

Meeting the needs of children who have experienced developmental trauma

A guide for school staff



Hull City Psychological Service

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This booklet was created by;

Dr Morgan Vallily, Senior Educational Psychologist

Sara Greene, Assistant Educational Psychologist

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Making sense of children's difficulties – The role of relationships in the classroom

Neuroscience has established that the way we are cared for in the womb and in early childhood affects how our brain develops. Consistently good enough loving relationships and low stress levels in early childhood build a brain that equips us to learn, share, empathise, regulate our feelings, feel good about ourselves and others and withstand everyday stresses. On the other hand, traumatic early experiences can affect our ability to form trusting relationships and develop healthy, well-functioning brains.



Some children's behaviour in the classroom can be very strange and confusing: the child who seems to crave negative attention, the explosive outbursts of seemingly otherwise placid children, the hiding under tables or biting sleeves of clothes. Have you noticed that very sensitive 8 yr old boy who cries whenever he loses his pencil? Or the otherwise intelligent child who cannot grasp the implications of spitting at other children? These children struggle in our educational system. They don't trust people; they don't make deep lasting relationships. Learning is not why they come to school; their main aim is to survive the day. (Marshall 2014)

The role of Attachment

Attachment is a framework for thinking about the importance of our earliest relationships. As infants, we are completely dependent on adults to meet our needs. From how they treat us, we learn about who we are, how we can expect others to behave, and what the world is like. All children need caregivers who are;

- Available – both physically and emotionally
- Attuned – able to tune into the child and work out what they need
- Responsive – able to give the child what they need

When our care givers are good enough (not perfect!), we learn that we are loved and ok; we learn that we can expect adults to be reliable and to meet our needs; and we learn to expect that the world will be safe, fun and exciting. We feel secure because are caregivers can be a 'safe base' from which we can go out and explore the world, returning to them for reassurance when we get anxious.

Some children's early experiences have taught them that adults are not available or responsive. These children have learned to manage their anxiety by avoiding

interactions with adults. They have learnt to try to look after themselves, appearing independent and self-sufficient, when really they feel very frightened and alone.

Some children's care givers are very unpredictable; they may be attentive and fun at times, but withdrawn and unresponsive at other times. Sometimes these children learn to keep themselves safe and cared for by trying to stay close to the caregiver and trying to make sure that they have the caregiver's attention at all times.

If a child's experience of a caregiver is so chaotic and harmful, then sometimes, no single way of responding may have been sufficient to keep them safe. Instead, these children have to carefully tune into each adult in each moment and act in a way which is the most likely to keep them safe and help get their needs met. These children are often experienced by adults as 'chameleons' or 'manipulative' when really they are working hard to stay safe.

The relatively new term "developmental trauma" is used to cover any number of difficulties that can arise when a child's development becomes compromised either in the womb and/or by neglect or abuse after birth. We now know from scientific research that this type of trauma can impact on every area of a child's development, from their physical health to their thinking, feelings, behaviour, sense of self and ability to form attachments.

Traumatic experiences that may affect a healthy attachment relationship include;

- Premature birth
- Abuse and neglect
- Domestic Abuse
- Post-natal depression
- Separation from care giver i.e. prolonged stay in hospital
- Parental substance misuse
- Poverty

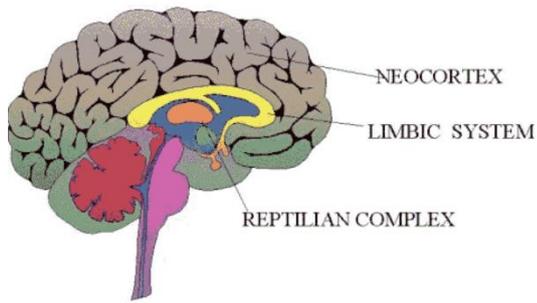
Attachment difficulties can make it difficult for children to;

- Achieve developmental milestones
- Reach their intellectual potential
- Behave in a socially acceptable way
- Think logically
- Develop a conscience, have empathy
- Develop good relationships with peers and teachers
- Feel like a worthwhile person

Brain development

The impact of trauma for children is not only emotional but also physical. Once we can truly appreciate this, it will be much easier to understand their behaviour. The brain develops from the bottom up and inside to outside. The first part of the brain to develop is the back part of the brain known as the reptilian brain. This area of the brain is concerned with survival.

This is where the fight, flight, freeze mechanism lives and this is all we need when we're born– the instinct to survive. As we grow and develop, the other two parts of the brain start to form, influenced by the attuned, repetitive interactions with our caregiver. The next section (limbic system) is known as the emotional brain.



This is where our feelings develop. Then, finally, the thinking brain (neocortex) develops. This is where all our logical thinking takes place – along with our reasoning, creativity and abstract thought. This is where most of us live most of the time. The interesting thing about the brain is that the reptilian brain and the thinking brain cannot work at the same

time; if the reptilian brain is fired up, the thinking brain is rendered inactive. If a child has experienced early trauma, the reptilian part of the brain is over-stimulated due to the stressful environment (it is hypersensitive, running on overdrive). Our reptilian brains are fired up very occasionally (for example when faced with a car speeding round the corner when we are in the middle of the road) however, for children who have experienced early trauma, the reptilian brain is on constant alert. So, when asked to do their times tables, a child who may already be over anxious about what might happen if they get it wrong, can't access the part of the brain needed to do times tables. It's not a case of 'won't do' – they simply can't. This is why you may find that some children can do something one day, then the next day they can't.



“When I was younger, wires got connected in the wrong places. I often think and feel like I am under attack, even when I'm very safe. This is when my brain activates survival mode to protect me. I probably won't be able to tell you what feels wrong. It has happened for such a long time, that this part of my brain is now incredibly strong and it controls the calm parts of my brain” (www.innerworld.co.uk)

“The part of my brain that is activated to help me survive is different from the part of my brain that is activated when I am calm. I can only learn properly when the calm part of my brain is activated. When I am in a survival state, which is often, it takes over from my calm brain and I cannot learn. If I don't feel safe, you will find it very hard to teach me. The truth is, I would really appreciate your help to feel safe so I can learn. I need you to see that I am in survival mode and it's not a personality trait. I do want to learn, I do want to feel ok and I do want to fit in but I cannot do that in school without support” (www.innerworld.co.uk)

Although a child's experiences impact upon their brain development, they can still make good progress at school when school staff change their attitude and expectations. Quite simply, we need to rewire the brain from the bottom up by relating to traumatised children of all ages with the attitude we would use with babies and toddlers, accepting that there are some things they cannot do despite their chronological age.

How Can We Help?

The key to making a difference for these children is about understanding what is going on for them and being committed to helping them build relationships. Being able to see them, not as 'naughty' children, but as scared, anxious children, whose behaviour is communicating their need to you will help you to adopt a nurturing approach.

There are 5 guiding principles when working with children who have experienced developmental trauma. These principles are based on the developmental need for children to be reassured, to be valued and to be cared for. Children experiencing developmental trauma will need many more of these attachment based interactions within school to help them to "fill in the gaps".

1. Relationships Over Programmes

When you are planning activities in the classroom, relationships are paramount. The more you can build trust in your interactions with children, the more they will be able to access what you want them to take on board. A framework for developing relationships, PACE, has been created by Dr Dan Hughes.

Playfulness – Approach children with a playful attitude

Accepting – Find ways to help children feel accepted whatever their behaviour

Curiosity – "I wonder if you're feeling...?" rather than "Why did you...?"

Empathy – When you really understand a child, you create a strong connection

So, it's YOU and your relationship with the child that will make the biggest difference, not the programme or intervention you use.

The child may need a 'key adult' who acts as an additional attachment figure. The role of the key adult is to

- Attend to the child – e.g. wondering aloud, mirroring their non-verbal communication
- Providing emotional holding/containment – letting them know it's ok to have big feelings and that you are there to help them manage them
- Keeping the child in mind – e.g. "I thought of you last night when I was watching the programme about penguins. I know you love penguins."
- Providing commentaries - "I can see you are getting into a bit of a muddle with all these instructions as you are shuffling the papers and sighing. I think you are starting to panic so we need to stop and take a quick break"
- Creating opportunities for the child to practise new things – i.e. practising asking for help, practising having fun, practising showing affection.
- Communicating empathy and hope – "I know it was hard for you to make the right choice today, I know that you will get it right next time"
- Advocacy – it is vital that the key adult can help other school staff to understand the child's needs

2. Emotional Age Over Chronological Age

Be aware and understand that a child's behaviours may be more about their emotional development than their academic level.

- To feel safe, sometimes children will need to be physically close to you and will need your attention. Give them jobs to do, check in with them regularly
- Be ready and prepared, anticipating when children might need support to avoid failure. Be an active presence for the child, intervening as and when necessary, as you would a much younger child
- Don't assume a child can understand the feelings of others, they may not have the skills to empathise, they will need to be taught these explicitly
- Consider the language you are using in the classroom, does it match their emotional age?

3. Structure Over Chaos

- Clear daily routines, firm consistent boundaries and predictable rewards and consequences – all adults need to respond in the same way
- Structure and Supervision – prepare for any changes in routine and staffing, provide close supervision in unstructured or new situations
- Use of schedules of the day i.e. visual timetable, now and next
- "Who helps me" board
- Clear explanations of why things are happening
- Keeping materials in the same place with photos of what they are – having sorting materials handy
- Finished and unfinished work trays
- Use of signs and symbols to help reassure of what is expected
- During unstructured times, i.e. playtime, provide close supervision, clear instructions and unambiguous rules to enable safe play

Sometimes, due to their early traumatic experiences, children may find things are too calm for them and they will push to create chaos; they will do this to create the atmosphere that is comfortable and 'normal' for them. They may push your buttons to see if you will shout and to see if they can break the stability you are trying to maintain. Even though they hate the chaos because it scares them, it's a more familiar place for them, so they will do whatever it takes to recreate that environment. You will need to remain mindful of this.

4. Time In Over Time Out

Children who have experienced developmental trauma need many more opportunities to relate to an adult. This is especially important during times of stress as they will often be unable to regulate their emotions and will need an adult in physical proximity. Therefore, traditional 'time out' strategies will reinforce their negative sense of self and experiences of rejection. This technique is often hard for us to understand if we feel we have to let a child know they have done something wrong, but the reason they behave in a certain way is due to fear and anxiety not 'naughtiness'.

- When you see a child becoming frustrated or dysregulated, pre-empt their anxiety and bring them close to a trusted adult. You can say "Billy, why don't you come and help me sort out these books" or "Jenny, can you help Ms Jones sharpen the pencils?"
- If a child is too unregulated to stay safely in the classroom, then the way you communicate taking them out is important. "I can see you have lots of energy right now. I think we should take a brain break. Let's go for a short walk so that we can use up some of this energy. Then, in a minute, we'll go back to class and we'll be carrying on with the number work we were doing"

5. Sensory Less Over Sensory More

Traumatized children's senses are often working overtime. Smells, sounds, tastes, sights and touch- any of these senses can be triggered to take them back to their early trauma. These children do not need more stimulation; they need more connections (see Principle 1).

- Prepare children for extra-curricular activities like school trips by thinking about regular breaks, identifying a calm place to go with an adult, and having an adult in close proximity
- Access to a safe space which replaces the safe base used by very small children – not open plan, a sensory element to reduce anxiety
- Time to scan the environment before settling
- The use of Calm boxes – to teach the feeling of calm: hand wipes; cool patch; hand cream; lavender; music; pictures, tangle etc. Planned opportunities to practise and learn about the feeling of calm. Calm start to the day/session;
- The use of sensory snacks – physical activity burst to help focus, brain breaks
- The use of Calm strategies; breathing, visualisations, get a drink, multi-sensory, short burst of physical activity; aromatherapy oils
- Flexibility around assemblies, productions, birthdays, celebrations
- Think about distractions in the classroom e.g. roller blinds over displays, lighting, noise

Essential Reading

Bomber, L (2016) *Inside I'm Hurting – Practical Strategies for Supporting Children with Attachment Difficulties in Schools* Worth Publishing Ltd

Marshall, N (2014) *The Teacher's Introduction to Attachment - Practical Essentials for Teachers, Carers and School Support Staff* Jessica Kingsley Publishers

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Siegel, D and Bryson, T *The Yes Brain Child* Simon & Schuster UK Ltd

Siegel, D and Bryson, T *The Whole Brain Child* Robinson

Websites

www.innerworldworks.co.uk

www.adoptionuk.org

www.beaconhouse.org.uk

www.hopeattach.co.uk

www.bravehearteducation.co.uk

www.nurtureuk.org

www.pac-uk.org

What Children Say

- ♥ I learn much better when I feel safe – emotionally and physically. I need you to like me and I need to like you, otherwise I just won't learn and school will be harder for both of us.
- ♥ Make a plan with me to help me through the day/through a difficult time e.g. about what I like, what I need to do or need to avoid or times of the day when I need extra help e.g. when there are big groups or what it is best to do when I am upset or angry.
- ♥ Let me know when I am managing my behaviour well – let me know what it is that I did which was good and you were pleased with e.g. that I asked before borrowing someone's pencil. This does help me.
- ♥ Help me to recognise my feelings. It helps me if you give the feeling a name and tell me how I look when I seem to be feeling it. E.g. 'you're looking happy, smiling and relaxed' or 'you're looking puzzled and screwing your eyes up, is something worrying you?'
- ♥ I may act younger than my year. Because difficult things happened to me when I was young, parts of my development just got stuck. So, I find it hard to get through the day without my Mum or Dad and I may need sensory reminders of them to help me feel safe. I need you to supervise me, give me boundaries, and relate to me as you would a much younger child.
- ♥ Tell me in advance about any changes e.g. new teachers or going on visits – I need a bit of time to get used to the idea of new people or something new happening.
- ♥ I find it hard to remember what equipment to bring on what days so making sure my parents/carers know what I need and when is helpful.
- ♥ Sometimes I need to be on my own to calm down – can we agree on a safe place for me to go and a quick way for me to tell you I need to go?
- ♥ Sometimes it's easier for me to draw or write a story about something which has happened than to talk to you about it.
- ♥ My behaviour is telling you how I am feeling – it is important that you stick to the plans that we have made for helping me through these difficult times.

Notes

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