not have such an impact on another. However, there are some common effects of childhood trauma. The ACE Study (Brown *et al.*, 2009) was one of the biggest public health studies of all time. Researchers interviewed 17,000 people and found that ACEs are the leading determinant of the most common forms of physical illness, mental illness and early death in the western world. Cancer, diabetes, heart attacks, depression and anxiety are all linked to ACEs. ACEs set people on a journey from childhood trauma to early death, following a predictable pattern outlined in Figure 1.

Not having any control over or options to escape childhood trauma takes its toll in countless ways. Healthy brain development and function are impaired, which affects self-

Figure 1: Mechanisms by which ACEs influence health and wellbeing throughout the lifespan (Brown, 2009).





regulation, behaviour and learning. As the number of ACEs increases, so do the chances of a child having learning difficulties, weak attainment, low attendance, disengagement or violent behaviour. In 2015, a study (Fuller-Thomson & Lewis) of 700 8-year-olds found that if a child had three ACEs or more, they were three times as likely to experience academic failure, five times as likely to have attendance problems and six times as likely to have behavioural problems as children with no ACEs. Of children who had four ACEs or more, over 50 per cent had learning problems and they were 32 times more likely to have behavioural problems than a child with no ACEs.

According to Dr Mine Conkbayir (2022), childhood trauma typically gives rise to **learned helplessness** in survivors. Characteristics include:

- feeling useless
- having a sense of purposelessness
- feeling no-one cares
- low motivation
- low self-confidence
- low or no expectations of success
- difficulty in persisting
- not asking for help
- ascribing a lack of success to a lack of ability
- ascribing success to factors beyond their control, such as luck.

As educators, we will have seen and heard similar characteristics in learners or wondered why some children don't even try. It is vital to be familiar with the signs of learned helplessness to avoid misjudging and labelling learners.

It is not all doom and gloom though as research shows that a range of protective factors before the age of 18 can help to interrupt the progression from childhood adversity to early death. Protective factors for a child include the following.

- I believe my mum or dad loved me.
- When I was small, other people helped my parents to take care of me and seemed to love me.
- Someone in my family enjoyed playing with me and I enjoyed it too.
- When I was a child, there were people who helped me to feel better when I was sad or worried.
- Family, friends or neighbours talked about making our lives better.
- When I felt bad, I could almost always find someone I could trust to talk to.
- There are people I can count on now.
- Someone in my childhood believed in me.

It is difficult for teachers to provide the first four protective factors, but I believe that teachers can definitely provide the final four factors. One emotionally available adult can make all the difference to a child who has suffered trauma and that one person can often be found in schools. The good news is that we can become more emotionally available to our young people and that not only benefits them greatly but also benefits us.

Enabling children to feel safe

As human beings, we have a need to feel and be safe. Our amygdala (the region of the brain primarily associated with emotional processes) is constantly looking for cues to check that we are safe. This is no different for children within our classrooms. When they do not feel safe, they cannot learn as an over-stimulated amygdala prevents the brain from being integrated. This affects children's ability to learn and concentrate, their emotional and social intelligence and empathy, their ability to inhibit impulsive behaviours, their stress regulation, and their ability to reflect and solve problems – all key skills if we want our children to thrive in PE and beyond.

As teachers we can protect learners and help them to feel psychologically safe through our body language and by increasing our safety cues. When we do this, we trigger their social engagement system rather than their social defence system. This leads to happier children who are more capable of learning and less time managing behaviour and stress for us as teachers. Children who have suffered from past trauma are more susceptible to perceiving danger even if they aren't in danger. Sometimes, even the simplest, non-threatening instruction can be perceived as a threat to their safety and an opportunity for conflict. As teachers, we need to trigger their social engagement system so that they, and all learners, feel psychologically safe. So how do we do that?

Our face, voice and body are of upmost importance when sending the right signals to create psychological safety in our classrooms. For example, meeting and greeting learners on entry at the start of the lesson becomes crucial. Welcoming them with a smile, a fist bump or high five and a friendly question or comment to let them know that we notice them is transformational. For trauma-informed PE, we need to consider how we can create such psychological safety in our subject.

Trauma-informed PE

As PE teachers, we understand the power of PE in positively shaping learners' physical and emotional wellbeing. However, addressing the impact of trauma in our classes can be complex, especially with limited resources and few professional development opportunities. Having spoken to dozens of brilliant PE teachers grappling with this challenge – just as I was – I collaborated with leading experts in the field of trauma-informed practice to identify, trial and adapt strategies for my own PE department. From this, I developed the Recover Roadmap (Figure 2) – a seven-step process that guides teachers how

to implement trauma-informed PE in a way that transforms relationships, leading to better engagement, behaviour and progress in the short term and better life chances for young people in the long term.

Stage 1: Approach

This informs teachers about the evidence behind the decline in engagement, attendance, behaviour and progress in a post-Covid-19 lockdown world in which more children have experienced trauma. It includes:

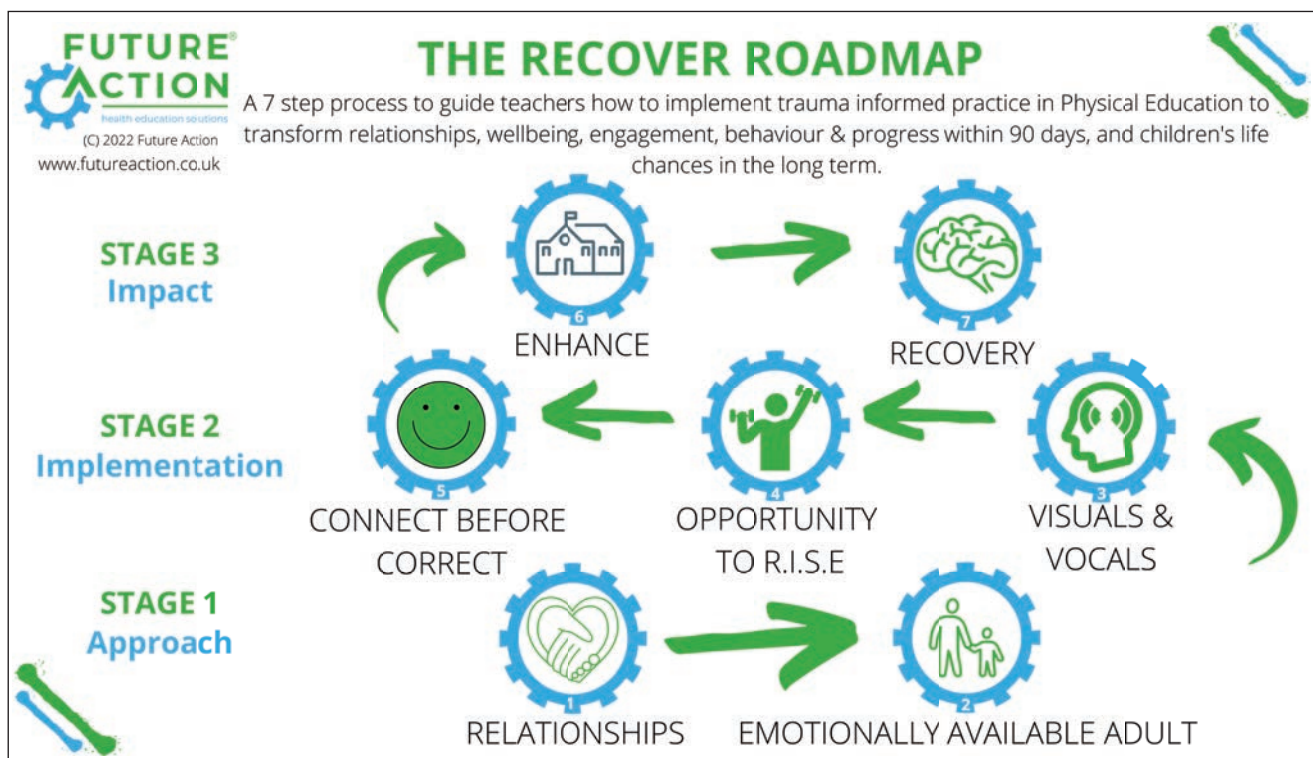
- Step 1 – relationships. This focuses on what a trauma-informed approach is, what ACEs are and how they affect children, currently in the classroom and their future life chances.
- Step 2 – hope. This looks at how emotionally available adults and the eight protective factors can break the cycle through the power of positive relationships. It clarifies the role of the PE teacher in supporting young people who are recovering from trauma.

Stage 2: Implementation

This is about how to implement a trauma-informed approach within PE. It includes:

- Step 3 – visuals and vocals. This guides teachers on how to create psychological safety for learners by using visuals and vocals to transform relationships and enhance engagement by triggering learners' social engagement system.
- Step 4 – opportunity to rise. This looks at how we can use physical activity to broaden our learners' window of tolerance so they feel calmer and make better decisions. It shows how to use PE to develop learners' sense of belonging and to help them to feel loved. It also explores how we can support children's neurodevelopment and relationships through the power of play.

Figure 2: The Recover Roadmap (Future Action, 2022).



- Step 5 – connect before correct. This looks at how to manage challenging behaviour in a compassionate way that does not re-traumatise children but maintains high standards so that we achieve the outcomes we need for effective teaching.

Stage 3: Impact

This is about how we can have a broader impact across our school and wider society. It includes:

- Step 6 – enhance. This looks at the different ways in which we can have whole-school impact using trauma-informed approaches such as sports sanctuaries, enrichment clubs and drop-down days.
- Step 7 – recovery. This explains what we need to know when supporting learners suffering from trauma and shares a secret formula for a transformational PE teacher in a post-lockdown education world.

The following case study provides an example of the Recover Roadmap in practice.

Trauma-informed PE in practice

Following the Covid-19 pandemic, we had a group of Year 8 girls who were struggling with their mental health, friendships and general confidence, and it was affecting their willingness to engage in PE lessons. Year 8 can be a tricky year for some girls anyway as they go through puberty and are more aware of social pressures and this was even more evident after lockdown.

We wanted to re-engage the group in PE by creating a psychologically safe environment where the girls felt comfortable and free to take part without feeling judged or threatened. We also wanted to give them greater ownership over their PE lessons. Our learning objectives were:

- Head: To understand the link between physical activity and mental wellbeing and to develop our self-kindness.
- Hands: To take part in a range of physical activities to boost mental wellbeing.
- Heart: To try our best and create a safe environment for everyone to thrive.

The first thing we did was to meet and greet the girls in an ultra-positive way. We did this by using face, voice and body to smile and welcome them to the class. We high-fived them on entry and made sure our voices were attuned and positive. When introducing the lesson, we stressed that the focus was on improving their mental wellbeing through being physically active rather than being assessed.

We then introduced the RISE Up categories and explained how each could benefit their mental wellbeing in a different way.

RISE is our acronym for four categories of activities that boost mental wellbeing in a variety of ways so that they meet young people's individual needs and give them greater ownership over how they can manage their mental wellbeing.

- **Repeaters.** These are activities where there is repetitive movement over a prolonged period of time, such as running, walking or rowing. Deep breathing in yoga also has the same effect. Repetitive deep breathing calms the amygdala, increasing the window of tolerance leading to calmer, more relaxed young people.

- **Inclusive teams.** Team sports are ideal for boosting our mental wellbeing. We strive for social connection as human beings. When we feel included, working together towards a common goal and feeling part of something bigger than ourselves, our body releases oxytocin, one of the happiness chemicals that makes us feel loved.
- **Stress busters.** Many of our young people struggle to deal with the pent-up anger and frustration over what they have lived through and missed out on over the last few years. We need to find a way for them to release this in a safe and controlled manner. Stress-busting activities, such as boxing, weight training, contact rugby, smashing a ball or yoga for our introverts, relieve stress and tension by releasing endorphins.
- **Energisers.** Energising activities, such as circuit training, high-tempo dance and high-intensity interval training (HIIT), trigger the release of dopamine and serotonin which boost our confidence and motivation and make young people feel energised and happier.

We presented the girls with a range of RISE Up-related physical activity options that we could offer in our sports hall and explained that we would create a carousel of activities they could choose to take part in. They voted for a circuit of skipping, a punchbag and small-sided games of football and dodgeball. We also encouraged them to demonstrate their leadership skills by creating their teams and making everyone feel welcome when they joined the activity.

It was important that we were as positive as possible to create a classroom that was wrapped in care so that the girls felt psychologically safe. As they took part in the activities that most appealed to them, we went round and talked to them to show an interest in their lives and deepen the relationship. Investing in these relationships was critical if we were going to re-engage the group over the coming weeks and months.

Halfway through the lesson, we stopped the activities and did some work on self-kindness. We asked the girls how they would support a friend who had made a mistake. We asked them what advice they would give then contrast that with how they would speak to themselves with their inner voice if they made the same mistake. Most of the girls recognised that they would be a lot harsher on themselves than they would a friend. We then talked about the importance of being kind to ourselves by being mindful of our inner voice, and how their relationship with themselves is the most important one they will have as they are stuck with their inner voice for the rest of their lives. The girls then returned to their preferred activity for the rest of the lesson.

To exit the classroom, we set the girls the challenge of telling us which RISE Up category they had enjoyed the most, which specific activity they had completed and how that activity had improved their mental wellbeing. We got some great responses from the girls, showing they had taken a lot from the lesson. Keeley said, "My favourite activity was the stress buster through using the punchbag. It helped me get all my stress and frustration out and I feel a lot calmer now." Sarah said, "I preferred dodgeball which is an inclusive team game. I loved playing with my friends and we had a lot of fun. It was nice to laugh with them and exercise together."

The lesson proved to be a great first step in re-engaging the group within PE. When analysing why the lesson was

a success, the girls gave us some brilliant feedback: they enjoyed the freedom to choose their activities; they loved prioritising relationships over performance; and they thrived on the supportive, non-judgemental environment we created for them. It gave us a blueprint on how to move forward with them so that they would love being physically active for life and understand how it can benefit their mental wellbeing. In the following weeks, the girls would regularly ask for this style of lesson so we incorporated more of this with additional self-care tools to help them to improve their mental wellbeing and increase their engagement in PE.

Trauma-informed school sport

We have also applied the trauma-informed PE principles to extra-curricular provision. For example, as part of a RISE Up Liverpool programme, we worked with The Belvedere Academy, a state-funded girls' school. Kate Reynolds, the Head of PE, transformed the school's intra-school sport. Like many schools, they ran inter-form competitions for various sports throughout the year. In the winter this was usually netball and in the summer rounders. Previously, forms selected the best players to represent them and competed in a round robin. After adopting the RISE Up principles, the school made tweaks that saw engagement rocket. Instead of the usual seven students per form for netball, it had over 550 students from Years 7-11 taking part.

The aim was to promote the netball competition as an Inclusive Team activity to increase student engagement. Staff wanted to make sure that the message of 'it's the taking part that counts' rang true with all students so they felt they belonged within PE and the wider school. Forms were told they could select as many students as they liked but that everyone selected must play in at least two of the five fixtures. The team captains (elected by the form) had to decide who would play in each fixture, enabling different leaders to emerge. This approach captured students from across the whole school demographic: school team players, SEND students, EAL students, Pupil Premium students and those whose attendance had been poor but who wanted to come to school to join in. The competition also fell at the start of Ramadan and many of the school's Muslim students joined in too, some choosing to break their fast in order to compete effectively!

Forms were given time during PE lessons and lunchtime enrichment sessions to practise their skills. This increased engagement in enrichment as forms used the time to analyse their strengths and weaknesses and make decisions. There was a friendly competitive buzz throughout school on the days running up to the event and the atmosphere on the week of the competitions was fantastic. Students created banners to show their form identity, made posters and wrote poems about the competition.

Giving pupils the option to take part and putting the emphasis on the development of life skills instead of playing to win meant that pupils felt psychologically safe when stepping up to play; they knew they were in a supportive and inclusive environment. The teamwork, empathy, perseverance and resilience on show were amazing to see. The school will be replicating this set up for the summer rounders tournament. Students have also asked if they can do more competitions of the same kind in dodgeball, football, bench ball and badminton – so it clearly works for them!

Spreading the word and practice

If we are to use PE and school sport effectively to reduce the negative impact of ACEs, we need an 'army' of teachers who are willing to engage with trauma-informed PE. Through Future Action, we can introduce staff to the concept and help them to adopt and adapt the principles to suit their own learners and settings. For example, we offer an online training course for PE teachers and an Enhancing Engagement in PE Scorecard to support a self-review and improvement process.

Seven years ago, when, as Director of Sport at my Norwich school, I was faced with students struggling with anxiety, I felt totally helpless that I had no strategies to support them or help them to feel better. It fired me into action to research trauma and wellbeing and trial new approaches so I didn't have to feel so helpless again. The experience of Covid and its impact on our children and young people have increased my resolve to make sure PE is part of the solution, not a part of the problem. Please get in touch if you would like to be part of that solution too. ■

The *Trauma-informed PE* online teacher training course shows how you can implement the Recover Roadmap in your PE department. Please quote **afPE10** to receive a 10 per cent discount if you would like to purchase the course. <https://www.futureaction.net/trauma-informed-pe-course>



To access the Enhancing Engagement scorecard, visit: <https://neil-hk02z4js.scoreapp.com/p/fitness-landing-page>



Find out more at: <https://www.futureaction.net/>

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Neil Moggan recently left his role as Director of Sport, Health and RSHE in a secondary school in Norwich and is now an educational consultant and coach specialising in mental wellbeing. He has helped over 100 schools across the world to implement his **RISE Up** early intervention mental wellbeing programme through his company **Future Action**.