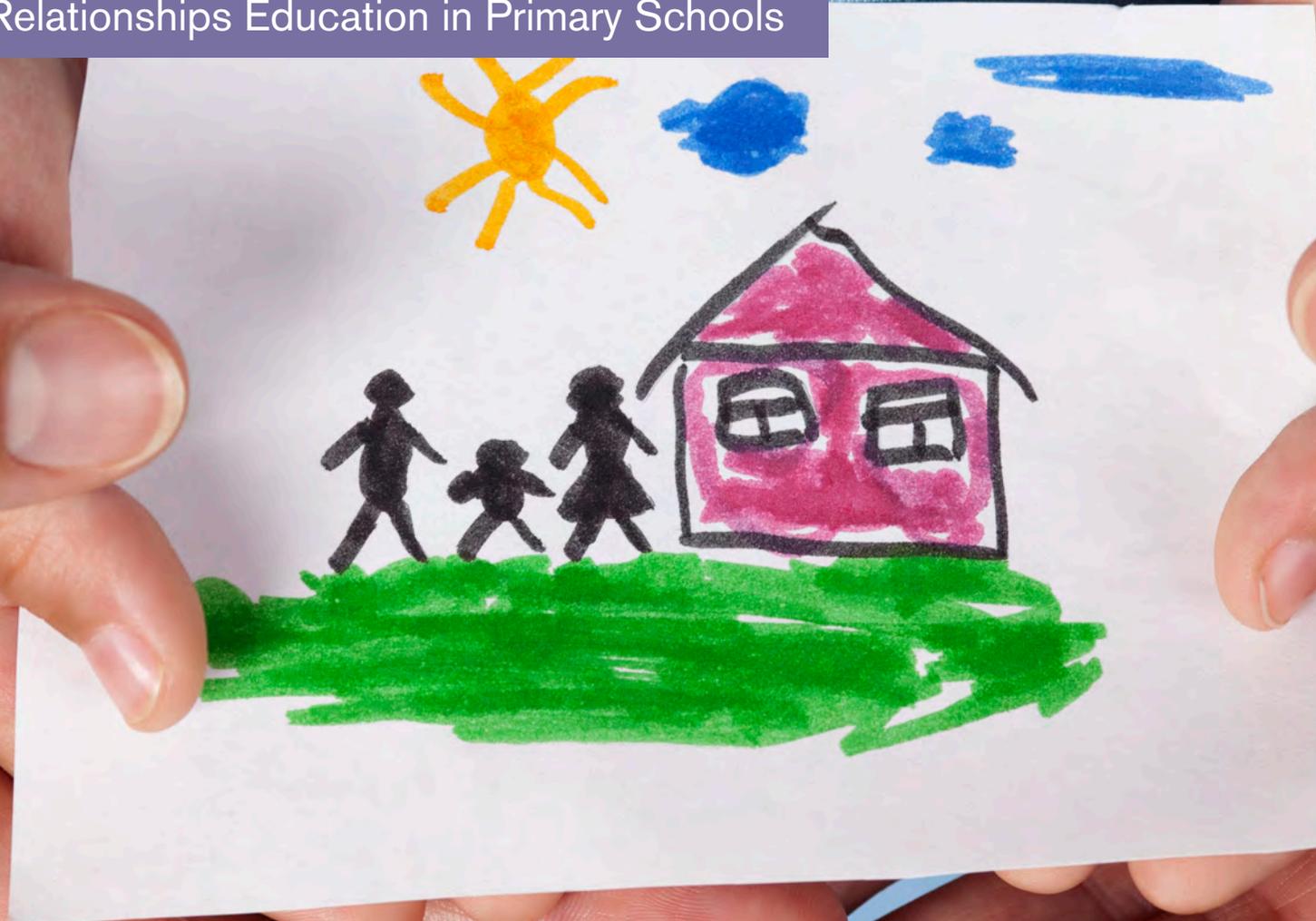


Understanding Relationships:

Supporting Relationships Education in Primary Schools



TAVISTOCK
RELATIONSHIPS

About this guide

The Children and Social Work Act requires primary school pupils to be taught about the characteristics of healthy relationships, and how relationships may affect physical and mental health and well-being.

To understand what constitute healthy and unhealthy relationships, and how they affect us, it is important to look not only at children and adults' behaviour towards one another but at the underlying reasons why they behave as they do.

Using short examples, this guide aims to provide primary school teachers with material they can draw on when talking to children about relationships. It covers:

- ✓ how we find ourselves doing things we're not really aware of
- ✓ how we were cared for as babies can affect the kind of people we look for as friends and partners
- ✓ feeling 'held' and understood, emotionally and psychologically
- ✓ how children (and adults) can get you to feel what they are feeling, especially when they're distressed or upset
- ✓ how children form relationships with peers
- ✓ how the way in which parents relate to each other might affect children.

How we find ourselves doing things we're not really aware of

Key points to cover:

- How much of what we do is outside of our conscious awareness
 - How early experiences shape our expectations of people, relationships and situations
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When she joined her new school, 5 year old Evie made enormous efforts to be friends with most of her class, including and especially her class teacher. She was very active in the classroom and needed the teacher's attention most of the time, becoming distressed or very fidgety when she did not have it.

Read the example above out to your class.

Questions you might ask the children: Why do you think Evie might be so keen to be liked, and so upset when she doesn't get the teacher's attention? There are no right or wrong answers; just try to think about the kinds of things that might be bothering Evie.

Try and get the children to think about the fact that Evie may not herself understand, or even be aware, of how she is behaving and why. You could touch on some aspects from the following explanation to help the children understand a bit more about why Evie behaves as she does:

Evie was separated from her mother at three months and adopted at eighteen months. Evie was so scared that the people looking after her would leave her that she worked extremely hard to make sure people noticed her and liked her. Although she wasn't really aware of it, in her mind, she was struggling with her fears that she might be rejected by the class, and this led to make such enthusiastic efforts to be friends with her classmates and her teacher, even though these ended up making her behaviour quite difficult to manage at times.

You could talk to your class about how – while we seem to be in control of a lot of what we do – a surprising amount of what we do is shaped by experiences we are not always very aware of. You could mention a time you did something but had no idea why you had done it. Or perhaps a time you said one word when really you meant another.

Acknowledging that we sometimes do things that we're not aware of can help us to understand why people behave towards us, and towards others, as they do.

Talk to the children about how such behaviour often has its roots in experiences that have happened to us in early childhood, particularly events that we have found so upsetting or painful we cannot think about them. For example, you could explain how Evie's unprocessed memories of being in a foster home might have affected her, and her expectations about whether or not things can be stable and permanent.

How we were cared for as babies can affect the kind of people we look for as friends and partners

Key points to cover:

- How behaviours such as sharing, turn-taking, negotiating and encouraging each other are all about relationships and how we relate to other people
 - The impact of early, repeated experiences – both good and not so good – on children's ability to share, take turns, negotiate and encourage
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Four children aged about 6 were sat at a table making mother's day cards. On the table was a small supply of craft materials, paper and crayons. Whilst making their cards they began to look at each other's work, and this seemed to spur them on to make bigger and better cards. The glitter and the shiny materials were particularly popular. One girl started an exchange about which crayons she wanted to use, and this led to a long conversation about who could use what crayons and materials, and how they could share them between themselves.

Read out the example above.

Suggestions questions: What positive behaviours are there in this example? Why do some children find it easier than others to share? Why do all of us find it easier to share things than on some days rather than on others?

You could talk to your class about how, to a greater or lesser extent, all children (and adults!) have difficulties with sharing. Generally speaking, children with sufficient 'good enough' early experiences – where their carers ensured that they were treated fairly – are more likely to have developed a sense that their needs will be met (and therefore there is enough of everything to go around), than those who haven't had enough of such good experiences. These children will be more likely to struggle to tolerate the frustration of having to wait and having to share.

Suggested question: How do you think a child who struggles to manage such a situation might react? (e.g. becoming very angry with the other children; refusing to share the materials; being unable to carry on making the card; crying for a grown up to rescue the situation?).

Suggested question: Does anyone know how many days a 3 year old has been alive?

You could then ask the class to reflect on the fact that by the time a baby has grown into a three-year-old, that child will have lived for more than a thousand days. This means that that child will have had thousands upon thousands of experiences of being cared for by their parents or significant others. The child will also have learned much about social interactions. From birth, patterns in relationships begin to form and continue to form as the baby develops.

Explain to the class how when certain behaviours, such a good feeding experience or being soothed when distressed, are repeated over and over again, a baby will grow up with the expectation that its needs will be met. Sadly, the opposite is also true, and when the baby's needs are not sufficiently met, he or she may well develop into a child and adult with relatively little self-confidence and little expectation of their needs being met.

Talk to the class about how most of us are challenged with a mixture of good and bad, pleasant and unpleasant experiences. Explain how the foundations of our characters, and how we relate to other people, are established when we are babies. And that the sense that we can manage situations comes from the repeated good and reassuring experiences we had as babies.



Feeling 'held' and understood, emotionally and psychologically

Key points to cover:

- The importance of feeling understood – or at least someone trying to understand us – for our mental well-being
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When Tom was 9 he felt very shy a lot of the time and didn't fit in with the rest of his class very well. His teacher knew he was a good story-teller so asked him to write a play for the class to perform. He wrote a play in which all the characters were animals and asked that the children be dressed in animal costumes. The teacher explained that although this wish could not be accommodated, the class could use puppets instead. The play was performed and enjoyed by the whole class. By enabling this play to be performed, the teacher helped the boy to find a place in his class, instead of feeling on the outside and rather lonely and frightened.

Read out the example above.

Ask the class what they think Tom might have been feeling, and how his feelings changed as a result of the teacher understanding what he was worried about. Ask the children in your class to think about times they were feeling upset and someone helped them to feel better.

Explain to the class that when a parent or a carer comforts a baby's cry, they are carrying out something incredibly important for how babies' minds grow. By being able to think about what a baby (who of course can't use words) might be experiencing – for example, hunger or terror at being left alone – a parent is able to turn that experience into something positive, such as 'the world can understand me and respond to my needs'.

Even if the parent or carer does not know exactly what is causing the baby to suffer, the act of trying to think about what the discomfort or anxiety might be can have a huge impact on the baby's psychological development. This experience is often referred to as 'feeling held'.

How children (and adults) can get you to feel what they are feeling, especially when they're distressed or upset

Key points to cover:

- Recognising that people can 'give' their unwanted and/or difficult feelings to other people sometimes
 - How difficult early experiences can result in some children and adults needing to do this more than others
 - How this process can be played out in situations of bullying and controlling behaviour
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6 year old Wilf seemed very anxious about being told off, and was always trying to make sure that he never did anything that his teacher would think was 'naughty'. Also, he somehow managed to get other children to do things that they should not, so they got told off instead of him.

Read out the example above.

Suggested question: Why do you think Wilf might be so worried about being told off? Have you ever felt that some children have a knack of making you do things that you don't really want to do?

You could explain a bit more about Wilf:

Ever since he had been born, Wilf's parents had had a very difficult relationship where they argued a lot. As a result of this, his father left the family home when he was just one year old. His mother became

so sad that she had to go into hospital for two months. Wilf's older brother Philip blamed him for his mother going into hospital.

This example obviously touches on some very difficult issues and you may want to tailor it to your class if you feel that it might upset anyone.

Try to talk to the class about how, at some level, Wilf felt responsible for his father leaving the family home and for his mother going into hospital. And that he was always so keen to be 'good' because he felt that if he did anything wrong or naughty that awful things might happen to his teacher, or his classmates.

Explain to the class that sometimes, because feelings are so strong, and people are so scared to actually feel them, they manage to make other people feel their own feelings for them. This might sound like magic, but it's actually how very young babies learn to communicate!

Depending on the age of your class, you could explain to children that some parents can find it really hard to deal with how helpless and alone very young babies and children can sometimes feel. And that instead of helping their baby to feel less overwhelmed by them, these parents seem to turn away from them instead. These babies are then left with these very upsetting and frightening feelings, and can't do anything with them. As they grow up, because they haven't had the experience of other people being able to help them make sense of such feelings, they tend to 'give' these feelings to other people to carry for them.

You could touch on the fact that this is a very important aspect of what can make people struggle to form and sustain friendships and relationships; it can play a significant role in bullying, but can also be a characteristic of other ways of relating which are not particularly healthy.

You can often see this happening in situations where bullying is taking place. The person who is carrying out the bullying manages to find someone who, for reasons relating to their own experiences, will take on the difficult/upsetting feelings that the bully wants to get rid of. So, for example, one child might make another child feel small, alone, unpopular etc. What is really happening is the unpleasant feeling is being transferred from one child to another.

Helping children to understand this process, or mechanism, will equip them to be much better able to recognise when this process is happening in real life.

How children form relationships with peers

Key points to cover:

- Understanding the difference between relating to someone else in a friendly and mutually respectful way, and relating to someone else in a dominating or controlling way
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Two 6 year olds, Emma and Anna, are playing in the kitchen play area. Anna is doing the cooking and giving Emma the food that she has cooked to eat. Emma is letting herself be fed and looked after. After a few minutes, Emma decides that she wants to do some cooking, and asks Anna what she would like to eat. Anna says that she would like a jacket potato. Emma cooks one for her, and Anna happily eats it.

Two 6 year olds, Greta and Isabelle, are playing in the kitchen play area. Greta is doing the cooking and giving Isabelle the food that she's cooked to eat. Greta is letting herself be fed and looked after. After a few minutes, Isabelle decides that she wants to do some cooking, and asks Greta what she would like to eat. Greta replies that she isn't hungry and that, anyway, Isabelle is the baby and has to eat what she is cooking for her. Isabelle looks a bit sad but continues to eat the food that Greta gives her anyway.

Read out the two examples above to your class.

Suggested questions: What do you think is the difference between these two examples? Which friendship, or relationships, is the more healthy one, and why?

You could talk to the class about how, away from the security of family relationships, children at school have to manage to learn to play cooperatively. Often, in an attempt to manage their anxieties about being in new situations or around a lot of other children, they will take on the role of favourite characters such as Superman or Spiderman, a princess or perhaps a parent. Ask the children why they think they like to pretend to be these characters.

You could discuss with the class that while some children might identify with Superman or a Princess because they will enjoy playing that role with another friend who wants to feel similarly strong, pretty, wanted etc., other children may identify with one of these characters because they want to be stronger/prettier than the other children. Try to help your class understand that the way in which they play with each other when they are pretending to be these different characters says something about how they are feeling, and what kind of relationship they want to have. Talk to the class about how Isabelle might be feeling in the example above. In what other ways could Isabelle have reacted to how Greta was treating her? (e.g. telling Greta that it was her turn to do the cooking; stopping the game and going to find someone else to play with).

How does the way in which parents relate to each other affect children?

Key points to cover:

- Recognising that people's behaviour is meaningful – i.e. people do things because of what is going on in their lives
 - Understanding how conflict between parents can negatively affect children
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7 year old Julian's parents were very unhappy together. In fact, most of the time they didn't even speak to each other. At night-time, Julian would sleep in the same room as his father, while his mother would sleep in a separate room with his younger sister who had a disability. As time went on, Julian found it harder and harder to concentrate at school. He also found it more and more difficult to have friends. He became very quiet himself, hardly ever talking to anyone.

Read out the example above.

Ask the children how Julian might be feeling, having to live with such an unhappy mother and father?

You could continue with the example:

One day Julian had a tantrum at school and told his teacher that he felt it was everything was his fault. He said he felt to blame for his parents arguing and also for his sister's disability.

Talk to the class about how children tend to learn about relationships through observing those around them; and that, for most children, this will be the relationship between their parents.

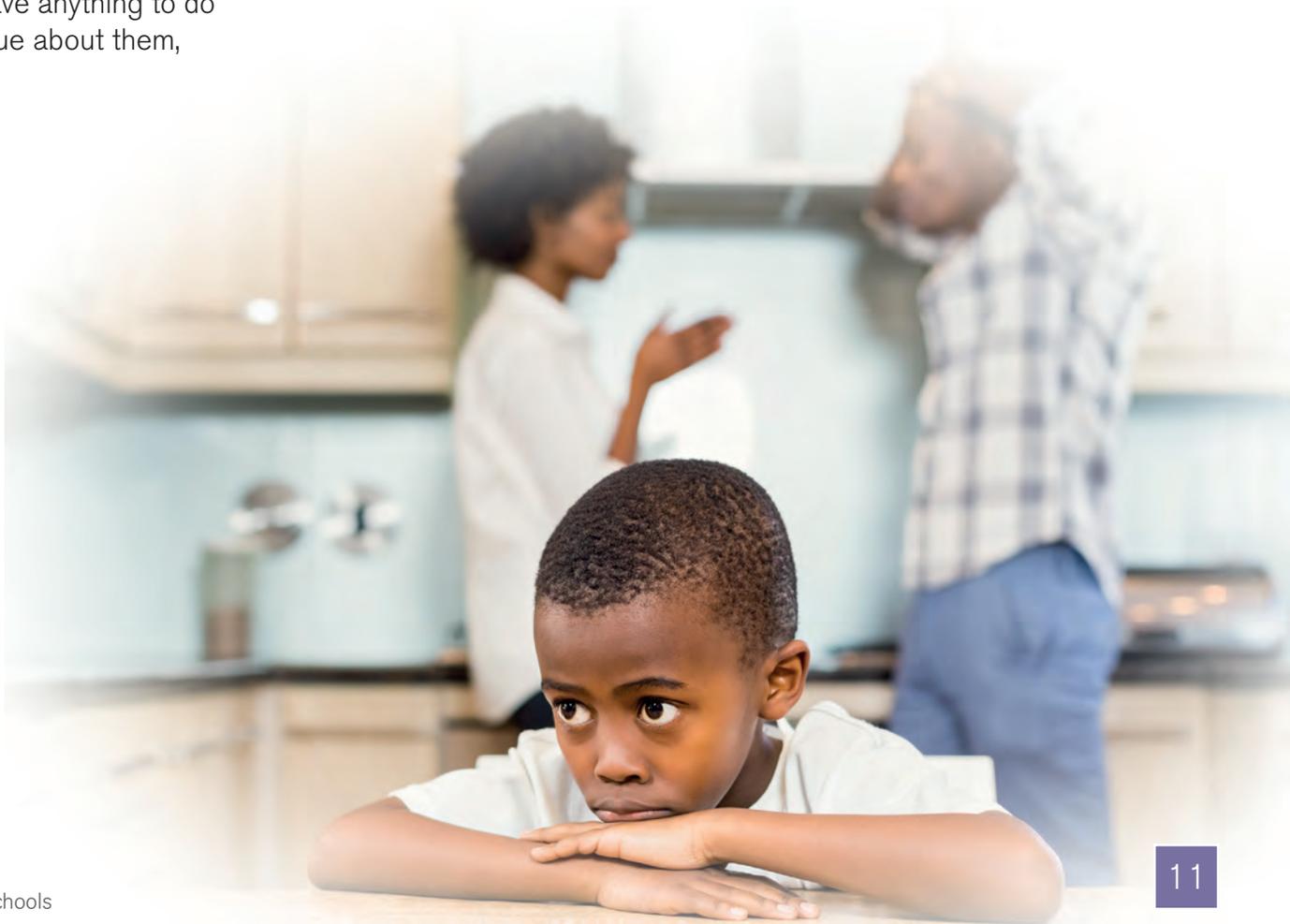
The children in your class will of course have had a range of experiences. Try to talk to your class, in general terms, about how, when parents get on well together, they tend not only to be better at being a 'parent', but also show children what a good relationship looks like. To see this can be very reassuring to children. This is also true when a child's parents have separated from each other but are able to work together co-operatively in relation to looking after their children.

Research from the Early Intervention Foundation shows that children who are exposed to frequent, intense and poorly-resolved conflict between their parents are likely to suffer increased levels of anxiety, depression and aggression; in addition, they may struggle to achieve at school. One of the difficulties which children can experience when they are not protected from any conflict between the adults spilling over into how they behave as parents is that these children can grow up believing they are somehow responsible for their parents arguing. This can have a significant impact on a child's well-being and mental health.

Talk to the class about why Julian might be feeling to blame for what's going on at home. How do they think that having these feelings is affecting Julian? Why do they think that Julian becomes so quiet? Does it have anything to do with the fact that, rather than talk about things, or even argue about them, Julian's mum and dad have stopped talking to each other?

You could finish the example by saying:

Julian's class teacher could see that he was very upset about what was happening at home. She talked to him about these feelings, and encouraged him to see that talking about difficult things was possible. Over time, Julian began to see that people can argue, have disagreements, but then make up and still be friends. He started to talk more in class and to find it easier to make friends.



Established in 1948, Tavistock Relationships is an internationally renowned charity delivering and developing advanced practice, training and research in therapeutic and psycho-educational approaches to supporting couples.

We research, develop, pilot and raise awareness of best practice, providing services to couples and families, and disseminating our learning through academic and policy activities.

Our training programmes in couple and sex therapy range from introductory up to doctoral level and are accredited by bodies including The British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy and The British Psychoanalytic Council. Our London-based clinical services offer affordable counselling and psychotherapy to people facing difficulties in their relationships and parenting. Our evidence-based, innovative projects – Living Together with Dementia, Parents as Partners and Adopting Together support and improve the quality of our relationships when they are most challenged.

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