



**NATP**  
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION  
OF THERAPEUTIC PARENTS



*Centre of Excellence in*  
**CHILD TRAUMA**

## **Naming the Emotion/Need**

### **-where there is aggression and violence**

Therapeutic Parents know that it is really important that we are able to meet our children's needs especially their early needs. Sometimes, however, it seems that we get led into an exhausting circle where the children's needs never seem to be met, they never seem to be satisfied, and furthermore we end up exhausted. This is particularly apparent where there is aggression. What we SEE is aggressive demanding behaviour, but until we correctly identify what unmet need is DRIVING that behaviour, we can be sure that it will continue.

- **Naming the NEED** is used to explain the behaviour to the child. It is a skilled, intuitive extension of using curiosity and wondering aloud. We relate the expressed emotions, (behaviours), back to an earlier unmet need. We didn't do this every time there was an incident, but if there was a pattern of difficult behaviours. 'Naming the need' is used to help the child make sense of their own behaviours and to understand why they do the things they do. It's okay if the child strongly disagrees or shouts back at you that you are wrong. Watch the behaviour which follows to see if you were right or not. Some parents worry that they may do harm by guessing wrong. This is unlikely to be the case because our children need to know that we are thinking about them and wondering why they might do the things they do, from an empathic start point. Sarah Naish and Rosie Jefferies have written a series of therapeutic parenting children's books which help parents to do this in a third-party way, particularly 'William Wobbly has a Very Bad Day' which links feelings driving aggression to early unmet needs.
- **Naming the EMOTION** may also be referred to as empathic commentary or wondering aloud. This is when the parent/carer correctly identifies the immediate underlying feelings which may be causing the behaviour and is very useful to use 'in the moment' in order to defuse or de-escalate a situation. Relate empathic commentary to what you think the child is angry about; for example, 'Wow I can see you are really angry about not being able to have extra TV time today.'

When you are **accurately** naming the emotion, this has a calming regulating effect on the child. Dan Siegel explains this clearly in his video "name it to tame it" (Video shown within the course Managing Violent Behaviour -Inspire Training). In his demonstration with his

daughter, he uses the scenario that she has had an argument at school. She is presenting as angry. He identifies that she is scared (of rejection by her peers). It is the accuracy of the naming of the emotion that works. (Anger arises from fear). Similarly, we need to accurately meet our children's needs. This does not mean running to do their bidding.

### Examples

**Child C** was feeling very angry with his dad because he had thought they were getting time on their own and found out that his stepbrother was also coming around. He lashed out at his dad. Grandma (a TP herself) assessed that he was feeling disappointment and identified this to him. Immediately he burst into tears and went to his dad for the cuddle and reassurance he needed.

In this case, the assessment was that the underlying emotion was disappointment. This enabled reassurance to be given. If the stated need had been met (I don't want my stepbrother round) this would not have been effective, and would not have given the opportunity to discuss, reflect and get reassurance. In this example, his need for reassurance, comfort, and security was met, plus he was given some information about the emotion disappointment.

**Young Person J** (age 17, developmental age around 7 – 10). J had an upset because she felt her bad behaviour would mean that nobody would like her and that she would have a repetition of rejection and abandonment. Her fear of this led her to pace outside, threaten suicide and tell her mum to "F\*\*k off". This YP can quickly move to aggression, so in meeting her need for **reassurance** it is not safe to approach her; however, her younger emotional age means that she will not move far from her attachment figure, despite her very disorganised and avoidant attachment style.

In this case, TP Mum went outside, sat on the step, very relaxed, and just replied to J's fears, giving reassurance. Using simple and repetitive language. "I will always be your mum, no matter what". "I will always love you". After a (quite short) time J began to calm due to the calm presence of her Mum, came in from the cold, accepted a cuddle, and a calming foot massage before going for a burger – establishing re-connection (unconditional gesture of regard).

In J's case, adults working with her have to always remember that she will speak from her fears. So, she will say she wants to move, live on her own, wants everyone to go away because she hates them, but actually, this is a very accurate picture of her anxiety about how she is perceived and whether anyone wants her near.