



Secure Base

The Secure Base model: promoting attachment awareness in schools

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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

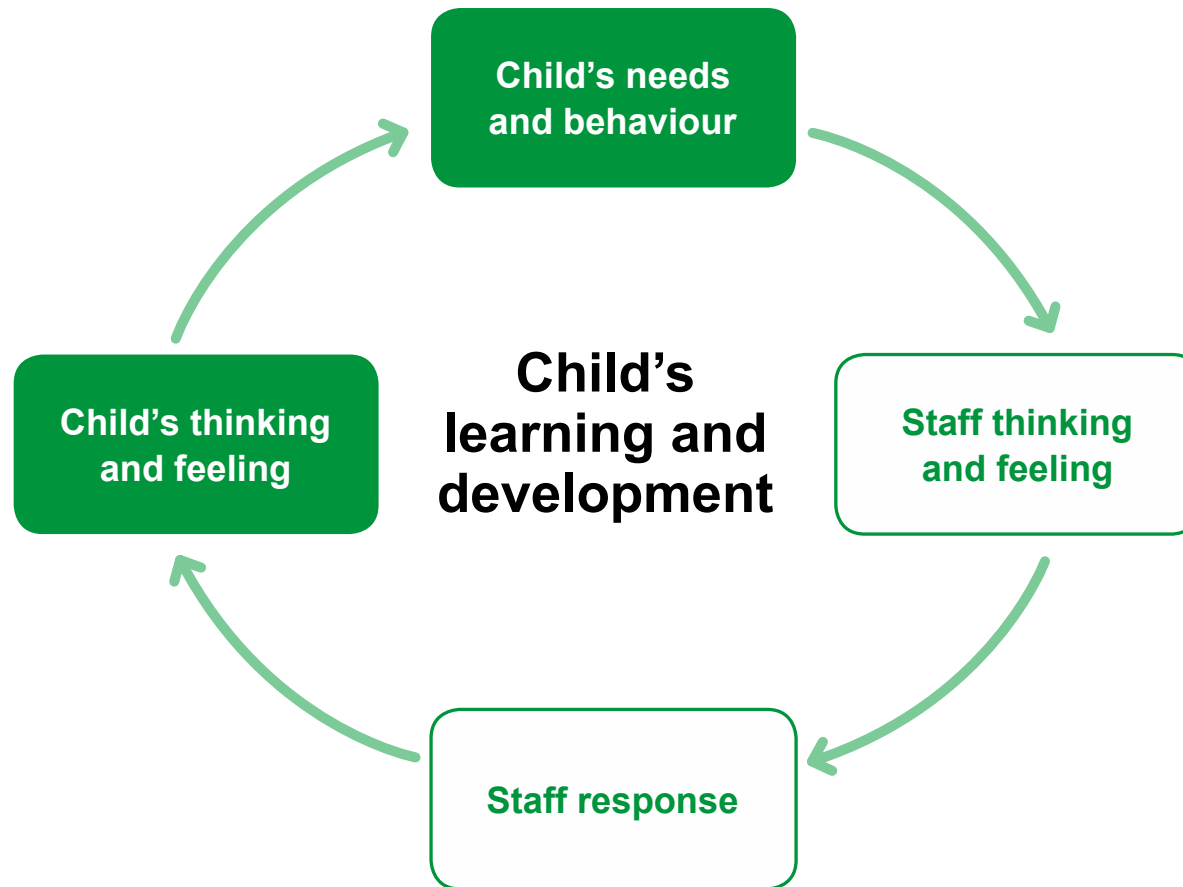
Secure base relationships in school

- 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

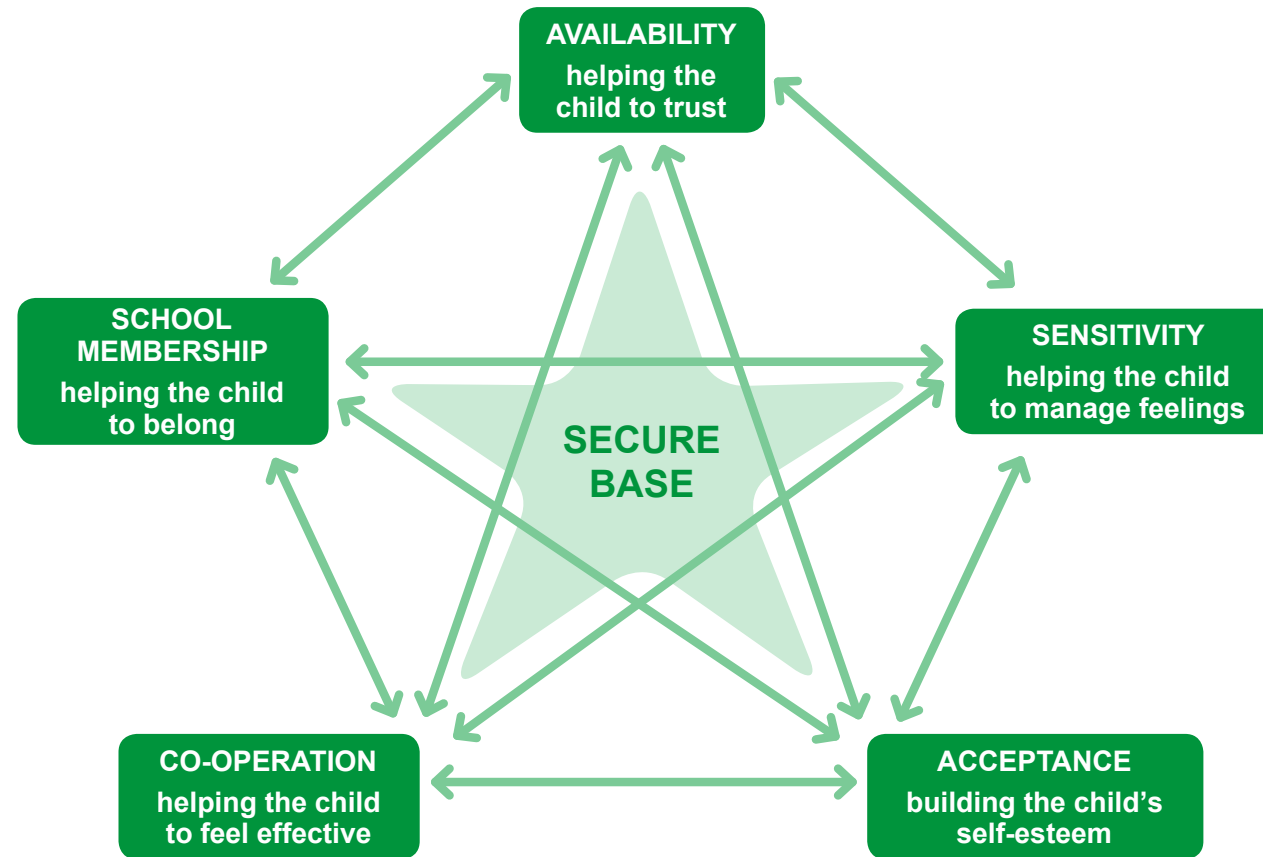
The staff–child relationship cycle



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'

Availability – helping the child to trust



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

‘I think one of the most important things is to always follow through when they come to you. If a child came to me saying someone’s annoying them, I’d never just say ‘keep away from them’. I’d always take care of it, even if it’s just a small thing. That way they can always trust that you’re there for them and you’ll do something to help them’ (Teacher)

Availability – helping the child to trust

‘I think you have to have a physical presence (in the playground) and that means actually connecting with the children. So I go round all the time, saying ‘hiya’, ‘are you OK?’ touching base, checking in, seeing what’s going on. That way, they know I’m there’ (Lunchtime supervisor)

Availability – helping the child to trust

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

Child (age 8): Tell a teacher. I would tell my class teacher or whoever is the play teacher. She would sort it out

Researcher: How would you feel then?

Child: Better because a worry will not have to go on

Researcher: What do you think other children might do if they had a worry?

Child: The same as I would, the whole class would, the whole school would

Discussion: Availability – helping the child to trust

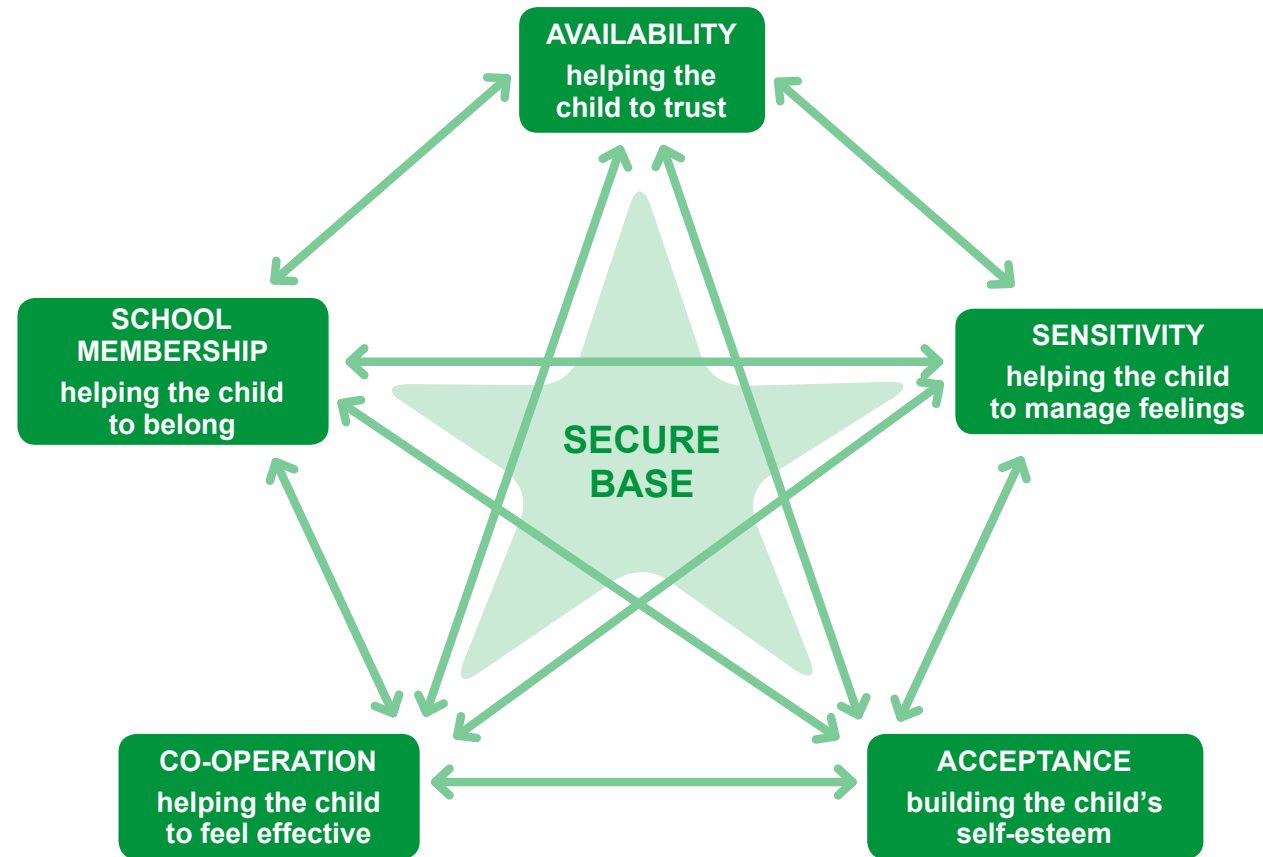


- How do you identify opportunities in lessons or at other times:
 - to signal to each child that you value them
 - to note/respond to individual needs and signals of anxiety?
- How does your school culture/policies identify and respond to individual children's' needs and anxieties
- What are the challenges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

Availability: child thinking and feeling

- In school, I matter, 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

Sensitivity – being helped to talk about my feelings

‘We use books a lot to get at feelings in a more indirect way. I’ve got a lot in my room and I can usually find one for the right age and situation. I try to get them to think about other people’s feelings. So I might say ‘when you hit someone, how do you think they feel? How do you feel when someone hits you?’ (Pastoral support worker)

Example: Sensitivity – helping the child to manage feelings

‘If you’re feeling – you know - you can go to (pastoral support teacher) anytime you want and she likes talking about that sort of stuff. She plays games and music and stuff that make you feel calm’ (Child 9yrs)

Sensitivity: child thinking and feeling

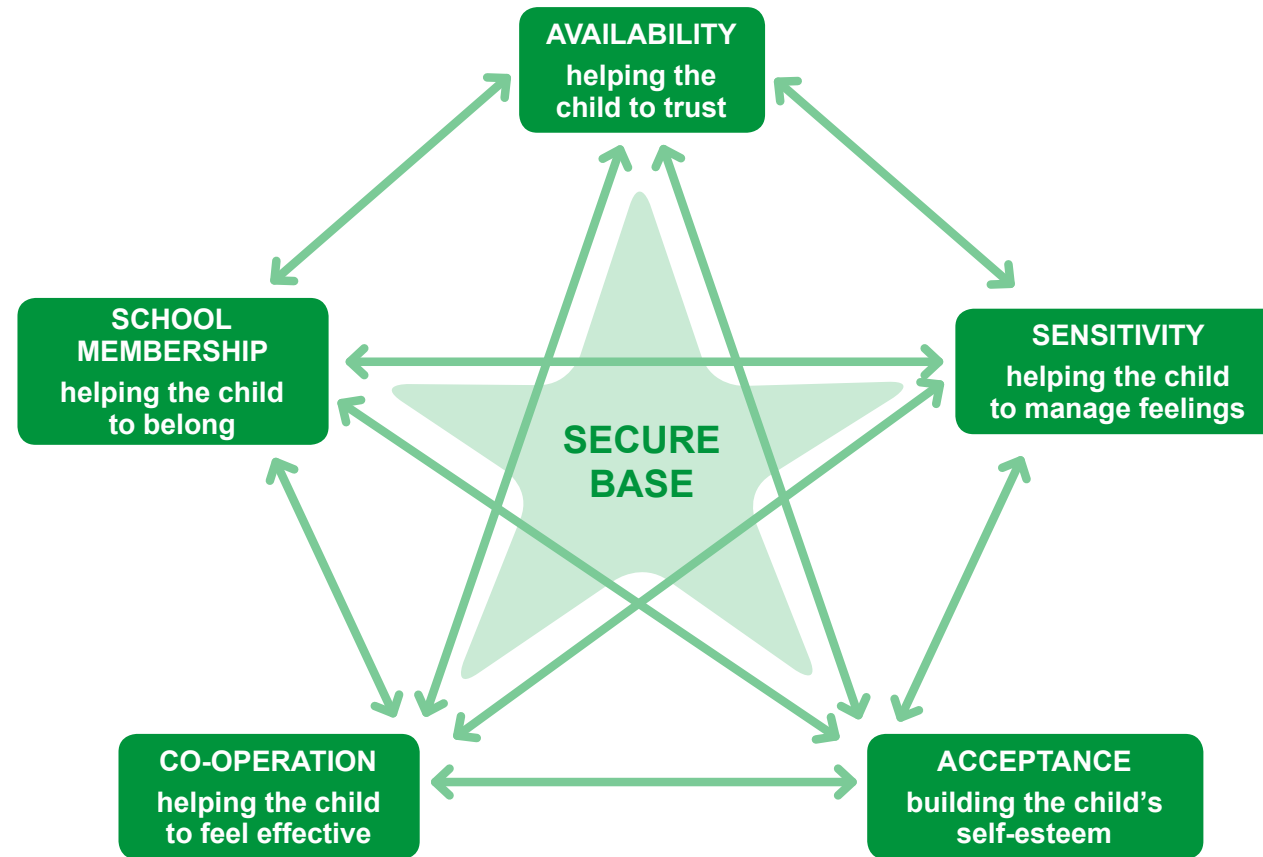
- My feelings make sense to others and can be managed
- Other people have thoughts and feelings that need to be taken into account

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?

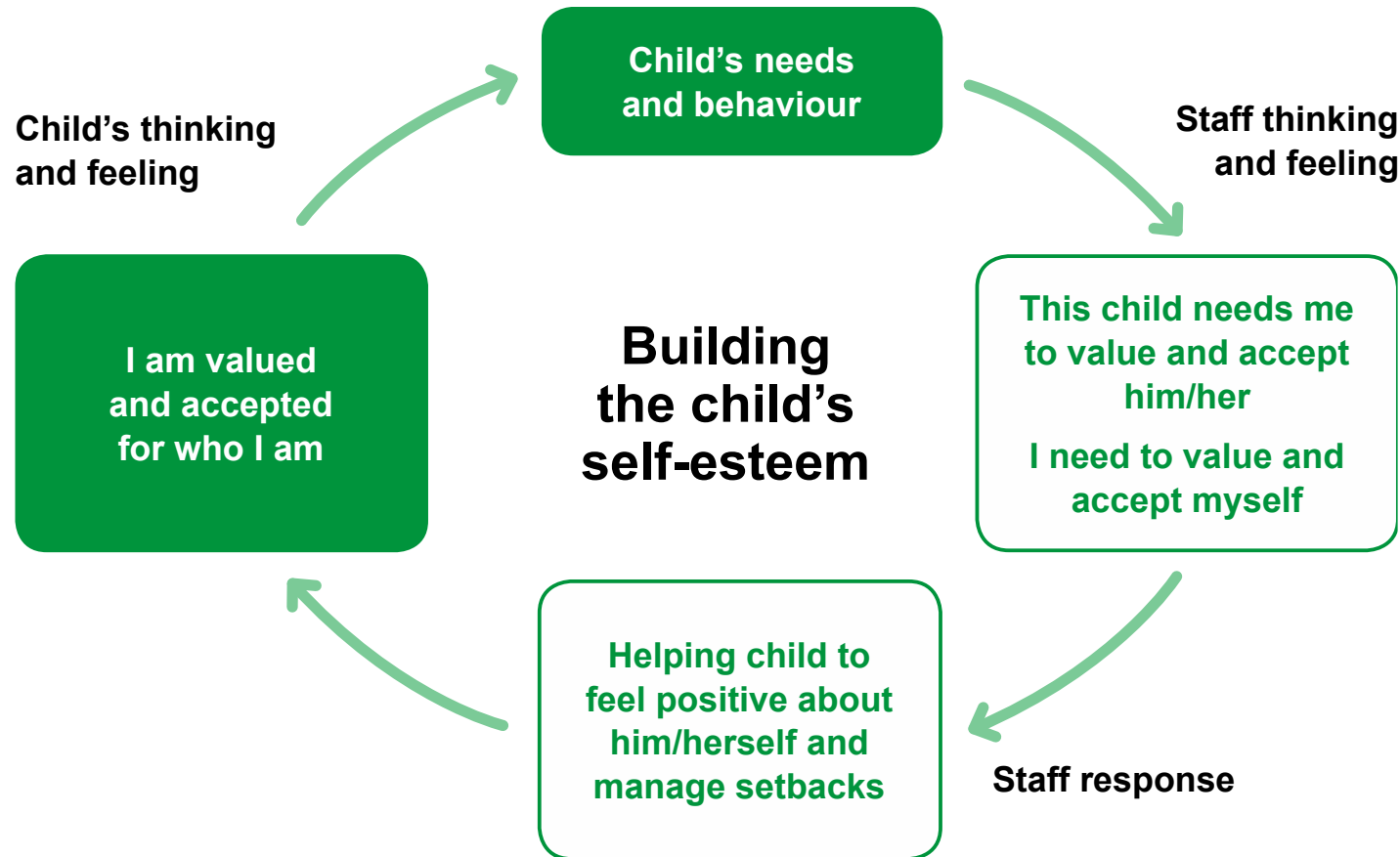
The Secure Base model for schools



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

‘Anyone in the school can and does get recognition – even for the smallest improvement in a skill or saying something nice to someone. So everyone has a chance to feel good about themselves’ (Teacher)

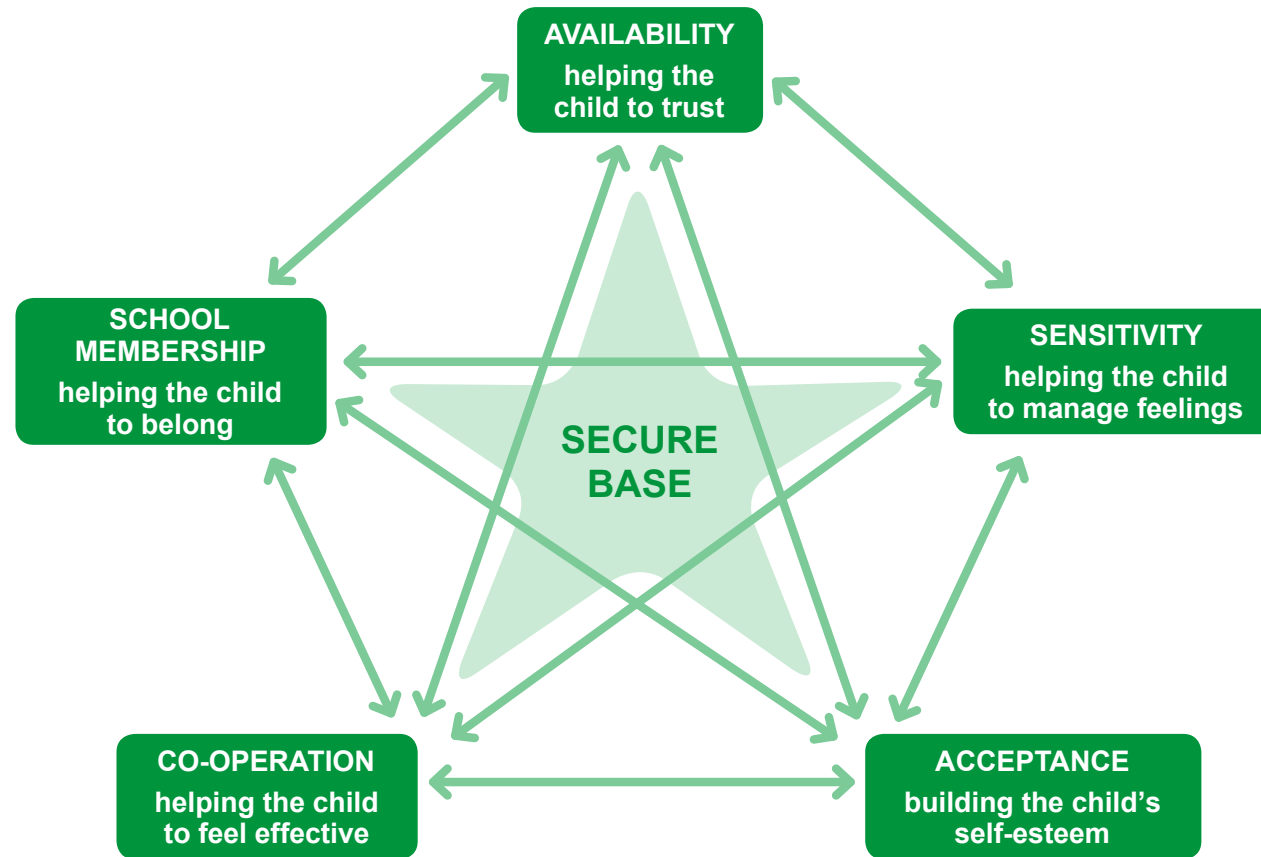
Acceptance – a targeted approach to building the child's self-esteem

‘Sometimes I used to get nervous if I done well because you have to come to the front and I don't like everyone to look at me. My teacher realised, and now I don't have to’
(Child age 9yrs)

Acceptance: child thinking and feeling

- I am accepted and valued for who I am

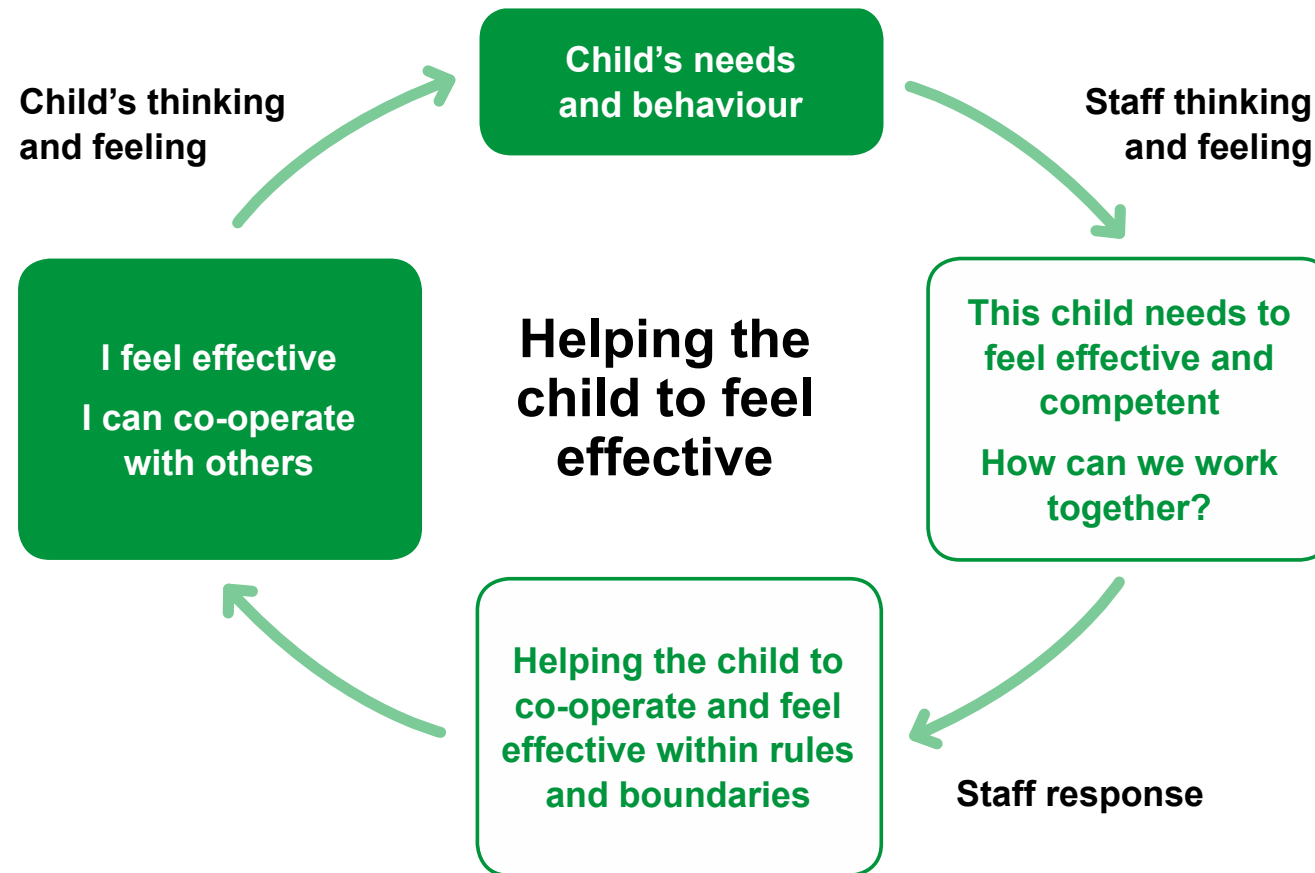
The Secure Base model for schools



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

‘Cooking is good for this (effectiveness). Because you’ve got a list of instructions, but you don’t have to keep to it, you can do it this way, or that way. They can choose, as long as you keep to the basic instructions’
(Cover supervisor)

Co-operation - helping the child to feel effective

‘I run a sports leadership group and they can be really responsible in that. They can volunteer to learn how to supervise and help younger children in sport activities and I can trust them to do it and they really step up to that’ (Cover supervisor)

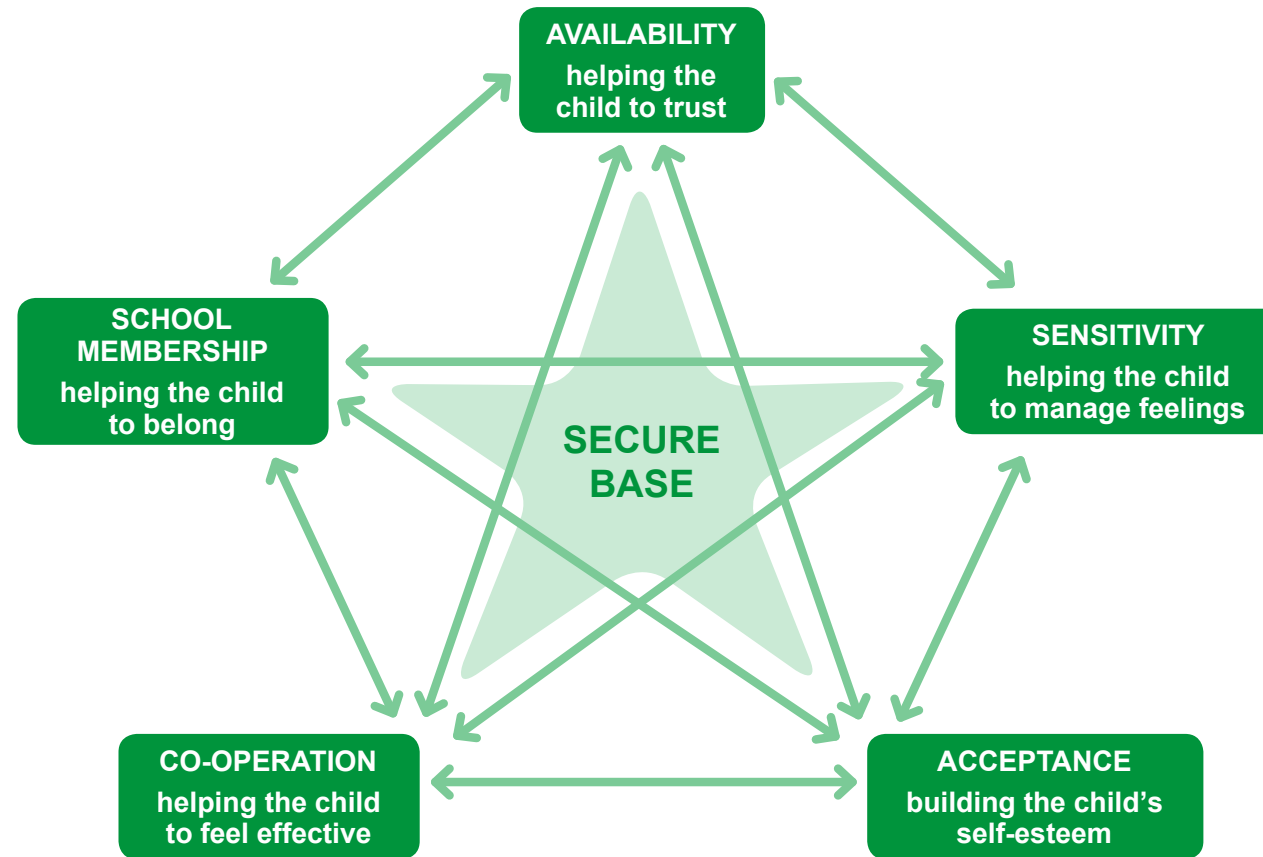
Co-operation - helping the child to feel effective

‘Everyone has a special job to do to keep our classroom nice and mine is watering the plant and I do it every day. On my own’ (Child aged 8)

Co-operation: child thinking and feeling

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

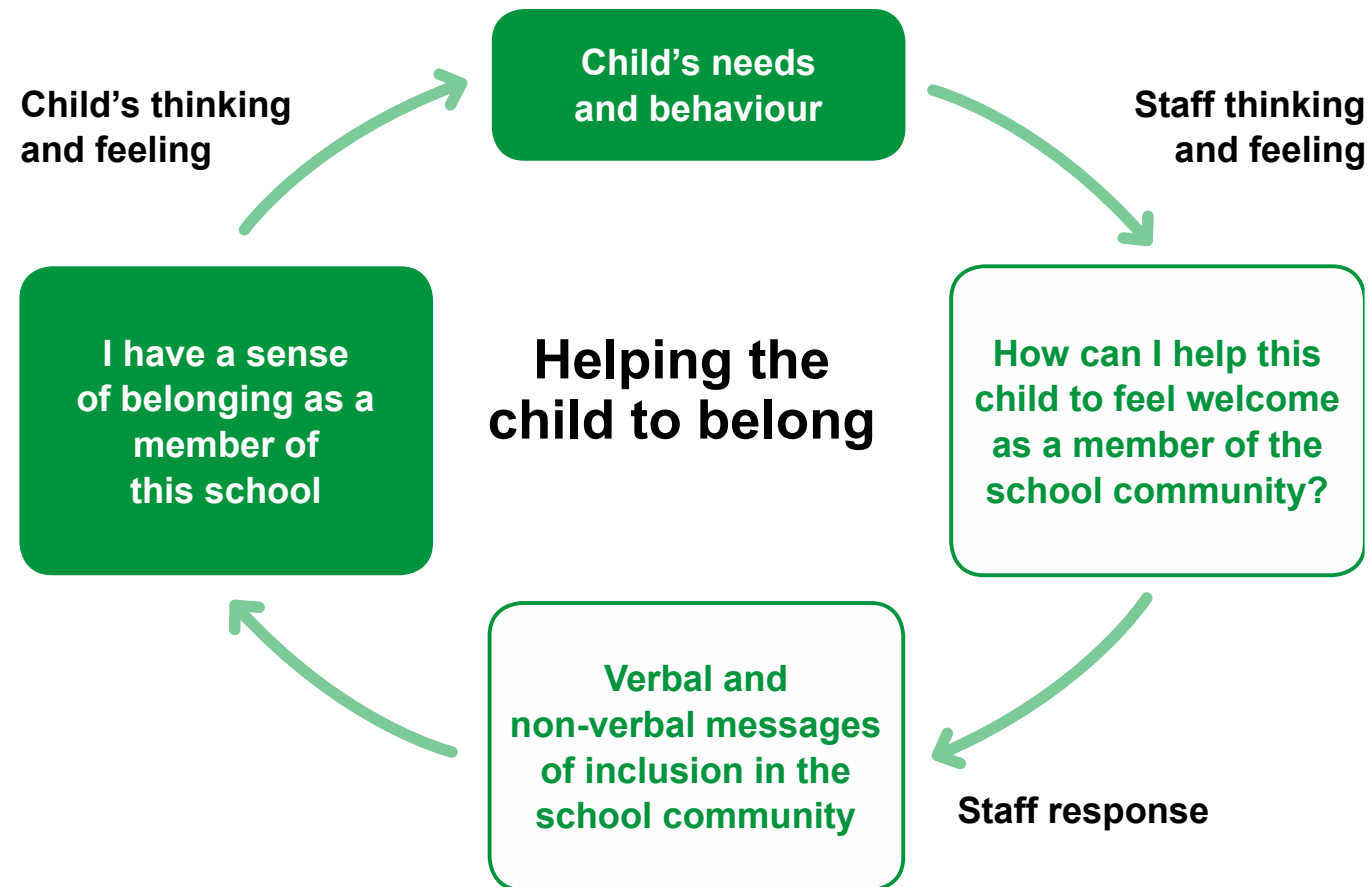
The Secure Base model for schools



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

‘Kindness is a big theme. ‘Right choice’ tickets can be given for small acts of kindness which help to bind them together, feel like they’re part of something good’
(Teacher)

A sense of belonging

‘I feel like we all belong here because we all wear the same clothes’ (Child aged 8)

‘School is a bit like home to me’ (Child aged 9)

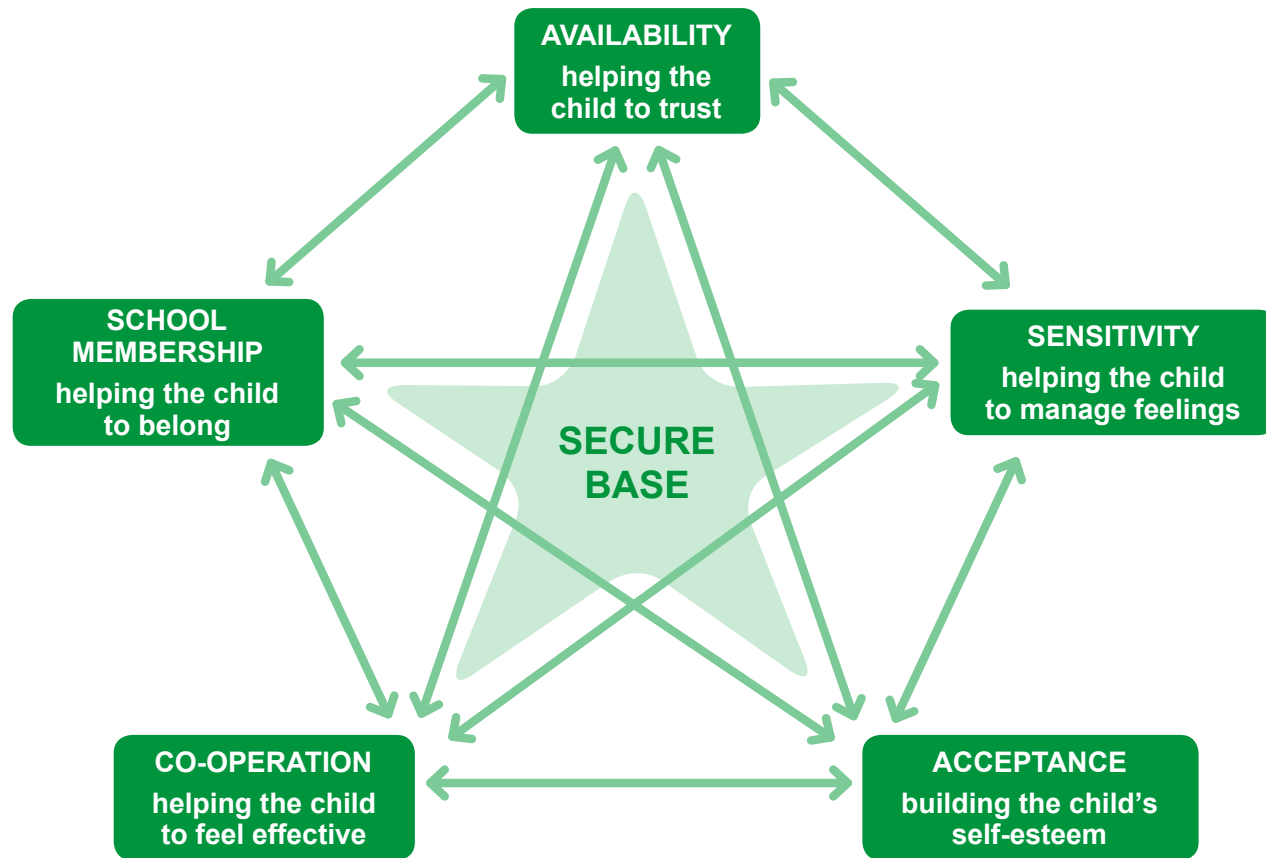
‘School makes me happy and excited’ (Child aged 10)

‘I like it here because I’m treated like everyone else’
(Child aged 9)

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?
- (N.B think about providing a secure base for children AND providing a secure base for staff, as this will enable them to provide a secure base for children
- How might these ideas be further developed?
- List the next steps that might be taken to achieve this

The Secure Base model for schools

