

CLASSROOM

ENGAGEMENT

CLASSROOM ENGAGEMENT

The
Unwritten Code

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 Sage



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About the author

Jen Foster is a fiercely passionate educator, trainer and consultant. Jen is the founder of The Good Morning Club which is the world's first online encyclopedia for all things behaviour and beyond. Created by an educator for educators it includes bitesized training videos, bespoke resources and programmes as well as digital regulation tools. This research-backed, practical approach is now used in over 84 countries around the world. Jen is also the host of @goodmorningsmfosterltd where she supports over 150,000 educators with daily behaviour insights.

Kids do better when they are excited to come to class.

Bobbie French (2023)

Why this book and how to use it

WHY ENGAGEMENT?

For me, I am most engaged and in the moment when I am actually teaching. I am most unsettled inputting data *eye roll*. It will take me forever to do this task and I will find MANY ways to procrastinate (coffee anyone?).

In the most recent Department for Education (DfE) behaviour survey (May 2023), 25 per cent of teachers said pupil misbehaviour had led to ten minutes of time lost for every 30 minutes of lesson time (TES, 2024). A Teacher Tapp report shared that 62 per cent of primary school teachers in the most disadvantaged schools entirely stopped learning at least once in every lesson (Allen et al., 2024). With many of the schools I work with, we are seeing unsettled behaviour in lessons. Many articles and recommendations focus on cracking down on behaviour. But we are missing an undeniable variable: the learning. Think about the tasks you do at work and your behaviour associated with them. It is likely that your behaviour becomes more unsettled (notice I didn't say low-level behaviour!) the less interested you are in the content.

TAKE A MOMENT TO THINK ABOUT YOUR OWN ENGAGEMENT

- When are you most engaged at work?
- How does it then impact how you behave?

Think about your own:

- unsettled behaviour
- peak engagement.

Now, of course, there are going to be things that our children like more than others. However, I think we take for granted how much control we have over how we teach. The way we teach and the opportunities we provide have an enormous impact on how children engage with the learning. What if it wasn't just about the behaviour, but the variables that impact it? One of my favourite mantras is *control the controllables*.

But it's not just behaviour. In recent years, there has been a huge focus on attendance. Attendance rewards, parent fines and a continual narrative that attendance equals better results (Mediaofficer, 2023). But again, if we want our children to **want** to go to school, shouldn't we look a little deeper at the experience we are providing them? I mean, we know if there is a school trip our children are skipping in to start the day on time. How enriching is our daily offer?

We are also having a societal shift. As many as one in five children in the UK are neurodivergent, with the majority attending mainstream education (Conway, 2024). The core problem schools are facing is we have historically taught in a neurotypical way, expecting all children to sit, process and approach the task in the same way. This doesn't work for our classrooms which means lessons aren't flowing from A to B. More often than not children are not completing the work, disruptions are increasing and educators are left exhausted, repeating the same tired systems. Children are being labelled as 'disruptive', 'naughty' or having 'bad behaviour' when really it is more about them being unable to successfully access the work. Educators need to be given the practical tools to create neuroaffirming classrooms where all children can thrive, and YOU can enjoy the lesson too!

We have to talk about Covid. Covid-19 happened. There was a significant fracture to pupil learning and personal development. Once returning to school, educators felt a huge pressure to 'catch up' and close gaps, with big recommendations on tutoring and, again, attendance (Committee of Public Accounts, 2023). That was never going to be an easy time to navigate. But let's take a moment to touch down in **common sense town**. If we want children to do better, they need to enjoy what they are doing. Right?

If we want children to feel happier, to achieve more and to behave better, it seems to me that we need an engagement glow-up.

THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

This book is about tackling the unwritten code of engagement. The missing part of the framework that undoubtedly influences how we feel, act and what we do.

WHAT TO EXPECT

Since this book is all about engagement, I have created it in a way that I hope is engaging to read! I mean, I can't stand it when you have school training about something and it is delivered in the opposite way. 'Let's talk about outdoor learning by watching three-hour videos online.'

This book is divided into Part 1 and Part 2. In Part 1, I have created each chapter to succinctly unpick the unwritten code of engagement. Most chapters follow the same structure.

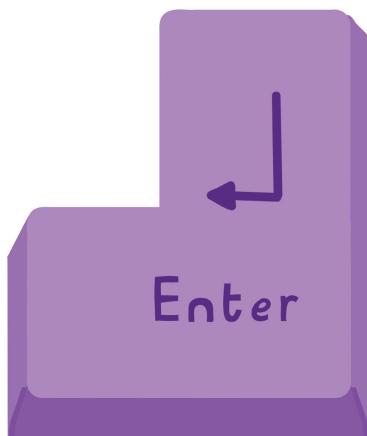
You will see similar visuals; let me break it down:



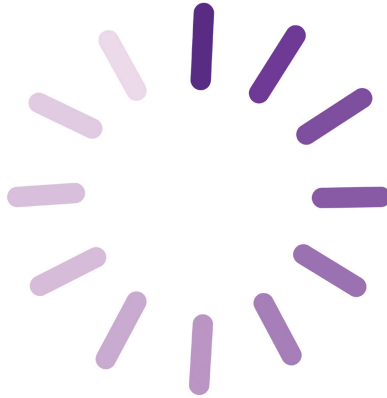
Shift: An invitation to shift your mindset on engagement



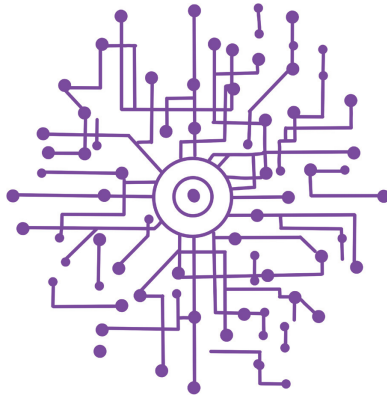
Backspace: An opportunity to think about the historical change in narrative



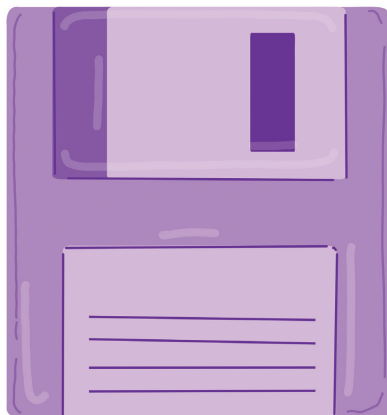
Enter: The research you need to know



Loading: Still buffering? This section will answer those burning questions!



Links: Summarising how the chapter links to engagement



Floppy disc: The headlines to remember



Sim: Your notes area

There will also be regular opportunities for you to reflect and think about your experiences, so make sure you have a pen or pencil to hand! I actually love scribbling my thoughts on books, but I know some people find they have to keep them pristine! Please take this as your formal invitation to journal as you read! There is also a MAGICAL notes page at the back if you'd like to keep it contained!

Part 2 is all about the **how**. Again, HOW annoying is it when you're given the concepts but not the execution? I wanted this book to really and truly be your planning bestie. So, make sure you choose your school bag wisely with a clear compartment! Every idea is broken down in your magical manual so you have practical solutions, strategies and tasks at the ready. No gatekeeping. No blurred lines. Just you, me and engagement!

What is key is that nothing is a stand-alone strategy or concept. You will see central themes revisited and this is a good thing! Many of the strategies I share combine multiple areas of engagement. They might get children moving, but also get children collaborating and provide an alternative to no hands up all at the same time. I wanted to share the different layers of these activities to build your perspective throughout the book. As you work through it, you will be connecting the dots of how different threads of engagement build or complement others. It should be a holistic approach to engagement and you will experience that through each chapter.

In this book, you will be introduced to our MAGICAL framework for engagement. This is not a lesson plan or a tick box. Each element of the framework shares a different area of engagement to consider and reflect on with your classroom. This isn't about overwhelming you and creating a new to-do list. It is about providing a bank of ideas at your fingertips to adapt, tweak and inject that magic back into your lesson!

Finally, this book is yours for life. Yay! I have curated it to be returned to over and over again for inspiration and spark. Don't feel like you have to read it in one go. But I promise, each time you open it up you will have an idea at the ready.

Let's demystify engagement together for you and your kids!

Part

1

An unmet need remains unmet until it's met.

Naish and Dillon (2020)

Safety before magic

SAFETY BEFORE MAGICAL ENGAGEMENT

‘But Jen, how did you manage to sit through that staff meeting?’

That was the response from my deputy head as I burst into tears. I had just informed her that during dismissal another adult was aggressive towards me. I was 21 at the time and absolutely terrified. I was shaking and couldn’t stop thinking about it. But I had to go straight into a staff meeting. I can’t tell you what that staff meeting was about. But I can tell you I spent the entire time trying not to cry. Here’s the thing: you cannot begin to engage with something if you don’t feel safe.

This might seem like an extreme example, but for our children unsafety wears many hats. Think of our experiences as a library. We have a negative bias towards unsafe or unknown experiences as our evolutionary mindset is driven to keep us safe. Our brain needed to remember if berries were poisonous and needed to be vigilant of paths unknown – strictly survival purposes. For our children’s developing brains, so much of their library is in the unknown shelves. Which means, they step into our classrooms *needing* to feel safe. This is their primary and most important need.

Why am I talking about this? Because we simply cannot begin to talk about engagement until children feel safe. We cannot delve into the realms of magical engagement until we have laid the foundations of security.

Shift

TIPPING CHAIRS

Victor used to enter my classroom by tipping chairs. The first 'lesson' (air quotes intended) he engaged in was such a surprise to me. It was a maths addition booklet. Barely a lesson really! I turned it into one because he seemed so calm. He sat and completed the whole booklet. He was far more engaged than any of my *all singing, all dancing* lessons. Why? Because Victor was experiencing a stress response. He was in a state of hypervigilance and adding unknown bells and whistles to that only escalated him further. Creating a sense of repetition, predictability and calm felt safe.

When I was a senior leader and class teacher, I was out of class more than I'd like to be. When I returned, I felt like I could barely get through a lesson. I finally realised this was because my class felt so anxious not knowing when I was coming or going and who would be teaching them. I was able to support them to feel safe by sharing really clear, visual information and removing the unknown! Maybe there is a time your lesson wasn't quite getting to the lesson part? Perhaps it was during transition time or before the holidays.

TAKE A MOMENT TO CONSIDER SAFETY

- Have you ever had a child who was trickier to engage with than others?
 - Was there a background of trauma?
 - Which lessons did they engage with most?
- What about your whole class? Think about times that have felt turbulent.
 - Can you trace a link back to safety and security?
 - Can you think of a time when your class were collectively unsettled?
 - How do you think it might have been linked to their sense of safety?

←
Backspace

WAIT, BACK UP A SECOND. THERE'S AN ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

You see, when I asked thousands of teachers if safety was important in their school there was an overwhelming and resounding yes. But here's the elephant. When we talk about safety in school, we often refer to safeguarding. Something we have regular training on,

something that underlies every policy and is categorically the most important thing we do. So what's the problem?

Safety is our top priority. But what about security? Read that again.

A child's safety and **sense** of safety are different things. Safety is (rightly so) paramount to everything we do. But a child's sense of safety is not always central to discussions. A child's sense of safety is the first stepping stone to learning. We might call this their sense of security, to differentiate. This refers to their psychological feeling of safety which, of course, in turn, impacts them physically (DOAC, 2024).

Why do we need to prioritise a child's sense of security?

COGNITIVE LOAD THEORY

Imagine your brain as a computer. It's got a limited amount of RAM, right? Are we loving all of these technology analogies gang? Well, that's kind of like our working memory. When we're trying to learn something new, our brain uses up a lot of that RAM.

Now, imagine your classroom as a computer program. If that program is always crashing or running slowly, it's not going to work very well. Similarly, if a classroom is chaotic and unpredictable, our children's brains are constantly working overtime to figure out what's going on.

Cognitive load theory highlights the importance of predictable routines to support children to feel safe, allowing children to focus on learning new concepts and skills (Reese et al., 2016).

WE CAN'T LEARN IF OUR NEEDS AREN'T MET

Most of us are pretty familiar with Maslow's 'hierarchy of needs' influenced by the Blackfoot nation. This image shows a slightly adapted version that makes direct parallels to education. This theory illustrates how, as humans, we are motivated to fulfil our needs. Ultimately, needs lower down in the hierarchy must be satisfied before individuals can attend to needs higher up. As I dropped my son off at school this morning, I overheard a child say to their parent: 'Are you sure I will be able to go for a poo before carpet time?' If a child's basic safety or belonging needs are not met, we cannot expect optimum engagement within the lesson. You might have hit the rest of the magical framework, but if a child needs the toilet, that is going to be the only thing they are thinking about. Similarly to Chapter 13 on attunement, this doesn't mean we have to be a mind reader! In our magical manual we will outline practical classroom resources to support children to communicate their needs to you.

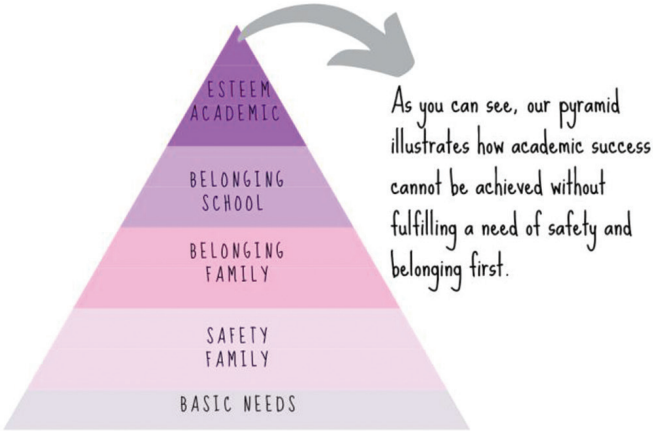


Figure 3.1 Pyramid of needs

BODY BUDGET

Dr Emma Hepburn (2023) visualises neuroscience and highlights how our brains are constantly predicting based on our sensations, our environment, other people, emotions, experiences and well ... everything. Why does this matter and have anything to do with engagement? Well, our brain is constantly predicting, making judgements and organising resources on what our body needs. It is **CONSTANTLY** surveying for possible threats. So, if our children detect a whiff of danger all of the body's resources get redirected to dealing with that. Regardless of there being a real-life danger or not. Our body doesn't differentiate. This puts engaging with the task on the back burner and safety at the top of the to-do list. This marries perfectly with our understanding of the stress response.

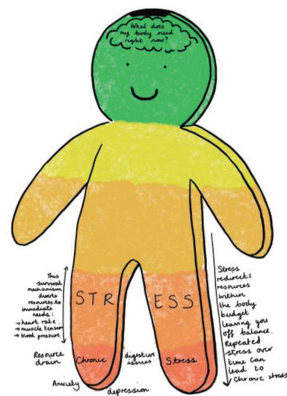


Figure 3.2 What does my body need right now?

(adapted from Hepburn, 2023)

UNDERSTANDING THE STRESS RESPONSE

When feelings become overwhelming, and we get dysregulated, this can trigger a stress response in the body.

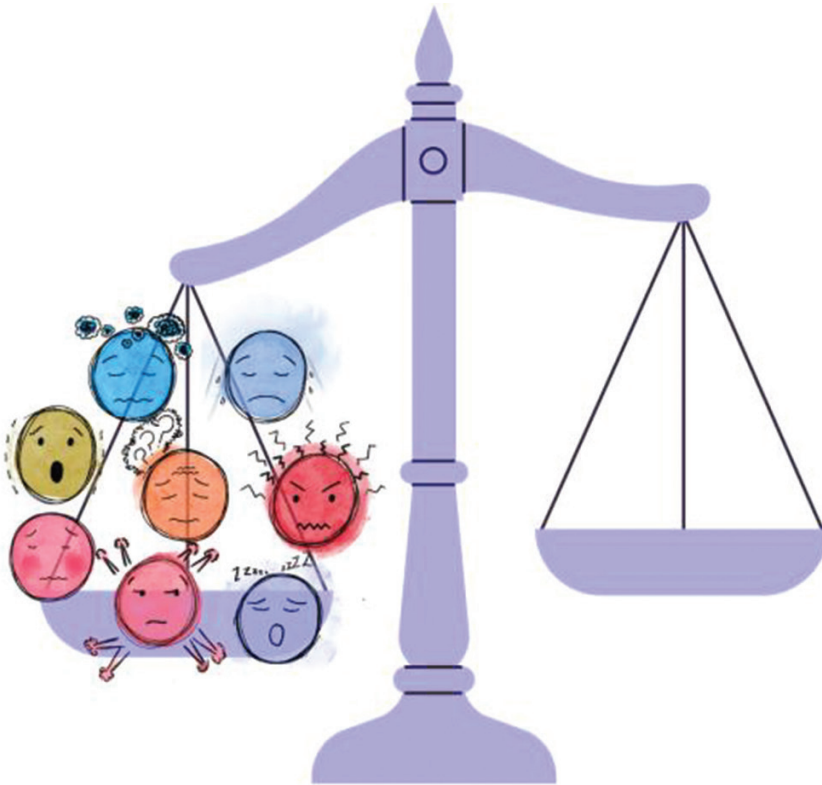


Figure 3.3 Dysregulation refers to being in a state of emotional, mental and physical imbalance

Children feel these more deeply. Why? Their prefrontal cortex isn't fully formed yet. So that rational thought is still developing. Children have fewer experiences to fall back on and therefore don't actually know if it is going to be 'okay'. Our experiences help to wire our responses. The more unknown, the more triggers. It is so important to note that a stress response is an involuntary physiological reaction. Words, threats or bribes won't bring children out of it. Treating it like 'misbehaviour' will only accelerate the stress. **The bottom line is: if a child is experiencing a stress response they will not be engaged in the task.** And actually, these are much more common than you think in your classroom.

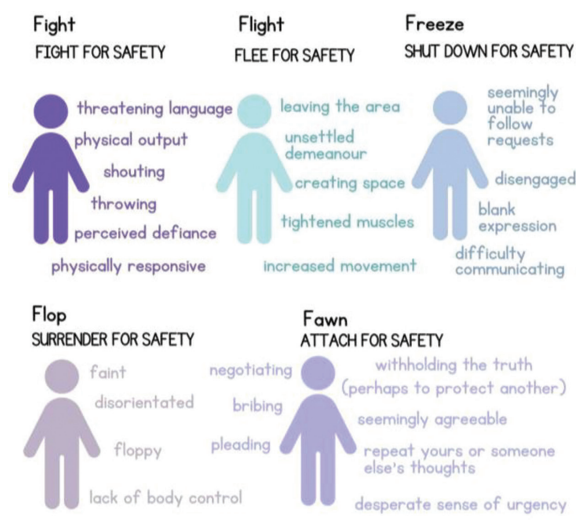


Figure 3.4 Fight, flight, freeze

Stress responses may be triggered by a child not being able to tie their laces and they have just become undone on the carpet. A child worried about taking their jumper off and their top coming off too. A child worrying about whether they are going to be asked a question on the spot. If they don't know who they are working with, if they have their lunchbox, what their lunch is, where they are sitting, who the adult is, if they have to perform, feedback, complete a task they find tricky like writing, be asked to read out loud in front of the class. That is why stress responses must be part of the conversation when we are talking about engagement in the classroom.

STRESS AND THE BRAIN

There are different levels of impact when it comes to emotions, regulation and engagement. We've looked at needs and stress, and it makes sense to finish on chronic stress. Chronic stress happens when we experience a stress response for a prolonged time. This was what Victor was experiencing. As Dr Wendy Suzuki states:

Stress releases stress hormones that go into the brain, at too high a level or too constant; it damages neural connections and then kills cells so it is intertwined.

The Diary of A CEO (2024)

If we want children to truly engage with a task, we need to cultivate environments where children feel safe and their needs are met.

THE ESCALATION CYCLE

The escalation cycle is an important reference because here we can understand how a child's regulation correlates with their possible engagement. We can all understand that a child isn't going to engage with the lesson if they are at peak dysregulation (Place2Be, 2024). But, looking at the image below, we also need to consider the build-up and the aftermath of peak dysregulation. We need to think about engagement from a regulation perspective. Remember that staff meeting I had to sit through? Investing in regulation is investing in engagement.

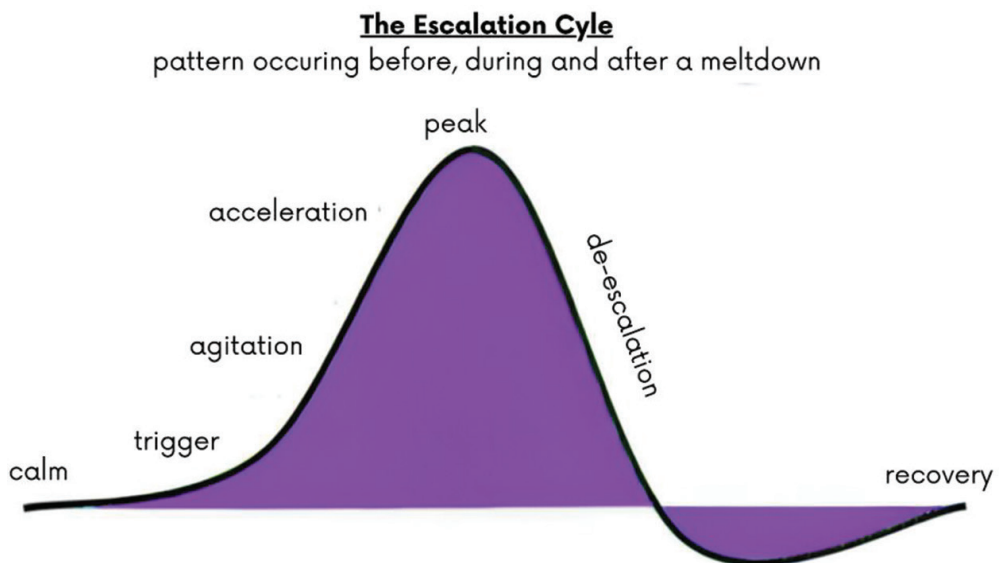


Figure 3.5 Pattern of the escalation cycle



THINKING THROUGH QUESTIONS ON SAFETY IN THE CLASSROOM

HOW DO I MANAGE A BIG STRESS RESPONSE AS WELL AS TEACH?

Yes, I personally found this incredibly problematic as a class teacher. Which is why I developed resources and strategies to make this possible even without a teaching assistant. We will unpick these in the magical manual!

(Continued)

WHAT CAN I DO TO MAKE A CHILD FEEL SAFE AND SECURE SO THAT THEY CAN LEARN?

Safety is established through consistency, predictability and connection. We will unpick some everyday routines in the magical manual! These are particularly important in the first six weeks of school. This is a critical time when there are many unknown elements. This part of the manual is essential to securing that safe foundation.

HOW DO I KNOW IF A CHILD ISN'T REGULATED?

In our magical manual we share check-ins you can use with your class. This is a systematic way to quite literally 'check-in' with how pupils are feeling.

WHAT IF ONE OR TWO CHILDREN AREN'T REGULATED, WHAT SHOULD I DO?

Teaching is fricking hard enough, isn't it? This isn't about teaching 12 lessons at a time or running a boutique hotel with a menu of different activities. No. This is not about making your job any harder. This is about understanding that if children aren't regulated, they won't engage. So, if we strip this back, the question is, how do we get that (or those) children regulated? It's not by expecting them to just **do** the lesson. It's by giving them an opportunity to rest and reset within the classroom. This might be utilising a calm space, giving them a fidget, a few minutes' quiet in the reading corner or some free doodling on a whiteboard. There are many things we can do to support regulation. This isn't about putting a plaster on it; it's about utilising your toolbox. Or, in our case, your manual! I will share some 'on the spot' regulation strategies you can use with your children in your magical manual.



SAFETY › ENGAGEMENT

Children will not engage if they don't feel safe.



HEADLINES TO REMEMBER FOR SAFETY IN THE CLASSROOM

- How often are we talking about a child's sense of security?
- If a child doesn't feel safe and secure, they cannot engage
- Regulation comes first



YOUR NOTES ON SAFETY

Note down three things you want to remember from this chapter and take forward into your teaching and classroom.
