

This resource follows on from the **Sport Sanctuary Think Piece** and the **Sport Sanctuary Guide**. It is intended to support schools with ideas for physical activities that can be used with children and young people who may find themselves dysregulated emotionally at school.

**THIS RESOURCE AIMS
TO SUPPORT:**

- Teaching staff and pupils to **develop** their **awareness and skills to sense (experience) and talk about** their internal states.
- Teaching staff and pupils to **use** their **awareness and skills to change** their internal states.
- Teaching staff and pupils to **co create** a place of sanctuary using STEP¹.



CREATING A SPORT SANCTUARY IN SCHOOLS

Sport Sanctuary Resource and Activity Cards

How can the concept of Sport Sanctuaries support children and young people?

Neuroception is a term coined by Dr Stephen Porges, a scientist who discovered the **Poly Vagal Theory**. This is an experimental theory which describes and explains the ways our autonomic nervous system (ANS) responds and puts us in states depending on what our bodies or the situation requires.

Our Neuroception is the part of us that is constantly scanning our internal experience of the world and registering what it experiences as **cues of safety, danger and life threat**.

Outside our awareness it sets us up to **'connect or protect'**. Neuroception detects what's going on in:



Our nervous system, (evaluating risk and adjusting our physiological response)



The nervous system of those around us



The world around us (scanning the environment, situations, people for safety or danger)



Our genetics, our previous experiences and our neuro divergence (diverse ways of thinking, learning, processing, and behaving) effects the **sensitivity** and **accuracy** of our neuroception, which is sub-conscious. We can experience danger where there is none, or we can experience no danger where there is. Conscious thought (perception) can also play a part by exacerbating this. In physical activity, especially in the outdoors, this refers to perceived risk and real risk and how we react to it.

Experiences in supportive 'sanctuary like' relationships with people, places, environments and 'time in' with sensations, images, feelings and thoughts can help children and adults become more aware of their 'neuroception' and its impact on the autonomic nervous system states which is activated by stress. Once we identify this, and know other people can help us, we can begin to understand and choose a little more how we respond to situations.

It seems that there are more and more children and adults whose nervous systems are dysregulated by all the energy and information around us. They find it difficult to focus their attention on a task or find the grounded, calm, awake and ready place within them that is required for learning and connection.

THIS CAN BE FOR MANY REASONS:

SPACE:

Sensory overload or under stimulation from the environment (a sensory audit of the environment and any learning space is often required to ensure engagement).

TASK:

Where a task does not land in the zone of proximal development *that sweet spot of not too hard or not too easy (understanding their tipping point)*. This can stimulate an experience which becomes unbearable, causes a feeling of shame and inability to cope. A survival response is triggered which causes brain fog, detachment from a situation, confusion, an inability to manage behaviour, think clearly and rise to the challenge, resulting in poor decision-making.

EQUIPMENT:

Staff should understand what pieces of equipment will trigger engagement or disengagement (causing an emotional and/or physical reaction) – and need to take into account; texture, colour, shape, size of equipment – providing choice for pupils.

PEOPLE:

An experience with peers or staff which may have been, or perceived to have been, unhelpful which causes dysregulating from a social, emotional and/or sensory point of view (for example struggling with social interaction and connection with others).

We can turn this sometimes negative STEP experience into a positive approach within Physical Education, physical activity and sport through our teaching and learning. If we adapt our teaching and support processes appropriately, we will enable young people to be more alert, engaged, feel safe and included.

We see children every day who have moved out of their window of tolerance and are either defensively shut down or in fight and flight - either way not ready or able to socially engage, learn and connect with new/different experiences, tasks or people in a way that is meaningful as a pupil. This state can be moved by giving due consideration to the environment, the child, and yourself. Being aware of our environment in school, and ensuring meaningful pupil voice can develop an understanding of how we can facilitate change and enable appropriate support.



Why might this understanding help you create a Sport Sanctuary in school?

Physical activity can be integral in creating a Sport Sanctuary, through;

PLAY GAMES MOVEMENT RHYTHM

UNDERSTANDING BREATHING TECHNIQUES

MUSIC SOCIAL CONNECTION/INTERACTION

BENEVOLENCE BEAUTY AWARENESS AWE

EXPERIENCES OF NATURE/THE OUTDOOR ENVIRONMENT

These factors, which can also be tactile and sensory, help us switch our emotional state from protection to connection, from threat to safety.

Knowing this, feeling this and intentionally working with this idea in mind could lead to us all working towards changing the way we respond to the different behaviours of young people, and creating an environment to accommodate a range of sensitivities. We can create intentional 'sanctuary' through a planned, responsive and personalised set of experiences. The intention of these experiences is to move a young person out of a **protection** state, towards a **connection** state that supports their personal, academic and social growth and development in our school settings.



PROTECTION

Our world, is getting busier and more demanding whilst also in many ways more informed and understanding.

It is full of experiences that, outside of our perception and awareness, can cause our autonomic nervous system (ANS) to experience **cues of danger** and threat, activating the autonomic states from two different branches of the ANS to **defensively protect** us from experience and connection that is anticipated as dangerous or threatening.

These are known as the **mobilising sympathetic fight/flight system** and the **immobilising parasympathetic dorsal vagal system**.

These two branches are about **PROTECTION**.

CONNECTION

We also now know more about which **cues of safety** are essential for a nervous system to allow the state that supports the **open and curious connection** needed for play, learning, joy, passion, ease – an autonomic state that supports **health, growth and restoration known as ventral vagal**.

This branch is about **CONNECTION**.

A glimmer not a trigger

Sport Sanctuaries can be the **activities, places and spaces** in schools that support children to experience **feeling safe, connected and engaged**. The **glimmer** of these anchoring, grounding, connecting experiences can support young people to feel OK in the classroom enabling them to settle, concentrate, and follow instruction.

Play, physical recreation, physical education and sport all have their part to play in supporting the development of a nervous system that is **resilient** – meaning that we have a body system that can cycle through different autonomic states with ease, returning to a state of calm connection, without getting stuck in a shutdown state of anxiety, or responding in ways that are a **mismatch** for the situation. Through Sport Sanctuaries we want to support young people to become more resilient, by learning to develop coping strategies for whatever stressful, challenging situation they encounter within a school setting, as well as life's general challenges. By offering suitable activities and an appropriate environment we can help young people to understand how to be regulated, sometimes through co-regulation to self-regulation, rather than be dysregulated.

The recipe for a sport sanctuary – 3 important ingredients

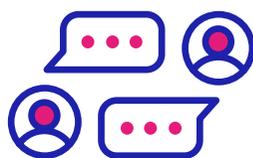
Sport Sanctuaries aim to bring our attention to three important ingredients that bring about the recipe for connection – embodied safety, alertness, possibility, and hope.

This is a state that allows us to access safe, fun, social and connected learning experiences in the way they are intended – in our best interests!

The ingredients in combination that bring about our capacity to feel safe, engaged and connected are:

- **Young person's inner experience**
Bringing attention to our inner experiences based on neuroception, managing stressful internal sensory input.
- **The relational experience**
Bringing attention to our safe relational experiences with others (Co-regulation).
- **The environment**
Bringing attention to safe places, spaces, and activities to intentionally use them to access our safe and connected state.

CREATING SPORT SANCTUARIES WITH THE IDEAS AND ACTIVITIES OUTLINED IN THIS PACK, WILL SUPPORT YOUNG PEOPLE TO:



Be more attentive



Enjoy movement



Understand breathing techniques



Develop a satisfying feeling of being in nature



Feel safe through relationships with people whose nervous systems are regulated

This will support them to feel anchored in a place of connection and possibility, enabling them to take part in school in a more engaging and fulfilling way.