

Recognising and Understanding the Impact of Early Trauma



What do you need to know about early trauma?

- Research and local evidence has highlighted that exposure to long term hostile, abusive and neglectful parenting has significant negative long term consequences for children, particularly on brain development.
- Prolonged exposure to these circumstances can lead to 'toxic stress' for a child which changes the child's brain development, sensitises the child to further stress, leads to heightened activity levels and affects future learning, concentration, their behaviour and how the child views themselves.

How does early trauma manifest itself?

- Children's prior experiences shape how they behave.
- Early trauma impairs the child's ability to trust and relate to others. When children are traumatised, they find it very hard to regulate behaviour and soothe or calm themselves. They often attract the description of being 'hyperactive'.

As practitioners, how can we recognise and understand the impact of early trauma, and respond to it effectively?

- Give due consideration to early experiences and any trauma that a child may have experienced
- Analyse what early trauma the child has experienced and the impact it has had
- Be mindful to avoid labelling children as 'difficult' or 'naughty' and recognise that their behaviour may be the manifestation of early trauma
- Take notice when a child is being characterised by parents, carers or professionals as inherently difficult or naughty rather than traumatised
- Work closely with the child and their family and contextualise the child's behaviour to understand the root cause of their behaviour. The behaviours a child is exhibiting may be a result of
 - their past trauma experiences
 - current abuse

- a combination of both
 - none of the above
- Do not rely on parents/carers self-reporting
- Hold multiple hypotheses in mind for what could explain what has happened, or is currently happening, to the child
- Work with multi-agency professionals to establish a clear picture of the child's experiences and include GPs in this
- See and speak to the child in different environments to assess whether their behaviour changes depending on if they are at home, children's centre, school, etc.
- Understand that parents/carers may themselves have experienced early trauma. This may prevent her/him from helping their child to regulate fear or distress because they ignore the child's distress to avoid triggering their own traumatic response.

Further reading and resources...

- Fostering and Adoption resources on early childhood trauma and early brain development and maltreatment can be found here –
<http://fosteringandadoption.rip.org.uk/topics/early-brain-development/>
<http://fosteringandadoption.rip.org.uk/topics/early-childhood-trauma/>
- Centre of the Developing Child, Harvard University animation video on building adult capabilities to improve child outcomes can be found here -
<http://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/building-adult-capabilities-to-improve-child-outcomes-a-theory-of-change/>

Suggested activities

- In a group, or within a team meeting, identify a case where a child is reportedly expressing difficult or challenging behaviour, and consider their behaviour in terms of early trauma. Also consider whether or not your recording accurately encapsulates the child's experience of early trauma or whether the focus is on their behaviour being 'challenging' or 'difficult'
- In a group, or within a team meeting, consider ways in which foster carers can be supported to receive a child that has experienced early trauma