The Association for Child and Adolescent Mental Health

Making Sense of Behaviour:

A Mentalizing Approach to Complex Trauma in Children and Families

Mentalizing is the capacity to interpret behaviour (our own and others') through the thoughts, feelings and intentions behind it. It develops within early relationships, and from there it supports emotional regulation, empathy and trust.

Because mentalizing is built through relationships, it is also vulnerable to them

How Complex Trauma Gets in the Way

Early adversity can disrupt these three interrelated capacities:

- **Attachment**
- **Mentalizing**
- **Trust**

When these are compromised, distress can sometimes surface as dysregulation or as behaviour that is difficult to read

Since trauma's effects are relational, it is important that recovery involve the whole system: the child, parents and carers, and the surrounding network. When those adults sustain their own mentalizing, they can help re-establish the child's safety and trust.

Join Dr. Emma Morris to explore how mentalizing can be applied within a systemic framework to assess, formulate and support children, young people and families affected by complex trauma.