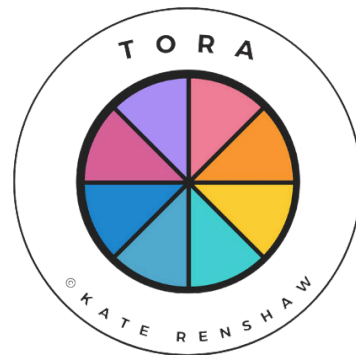


# The Teacher's Optimal Relationship Approach

A Universal Mental Health and Wellbeing Approach



playroom  
therapy.

CHILD&FAMILY PSYCHOTHERAPY

# What is the Teacher's Optimal Relationship Approach (TORA)?



The Teacher's Optimal Relationship Approach (TORA) is a school-based, early intervention, mental health and wellbeing approach. TORA acknowledges the pivotal role teachers play in the lives of children and provides teachers with skills to embed therapeutic qualities and playfulness into their daily relationships.

TORA Certified classrooms are evidenced to be academically, socially and emotionally optimal learning environments. TORA offers teachers 8 practical and therapeutic skills to embed into their teaching practice.

The outcomes of which include:

- Improved academic performance.
- Reduced overall problem behaviours.
- Increased pro-social behaviours.
- Enhanced student and teacher happiness and engagement.
- Improved student attendance rates.

TORA is evidence-based and underpinned by internationally recognised psychological and play therapy approaches, which are grounded in attachment theory and bio-psycho-social development theory.

# Evidence-base of TORA

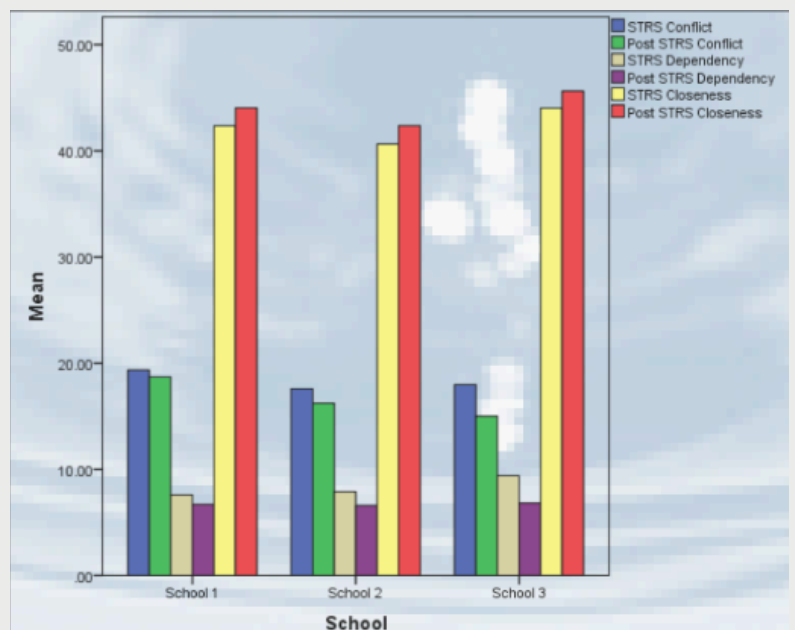
TORA was developed by Dr Kate Renshaw, one of Australia's leading Child Play Therapists. Dr Renshaw put TORA to the test through her doctoral study, whereby she delivered TORA into Victoria schools.

In the study TORA was implemented in three Victorian schools with measurements being recorded pre and post intervention. All teachers involved completed a Student Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS) and the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) for all students in their classes prior to completing the TORA training and again after embedding TORA in their daily teaching for a school term.

The STRS assesses for relationship patterns in terms of conflict, closeness, and dependency, as well as the overall quality of the relationship. The SDQ assesses both positive and negative behavioural, emotional and psychological attributes such as conduct problems, peer problems, internalising and externalising behaviours and overall total difficulties.

Results of Dr. Renshaw's study demonstrated significant increases in prosocial behaviours and in closeness of teacher-student relationship and a significant decrease in conflict and dependency in relationships (Table A).

There was also a significant decrease in total difficulties, conduct problems, hyperactivity, peer problems observed post TORA (Table B). As well as a significant decrease in internalising and externalising behaviours (Table C). All results were shown to have statistical significance with a probability value (p value) of  $p = 0.000$  for all measurements.

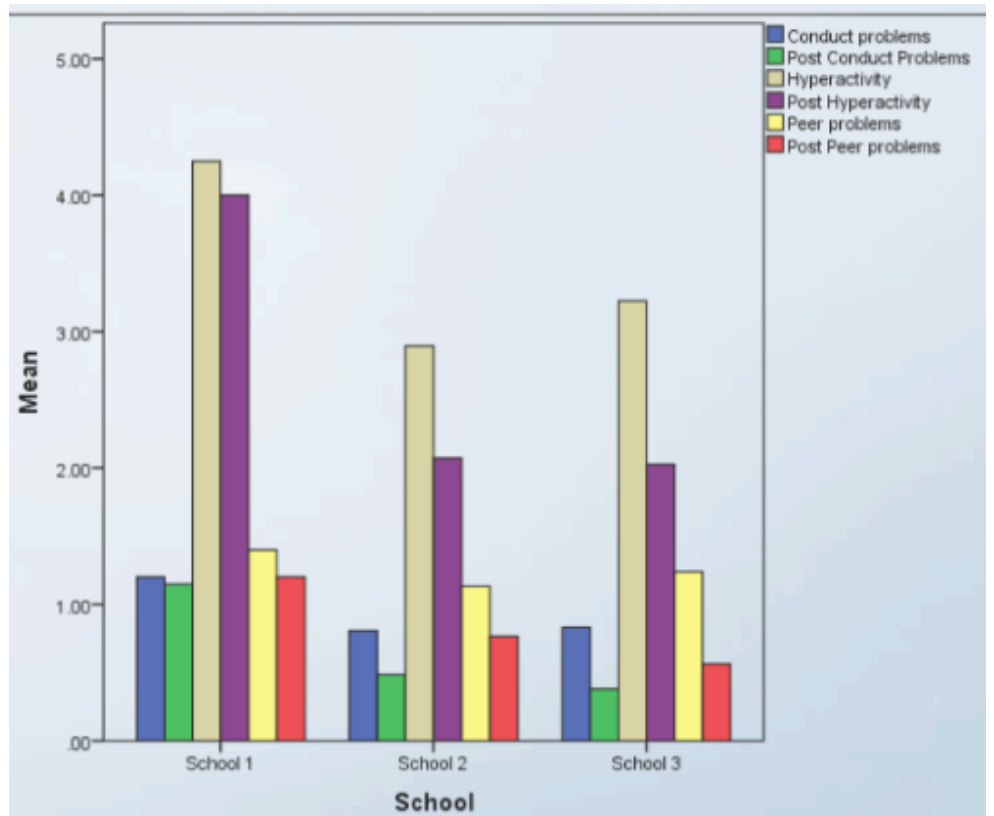


**Table A:** Shows the results pre and post TORA for conflict, dependency and closeness using the Student Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS).

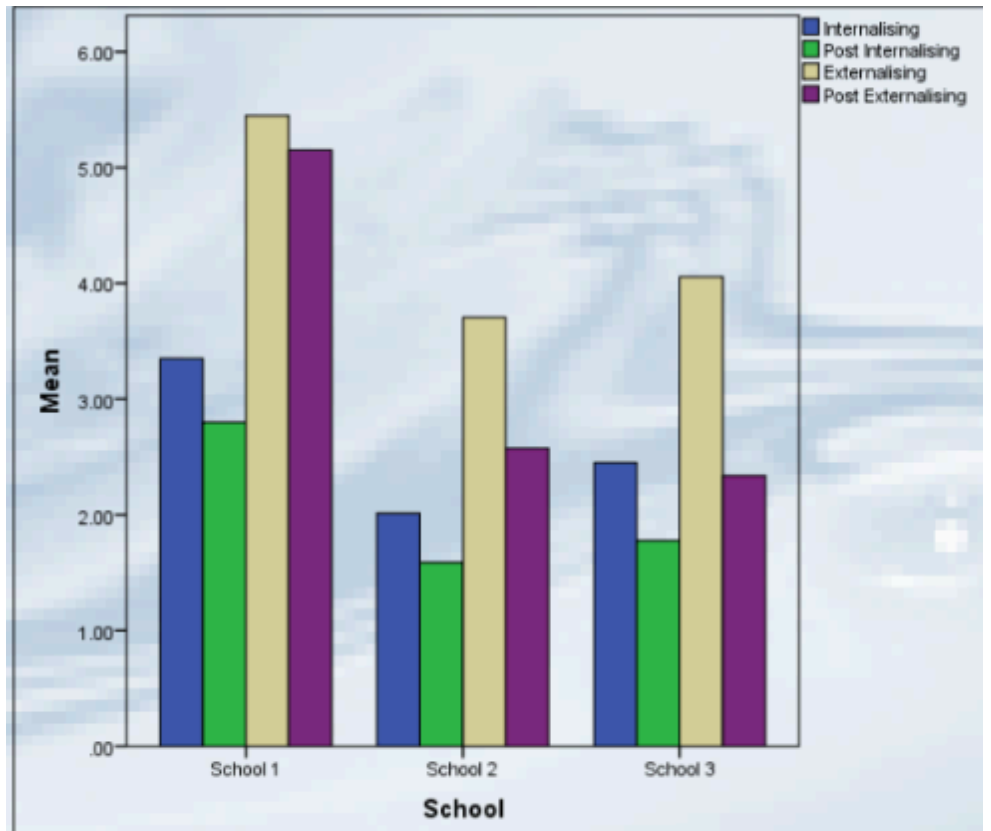


I believe the TORA approach often diffuses situations with some students that might have escalated if it wasn't used.

Teacher, Victoria, Australia 2023



**Table B:** Shows the results pre and post TORA for conduct problems, hyperactivity and peer problems.



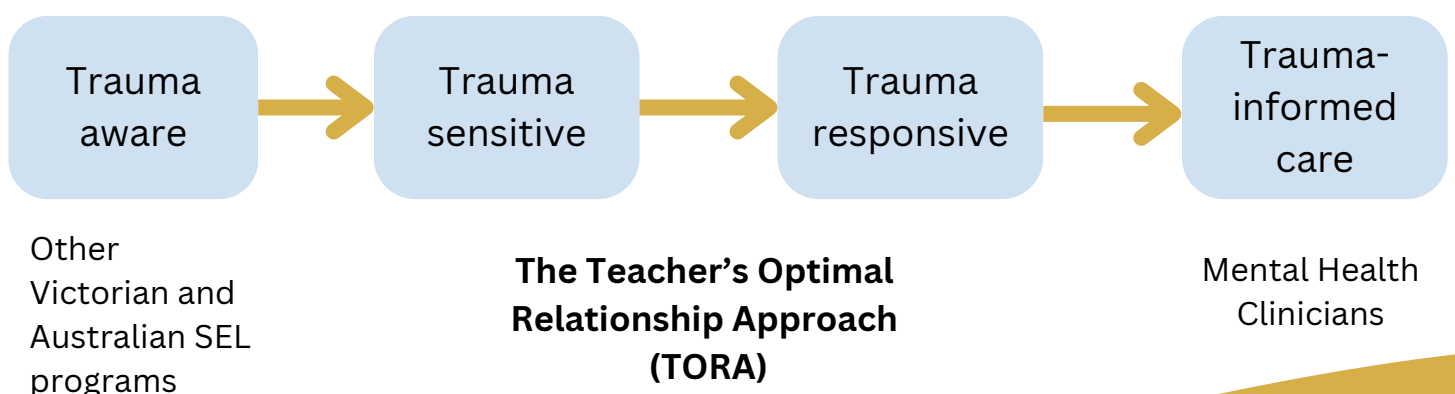
**Table C:** Shows the results pre and post TORA for internalising and externalising behaviours across all three schools.

# What makes TORA different from current mental health and wellbeing approaches in Victorian primary schools?

TORA is aligned with current mental health, wellbeing and reporting guidelines for schools in Australia and overseas. However, TORA departs from past and current behavioural approaches to managing challenging behaviours that rely on inconsistently effective reward and consequence schemes.

Instead, TORA is focused on strengthening relationships between the teacher and their students, which has the natural effect of reducing oppositional behaviours, improved teacher job-satisfaction and wellbeing, and increased peer-to-peer cohesion.

There are many, distinct and significant advantages of adopting a TORA approach. Firstly, the current scope of mental health and wellbeing programs in Victorian schools is limited to developing trauma awareness. However, a school has the power to become a therapeutic community, where teachers act as secondary attachment figures for students, generating observable and significant, therapeutic change. In this way, TORA further develops a school's capacity to transition from simply trauma-aware, to more impactful, trauma sensitive, and even trauma responsive, environments.



Secondly, TORA targets ALL student populations, not just those students with extreme behavioural challenges. This means that this approach offers something for everyone. Similarly, TORA can be adopted by all teachers whom are at different stages of their teaching careers.

TORA is a low-to-medium time commitment, with a flexible approach to delivery and implementation, that can be tailored to meet individual school preferences and requirements.

TORA is also aligned with the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) and Vic Curriculum, but unlike other widely used approaches, TORA is not a curriculum add-on, and does not require planning and teaching of specialised content or lessons. Rather, TORA is a scaffolded approach where teaching staff participate in a short training phase and are then supported to embed therapeutic skills into their everyday teaching practice. TORA offers a new way of being, rather than doing.

**“Because we’re so many different things. We’re not just teaching reading, writing. We’re working with parents who’ve experienced abuse, and we’re working with children who are coming from that... but... we’re not taught these things [the TORA] ....so I think that is a big fault in the system, and I think that would be a powerful change if teachers came into schools knowing these things and then putting it into practice and learning from it and growing with it.”**

Teacher, Victoria, Australia (Renshaw, 2022)

# The TORA process

## **Pre and Post Assessments**

Victorian schools are now required to report on wellbeing and for this to be included as part of the Annual Implementation Plan. TORA includes pre and post assessments administered by the therapists, with the teachers, to track measurable outcomes on student, classroom and whole of school mental health and wellbeing. This data can be used by schools to meet reporting requirements. Results can also be shared with teachers to better understand and relate to their students, track student health and wellbeing progress and to respond more effectively to students' diverse emotional and academic needs.

## **Professional Development & Training**

Professional Development and Training is delivered to all staff within the school and includes both theory and practice. Theory explored in TORA includes brain and behaviour science, relationships and attachment theory, and more.

Following delivery of the 'why' TORA, participants will be taught the 'how' through the training of, and practice in, 8 specific relational skills.

Flexible training options are offered to suit the needs of the school community. These may include full or half days of training, or 3 x 1.5-2 hour blocks of training delivered during after-school meetings

## **Mentoring and Supervised Practice - Observation and Feedback Cycles**

Following the professional development and training phase, staff are supported to translate knowledge into practice, through regular observation and feedback cycles in partnership with a registered Play Therapist certified in the approach. These observation and feedback cycles provide opportunity for teaching and education support staff to build capacity and confidence, and engage in reflective practice in the embedding of the skills.

Data gathered by the therapists from individual teachers will inform and target specific skill development. Teachers are offered highly specific analysis of their students' behaviours along with measurable indicators of the student/ teacher relationships in order to tailor the coaching and feedback for each teacher and student cohort.



### **Education Staff Certification**

The final certification phase includes a Therapist appraisal and discussion of the teacher's use of TORA skills in their teaching practice. Once evidence of satisfactory TORA skill development has been observed, staff will be awarded the title of Certified TORA Teacher ©/ Education Support © and provided with a certificate and digital badge. Ongoing networking opportunities exist for certified TORA staff to encourage reflective practice and peer support.

A resource book is available for Certified TORA teachers and school staff, and after completing the process, teachers are welcomed to contact the TORA facilitators directly if additional support is needed.

### **Supported Therapeutic Groups**

TORA Teachers© and Education Supports© can be supported to establish and deliver therapeutic groups. With a 'gradual release of responsibility' approach, schools and services can be supported to deliver effective therapeutic groups for their students through shadowing, co-facilitation and ongoing clinical supervision with Certified TORA Facilitators©.





# About Certified TORA Facilitators ©

Certified TORA Facilitators © are Registered Play Therapists with additional training and experience in Group Play Therapy and Filial Therapy.

Certification includes:

- Completion of 18 hours of Professional Development.
- Demonstrated Knowledge of The Teacher's Optimal Relationship Approach: TORA Certified Guidebook for Play Therapists, including an oral examination
- Coding and interpretation of assessments.
- Evidence of having provided observation and feedback to teachers on their TORA skill development

Talk with us for more information and to develop a tailored package of services to meet the needs of your team and the families you work with.



**TORA reminds me to have everything possible in place to ensure all children feel safe and supported. It reminds me to have structure and limits whilst also being empathetic and congruent with the children and having fun with them on their level. It has taught me to verbalise what I see to support children to name feelings and emotions and manage what they are feeling, thus creating more socially and personally aware students that can support each other and feel safe at school.**

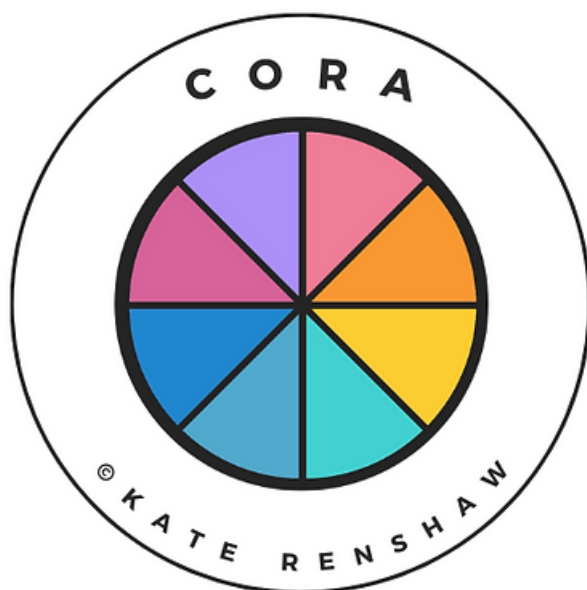


Teacher, Victoria, Australia 2023.

# Contextualised Optimal Relationship Approach (CORA)

TORA has since been adapted for application and use in wider community contexts. This is known as the Contextualised Optimal Relationship Approach (CORA). CORA is an evidence-based mental health and wellbeing approach that can be used by allied health professionals and other paraprofessionals working with children and families.

To-date, the CORA has been delivered and rolled out in various community settings, including hospitals and women's refuges. Like the TORA, the CORA can be adapted to include specific focus areas most relevant to the service. For example, when delivered in the context of a Family Violence Women's Refuge, the training included an in-depth look at the impact of trauma and exposure to family violence on child mental health and wellbeing. When delivered in the context of a major hospital, the Queen Elizabeth Centre Hospital, training included opportunities to reduce the traumatic impact of medical procedures within a therapeutic garden setting.



# Fees and funding

## Funding streams

The TORA can be delivered flexibly and in accordance with the needs and capacity of the teachers and their school/service. As such, the duration and focus of each part of the TORA training is determined through consultation.

TORA can be funded through various State Government funding streams, including the School Readiness Funding (SRF), available on the Menu under 'coaching'. We also work with schools through the Schools Mental Health Fund and Menu (SMHFM), available on the Menu under 'Additional Mental Health and Wellbeing Professionals'.

Separate quotes can be provided for Stage 1 (Professional Development and Training) and Stage 2 (Mentoring and Supervised Practice).

Speak with our team for more information, and to develop a tailored package of services to meet the needs of your team and the families you work with.

## Contact



0478 389 793



hello@playroomtherapy.com.au



playroomtherapy.com.au



91 Waverley Road, Malvern East &  
101 Doncaster Road, Balwyn North

playroom  
therapy.

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