



Approach

All work undertaken by Amy's Trust sits upon the bedrock of a child-led relationship-based approach. This is the undercurrent informing what takes place during and over the course of an individual's time with us.

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The Core Approach

A Child-Led Approach

"Children are not things to be moulded, but people to be unfolded" ~ Jess Lair

"The word 'education' comes from the Latin 'educere' = e- (out of) + -ducere (to draw). Education is not just about putting information in. We have forgotten that it, in fact, begins in the child's heart." ~ Vince Gowmon

A child- led approach refers to allowing a child to choose and follow what they are drawn to, learning through the process. Underpinning a child- led approach is the ability to see the child as a whole being with their own unique make- up of interests and gifts for this world, which only they can truly know. Our role is to support the individual to connect with and explore their innate callings. This process presents learning opportunities in line with what is alive and interesting to the child, providing fertile grounds for the development of skills contributing to well-being, empowerment, and fulfilment.

These skills are detailed in the 'toolkit' section of this document which is important to read in the context of the wider child-led relationship-based approach. This is to avoid using the tools in a linear goal-oriented way which is counter to the underlying approach they are designed to serve.

A Relationship-Based Approach

"Restoring relationships and community is central to restoring well-being" ~ Bessel Van der Kolk

A relationship-based and restorative approach to understanding behaviour is detailed in Nottinghamshire County Council's "Understanding Behaviour" toolkit¹. This strengths-based approach is grounded in well-established psychological theories of human development and supported by up-to-date research evidence. The approach involves 3 kev ideas:

- 1. Unmet needs behaviour is a form of communication. Challenging or distressed behaviour communicates an unmet need. Therefore, understanding and connecting to the unmet need is the root of addressing what the child is communicating through their behaviour. A relationship-based approach helps children to learn how to identify and communicate their needs more effectively thus enhancing their sense of self.
- 2. **Individual influences** a child's behaviour cannot be fully understood in isolation, individual influences must be considered. In other words, we are all deeply connected to our world, the environment a child experiences shapes their mental health and behaviour (see Environment section).
- 3. **Relationships** Relational connection and belonging build trust and a feeling of safety. This is the grounds for being able to explore difficult and strong emotions, resolve conflict and increase self- confidence and resilience.

Further research supporting the importance of a relationship – based approach:

"Wired for connection"

Research shows we are wired for connection, and it is essential to our wellbeing². Relational wounding is healed in relationship, therefore a relationship- based approach to support vulnerable children and young people that have had adverse experiences is integral to their healing, growth and authentic self-expression.

P.A.C.E Approach

Amy's Trust incorporates the P.A.C.E approach into their work with children and young people. The P.A.C.E approach was developed by Dr Dan Hughes, a clinical psychologist specialising in childhood trauma, with the aim of supporting adults to build safe, trusting, and meaningful relationships with children and young people who have experienced trauma. P.A.C.E is a way of thinking, feeling, communicating, and behaving that works to support the child to feel safe, contained and connected by communicating the four elements of P.A.C.E together flexibly, not as a step-by-step process: Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity and Empathy³.

Interpersonal Neurobiology

From the convergence of an array of scientific fields emerges the latest interdisciplinary view of mental well-being: interpersonal neurobiology. The field of Interpersonal Neurobiology of human development, developed by Daniel J Siegel, enables us to understand that the structure and function of the mind and brain are shaped by experiences, *especially those involving emotional relationships*⁴. This area of study supports the importance of a relationship- based approach for mental well-being.

"As we'll see in virtually all the dimensions of interpersonal neurobiology this finding – that health emerges from the linkage of differentiated parts of a system – reveals how integration is the foundation of good health" ~ Daniel J Siegel

A Psychology of Original Goodness

"The finest act of love you can perform is not an act of service but an act of contemplation, of seeing. When you serve people, you help, support, comfort, alleviate pain. When you see them in their inner beauty and goodness, you transform and create" ~ Anthony De Mello

We work with the first principle of Buddhist psychology: see the inner nobility and beauty of all beings. Alongside an understanding of how past painful experiences can cause individuals to cover over their beauty and act from places of hurt⁵.

This seeing of one's original goodness is key to holding the door open for transformation, whilst an understanding of trauma builds a wise discernment informing the approach to supporting an individual on their journey towards wellbeing.

Toolkit

The child-led, relationship- based foundation of the approach is accompanied by a box of activities designed to cultivates skills ("tools"). These tools are the seeds of

well-being that, when sown with care, will grow for years to come, supporting the child on their own life journey.

They include:

- Self-centring skills
- Relationship skills
- Mindfulness
- Emotional intelligence
- Empathy
- Self acceptance/compassion
- Self- confidence
- Trust (in self and others)
- Resilience

The activities designed to cultivate these tools include:

- Passive Equine Facilitated Learning activities*
- Active Equine Facilitated Learning activities*
- Relationship Foundations
- Honouring silence
- Nature walking
- Art in nature

Key toolkit notes:

"Anything forced is not beautiful" ~ Xenophon

All activities are designed only to be used in the context of the wider child-led, relationship – based approach. Each activity's power to support the development of skills is dependent on the relationship with the child, their innate interest and a pressure free approach.

This is important to avoid unconsciously using activities to fulfil an adults need over a child's need. For example, if the adult feels they need to have 'achieved' something tangible during the session, the child then becomes secondary to that need*. This invisible pressure of expectation that 'the need to achieve' engenders is easily felt by highly sensitive children and people and therefore has an impact on the feeling of safety in the environment (see Safety, Environment and High Sensitivity, Autism & Neurodiversity sections).

*It is noted that such feelings naturally stem from cultural wounding around self-worth being linked to measurable productivity. We invite a compassionate awareness of this to facilitate deeper healing, expanding the container we are able to hold for the child.

Further Details

Safety

"Safety is critical in enabling humans to optimize their potentials along several domains. Safe states are a prerequisite not only for social behaviour but also for accessing the higher brain structures that enable humans to be creative and generative" ~ Stephen W. Porges

An understanding of The Polyvagal Theory, the Transformative Power of Feeling Safe, informs the environment created at Amy's Trust. It is central to the approach in a number of ways:

- For a child-led approach to flourish the child must feel safe enough to begin to reach out, follow their innate interests and learn.
- Working with our equine partners invites an awareness of and connection to nervous system states felt in the body. This is due to the nature of non-verbal communication (see Working with Horses section). The Polyvagal Theory informs exercises with the horses that empower children to identify and meet their body's need for feeling safe.
- The P.A.C.E approach (see Relationship Based approach section) is designed to build relationships that feel safe. Assessing potential objective risks in the environment is only one side of safety; fostering an environment that *feels* safe is key for providing a child with a container in which they are truly able to heal, learn and grow (including how to navigate risk themselves)⁶.
- Highly sensitive children are highly tuned to their environment and detection
 of stimuli that detract from a felt sense of safety (including sensory overload)
 may occur at levels imperceptible to others (see Environment and High
 Sensitivity, Autism & Neurodiversity sections).

The Environment

"The environment we create will determine what prevails" ~ Jane Goodall

This approach incorporates a deep understanding of our connection to the environment and the mutual influence we have on one another. With an understanding of The Polyvagal Theory (see Safety section) we can see how *feeling* safe in our environment influences our physiology, contributing to the behaviour we naturally express.

"The most important question a person can ask is, Is the Universe a friendly place?" ~ Albert Einstein

This is the question that the body is constantly asking of its environment (consciously or unconsciously) to decide whether it needs to contract and defend or whether it's safe to open and grow. Amy's Trust works to create an environment where individuals can begin to truly answer "Yes" to this question through what they have experienced at the provision.

Further research on the significance of the Environment:

"Our beliefs are not only self-fulfilling; they are world building" ~ Gabor Maté

The Buddha observed that "with our thoughts we create the world", and at the same time, recent neuroscience shows that "before the mind can create the world, the world creates our minds". In other words, the experiences that we have shape how we see things: Negative experiences, such as trauma, colour the lens we look through with shades of fear and distrust - our mind effectively asks: "the world wasn't safe before so why should it be now?". As a result, the mind is limited in what it feels safe to imagine possible and hence create.

By creating an environment capable of soaking individuals in positive, healing experiences we facilitate the healing of the mind so it may see and trust in the goodness, connection and love that is available in the world. (The healing of the mind goes hand in hand with the healing of the body, this understanding is supported by research referenced here but the topic is beyond the scope of this document).

Nature is cyclical

Once one thing has occurred (i.e. a child's behaviour begins to change) it doesn't necessarily mean it will be the same every time in every circumstance – the environment and an array of individual factors (see Relationship – Based approach) have an impact on what is expressed behaviourally. Understanding the cyclical nature of everything – healing, learning, growing, life – helps us to let go of the belief that things should be linear in their progress - "you did it before so you should be able to do it again". This reduces frustration, pressure, and judgment which is detrimental to the overall process of change. By cycling back to approach behaviour as information rather than a 'problem to be fixed' we promote acceptance and curiosity, taking a wider perspective of change over a period of time.

Boundaries

Boundaries form an important part of guiding children, and it is important to define what is meant by a boundary and why one is implemented. This section looks at boundaries through the format of "What? When? Why? How?"

What:

Amy's Trust defines a boundary as:

A limitation on how one may use their influence for the purpose of maintaining a feeling of safety, respect and connection.

When:

Due to the changing nature of an individual's healing and growth process the implementation of boundaries is made on a case-by-case, moment-by-moment basis by a suitably trained professional guided by the **3 reasons for boundary setting** below.

Why:

3 reasons for boundary setting:

To prevent an individual from causing harm to a) themselves

b) others (humans and animals alike)

c) property

How:

Setting boundaries with children that hold trauma and/or have autism – in particular demand avoidant profiles – can be a delicate process especially in the early stages of building the relationship, but it is also an important part of the process to help a child feel safe and contained. The overall aim is to set the boundary whilst staying connected (open hearted) to the child, navigating any feelings that may come up together. This approach is detailed below but how it will play out in a case-by-case situation will vary.

Redirecting energy:

We work to redirect the energy a boundary intersects so it may be explored and transformed, as opposed to staying 'stuck'. Supporting this process is demonstrated by the difference in language between setting a boundary with a straight "No." and setting a boundary in a way that connects and steers the individual in the direction of transforming the underlying energy fuelling their behaviour: "we can't do that because it will hurt someone, but I can see you have a lot of energy right now and maybe some feelings of anger, shall we go and hit the punch bag together and explore what you're feeling?" (see P.A.C.E approach in Relationship – Building approach section).

Staying connected:

Working to stay connected and open hearted throughout the boundary setting process is important to support an individual through feelings of rejection or shame that setting a boundary might bring up. "You are not your behaviour" is an important point to convey to avoid triggering shame and helping them understand that "no doesn't mean you are bad or that you did anything wrong". In this way children are not disciplined for their behaviour as 'bad' or 'good' but supported to understand how their actions impact the world around them and explore what leads them to behave a certain way. This process is supported by an empathic

A note on Demand Avoidance:

facilitator in line with where they are in their development.

This understanding of boundaries is especially important when working with children that have demand avoidant profiles. Distinguishing a boundary with a valid reason from a demand without a valid reason (eg. "Because I said so") is critical for fostering a felt sense of safety throughout the boundary setting process (see Safety section). For children with PDA, a demand (without a valid reason) will be received as an attempt to control them and consequently escalate feelings of anxiety. In many ways children with PDA are holding a mirror up to us asking: "Why are you doing what you're doing?", "Why are you asking what you're asking?"

In summary, this approach uses boundaries in their truest service: to keep everyone safe from harm. When we hurt others, we are also hurting ourselves. We will protect

children from this to the best of our ability, supporting them to find compassion for the places that hurt within.

Power

"Those who are truly powerful do not harm themselves or others; instead, they use their energy to enrich all they know with love." Yung Pueblo

This approach addresses the human relationship to power, providing an education on how to use our power (ability to influence) to create what our heart's truly desire. This leads to a sense of empowerment, agency, trust in oneself and enables creativity to flourish over a lifetime.

To be able to use power in this way requires two elements:

- a) The ability to connect to the heart (the primary feeling centre).
- b) The ability to express ourselves.

Both elements must be nurtured in each child. Due to societal gender conditioning (amongst other factors) there is often an imbalance in an individual's ability to access these two elements simultaneously.

Boys tend to be discouraged from connecting to their hearts ("big boys don't cry"), whilst expression, even in harmful forms, is often accepted ("boys will be boys").

Girls tend to be accepted in connecting to their full range of emotions (tears included), whilst expression is tightly reined in ("that's not very lady-like", "be seen, not heard").

We work to support each child to develop both these skills (whatever their gender identity) so that they may harness their power in a way that fulfils and nourishes them (see Toolkit section).

We are effectively working to balance the masculine and feminine principles.

Having children learn to honour both elements in a safe container within themselves lays the foundation for building healthy, consensual relationships (of all forms) for years to come.

When exploring relationship to power it's important to be aware of and honour the trauma individuals may carry because of another having used their power (influence) against them in the past. Exploring power is therefore always only touched upon in the wider context of the child-led, relationship-based approach.

High Sensitivity, Autism & Neurodiversity

"What is love? It is a sensitivity to every portion of reality within you and without along with a wholehearted response to that reality." ~ Anthony De Mello

High Sensitivity, autism and neurodiversity and are frequently viewed by modern healthcare systems through the lens of disease and disorder. However, Amy's Trust views these individuals as inherently well with unique sensory systems which, when placed in a highly stressful environment such as our current culture, respond in ways that get interpreted as 'evidence of disorder'. Yes, they highlight disorder – but where is the disorder coming from?

To understand what truly underlies these behavioural responses requires two keys:

- 1. Seeing behaviour as communication (see Relationship-Based approach).
- 2. Understanding we are inherently connected to our environment with a mutual influence taking place between the two (see Environment).

These enable us to see the child's behaviour not as an isolated 'problem to be fixed' but as the response of a sensitive being that is acted upon by a wider set of influences. If we can stay curious and open-minded we can begin to uncover the root of the behaviour through viewing it in its larger context.

Highly sensitive children (inclusive of or exclusive of being highly empathic) are more acutely influenced by the environment they are in which contributes to behaviours expressed. In many ways we could say that these individuals are like the 'canaries in the coal mines' detecting when an environment begins to turn 'unsafe' and sounding the alarm through their behaviour (see Safety). By using behaviour as communication, we are invited to discover what is causing the lack of felt safety they are reacting to and learn how to create environments (cultures) that feel safe and promote health.

This sensitivity is a gift to be protected if we want to bring more love into our world "for love is sensitivity, and sensitivity that is impaired even in the slightest degree is sensitivity destroyed". In this way we could view these children as the protectors of love.

This gift is a double-edged sword. When sensitivity is coupled with living in a culture that views certain behaviours as 'wrong' or even 'unintelligent', sensitivity can feel like a huge burden to bear. The pain of being labelled as the 'disease', rather than seen as a sensitive being *reflecting* dis-ease, destroys self-esteem, confidence, and trust by depriving the child of the sense of belonging that comes from unconditional acceptance and validation. This is integral to the well-being of a species wired for connection² and to the development of their unique gifts[∞].

A deeper discussion on this topic is beyond the scope of this document but is touched on it here to highlight our view of high sensitivity, autism and neurodiversity: one of innate belonging, value and health.

Working with Horses

The Horse

Working with horses starts with a fundamental honouring of the horse as their own being - sentient and highly intelligent. Our view of intelligence reaches beyond the

narrow range of 'left brain attributes' emphasised in the predominant education systems of today to include a much greater vista.

"Everyone is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid." ~ Albert Einstein

Understanding who the horse is as a species and as an individual is at the forefront of our ability to work with them in integrity. This is woven throughout our approach and the research supporting it accessible in 'The Horse' manual - a hard copied reference point for learning about the horse on her terms. It is reflected in how the provision is designed, how the horses are kept and how we interact to create a space that serves inter-species collaboration. This runs all the way through from pasture management and feeding to training and equine facilitated interactions.

Equine Interactions

Working with horses provides a unique opportunity to develop sensitivity, connection and a positive sense of self. Highly sensitive themselves, horses are keenly attuned to their surroundings. Understanding the way they sense, communicate and relate in a herd offers avenues for the exploration of relationship building principles and communication skills set within a context capable of enabling an individual to understand and integrate their own sensitivities and unique sensory make-up to form a positive self-sense.

Working with horses brings us into the realm of the body. This is due to their communication being non-verbal and the body being the source of non-verbal communication. The space between horse and human therefore lends itself to the gentle and indirect exploration of feeling and emotion. This paves the way for developing emotional intelligence which is a key contributor to health and wellbeing.

Due to their sensitivity horses offer a deeply powerful way for individuals to observe how the body's state influences the surrounding environment through reflecting back what they detect through their body language, behaviour, and expression. This provides a powerful experiential learning where one can come to feel their interconnection with the world and cultivate an embodied sense of belonging. Another key contributor to wellbeing.

Horses offer unconditional acceptance to all which is particularly significant in the early stages of developing relationships for those that have significant relational trauma from past experiences. Furthermore, horses can choose to offer themselves as vessels to indirectly explore emotions and feelings which are too much for a child to experience directly.

As is consistent with the wider child-led, relationship-based approach, children are supported to approach their inner worlds in their own time and at their own pace.

The Invitation

Extending the environment created by this approach into the wider community.

"Heaven on Earth is a choice you must make, not a place you must find" ~ Wayne Dyer

Extending this approach into wider community culture is an invitation to anyone who encounters the work we're doing and wishes to see it spread further into the world.

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