

# "I need you to...": Stepping into the shoes of a child who has experienced trauma, loss & change

This blog is going to be written from the perspective of a child or young person who has experienced trauma, loss and/or significant change. Of course we can never truly understand their inner experience without listening to them and eliciting their own voice. But it's important that we try to put ourselves in the shoes of these young people and think about the fundamental ingredients of trauma-sensitive education. What are the desirable qualities for the adults who are building relationships with these young people? Here are just some of the possible responses they might give, if we were to ask "*What do you need from me?*".

## **I need you to...NOTICE ME**

It might sound strange, but I feel like I've never truly been seen. Sure, people have been in the same room as me or gone to other places with me. But I didn't feel like I had their full attention. It's so hard for me when I think that I'm being ignored. I just want to be remembered. So I might get in your face with a hundred questions or maybe just one question a hundred times! It may seem like a good idea to break the rules or do something unexpected, just to get your attention. I need you to help me feel noticed - chat to me, show an interest in my interests and tell me that you've been thinking about me when you've been elsewhere.

## **I need you to...ACCEPT ME**

When I've had really big feelings in the past, people have given me the impression that it's not ok. Sometimes they've ignored me. Other times, they've said or done the wrong thing and I felt even worse. I need you to let me know that it's ok to feel the way I do. That my feelings make sense and won't last forever. It's hard for me to know when others "get me"; when they understand what I'm going through. You have no idea how powerful it is to hear the words "I know this is tough for you". People haven't always been brave enough to take a walk in my shoes and open themselves up to what's going on inside me.

## **I need you to...BE CURIOUS**

I don't always know how I'm feeling. When you tell me that play time is over, I start to scream and shout. It probably seems like I'm really angry. But really, I'm sad that it's come to an end and worried that we'll not be able to play again for a long time. When I'm not working on a task, it might look as if I'm bored or being defiant. Actually, I'm so scared of making a mistake that I don't have the confidence to try the task. Since I find it hard to put my feelings into words, you need to stay open-minded. When you wonder out loud about what I'm going through, I feel understood and start to learn why I feel the way I do in different situations.

## **I need you to...BE ANIMATED**

I've seen lots of faces on adults. Some have looked angry or upset. Some looked like they were frozen and I couldn't tell what they were feeling. I've also seen lots of different postures. Some adults have turned away from me, as if I'm too much. Others have looked really tense, as if they're going to shout at me or hurt me. When I can't tell what your face or body are showing, I panic. It's so easy for me to think I've done something to annoy or disappoint you. When you're happy to see me or proud of what I did, I need to see it in your eyes, your smile, your tone of voice and the way you stand.

## **I need you to...HELP ME FEEL SAFE**

Part of my brain is always going to be on the look-out for danger and I'm so used to looking after myself. With so many thoughts and feelings popping up, it's hard for me to focus on what we're doing or take in information. I see things that are scary, react to them and then feel so ashamed by what I've done or said. A big part of your job is helping me feel safe. Check in with me first thing in the morning, so we can talk through my feelings and prepare for the day ahead. Show me what I have to do in a task and tell me how long it will take. Look calm when I'm having a tough moment, so I know you can deal with it. Come with me to a quiet place when I need time to relax and de-stress.

## **I need you to...MAKE THINGS PREDICTABLE**

Life for me has been a roller-coaster. I've met lots of adults in my time. I've even lived in different places and not really understood how I got to some of them. The school day can remind me of these times. One minute we're doing this, then suddenly we're doing that. It's hard for me to keep track of time. I can be sad or cross when it's time to leave my favourite activities. When we're tidying up or coming to and from the classroom, I can feel so anxious. So many people moving around and making noise! I need you to tell me what's happening throughout the day and help me to organise myself. I also need to know in advance when the normal routine is changing, why it's changing and what's happening instead.

## **I need you to...BE RESPONSIVE**

There have been so many up and down days in my life. So much change. So much stress. My mind can be mixed up at times. I might have had a great day in your classroom yesterday, but today the corridor feels really scary. The other kids in the room are annoying me

by being so loud. I can't bear the thought of going to assembly or coping with the playground. I know this might be annoying or unpredictable, but I can't help it. When I have a day like this, I need you to slow things down. I might need more breaks from my work. I might need you to stay closer to me than normal. One thing is for sure - I'll need you to remind me more often that things are ok and you're not going anywhere.

### **I need you to...BE FLEXIBLE**

There have been times in the past where I've not been given a choice in things. I might need you to make choices for me and talk me through what to do. On other days, I will want more control – you can help me by giving me choices; like how to start a task, where to sit or who to work with. When I've needed help in the past, I've been ignored, rejected or let down. There are going to be days in the classroom when I'm desperate for help, but part of me can't bear to be disappointed again. Try asking if I need help. If I am sensitive to this, you may have to tell the other kids nearby what to do so I can hear it.

### **I need you to...MAKE ME LAUGH**

I look at the other kids in my class and it seems so easy for them to have fun. They giggle over the slightest thing and find the funny side of things when they're working together. I can find it really hard to relax. My body feels tense or shaky when I'm stressed. Worries are always swirling around my head. This is where you come in. Tell me a joke. Put on a funny voice. Be silly. Make a mistake. Arrange time to play games with me, even if they are games you would normally play with someone younger than me. I need you to help me be more positive and laugh more often. Even if I find it a bit strange or unsettling at first, I can start to forget about my stress for a while.

### **I need you to...GIVE ME HOPE**

When I look back on yesterday, last month or last year, I get caught up in the bad stuff. Times where I failed. Times where I gave up. Times where I could have worked harder. It's easy for me to focus on the negatives because there have been so many in the past. I need you to go out of your way to give me encouragement. You can be the positive and optimistic voice in my head, drowning out my stress voice. Tell me when I've tried my best. Show me examples of my achievements and my strengths. Let me know that I'm getting better at something, so I can keep trying even when it's tough.

### **I need you to...HANG IN THERE**

There will be days when I don't seem to like you. Days when I don't want to talk to you. Days I tell you that I hate you or call you some bad words. I need you to hang in there and ride out these moments. The reason I can do this with you is because I know I'm safe with you. I haven't been able to do this with other people. I've tried it in the past and ended up feeling worse when the person got angry or left me on my own. I have no experience of an adult keeping a lid on my big feelings. You have the honour of being one of the first to try this. Sorry! You might have to take time to talk to someone or look after yourself when it's been a tough day, just like you look after me when I have my tough days.