

ADHD and a Trauma-Informed Approach: PACE

For parents, carers, and school staff

Written by Jolene Ironside

What is PACE?

PACE is a way of relating to children developed by Dan Hughes. It stands for Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity, and Empathy. The aim is to help children feel safe through the way adults behave, listen, and respond — focusing on building trust and strengthening relationships rather than punishment or control.

Playfulness

Playfulness brings lightness into difficult moments. It doesn't mean telling jokes or being silly, but showing warmth and a gentle sense of humour. Playfulness helps children feel hopeful, break down their defences, and reconnect with positive feelings.

Acceptance

Acceptance means recognising and validating a child's feelings and intentions — even when their behaviour is not acceptable. It's about saying "your feelings are OK" while still guiding their actions. This helps children feel less criticised as a person, and instead understand that it's their behaviour that needs to change.

Curiosity

Curiosity means wondering aloud with a child about what might be happening for them. It's not about gathering facts or interrogating — it's about showing genuine interest and trying to understand their world.

For example:

- "I wonder what was going on for you then..."
- "I noticed that..."
- "Why do you think that happened?"

Curiosity helps children reflect on their experiences without shame, and shows them you want to understand.

Empathy

Empathy is letting a child know you are alongside them. It's showing compassion and tuning in to their feelings — whether sadness, worry, or frustration. Empathy tells the child: your inner world matters, and you don't have to go through this alone.

PACE in practice

PACE is not a technique to apply in difficult moments only — it's a way of being with a child consistently. When children experience PACE regularly from the adults around them, they develop a felt sense of safety that makes it easier for them to learn, regulate, and connect.



For children with ADHD in particular, who may have accumulated a history of correction, criticism, and feeling misunderstood, a PACE approach can be genuinely transformative — shifting the relationship from one of management to one of genuine connection.