

2.1.2 Trauma

Many children have experienced trauma. Common causes include

- Violence in the home.
- Drug and/or alcohol dependence of the care giver. (It is estimated that this is an issue in two thirds of care proceedings).
- Loss of a carer giver (death, abandonment or imprisonment).
- Stressful environment due to housing or financial problems.
- Experiences of war or disaster.
- Carer ill health (physical or mental health issues).
- Child ill health which may have meant long separations from their care giver due to hospitalisation.
- Parental neglect or abuse. Especially damaging as the person who should be providing safety and care to the child is dangerous and frightening.

Children can overcome trauma with support from loving care givers. However, Children Looked After have often experienced multiple traumas over a long period of time (chronic). Trauma is linked to a number of behaviours which can be challenging in school including lack of emotional control, poor organisational and planning skills, problems with working memory and difficulty beginning new activities or transitioning between activities.

Section 2.2.3 suggests ways of supporting children who have experienced trauma.

2.2.2 Supporting children who have experienced trauma

The Australian Childhood Foundation (2006) developed a framework for supporting young people who have experienced trauma in school. This framework uses the acronym **PRACTICE**.

The school should aim to

- Give children very predictable routines
- support children to develop relationships with peers and adults who are supportive and consistent
- keep children calm
- build children's memory and cognitive functions
- improve children's behaviour
- support children to shape their internal emotional reactions

Predictable

Traumatised children experience *change* to routines and their environment as a potential threat.

Strategies:

- Create an environment that is predictable and familiar
- Build a reliable routine of activity that traumatised children will experience as familiar over time
- Always prepare traumatised child for what is coming up next
- Establish a supportive pattern of one to one communication with traumatised children that explains the immediate and short term future
- Be particularly sensitive to times of transition
- Use daily and weekly timetables that traumatised children can understand
- For younger children, build a visual timetable that they can carry with them or keep on their desk

Responsive

Traumatised children often find it difficult to remember and apply rules and consequences. The challenging behaviour demonstrated by traumatised children can provoke reactions in others which further escalate stress and disengagement. Being responsive to traumatised children relies on understanding the meaning and purpose of the behaviour.

Strategies:

- Understand the purpose of the behaviour in the context of the way that children deal with and manage stress or change at school
- Use low stress opportunities to constantly reinforce rules
- Sanction misbehaviour without being rejecting of the child
- Track, record and acknowledge when children abide by the rules
- Use neutral body language and tone of voice when delivering feedback or implementing consequences
- After an issue has been resolved, go back to the traumatised child and talk it through with him/her again positively to reinforce the rules

Attuned

Traumatised children are not attuned (in touch with) to the way they feel because

- They experience feelings as separate to themselves
- They have a limited vocabulary of feelings that they can describe and express
- Their responses tend to be reflexive (from the primitive limbic area of the brain) rather than thoughtful and planned (controlled by their brain cortex)
- They transfer the emotional reaction from a previous traumatic experience into a current situation without any awareness that they are doing this

Strategies:

- Help traumatised children to develop a vocabulary about feelings
- Identify ways to support traumatised children to name and know the way they are feeling
- Find ways for key school staff to be aware of and track children's feelings on a regular basis
- Play feelings bingo with children. This game encourages children to identify feelings and name them. Each student is given a bingo sheet and they circle feelings they have experienced that day

Connecting

Traumatised children often feel disconnected from their feelings, their memories and their own sense of identity because

- They are used to having their feelings ignored
- They spend a lot of time feeling stressed or overwhelmed which reduces their brain's capacity to understand experiences
- Their memory of experiences are unstable
- Their experience of relationships has been poor.

Strategies:

- Provide opportunities for key school staff to regularly reflect back to children the way they seem to be feeling
- Support traumatised children to experience validation of their feelings, memories and thoughts
- Identify ways to help children experience relationships as consistent over time

Translating

Children's memory capacity is disrupted by trauma. They feel separate from their past and present and therefore find it very hard to think about the future.

Strategies:

- Create regular opportunities to review with children what they have done during the day or week
- Help children write/tell real life stories which include them in it
- Use a range of techniques to record children's memories and experiences
- Build stories with children that project them into the future with qualities that they know about themselves in the present

Involving

Traumatised children have poor internal working models for forming, maintaining, understanding and being in relationships with their peers because

- They have often not experienced positive relationships with peers
- They can find it difficult to tolerate the feelings of others and therefore do not know how to respond

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- They often use unhelpful behaviour to engage with peers because they do not know how to engage appropriately

Strategies:

- Create opportunities for children to become part of a group that shares interest, not necessarily social ability
- Engage children in practicing co-operative rather than competitive games
- Role model positive social exchanges with children
- Support and value relationships as part of normal school activities

Calming

Traumatised children live in a constant state of elevated stress. They experience the unfamiliar as threatening. They have little understanding and experience of what calm is, and they do not know how to calm themselves down.

Strategies:

- Plan regular opportunities for relaxation into every day
- Use music and other similar activities that help children to experience how these can change their feeling
- Focus on physical activities that helps children to relax their body as well as their mind
- Be aware of your own stress levels and apply strategies to keep yourself relaxed and resourced, this will avoid you inadvertently escalating situations with traumatised young people
- Develop and use a checklist to support children to identify and remember strategies that they know will help to calm them down.

Engaging

Traumatised children have poor internal working models for relating to adults because

- they have had experiences of adults not knowing or meeting their needs
- past relationships with adults have felt unpredictable
- adults have hurt them in the past
- They are unsure about how to have any control or influence over adult behaviour or communication.

Strategies:

- Engage in daily and repetitive exchanges that communicate continuity no matter what
- Give messages to children that explain how trust, care and support are related to each other
- Build and maintain consistent, engaging strategies over time and across different settings at school.