

Children's experiences of family violence

Exposure to family violence and traumatic events has long-lasting effects. Children's brains and bodies are malleable, making trauma faster to manifest and leaving deep tracks of damage. In these circumstances, children's brain and body systems will be harmed, affecting the way they react and relate to others and to their physical environment. (Tucci et al., 2017)

Traumatic events reduce the capacity of the thinking part of children's brains to shape the way they react to challenges in their environment. As a result, children and young people appear to behave instinctively and sometimes inappropriately, without knowing why.

They are also not able to easily influence their feelings when faced with perceived threat or increases in their experience of stress. This impairs the growth and activity of the connecting structures between the left and right hemispheres of the brain.

As a result, children find it difficult to know, name and express their feelings. They can find it difficult to read social cues and respond in social exchanges. Traumatic events increase children and young people's base arousal level such that they live in a constant state of vigilance and heightened alarm. As such, vulnerable children and young people are easily triggered by seemingly minor issues. Their responses are often seen as coming 'out of the blue' or as 'over reactions' to situations.

Traumatic events lock down children and young people's capacity to adapt to change in their environment. They are more likely to use fixed and repetitive behavioural routines in situations where they feel distress and unease. These routines involve movements and actions that feel familiar and comforting to them – even if they are destructive or harmful to others.

These children and young people lack the adaptability and flexibility necessary to respond differently to varying situations and contexts. They have a limited range of coping strategies. Whilst these strategies may have been effective in assisting them to survive in unsafe situations, they are often inappropriate responses in situations where there is an absence of danger.

Children and young people affected by traumatic events find it difficult to make meaning from their experiences. They have few or no effective internal maps to guide their actions. As a result, they react rather than respond.

Their beliefs about themselves are determined by the very people who violate them. They hold onto ideas about relationships which are not helpful to them in their communication with peers and other adults, like teachers. They can find it difficult to see adults as supportive. They are cautious about being hurt and are more likely to stay closed to the development of new connections or relationships.

They do not easily understand or engage with consequential learning. Their brains are so overactivated that they are able to take in very little and do not learn new information easily. In particular, their memory systems continue to remain under stress. They fail to consolidate new learning. Their working memory for even the easiest set of instructions can be severely compromised.

Children and young people affected by traumatic events experience the present with little reference to their past, even though their behaviour, feelings and physiology are affected by their experiences of violation. They do not have access to the qualities that make them who they are. They have a transient sense of their own identity. Their future is without plans or a sense of possibility.

Through shaping and reshaping relationships and day-to-day interactions, intervention offers children and young people opportunities to heal some of the damage caused by experiences of high impact and toxic stress. In order to achieve these important moments of repair, the approach to therapeutic work needs to be informed and supported by practice orientation that prioritises the needs of children and young people and gently and carefully responds to these needs. (Tucci et al., 2017)

Adapted from Tucci, J., Mitchell, J., Lindeman, M., Shilton, L., & Green, J. (2017). *Strengthening community capacity to end violence: A project for NPY Women's Council*. Alice Springs: NPY Women's Council and Australian Childhood Foundation.

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