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National Foster Carer and Kinship Conference reflections – Gemma Baxter

Huge thanks to FCAV for supporting me and enabling me to attend this incredible event in November 2025.

Being in a room full of carers — foster carers, kinship carers, and those supporting across the sector — was extraordinary. Despite the mix of fatigue, frustration, and emotional load many carried into the room, the space felt deeply warm and nourishing. Over the few days, I felt myself re-energise, grounded by a sense of community and shared purpose.

One thing I craved was more genuine connection at the tables. While I loved the lunches and the gala dinner, I was nervous about striking up conversations. That's why I appreciated the interactive elements so much — the “stand up if you've...” moments, the table activities, the shared experiences. Those were the moments that helped me bond, feel seen as a carer, and stay fully present in the room.

Before attending the conference, I'd already hosted a morning tea to encourage more young people to explore fostering — five friends came along. Hearing afterwards how valuable they found it reaffirmed how critical carer recruitment is, especially with rising attrition rates and more children needing safe homes. The conference strengthened my resolve to keep advocating.

What struck me most was the huge diversity in people's experiences and the very uneven support systems we operate in.

- Kinship carers seemed to have fewer practical supports than foster carers.
- Victorian carers receive the **lowest care allowance rates in the country**, unchanged since 2016.
- The level of support from case managers varies enormously. I shared how supported I feel through Lighthouse, and it became obvious not everyone has access to that level of care.
- As a trained therapeutic carer, some material wasn't new to me — and it left me wondering why this level of training isn't offered to *all* carers.

These conversations inspired me to get more involved in shaping our systems. I met some incredible people who sparked ideas about where I might contribute next.

Key Learnings I'm Bringing Back Into My Practice

1. Staying out of the jungle (Dr Brenda Heyworth)

This metaphor was a game changer for me. It distilled what I already understood about regulation and brain states into something I can easily use under pressure. Speaking calmly, slowing down, offering short sentences, and giving a child time — even five minutes of play or a yoghurt break — has become second nature.



I've used it with kids in my care and shared it with my sister, whose twin 13-year-old boys often struggle with big behaviours. The “reset button” concept — consequence, reset, move on — has been powerful. They're not collecting in their metaphorical backpack all the things they've done wrong, collecting failure. The consequence enables the reset.

IMAGE from Brenda's website

2. Playful and Practical Regulation Tools (Ursula Elisara)

I learned so many practical ways to embed calming activities into our routines, which helped me create a **calm kit** for my sister's kids — who have experienced trauma — and to start building one for my own home. Some of the tools I loved included:

1. Band-aids activity: identifying inside or outside hurt — “Where does it hurt?”, “Is it okay if I put a bandaid there to remember you're hurting?”, “which bandaid would you like?” followed by “I'm sorry you're hurting.”
2. Bubbles activity: blowing bubbles at the table to model slow, regulated breathing.
3. Magic moustache: applying gentle pressure to the point above the upper lip — a surprisingly effective little regulation tool.

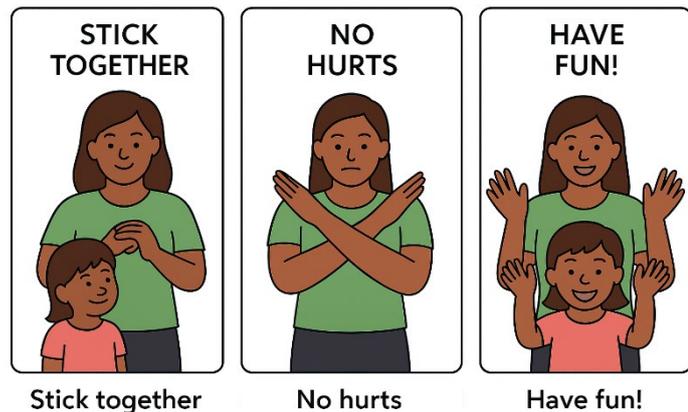


I've also added things like breathing shapes, a straw cup, fidget spinners, playdough, slime, magnets, drawing pencils, a heavy blanket, roll-on lavender oil, and a hot/cold eye pack — all small items that help support regulation in different moments.

3. Simple, Effective House Rules (Ursula)

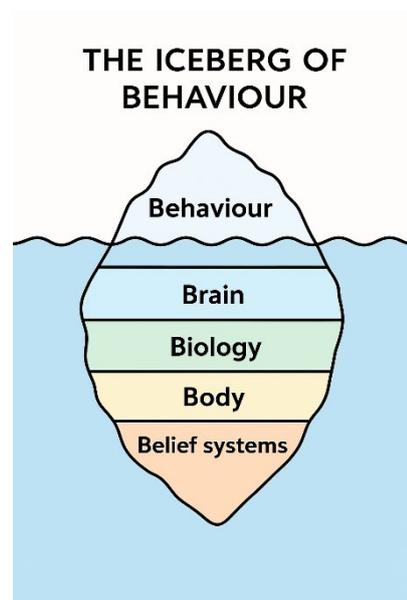
These have become my go-to. Kids from ages 5–11 respond beautifully to them, and they give me a simple language for reinforcing boundaries.

Stick Together, No Hurts and Have Fun! (with hand gestures). Having fun is always received so well!



4. The Iceberg of behaviour

This reminder — that behaviour is only the visible tip — helps me stay curious about what I *can't* see that is contributing to the behaviour: is brain, biology, body, belief systems. When kids are hungry, feel fear or shame, are tired, hurt or believe they're not worthy of love, these can all contribute to the behaviour. I now share this often with friends when we're navigating tricky adult behaviour too.



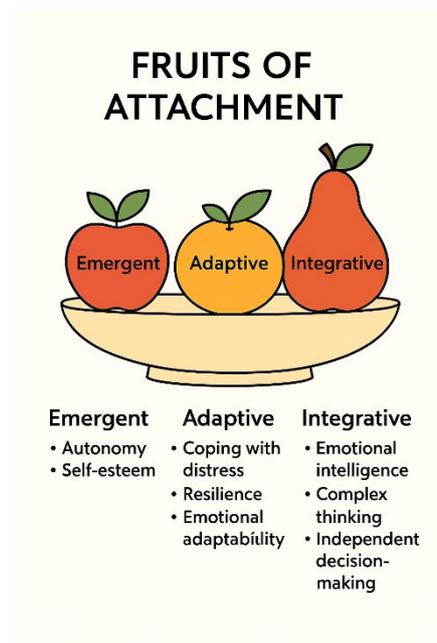
5. The Six Stages of Attachment (Dr Gordon Neufeld via Ursula)

From the first stage - senses/touch (baby) – through sameness and parroting (2 yr), belonging and loyalty (3 yr), significance and tolerating separation (4 yr), love and being known (5 yr). Understanding these stages helped me reflect on the kids in my care — where they are developmentally, where gaps might be, and how I can meet them in the stage they're operating from.

ATTACHMENT STAGES	
	Senses/touch (baby)
	Sameness (2 yr)
	Belonging and loyalty (3 yr)
	Significance and tolerating separation (4 yr)
	Love and being known (5 yr)

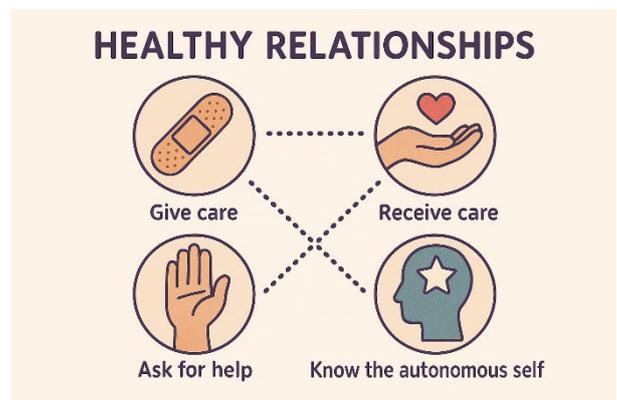
6. Fruits of Attachment (Ursula)

Healthy attachment acts as a foundational "secure base" that fosters a young person's growth and develops the 'fruits of attachment' – that is to become an emergent, adaptive, and integrative individual. Emergent in that they have autonomy, self-esteem, and cognitive skills, they have the emotional tools to adapt to new situations, cope with distress, and build resilience, and they are integrative, and can synthesise experiences so that they have improved emotional intelligence, complex thinking, and independent decision-making skills. The results of this development include better social skills, fewer mental health problems, and increased capacity to navigate complex interpersonal relationships. This framework helped me articulate why nurturing attachment isn't just emotional — it's developmental.



7. Healthy Relationship Skills (Ursula)

To have healthy relationships, you need to be able to give care, receive care, know your autonomous self, and have the capacity to ask for help. I loved that these can be taught as skills to children through simple, fun activities — like the bandaid activity, which is such a powerful way to practise both giving and receiving care. It also helped me recognise kids in my care who *can't* yet ask for help. Knowing this means I can be more intentional about encouraging them, helping them feel safe to seek support, and showing them that their needs will be met by people who genuinely care for them.

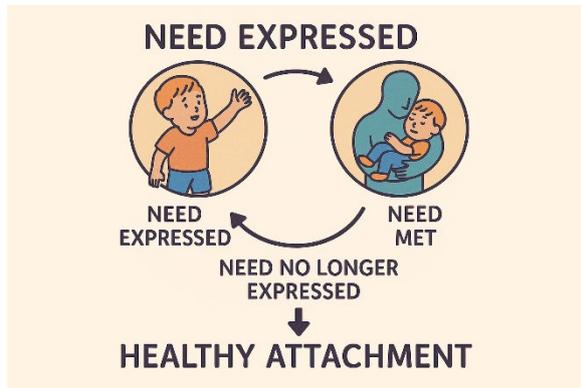


8. Meeting Needs Unwaveringly

The story of the child who needed to be "born again" through repeated rocking was profound. The reminder: unmet needs don't disappear — they show up in behaviour until someone meets them. Or, when needs are met, they'll find ways to check out. I thought about the little boy who runs to hold my hand the moment he sees me; a sign

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that this need *is* being met, and that he's able to ask for help or seek attachment with the trust that I'll respond to him and meet his need.



9. ACEs and Health (adverse childhood experiences)

The ACEs exercise was stark but illuminating — seeing people with high scores still standing alongside their health conditions brought home the lifelong biological impacts of adversity.

10. The young peoples' panel

Their message was clear and powerful:

“Don't give up on us. Don't kick us out when it gets tough. Stand by us.”

I will carry this with me.

11. Compassion Fatigue

Hearing others share their experiences normalised something so many of us feel. I was reminded of when I needed time off and how much stronger I returned afterwards with the support of my case manager.

12. Life Without Barriers session on Cultural Plans

This session underscored how essential cultural and family connections are — and how often the system fails to prioritise them. It motivated me to advocate more fiercely for the kids in my care.

There was a following session on life story work and we saw a fantastic video with a young person who has been in out-of-home-care and went through the life story process, demonstrating how healing it was and enabled her to have better relationships with her carers. This was really impactful.

13. Book List + Resource Access

I left with an enormous book list — and also the realisation that many carers can't afford these resources. An FCAV library or lending system could be a game changer.

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14. Innovation Work

The Key Assets/Chrysalis innovation work was deeply inspiring. I hope future conferences highlight more system design, research, and pilot learnings.

15. Sarah Naish

Absolutely phenomenal. Honest, humorous, and packed with practical insights:

- “If I’m scared of spiders, I don’t care if you’re a good spider.”
- “It’s not you, it’s what you’ve been through” “it’s not because you won’t, its because you can’t”
- “Your parents couldn’t look after any children, even the best kids in the world” (it’s not you)
- “You do these things because bad things happened”
- The two rooms – room 1 and 2 – the reality now and their born room which is dangerous, things that might make them slip through the trap door into their old life/room.
- Show they’re good don’t tell them – I know you’re a good person because yesterday I saw when you were really kind to your sister. Hold up a mirror to them.
- Rewards charts do not work for children of trauma. We have to get them to adulthood in a different way.
- We need to be CPR – consistent, predictable and reliable, meet unmet developmental needs, promote and support attachment, rewire brains and change their internal working model.

Her humour — like comparing “why did you do that?” to hitting yourself with a saucepan — made the learning land.

16. Foster Carer Stories

I really really enjoyed hearing the stories of other carers peppered throughout the day – more of this!

Attending the FCAV Conference grounded me, challenged me, and filled me with renewed purpose. I walked away with practical tools, deeper insight, new language to articulate what matters, and a stronger sense of the carer I want to be: curious, consistent, nurturing, and always learning.

Most of all, I left feeling reconnected — not just to the sector, but to the community of carers who hold so much hope, resilience, and heart. Thank you FCAV!