

Children who experience trauma



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Find out about the impact of trauma on children living in residential child care

What is trauma?

Trauma is not the event but the response to the event. Trauma happens when children experience things that are actually or potentially life threatening or could cause serious injury (physical, sexual or emotional abuse or neglect).

Trauma can also happen by witnessing these things happening to another person (or just knowing about them), for instance domestic abuse. Trauma can be the result of experiencing an unexpected or violent death, serious harm or threat of death/injury to someone close to you or being very frightened. It can also be caused by being in a highly stressful environment like a war zone.

An event is traumatic if it's extremely upsetting and at least temporarily overwhelms a child's ability to cope with it practically or emotionally. Babies and very young children are especially vulnerable to trauma because they can't protect themselves or understand what's happening. Their responses may be intense fear (terror) and feelings of helplessness/hopelessness or shock and revulsion.

Trauma in early life

When parents or caregivers subject a child to chronic neglect, physical, emotional and/or sexual abuse, exposure to violence and/or exposure to alcohol/substance misuse they can cause developmental trauma.

Developmental trauma is likely to affect the child's normal physical and emotional development, for instance how they process senses and their ability to [form attachments](#) with adults.

[Beacon House Therapeutic Services and Trauma Team has a downloadable resource about training around developmental trauma](#)

The impact of trauma on children

Developmental trauma makes it particularly difficult for children to form secure attachments and this means children will be left feeling frightened, helpless and abandoned.

To feel safe, a traumatised children may often be controlling in their behaviour. This is because their experiences of the world and the people around them have not been safe. Controlling behaviour may include:

- cutting themselves off from social relationships
- not engaging in what's happening around them
- trying to force other to do things.

Children with developmental trauma will find it hard to understand and manage their emotions (emotional regulation) and will struggle to understand or relate to other people's emotional experience/responses.

Action for Children has produced [a video which shows the impact adverse childhood experiences \(ACEs\) can have on someone's life](#)

[Public Health Wales also has a video about ACEs](#), which highlights the physical as well as emotional affect that can have on young people as they grow older.

Being stuck in 'survival mode'

Because of their experiences, children who've experienced trauma feel like they're in danger a lot of the time, even when they're not. This is because the child's brain has become used to operating in 'survival' mode (fight, flight or freeze).

The fight, flight or freeze response is the body's automatic, built-in system designed to protect us from threat or danger. For example, when you hear the words, "look out!" you will probably react without processing the information. This is why these children may appear to:

- 'overreact'
- not respond in ways you might expect
- become quickly aggressive
- run away from people/situations
- disengage or 'shut down'.

Just because children are now in a safe place doesn't mean they can just 'switch off' these responses: even small, everyday things (like moving from one classroom to the next or a slightly raised voice) could signal 'life or death danger' and trigger the fight/flight/freeze response.

For children stuck in survival mode, it's especially hard for information to get to the part of their brain that does the rationalising. Their brains are working so hard all the time on staying alive that things most people take for granted may take a huge effort, such as:

- reasoning
- processing why things happen
- remembering things

- understanding other people's feelings.

Communicating with a child who's experienced trauma

You can't reason with a child who's in fight/flight/freeze because they just can't access the part of their brain where reasoning happens until they feel safe again. Instead, try to build a relationship with the child and help make them feel safe once they're calm and receptive to you. You can do this by:

- Doing what you say you're going to do (not over-promising)
- Involving young people meaningfully in decisions that affect them, so they feel they have some control over what happens
- Being as clear as you can be about decision-making
- Using the child's strengths (being hopeful and optimistic for them).

You can learn more about this in [Understanding challenging behaviour in children](#).

Trauma in the care system

Most of the children you care for will have experienced trauma to some degree. Sadly, some may also have experienced trauma since being in the care system. This may include their placements breaking down, which may have left the child feeling:

- rejected
- as though no-one can look after them

- unwanted
- unlovable.

Because of these experiences, children will find it [hard to trust adults](#) and they may expect you to let them too down. When children have experienced lots of rejections, they will find it safer to try to reject you first; after all, if you're going to reject them anyway, at least this gives them some control.

Try not to take this to heart: it's not personal but an indication of how badly they've been hurt by others. Continuing to stick by them, despite how hard it may be, shows them you're there for them.

Some children may have also experienced abuse within the care system. They will find it particularly difficult to trust the people who are caring for them. Make the safety of children a priority and ensure you're respectful of [boundaries in terms of touch and their personal space](#).

Useful resources

[Our work to support children who are looked after](#)

[Our chosen or 'curated' research about the number who are looked after](#)

[Trauma, brain and relationship: helping children heal](#)

[A guide to therapeutic approaches in children's residential care](#)

[Advice about building relationships with children who have experienced trauma](#)

[Resources about trauma from Beacon House Therapeutic Services and Trauma Team](#)

We want your feedback

Help us to improve the Residential child care worker resource by telling us what you think about it in our short [four question survey](#).