



## Christmas for Children and Young People who have experienced trauma.

### Resources for families and professionals working with trauma experienced young people.

Christmas is coming and for most children, young people and their families, this creates feelings of excitement and joyful anticipation as they recall their memories of Christmas past; family coming together, the magic, the surprise, the gifts, the food.... Unfortunately, Christmas isn't like that for everyone.

Children and young people with developmental trauma may recall Christmas as the time when the adults around them, who perhaps were always unpredictable, frightening and abusive, become even more so - for these children and young people, Christmas may be anticipated with terror.

(Acord Education and Care, 2020)

This information guide has been produced by Virtual School Kent's Advisory Team and is designed to help those supporting trauma experienced children.

We wish you all a happy and nurturing Christmas period.



# Research

Fundamental to supporting children and young people with developmental trauma is establishing a sense of safety.

Critical to this is known carers providing reliable, predictable daily routines and boundaries, a consistency of communication and response and clarity of expectations within containing and sensory balanced environments.

Christmas however, often means a complete change in the norm—the environment is decorated, the lighting is different, bedtimes and getting up times may vary, the bedtime routine may be different in preparation for Santa, meal times may happen at different times, there may be unknown visitors, secret whispers and hiding, lots of surprises, loud noises, singing and nativity practise, unstructured timetables and references to sought-after gifts.

It would seem then, at a time when a traumatised child or young person is in most need of feeling safe, a time when they are anticipating terror, everything that may bring that sense of safety, changes. (Acorn Education, 2020)

For those children who do not celebrate Christmas, it can still be a time of difficulty. Lack of familiar routines at school, feeling confused or not feeling included can all lead to increased anxiety and a lack of feeling safe.



Research shows that children and young people with developmental trauma are hypersensitive to danger and are thrown back into their primitive drive for survival, adopt states of 'Flight/Flight/Freeze' and within these present with many behaviours:

- \* Not focused
- \* Not listening
- \* Clumsy
- \* Daydreaming
- \* Aggressive
- \* Disruptive / loud
- \* Hyperactive
- \* Running away / hiding
- \* Silly voices
- \* Controlling

(Bowlby, 1969)





## **Routines and Structure:**

(Beacon House, 2021)

- \* Do more of what works (rather than less): Children may need more of your presence, more supervision, more scaffolding and more support than usual. How can time for this be built in? How can you build up your emotional reserves to give you the energy you need?
- \* KNOWLEDGE is empowerment: Making the Christmas schedule explicit and predictable lowers stress for all. Draw it out, write it out, repeat it lots, keep as much as you can as the same as usual. Share the timetable with parents who can support their children with their daily routines.
- \* Provide opportunities for emotional regulation: Build in quiet times to the festive days, after each exciting point providing time to calm, regulate and touch base.

## **Zones of Regulation and Emotional Check-ins:**

- \* EXPLORE the anticipation of Christmas: “Christmas is coming, what’s that like for you?” “Where do you think you are today?”
- \* EXCITEMENT is just the other side of the coin: Anticipate that excitement can often feel the same as stress for traumatised children. It’s okay to keep things low key and by reducing excitement you are reducing stress.
- \* CONNECT then REFLECT: “I can have a hard time when Christmas is over too—especially when I was a kid.... Here’s what we could do together to get back into a routine we enjoy...”

## **Naughty or Nice list:**

- \* Help the child to know that giving and receiving presents is not dependent on them being good. They are loved and worthy regardless of their behaviour. Similarly, you are thinking of them over the break, perhaps give them some colouring to bring back in January that you are very much looking forward to seeing!
- \* Elf Cams and Santa’s watching—be mindful that this can be stressful for children who feel shame and rejection.

# Strategies for Home



## **Try to make Christmas a predictable, planned event:**

- \* Talk about Christmas beforehand. Explore fears and hopes. Think about coping strategies.
- \* Involve the children in the planning, allow them to have some control over the events.
- \* Prepare a schedule for Christmas— who is around, what will happen and when.
- \* Use the advent calendar as the countdown and schedule of events.
- \* Prepare your children ready for the next school term— what will they be learning, why the classroom will look different (the decorations will be put away before they are at home, displays will change etc).

## **Keep to the house routines:**

- \* Try to maintain the daily routines; particularly the child or young person's individualised routines for getting up, washing, dressing, bedtimes and meal times, even Christmas dinner.

## **Keep to the house rules:**

- \* Stick to the house or individual rules about time on social media or gaming consoles.
- \* Maintain the usual boundaries and behavioural expectations.

## **Provide opportunities for emotional regulation:**

- \* Build in quiet times to the festive days, after each exciting point providing time to calm, regulate and touch base.
- \* Make time to get some fresh air or take some physical exercise.
- \* Be thoughtful about noise levels, allocating a 'quiet room' where noisy games and activities are kept away from.
- \* Remind children and young people of their coping strategies, their soothing boxes and their regulating activities.



# Resources

## Useful Websites:

[Issue-4-Christmas.pdf \(acorneducationandcare.co.uk\)](https://www.acorneducationandcare.co.uk/Issue-4-Christmas.pdf)

[Coping with Christmas | Adoption UK Charity](#)

[5 Ways To Have A Trauma Informed Christmas - Lisa Cherry](#)

[Xmas storm \(beaconhouse.org.uk\)](https://www.beaconhouse.org.uk/xmas-storm)

[PACE at Christmas \(beaconhouse.org.uk\)](https://www.beaconhouse.org.uk/pace-at-christmas)

[Surviving Christmas with Trauma - The Trauma Practice](#)

[Surviving the Holidays with C-PTSD / DID — Beauty After Bruises](#)

[50+ Christmas Crafts for Kids - The Best Ideas for Kids](#)

[Christmas Sensory Survival Kit \(sensoryintegrationeducation.com\)](https://www.sensoryintegrationeducation.com/christmas-sensory-survival-kit)

[Sensory Gift Guide for All Ages \(sensoryintegrationeducation.com\)](https://www.sensoryintegrationeducation.com/sensory-gift-guide-for-all-ages)



## Books:

[11 Christmas Books For Adoptive Families | Adoption.com](#)

[The Very Wobbly Christmas: A story to help children who feel anxious about Christmas: Amazon.co.uk: Naish, Sarah, Jefferies, Rosie: 9781726626729: Books](#)



### SUPPORTING TRAUMATISED CHILDREN THROUGH THE CHRISTMAS STORM

Based on ideas from Dan Hughes, with thanks to Helen Crofters

Christmas is coming and we each bring our own sledge load of past experiences, expectations, internal and external pressures. Here are some top tips for how to survive and thrive in the Christmas Storm:

**CHRISTMAS WISDOM FOR THE ADULTS**

Your Own big feelings: It is ok to prioritise your own regulation. If you feel broken, rage or despair then your child will feel it too. The first Christmas job is to regulate yourself.

**OWNING your feelings:** By acknowledging your own feelings towards Christmas, you can start to see how they might impact your empathy and connection with others.

**CO-CREATING your own Christmas:** Christmas brings huge changes in routine and expectation. It is ok if you avoid or adapt certain Christmassy rituals. By doing this you are supporting your child to feel successful by not having the experience of 'falling at Christmas'.

Invite your **SUPPORT NETWORK** to help. It's okay to know that you can't do it all alone. Ask your supportive friends, family or colleagues to help co-create a Christmas that is right for you and your child.

**REGULATION & STRESS**

**STRESS OVERWHELMING FEELINGS E.G. EXCITEMENT, ANGER LEAD TO HYPERREGULATION**

**EXCITEMENT** is just the other side of the coin. Anticipate that excitement can often feel the same as stress for traumatised children. It's okay to keep things low key and by reducing excitement you are reducing stress.

### CREATING CHRISTMAS SAFETY THROUGH CONNECTION, PREDICTABILITY & CURIOSITY

**KNOWLEDGE** is empowerment. Making the Christmas schedule explicit and predictable lowers stress for all. Draw it out, write it out, repeat it lots, keep as much as you can the same as usual.

**DO MORE** of what works (rather than less). Your child needs more of your presence, more supervision, more scaffolding and more support than usual. How can time for this be built in? How can you build up your emotional reserves to give you the energy you need?

**DO ACTIVITIES TOGETHER:** Create a Christmas culture of connecting, playing, making, baking. Consider what would be 'just the right' level of connection.

**EXPLORE** the anticipation of Christmas: "Christmas is coming, what's that like for you?" "Everyone experiences Christmas differently, from being happy and excited through to finding it really difficult. Where do you think you are today?"

**UNDERSTAND** their Christmas past. Be curious - "What did you used to do at Christmas that you enjoyed?" "What would you like to keep doing each Christmas?" "What would you like to lose?" "What would make it just right for you?"

**LETTING go of 'should' s:** Let go of expectations for yourself or your child about what Christmas should be like or feel like. It is what it is for you and your child in that moment. That is more than okay.

**DISCOVERING** the worries. Be curious and empathic towards your child's memories, questions, feelings, guilt or shame about their birth family. Explore - "How does it feel for you to enjoy Christmas?" "Is there a part of you that feels bad?" "How does it feel to know that this is so normal and you can both feel bad and enjoy it?"

### GIVING AND RECEIVING AT CHRISTMAS

The **DILEMMA** of presents: First deprivation may make both giving and receiving presents a trigger for shame, guilt or fear. Be a model for your child: help them see the joy people experience from the thinking, planning, making, giving and receiving of presents.

**FORGET THE NAUGHTY OR NICE LIST!** Help your child to know that giving and receiving presents is not dependent on them being good. They are loved and worthy of gifts in your family regardless of their behaviour.

**Keep presents LOW KEY.** Too many or very expensive gifts can be overwhelming and 'too much', leaving your child with an urge to reject or break things to regulate their feelings. Tibate your gifts, make them bite-size, tolerable, acceptable.

**WATCH OUT FOR THE POST-CHRISTMAS BLUES**

**PARENT / CARER:** "I should have known better!" "I can't get it right, it's always real life!" "This was a waste of time and money!"

**CHILD:** "It's my fault!" "I should have..." "I feel so guilty because I should have enjoyed it but I didn't."

**WHY NOT TRY...**

**INCREASING** familiar structure and supervision. Helping them get back into the momentum of 'normal' life by increasing structure and supervision. Use your presence to help them get back to previous habits and predictable routines.

**CONNECT** then reflect: "I can have a hard time when Christmas is over too - especially when I was a kid, here's what we could do together to get back into a routine where we enjoy"



Beacon House is passionate about developing freely available resources so that knowledge about the repair of trauma and adversity is in the hands of those who need it.

Please visit their website for the whole range of resources available:

[Resources \(beaconhouse.org.uk\)](https://www.beaconhouse.org.uk)

### The Power of PACE at Christmas Time

There are a lot of feelings flying around at Christmas time for children and adults alike. Finding the right balance for YOU is something to work towards. PACE can help. PACE - Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity, Empathy.

# PACE

**Playfulness** isn't the same as playing but is enjoying time with someone else or yourself in an unconditional way.

This can look like a 5 minute sofa snuggle with someone, walking hand in hand, swapping cringy crackle jokes or even taking yourself off for a cry on your own if that's where you're at and trying to leave behind any guilt about it.

It's about showing a real interest in someone, or yourself, and finding something you really enjoy about them - or you. Even if that's 2 minutes alone with yourself outside the front door!

**Acceptance** means sitting with strong emotions or perspective of another and knowing that you might not be able to take these away. There may be no words of advice to give, strategies to implement or thoughts to share, only comfort by offering your safe presence.

It is allowing uncomfortable sensations and emotions to be in your own body without judgement. Accepting their existence.

For an example of this and Empathy, watch the YouTube clip called 'Beane' from Beacon House on Empathy' or find inspiration from the song 'Hold Space' by Ward Thomas.

**Curiosity** isn't about asking "why?" even when this is exactly what we want to know! It's about wondering what is going on inside for someone or oneself.

It's about taking the risk of being wrong "Can I share my ideas with you... I wonder if... I might be wrong, so tell me if I am, but here are my thoughts..."

A way of letting someone know that your mind is on their mind and genuinely interested in anything at all that's going on in there without judgement.

It is practising this same non-judgemental curiosity within ourselves.

**Empathy** can take a lot of energy at Christmas. Sitting with the disappointment of a child who hasn't got the gift they hoped for "I can see the sadness in your eyes that it's not what you wanted" or accepting our own disappointment that the time hasn't felt very festive "I am where I am and things are how they are and I'm going to do my best to feel okay with that".

A top tip is to try to move away from reassurance or denial of feelings - others or your own. Naming what is happening for ourselves or another helps us in our offering of empathy.

To PACE oneself: "To do something at a speed that is steady and that allows one to continue without becoming too tired."






Virtual School Kent (VSK) acts as a local authority champion to promote the progress and educational attainment of Kent children in care, young people who have previously been in care and those who have had social services support within the last 6 years. Our aim is for these young people to achieve educational outcomes comparable to their peers.

Ensuring that all of these young people receive a high quality education is the foundation for improving their lives.

## The 6 principles of Nurture

-  **Whatever changes you face we are here to guide you**
-  **No matter what age, everyone is at a different stage**
-  **VSK can help you find your voice**
-  **How you behave tells us how you feel**
-  **VSK can be your safe space**
-  **Nurture helps you feel happy and healthy**

VSK are proud to have achieved the National Nurture Schools Programme.

Nurture is at the heart of all that we do.

### **Kent Children in Care:**

Please contact your Virtual School Kent Area Team for advice regarding current Kent Children in Care.

**Email:** [VSK@kent.gov.uk](mailto:VSK@kent.gov.uk)

**Phone:** 03000 412777

### **For Kent Children in Care who are placed out of Kent:**

**Email:** [VSKOOC@kent.gov.uk](mailto:VSKOOC@kent.gov.uk)

### **Children in Care to other local authorities:**

Please contact the Virtual School from the local authority who is caring for them.



## **VSK Advisory Team**

The Virtual School Kent's Advisory Team are a countywide team set up in response to the new duties for virtual schools, as outlined by the statutory guidance for promoting the education of previously looked after children and, more recently as an extension to this, for children with a social worker .

The team are dedicated to working with all those who support these young people so that together we can make a difference to their educational and life outcomes.

## **Who are Previously Looked After Children? (PLAC)**

Previously Looked After Children are those children who have left the care of a local authority under an Adoption, Special Guardianship or Child Arrangements Order.

VSKAT is a source of advice and information for parents and guardians of previously looked after children on roll with Kent education settings so that they can advocate for their young people as effectively as possible.

## **Who are Children with a social worker? (Ever6 CWSW)**

Any child or young person who is currently (or has been in the past six years) the subject of a Child in Need or Child Protection Plan for safeguarding or welfare reasons fall within the Children with a Social Worker cohort (not including Children in Care).

It is VSKAT's responsibility to strategically champion the educational attendance, attainment and progress of children with a social worker.

### **Contact VSKAT:**

Referral Form for Ever6CWSW: [Request advice for children with a social worker cohort - Return to Kent.gov.uk \(achieveservice.com\)](#)

Referral Form for PLAC: [Request advice for previously looked after children - Privacy notice - Return to Kent.gov.uk \(achieveservice.com\)](#)

Website: [www.virtualschool.lea.kent.sch.uk](http://www.virtualschool.lea.kent.sch.uk)