



Secure Base

The Secure Base model: promoting attachment awareness in schools

© University of East Anglia, 2020

Aims of the session

- To introduce key concepts in attachment theory
- To outline and explore the Secure Base model for schools
- To consider ways of applying the model in your school

What is the Secure Base model?

- A framework for promoting secure base relationships between adults and children
- Drawn from theories of attachment and resilience
- Based in the day to day interactions between adults and children
- Strengths based

What is a secure base relationship?

- A secure base relationship develops when caregivers reduce a child's anxiety by responding to their needs sensitively, warmly and reliably
- When anxiety is reduced, the child feels secure and is able to explore, to think and to enjoy play and learning
- Attachment theory suggests that secure base relationships are first formed in infancy and support development, including brain development.
- But secure base relationships can be formed at any age

What does the secure child take into school?

- The child who has experienced secure base relationships in the family learns:
 - I am loved and lovable
 - Adults can be trusted to be available for me
 - I can explore and return for help
- The secure child takes these positive expectations (their *internal working model*) into new relationships in nursery, school and other activities
- Others tend to respond more positively to a secure child who has positive expectations of self and others and is happy to play and learn

Why have some children not had secure base relationships in their families?

- Some parents did not experience secure base relationships in their own childhood
- Parental stresses such as isolation, poverty, mental ill health, domestic abuse, drug or alcohol misuse may make parents less able to provide a secure base
- Parents may have:
 - Rejected the child's emotional needs
 - Responded unpredictably
 - Been frightened or frightening

How do children cope in the absence of secure base relationships?

- Children may develop defensive strategies for coping/attempting to get their needs met. e.g.
 - Shutting down or denying emotional needs and feelings, being self-reliant
 - Becoming emotionally demanding
 - Being confused, aggressive or controlling
- Early coping strategies will develop by the age of 12 months e.g. not showing emotions or making demands
- Unresolved fear or anxiety beyond the child's capacity to cope is sometimes known as **trauma**
- This can have lasting effects on thinking, emotions and behaviour

What does the insecure child take into school?

- The child who has experienced insecure relationships in the family may start to think:
 - I am not loved or lovable
 - Adults cannot always be trusted to be available for me
 - It is too risky to explore or try new things
- The child takes these negative expectations of self and others (their *internal working model*) into new relationships in nursery, school and other activities
- Others (adults and children) tend to respond less positively to a child who has negative expectations of self and others and may be very needy, demanding or aggressive

Discussion: What do you see in school when children:



- Shut down or deny emotional needs and feelings
- Are emotionally demanding
- Are aggressive or controlling

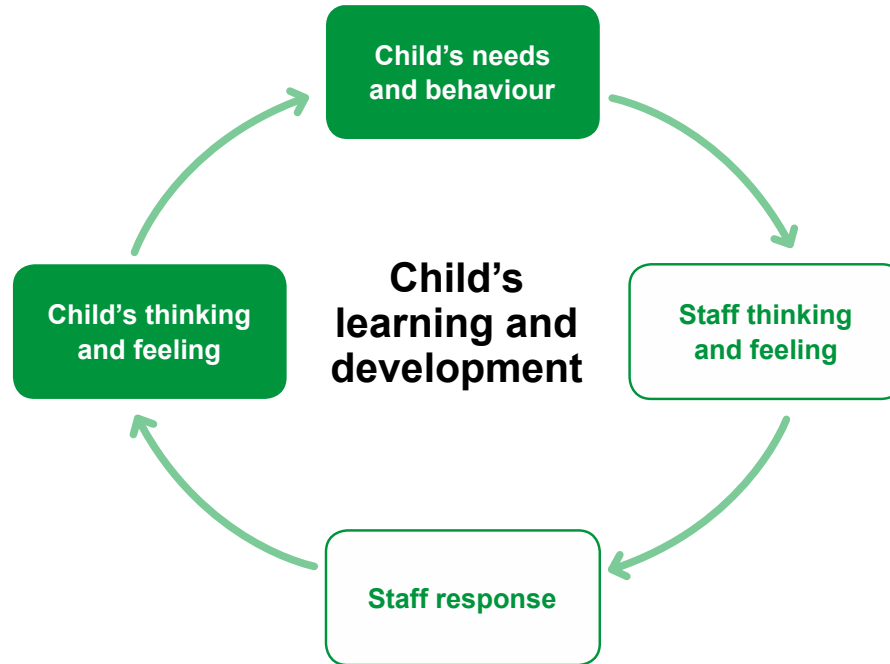
Secure base relationships in school

- From first entering school, all children's learning and development can be supported by secure base relationships with staff members – insecure children in particular will benefit but **all** children feel anxious at times
- These relationships will build trust, provide reassurance, reduce anxiety and so enhance children's capacity for learning
- They also enhance children's capacity to manage their feelings and behaviour, to build self-esteem and to form co-operative relationships with staff and peers

Providing secure base relationships in school

- Secure base relationships in school can be developed through
 - one to one relationships with staff that the child sees regularly
 - contacts with staff throughout the school day
 - a school culture of respect for and responsiveness to every child

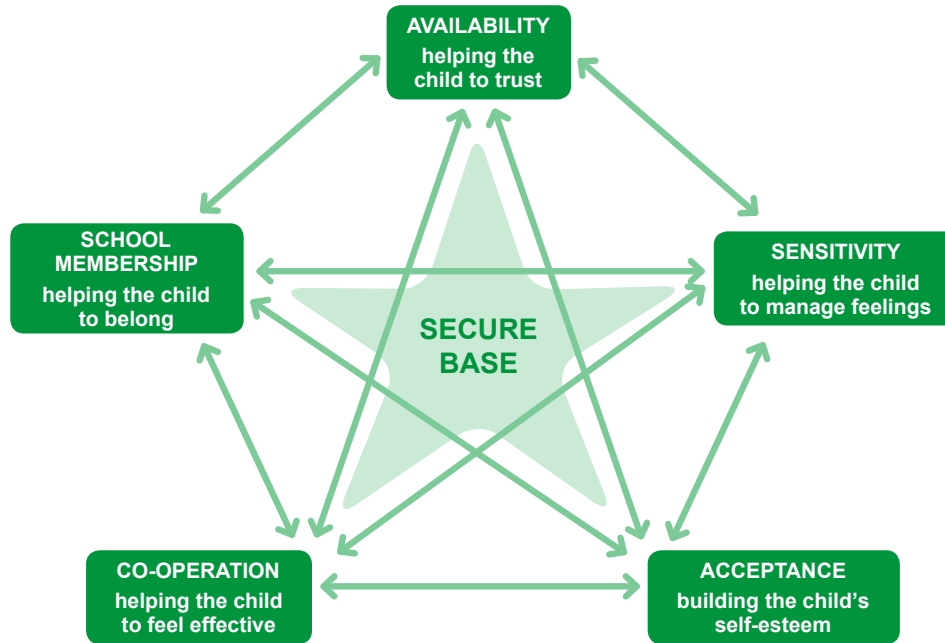
The staff–child relationship cycle



The five dimensions of secure base relationships in school

- Availability – helping the child to trust
- Sensitivity – helping the child to manage feelings
- Acceptance – building the child's self esteem
- Co-operation – helping the child to feel effective
- School membership – helping the child to belong

The Secure Base model for schools



Availability: helping the child to trust

- Being available means signalling your interest and concern to all children
- Children who are more troubled may need individualised approaches to demonstrating availability
- The aim is for ALL children to be able to trust that one or more staff members are 'there for them' if needed

Availability – helping the child to trust



Discussion: What might you see in school when a child lacks trust?



- Think of a child that you have taught or is known to you who seems to lack trust in adults. What behaviours have you observed?

Availability: staff member thinking and feeling

It can be helpful to think about:

- What does this child expect from adults?
- How can I show this child that I can be trusted?

Availability – helping the child to trust: staff member response

- Responding to the child's needs and signals
- Providing verbal and non-verbal signals of availability

Availability – helping the child to trust

‘Every morning, one of us (usually me) is on the gate. I say ‘Good morning’, ‘How are you’ to every child as they arrive. I might chat to anyone who’s ‘hovering’, say hello to parents, check uniform and give a friendly warning. I just think it’s important that they feel a connection with someone as soon as they arrive’

(Pastoral Support staff member)

Availability – helping the child to trust

‘There’s a lad at the moment and he’s looking really sad and he comes and sits in the Library, in my line of sight, but he won’t say anything. I say to him ‘everything OK?’ and he says ‘Yes, I just want some peace.’ And I passed him in class and saw him staring out of the window. I’ve sent an e mail round to everyone to keep an eye on him. But he keeps coming (to the Library) and sooner or later, he’ll probably talk about it’ (School Librarian)

Availability – helping the child to trust

Researcher: ‘What would you do if you had a problem or you were worried about something in school?’

‘If you’ve got a problem, you can always find a teacher who understands, someone you can turn to’ (Child, age 13)

‘Or another teacher will take you to one who understands, because maybe they’ve had that sort of problem themselves or they’ve helped other children with that problem’

(Child, age 14)

Availability – helping the child to trust

Researcher: ‘What makes a trusting relationship with a teacher’?

‘You build trust with a teacher when you have a nice conversation with them – not just about your work but about other things as well. Like how they might deal with things that are on your mind. They have the right attitude – they are positive and they can nip things in the bud before they get too big’ (Child, age 13)

Discussion: Availability – helping the child to trust

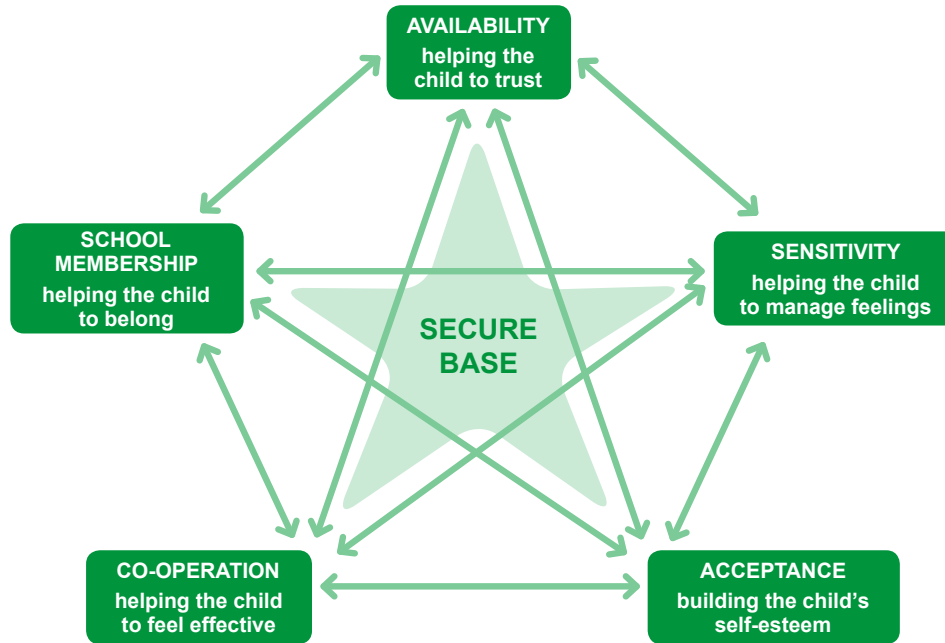


- How do you identify opportunities in lessons or at other times:
 - to signal to each child that you value them
 - to note/respond to individual needs and signals of anxiety?
- How does your school culture/policies identify and respond to individual children's' needs and anxieties
- What are the challenges of showing availability/building trust in a school setting?

Availability: child thinking and feeling

- In school, I matter and I am safe
- Adults will help and support me

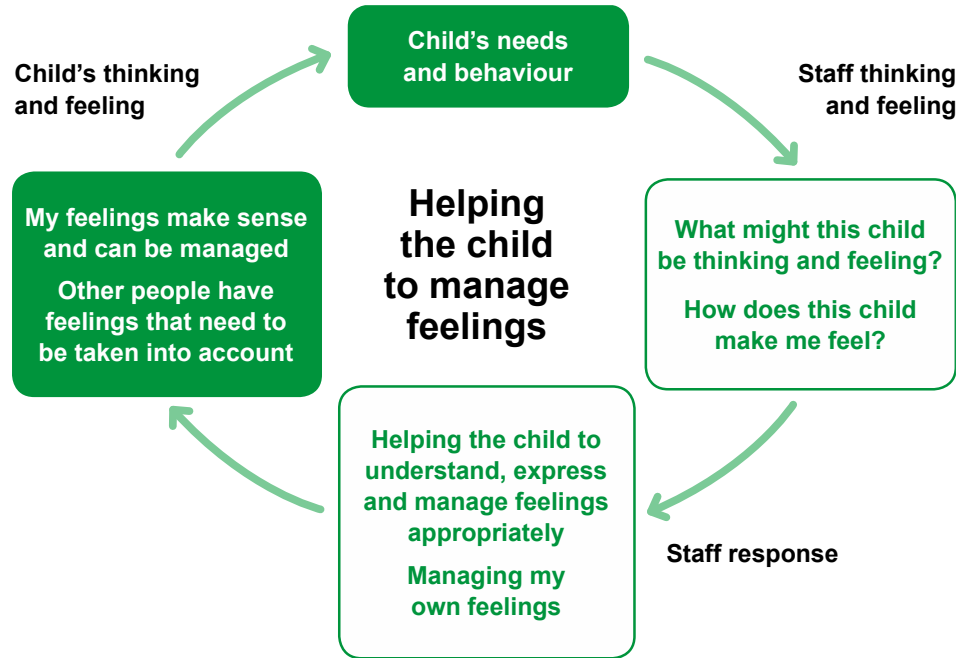
The Secure Base model for schools



Sensitivity – helping the child to manage feelings

- Sensitivity refers to the adult thinking about what the child might be thinking and feeling and taking this into account in how they respond
- Sensitive discussion about feelings can help children to name and manage difficult feelings and to regulate troubled behaviour
- The goal is for all children to be able to understand and manage their feelings, and to be sensitive to the feelings of others

Sensitivity – helping the child to manage feelings



What you might see in school when children cannot manage their feelings?

- Feelings may be shown excessively or denied/repressed
- Feelings may become chaotic
- Feelings may be expressed through bodies e.g. headaches, eating problems, self-harm
- Appear unaware/unresponsive to the feelings of others

Sensitivity: staff member thinking and feeling

It can be helpful to think about:

- What might this child be thinking and feeling?
- How does this child make *me* feel?

Sensitivity – staff member response

- Helping the child to understand, express and manage feelings appropriately
- Managing my own feelings

Example: Sensitivity – helping the child to manage feelings

‘Sometimes I think when they’re angry, they’re just teenagers and they just need a bit of time and space to have a think. Sometimes I can catch someone when they’re storming out and I say come and have 5 minutes in here (reception) and I don’t say anything to them but that five minutes of quiet and non-judgement can be enough for them to calm down and get over it’ (School receptionist)

Sensitivity – being helped to talk about my feelings

‘I think it all comes back to trust again. The teachers you can trust can read your emotions. They know you and you’d open up to them. In this school, there’s loads of teachers who would know if you’re upset about something. But just one or two who you’d talk to about it. That’s good because you wouldn’t want everyone saying, ‘Are you OK?’ But you’d know that one or two teachers really understood and cared how you were’
(Child, age 14)

Sensitivity: child thinking and feeling

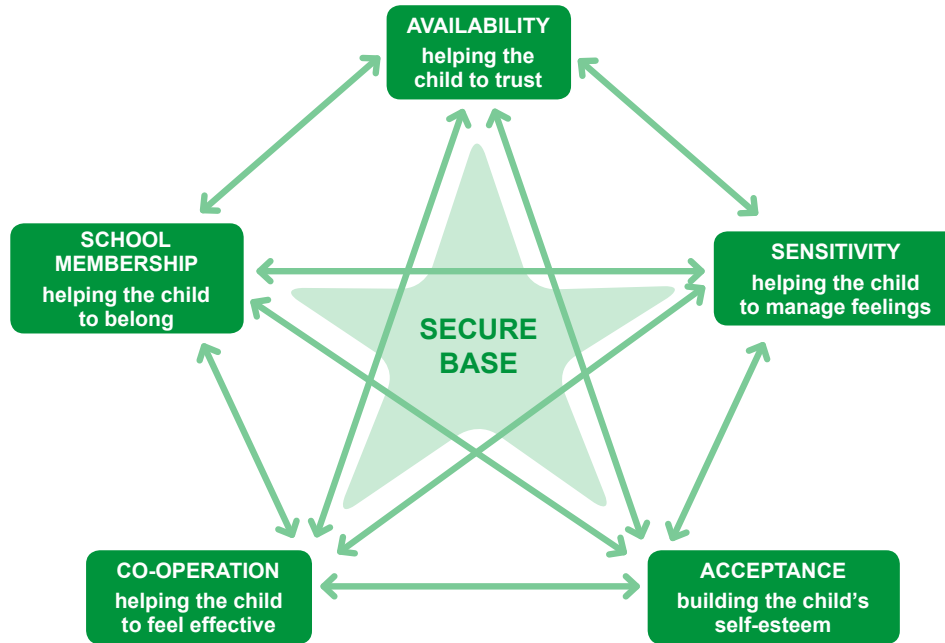
- My feelings make sense to others and can be managed
- Other people have thoughts and feelings that need to be taken into account

Discussion: Sensitivity - managing your own feelings



- What is the *range* of feelings that you have experienced in your interactions with children in school?
- What are the challenges of acknowledging and managing difficult feelings that children might trigger for you? What can help with this?

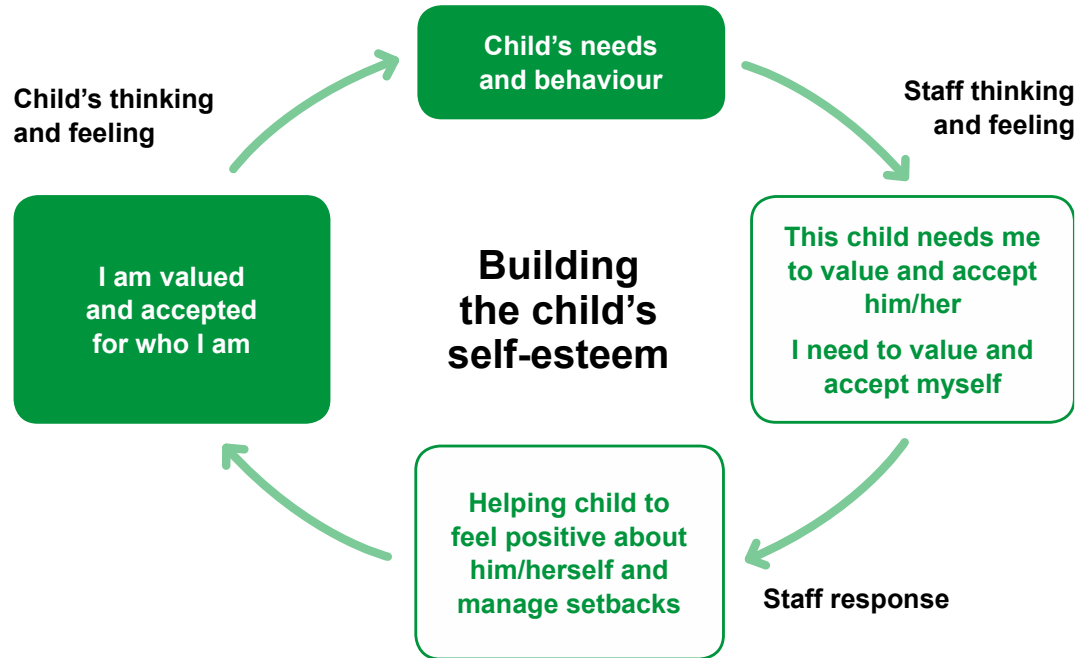
The Secure Base model for schools



Acceptance – building the child’s self-esteem

- Acceptance
 - involves relationships in which each child is accepted for who they are
 - celebrates difference – in ethnicity, culture, sexuality, personality and talents
 - celebrates success – but also supports the child through disappointments and setbacks
- These elements of acceptance combine and interact to build the child’s self esteem
- Some children may need targeted approaches to building self esteem

Acceptance – building the child's self-esteem



What might you see in school when a child's self-esteem is low?

Child may:

- Feel unworthy of success/praise and react negatively to it
- Fear failure/avoid risk
- Minimise knowledge or achievements
- Defend themselves with exaggerated claims

Acceptance: staff member thinking and feeling

It can be helpful to think about:

- This child needs me to value and accept him/her
- I need to value and accept myself

Acceptance – staff response

- Helping the child to feel positive about him or herself
- Helping the child to manage setbacks

Acceptance – building the child’s self-esteem

‘We want every child to feel valued, and if there are issues in school we always convey that we will deal with them and move on. Each day (sometimes each lesson!) is a new one and what’s over is over’ (Teacher)

Acceptance – a targeted approach to building the child's self-esteem

‘You have to think of how you’re doing it (giving praise). Some children love everyone to know they’ve done well. But others hate all that and you have to just quietly, privately say ‘I’m really proud that you managed that so well’ or something like that’ (Teacher)

Being accepted for who I am

‘In this school, whoever you want to be, they’ll be happy for you’

‘But also, if they know you well, they know if you’re trying to act like someone else and you’re not really being you. Like if you’re mixing with the wrong people. So they help you be your best self’

‘Teachers always deal with it if someone’s not respectful’

(Young people)

Discussion: Acceptance – building the child's self esteem

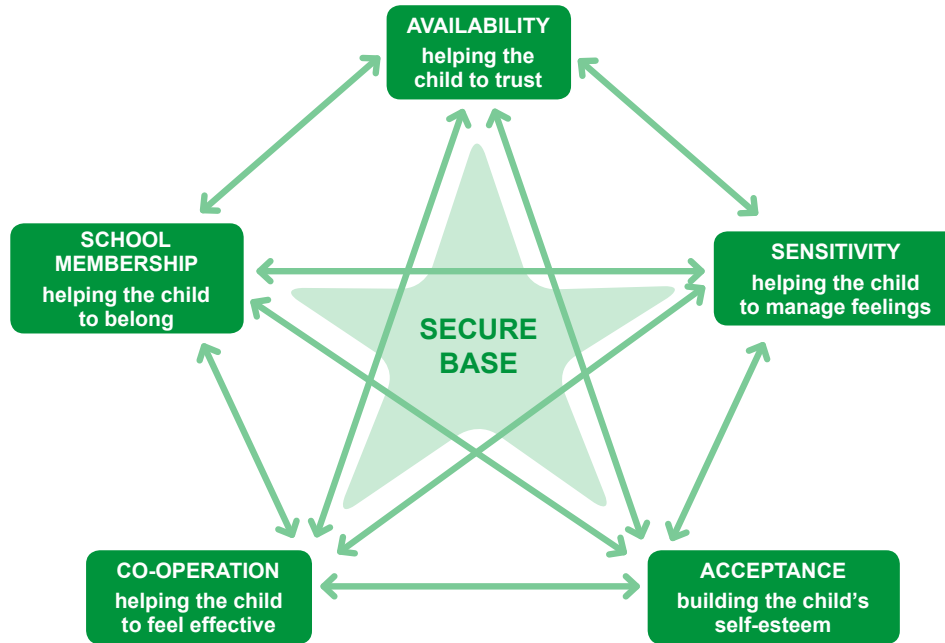


- What are the opportunities in lessons and other parts of the school day, to help children to feel good about themselves/manage setbacks? Is there anything more that could be done?
- How does the school culture/policies support children to help children to feel good about themselves/manage setbacks? Is there anything more that could be done?
- How does your school recognise and value staff members' contributions and achievements? Is there anything more that could be done?

Acceptance: child thinking and feeling

- I am accepted and valued for who I am

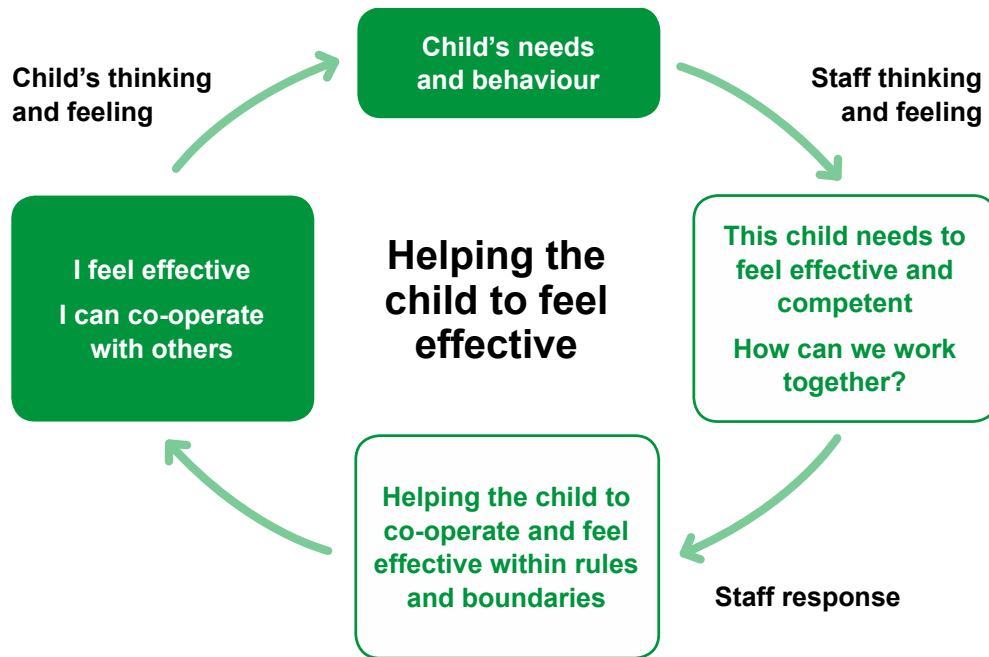
The Secure Base model for schools



Co-operation - helping the child to feel effective

- Co-operation means encouraging and enabling children to work together with staff members and each other to achieve shared goals
- Working together promotes effectiveness and competence
- When children feel effective and competent, they are more likely to compromise and be co-operative
- Some children may need additional support to engage in co-operative relationships

Co-operation – helping the child to feel effective



What might you see in school when children find it hard to co-operate?

- Some children have not experienced co-operative relationships in the past or may have felt powerless and lacked control over what happens to them. May try to cope by being:
 - Too powerful and controlling of adults
 - Bossy/controlling with peers
 - Over-compliant, lacking confidence and appropriate assertiveness

Co-operation - helping the child to feel effective: staff thinking and feeling

It can be helpful to think about:

- This child needs to feel effective and competent
- How can we work together?

Co-operation - helping the child to feel effective: staff response

- Helping the child to feel effective within rules and boundaries

Co-operation - helping the child to feel effective

‘The rules are the same for everyone, but there are different ways of going about it. For example, someone’s chewing gum and you know there are issues. I might say ‘I don’t want you to have a bad day because you get caught chewing. I’ll let you pop it in the bin, and I’ll check later’ (Pastoral support staff member)

Co-operation - helping the child to feel effective

‘Negative points are for shouting out, pushing, answering back etc. But for each one, your form teacher talks to you about it and you can have your say. You still get the point but you can explain the circumstances or if you were upset about something else that day. So you’re not powerless’ (Child, age 12)

Co-operation - helping the child to feel effective

Researcher: 'How might a teacher work together with you on a problem'?

'They always try to find a way forward – and they give you a choice about whether or not you want to do it. For example, whether or not you want other children to know about it and that sort of thing' (Child, age 13)

Discussion: Co-operation - helping the child to feel effective

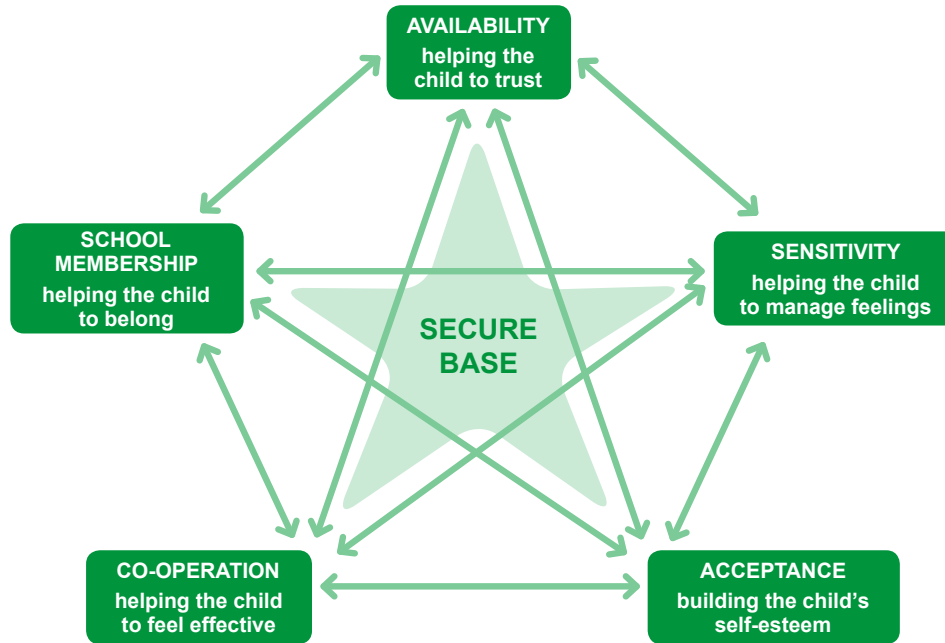


- From your own professional experience, can you think of an example of a co-operative approach helping to defuse a potentially conflicted situation?
- How does the school culture/policies support children to feel effective within the rules and expectations of the school?
- Anything else that might help?

Co-operation: child thinking and feeling

- I feel effective
- I can co-operate with others

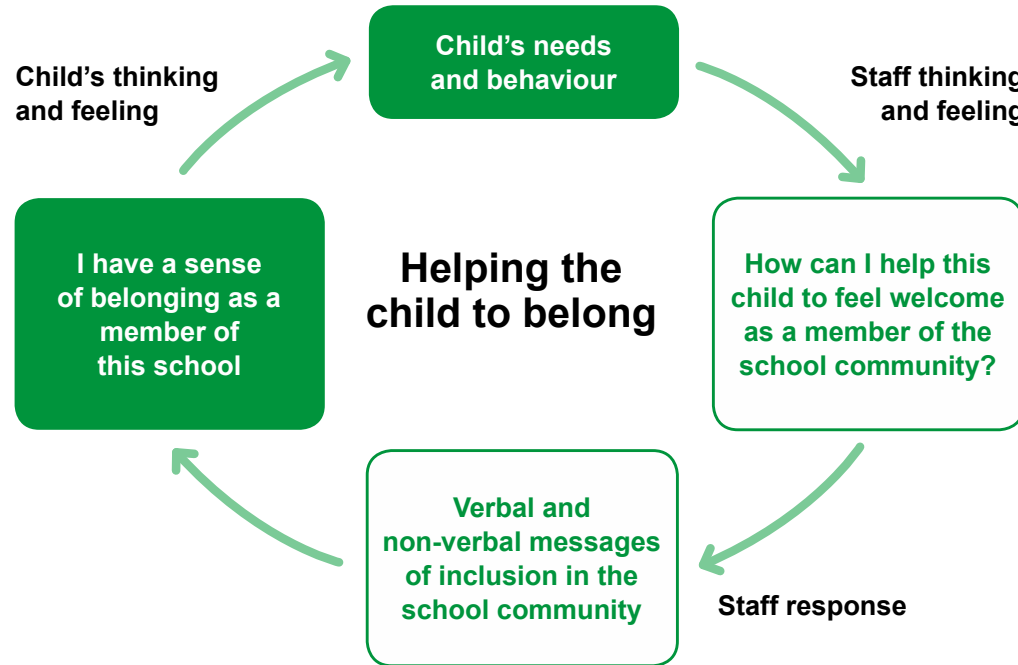
The Secure Base model for schools



School membership – helping the child to belong

- School membership
 - indicated by the extent to which the child identifies with the school and participates in academic and non-academic school activities
 - offers feelings of solidarity, entitlement, unconditional acceptance and shared identity
 - provides a set of expectations, norms and values for living in society
 - extends to the whole family - parents, carers, siblings, grandparents
- Some children may be resistant or not enjoy a sense of belonging

School membership – helping the child to belong



What might you see in school when children do not have a sense of belonging?

- Poor participation/disengaged
- Negative behaviour and attitudes
- Anti-social behaviour (in and out of school)

School membership – helping the child to belong: staff thinking and feeling

It can be helpful to think about:

- How can I help this child to feel welcome as a member of the school community?

School membership – helping the child to belong: staff response

- Verbal and non-verbal messages of inclusion in the school community

School membership – helping the child to belong

‘Language is important. We use the word ‘We’ a lot. ‘We can sort this out’.
‘We’re very proud of you’ etc. To give the feeling that we’re all in this together’

‘We do a lot in the Community and that creates a sense of pride and lots of positive feedback for them. For example, we entertain the elderly at Christmas, we recently had the Royal Philharmonic.
They feel proud to be part of things like that’

‘Our interview process for new staff includes other staff and students
– it’s a shared decision’

(Head of School)

A sense of belonging

‘Teachers you trust have their doors open at lunchtime so it’s not ‘them and us’ we’re all here together’ (Child, age 13)

‘Teachers never ignore anyone – it’s like everyone is as important as each other’ (Child, age 12)

‘New children get a teacher to check things out with them, make sure they’re ok, feel part of things. They even keep in touch with you if you move away. Like ‘how are you doing’? (Child, age 14)

Discussion: School membership – helping the child to belong

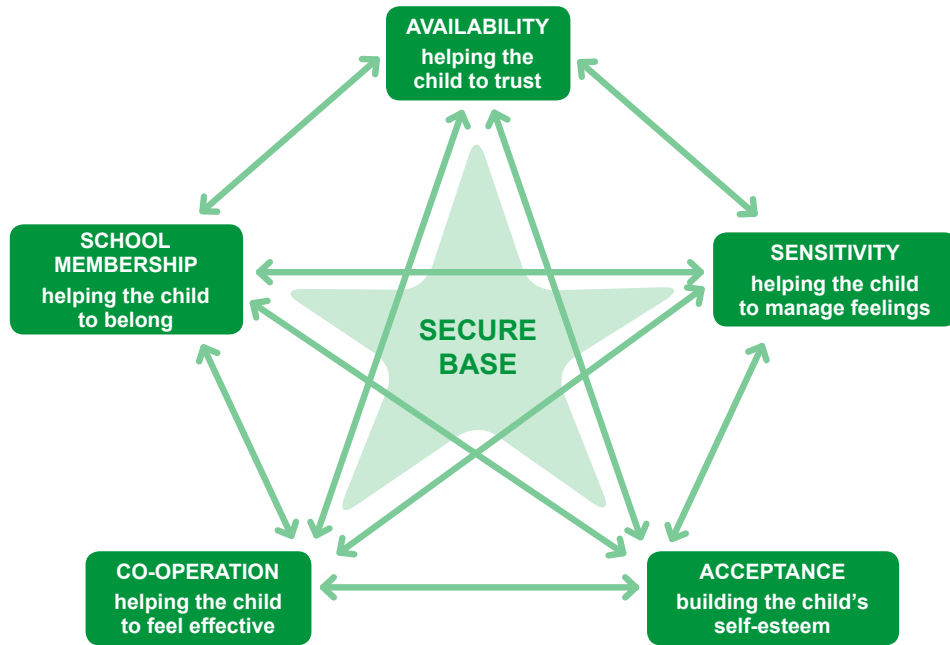


- How does your school culture/policies support each child and their family to feel a sense of belonging and inclusion in the school?
- Are there ways of encouraging children who seem resistant/not to want or enjoy a sense of belonging to the school?
- Is there anything else that might be done to help?

School membership: child thinking and feeling

- I have a sense of belonging as member of the school

Exercise: Using the Secure Base model to think about a child



- Consider a child in school who is 'on your mind' at present. From what you know about this child, how do you feel he or she is managing, at a classroom and/or whole school level, within each of the 5 dimensions of the model? What might help?

Exercise: implementing the Secure Base model

- How are the ideas from the Secure Base model already reflected within your practice and in the policies and ethos the school?
- How might these ideas be further developed?
- What might be done differently
- List the next steps that might be taken to achieve this:
 - to provide a secure base for children
 - to provide a secure base for staff

The Secure Base model for schools

