

Understanding the Effect of Trauma on Behaviour

All children are different. Children who have been affected by trauma will have their own individual response to it. However, there are some common patterns that may help you with understanding your child's behaviour and, importantly, how you can help them overcome the effects of trauma.

Common responses to Trauma

- Many kids who have experienced trauma are living in 'survival mode'. Like a smoke detector that has been set to high alert, they are constantly on the lookout for threats and dangers in their environment. They may misinterpret totally unthreatening situations as ones that are dangerous. This can lead to their emotional/reactive brains being triggered, producing a fight, eg. verbal aggression, running away or a shutdown response.
- Some kids have experienced that if they take control life feels more predictable. These kids can find it very hard to follow other people's rules, routines, or instructions.
- Many kids will have trouble keeping their 'engine' running just right – they may become overexcited or quick to anger. Some kids will just shut down, appearing to be unresponsive.
- For kids who haven't had a stable, loving parent/carer, many will be overly friendly to anyone who comes their way, resulting in them not having any awareness of stranger danger.
- Many kids who have experienced neglect will not be in touch with their body signals, which may mean they are not aware of toileting accidents, being hungry, being cold etc. They may have also learnt not to ask for help (why ask when no one responds?) and can be very resistant to being helped (this just feels too unfamiliar). They may also hoard food, toys, and clothes because they don't believe they can trust or rely on adults to meet their needs.
- Many kids who have experienced trauma will behave very inconsistently – friendly and loving one minute, angry the next, rude and defiant following that. It can feel like their emotions and behaviour change at the flick of a switch and it can be hard to figure out what has triggered the change.
- Some kids who have experienced trauma will have their memory and learning affected. The thinking part of their brain goes offline and the energy is focused on keeping them safe. Because of this, some kids will have developmental delays because they did not have the start to life that kids need if they are going to thrive.

There are no quick fixes for helping kids overcome the impact of trauma, but the following strategies/suggestions will definitely help.

- **The most important factor that will help kids who have experienced trauma will be connection with a caring adult.** These connections are best when they are safe, predictable, attuned and warm.
- **A very loving, understanding, empathy-filled and nurturing approach.**
- **Tons of patience** – you may need extra self-care or help with keeping yourself calm so that you can find the patience they will need.
- **Knowing that no matter what, you won't give up on them.** (*If you can't love them out of a bad decision, love them through it*)
- **An environment that is responsive to their needs and helps them see that they are good people** who have strengths and that they can contribute positively to their family and community.

- **Parents/carers/teachers not taking any of their challenging behaviour personally** – they might look rude and angry but it is much more likely they are feeling overwhelmed and anxious. They might say hurtful things in the heat of the moment but this is only their fight response being triggered or them feeling super uncomfortable as they are not used to being treated well.
- **Adults who are very predictable and 100% trustworthy** – don't make promises you can't keep. Routines, timers and visuals can help – see your Keyworker for more info.
- **Firm and fair boundaries**, but don't sweat the small stuff. And make sure you are very kind, understanding and patient while you help them cope with boundaries – this might be a very new experience for them.
- **Getting the sensory input they need**, try lots of rhythmical movements (this works via the brain and replicates the rhythmical rocking we give babies to settle and soothe them, which many kids who have had trauma have missed out on)
- **Choice** – giving kids the opportunity for limited choice can be good (choice of two things) as it can help them feel safer and more in control. However, for some kids having to make a choice can leave them feeling anxious – for these kids reducing choice is needed.
- **Don't be in a rush to teach independence skills** – they may need a bit more time being nurtured and cared for before they are ready to be independent.
- **Don't take it personally if they reject your love and helping** – again this might feel very uncomfortable for them if they have not experienced it before. Looking after themselves might be the only thing that feels normal, so they may subconsciously push for this to happen.