

TRAUMA-INFORMED PRIMARY PRACTICE: PLANNING SAFE AND INCLUSIVE “GETTING TO KNOW YOU” ACTIVITIES

Many primary schools begin the year with activities designed to help children settle in and build relationships. Tasks like “draw your family,” “family trees,” or “bring in a photo of you as a baby” are often chosen with good intentions — usually to support identity, belonging, and connection.

WHAT THE PRIMARY CURRICULUM AIMS TO DEVELOP

Across UK primary curriculum, early-term activities often aim to support:

- Identity — helping children understand what makes them unique
- Belonging — helping children feel part of the class and school community
- Relationships — exploring trusted adults, friendships, and support
- Diversity — recognising that people’s lives and families can look different
- Wellbeing — building confidence, emotional literacy, and safety



These aims are important — and they can be met in many ways.

WHY SOME CHILDREN FIND FAMILY-FOCUSED TASKS DIFFICULT

While many children enjoy talking about their families, others may find it confusing or emotionally challenging. This can include children who:

- live in kinship care, foster care, or residential care
- have experienced trauma, loss, or separation
- have blended or complex family structures
- have strained or unsafe relationships with adults at home
- feel unsure about what they are “allowed” to share



A trauma-informed approach simply recognises that not all children can comfortably talk about home life, especially early in the year.

HOW TRAUMA-INFORMED ALTERNATIVES SUPPORT CHILDREN



Trauma-informed “getting to know you” activities are designed to support every child, especially those who may feel unsure about adults, worry about saying the wrong thing, or carry internal beliefs shaped by past experiences. Some children may enter school with thoughts like “I don’t belong,” “I’m different,” or “I need to be careful what I share.” Gentle, flexible activities help create emotional safety from the very start.

These approaches support children by:

Reducing pressure and worry

Children who feel anxious about talking about home life can take part comfortably, without fear of revealing something they don’t feel ready to share.



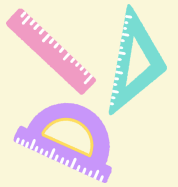
Protecting emotional safety

Children who feel different or unsure about their place in the class are not put in situations where they compare themselves to others or feel exposed.



Helping build trust gradually

Activities focused on strengths, interests, and supportive people allow children to experience adults as predictable, kind, and safe — which gently challenges internal beliefs that adults might not be trustworthy.



Promoting a sense of belonging

When children see that everyone’s experiences are valid and that there is no “right” answer, it helps them feel included even if their home life is complicated.



Offering choice and control

Being able to choose who they draw or write about helps children feel secure. Choice is especially important for children who may feel powerless or unsure about adults.

Avoiding accidental triggers

By not centring family structure, teachers reduce the risk of activating feelings of sadness, confusion, shame, or fear — all of which can be linked to a child’s internal beliefs about themselves or others.



Still meeting curriculum goals

Identity, relationships, diversity, and wellbeing are explored in ways that feel comfortable and accessible for every child.



TRAUMA-INFORMED ALTERNATIVES

“What Helps Me Have a Good Day at School”

This supports regulation and helps children identify what makes the school environment feel predictable and comfortable.

Children can choose to share:

- places in school where they feel settled
- activities that help them calm
- objects that help them feel comfortable
- routines that help them start the day

This avoids home-based triggers and builds a sense of safety in the present.



“My School Day”

A gentle, grounding activity that helps children feel secure in the present.

Children can draw or write about:

- parts of the day they enjoy
- things they look forward to
- activities that help them settle
- moments that feel calm or predictable

This reduces anxiety around transitions and supports emotional regulation.



“Things I Like to Learn About”

A strengths-based activity that avoids comparison or pressure.

Children can choose:

- topics they enjoy
- things they're curious about
- activities they like doing in class

This builds identity safely without touching personal history.



“People and Things That Are Important to Me”

Draw or write about people who help you feel safe or happy. You get to choose who that is.”

Children may choose:

- a friend
- a teacher
- a neighbour
- a pet
- a fictional character
- someone they admire

This gives full control and avoids assumptions about home life.



WHY THESE ACTIVITIES WORK WELL FOR CHILDREN WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED EARLY LIFE TRAUMA

Children who have experienced early-life trauma — such as separation, loss, multiple moves, or inconsistent caregiving — often need extra emotional safety and predictability in school.

These activities work well because they:

- Avoid sensitive personal topics like family structure or babyhood, which can be painful or unknown.
- Focus on the present, helping children feel grounded in what is happening now rather than revisiting difficult early experiences.
- Offer choice and control, which is important for children who may have felt powerless in the past.
- Build safety and belonging in school, through routines, trusted adults, and strengths-based identity work.
- Support regulation, helping children identify what helps them feel calm, comfortable, and ready to learn.
- Meet curriculum aims without requiring children to disclose personal or traumatic information.

This approach supports children's emotional safety, strengthens their sense of belonging, and helps them build trust in school adults — all essential foundations for learning.

For schools wanting to deepen their understanding of trauma-informed practice, *The A-Z of Trauma-Informed Teaching* by Sarah Naish et al. offers clear, accessible guidance on supporting children who have experienced early-life trauma, disrupted attachments, or instability.

