

Impacts of Trauma

The children and adults you work with are likely to have experienced one or multiple types of trauma. Children, families, and carers will need you to understand how their trauma and resistance shapes who they are and how they interact with others.

It is important you take the time to understand their story, so you will understand how best to support them. Understanding the impact of trauma will help you adjust the way you work with them, so you can build trust and promote healing.

Always remember that each person processes experiences in their own unique way. Some people may experience symptoms of trauma after exposure to what most would consider a traumatic event, but others may not. It is important you do not make assumptions that a child or their parent/carer has been 'traumatised'.

Instead, watch for signs in their behaviour. Factors that contribute to the appearance of symptoms include the severity of the event, proximity to the event, caregiver's reactions, prior history of trauma, and family and community factors.

Most children show distress or behavioural change in the initial phase of recovery from a traumatic event. However, distress or behavioural changes can also be delayed and occur for much longer. Over time, and with love and support, most children are able to heal from trauma.

The video '[ReMoved](#)' is an example of the impact of trauma on children's feelings, thinking and behaviours when placed in care. Please note that this video may have an emotional impact.

As mentioned, many parents and carers you are working with will also be affected by trauma and it may be affecting the way they interact with their children. Supporting not just the child, but also the adults around them with their trauma, is an important part of your work.

Trauma can change the way a person's body responds to stress, how they see themselves and others and their ability to concentrate and learn.

(Perry & Ludy-Dbozen, 2010).

Impacts of Childhood Trauma including Developmental Trauma

Developmental trauma, also known as complex trauma, is a term used to describe childhood trauma such as chronic abuse, neglect, or other harsh adversity in their care environments, often perpetrated by those responsible for caring for the child. This type of trauma often occurs from a young age and is prolonged, impacting on a child's holistic development. This type of trauma can be very common among children in care and can result in them seeing adults as unsafe.

Impact of Childhood Trauma



Relationships and Trust

When a child's relationships, often with caregivers, have been unstable or unpredictable, children may learn that they cannot rely on others to help them. A child with a trauma history may therefore struggle to make secure attachments in relationships with others.

A child may find it hard to trust and judge the intentions of others or may make poor choices in who they trust or trust too easily. They may be uncomfortable being vulnerable with or counting on another person. Trust issues can stop children forming new relationships. This may mean they will have problems forming and maintaining friendships and responding to authority figures.

A child may have difficulty understanding and adhering to social norms (especially in groups).

Emotions and Managing Stress

Children who have experienced trauma often have difficulty in identifying, expressing, and managing their own emotions. They may misinterpret feelings (even with simple emotions), and struggle to understand the feelings of another person. This is usually because these skills have never been learnt. Children may not have the language to describe how they are feeling. A child may also feel disconnected from others.

A child may become withdrawn or not express emotions, which can lead them to internalising stress reactions. As a result, the child may experience significant depression and anxiety. They may have an uncontrolled outburst or engage in self-soothing behaviours.

[Download the Smiling Mind](#) - a free app which includes short modern meditations for children of all ages to help regulate emotions and control stress.

Behaviour

Always remember when a child has a trauma response their thinking brain goes offline. When this happens, a child may struggle to follow rules and have an inability to explain their behaviour.

At times they may be easily ‘triggered’, and these reactions are likely to be heightened and intense. A child can escalate from calm to angry in seconds. The child may struggle to calm themselves (self-regulate), appear to lack impulse control, and find it difficult to think through consequences before acting.

A child may misinterpret social cues and act younger or older than their age. They may easily be influenced by others, or not know when to ‘stop’. A child who has experienced complex trauma is also more prone to engage in high-risk behaviour, illegal activities, unsafe use of alcohol and drugs, and unsafe sexual behaviour.

A child may also display food-related behaviours that are unusual, such as overeating, undereating, vomiting, hiding, or hoarding of food.

Remember a child’s environment, situation/s, even smells can remind them of the trauma they have experienced, triggering a strong response. A child may try to avoid or withdraw from day-to-day interactions, or avoid sensory experiences such as crowded environments i.e., bright lights and loud noises. The child can become easily over-excited, or appear to not be listening (i.e., withdrawn, or dreamy) and have sleep difficulties.

Cognition

A child may struggle with concentration, thinking clearly, reasoning and planning for the future. Because the child's brain has learned to be in chronic stress-mode, they may have trouble thinking through a problem calmly or considering possible alternatives. They may find it difficult to develop new skills, pay attention or learn new information.

A child may have difficulties with understanding and expressing language. They may also have difficulties with gross motor skills such as balance and movement. As well as fine motor coordination such as holding a pencil or managing buttons.

Always remember if a child's brain is focused on potential danger, it is difficult to focus on learning.

Physical Health

A child's physical health can also be affected by trauma including lowered immune system and heightened physical stress responses that may be out of proportion in the context of a 'normal' reaction. They may have a high pain threshold, or, on the other hand, complain of chronic pain for which no physical cause can be found. Trauma is also linked to poor long-term health outcomes.

Mental Health

A child's mental health can also be affected by trauma. Complex trauma especially may lead to depression, anxiety, negative self-image / low self-esteem, post-traumatic stress disorder or suicidality.

Brain Development

A child's experience of trauma can impact on their brain development. This can result in smaller brain sizes, less efficient processing, and impaired stress responses.

With the above in mind, it is extremely important to identify challenges and gaps that a child may be experiencing or displaying, as early as possible, in order to help identify appropriate supports or services to best meet the child's specific needs.

[Watch 3 short videos](#) on the Developing Child from the Harvard Centre. They talk about the impact of toxic stress on development.

Trauma at Different Ages

Traumatic experiences can affect a person no matter how old they are, this includes infants and toddlers. The way traumatic stress manifests will vary from child to child and will depend on their age and developmental level.

Older children are more at risk of developing anxiety following multiple exposure to trauma or family adversity; and are more likely to show symptoms of post-traumatic stress. Despite this, many older children can overcome their trauma and grow and develop in healthy ways.

The table below outlines some of the common signs of trauma in different age groups.

Signs of trauma in different age groups		
<p>Preschool</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • fear of separation from parents and caregivers • cry and/or screaming • eat poorly and losing weight • have nightmares 	<p>Primary School</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • become anxious or fearful • feel guilt or shame • find it hard to concentrate • have difficulty sleeping 	<p>High School</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • feel depressed or alone • develop self-harming behaviour/eating disorder • abuse alcohol and drugs • become sexually active

Source: Anxiety & Stress Centre, P.C.

Impact of Trauma on Parents

Parents who have experienced childhood trauma are affected in the same manner, and this can have consequences in the way they raise their children. It may affect how they respond in situations and/or to their child's needs. A parent's own trauma can impact their ability to make appropriate judgments about their own safety and danger, and their child's. Their trauma may influence their capacity to plan, make decisions, and cope when met with challenges or disruptions in their lives.

It can affect their ability to develop and maintain secure and trusting relationships, evidenced by:

- challenges in relationships with their children

- experiencing negative feelings about parenting
- personalising children's challenging and negative behaviour which may lead to inappropriate or ineffective discipline and boundary setting
- regulation of their emotions and lower self-esteem, which may lead to maladaptive coping strategies
- experiencing triggers of trauma
- being vulnerable to other life stressors
- finding it challenging working collaboratively with caseworkers, carers, and the PSP environment, including experiencing difficulties in supporting children and young people's therapy.

Collective Trauma

Collective traumas are traumatic events that affect a whole group of people. This could be a family unit, a school community, a gender group, or an entire society. This can alter the collective 'sense of self' and is especially important to notice within cultures that are more collective in nature. Collective trauma can take many forms such as war, dispossession, and natural disasters.

As well as the above-mentioned impacts of trauma, a child impacted by collective trauma may also:

- experience the loss related to the trauma of others, like the death of loved ones and disruption of their community
- have reduced individual support because people in support networks are also impacted
- be exposed to constant information about the trauma through the news, increasing their anxiety and triggering their own experiences.

See [Collective Trauma](#) for more information.

Aboriginal Communities

The effects of colonisation and the Stolen Generation on Aboriginal communities is an example of collective trauma that you will likely encounter in your work. It is also an example of intergenerational trauma.

Aboriginal communities across Australia experience collective and intergenerational trauma due to past and current practices. Aboriginal families are collective and therefore through kinships systems and connections the trauma experienced by individuals impacts whole communities.

When whole communities experience trauma, whole communities need to heal. Walking alongside Aboriginal communities to heal is required and people and communities heal in their own way and own time.

See [Trauma in Aboriginal Communities](#) for more information.

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