

The Trauma-Sensitive Approach with A/C (mixed or disorganized) Attachment Adaptations

Core Principles

- Safety before exploration:
 - Regulation must precede relationship and reflection
- Somatic attunement:
 - The body holds the story, start with breath, posture, and tone
- Non-intrusive curiosity:
 - Avoid “reading” the child too quickly, tolerate ambiguity
- Relational repair over perfection:
 - Disruptions are inevitable, repair teaches safety
- Integration over interpretation:
 - Help the child link sensations, emotions, and meaning gradually

A/C Attachment Adaptations

- Children with A/C (mixed or disorganized) attachment adaptations have experienced caregiving that was both a source of comfort and of fear
- They may shift unpredictably between avoidance (A-strategy) and intense emotional pursuit (C-strategy)
- These behaviours are not manipulative, they are self-protective responses to an environment where safety and danger were intertwined
- Their nervous systems often show signs of hyperarousal (fight/flight) or hypoarousal (freeze/dissociation), reflecting survival-based adaptations to relational trauma
- The therapeutic goal is not to “fix” behaviour but to restore safety and regulation first, using a trauma-sensitive, body-first, relationship-second approach

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Therapeutic Goal	A/C Child's Reaction	Trauma-Sensitive (A/C) Response
Create a sense of safety	Alternates between clinging and withdrawal; may appear confused, defiant, or fearful.	Focus on predictable structure and calm tone. Let safety be felt through consistency and gentle pacing rather than words. "You don't have to choose, I'm here."
Regulate arousal	May shift suddenly from hyperarousal (panic, rage) to dissociation (zoning out).	Use grounding and somatic co-regulation, steady breath, rhythmic voice, safe sensory input. "Let's feel our feet on the floor together."
Reduce shame and fear	Interprets correction or empathy as danger; may self-blame or externalize anger.	Maintain non-judgmental curiosity. Normalize survival responses: "That reaction makes sense, you were trying to stay safe."
Support reflection and integration	Becomes overwhelmed by direct emotional inquiry or talk about trauma.	Work bottom-up: start with the body and sensation before story. Use modalities like DDP, EMDR, or sensorimotor strategies to integrate gently.
Build relational trust	Fears both closeness and abandonment; tests adults' commitment.	Offer calm persistence and emotional transparency: "Even when it feels messy, I'm staying with you." Name the process without pressure.
Foster self-agency	Feels powerless or out of control; may reenact helplessness or aggression.	Reinforce choice and collaboration: "Would you like to take a break or stay here a bit longer?" Predictability restores agency.

In Practice

- In the classroom:
 - A student freezes when corrected
 - Instead of repeating the instruction, the teacher softens their voice, lowers body posture, and says:
 - "It's okay, take your time, I'm not in a rush"
- In therapy:
 - A child alternates between angry outbursts and numbing silence.
 - The therapist stays grounded, speaking gently and rhythmically:
 - "I can see your body's working really hard to keep you safe right now. Let's notice our breathing together"