

## **Implications of Trauma for Learning and Coping in the School Environment**

When a child is still coping with the effects of trauma, the primary areas of the brain that are processing information are different from those in an untraumatised child. A child who is safe and calm can engage in reflection, has a firm sense of time and future and will be able to hear and respond to the words and information that the teacher uses. A traumatised child, who is just as intelligent, may be literally unable to hear the words as they will be alert to all the peripheral cues that may indicate danger in their environment. They will be very sensitive to the tone and body language of the teacher and other pupils but may interpret behaviour as threatening even if there is no such intent. This concentration on the non-verbal sometimes means that children may develop their performance skills far more effectively than their verbal skills. This is reflected in tests on populations of traumatised children where there seems to be a consistent split between verbal and performance scores (performance scores being significantly higher).

A frightened child will often present as defiant. This is usually seen as deliberate bad behaviour. Rather than understanding the behaviour as related to fear, adults may respond to the child by becoming angrier and more frightening. The child may feel more threatened and moves rapidly along the continuum from alarm to fear to terror. These children may end up psychologically disconnected from the situation or in a very aggressive state. The behaviour of the child reflects their attempts to adapt and respond to a perceived threat. Within school a traumatised child faces a number of demands for attention, concentration, staying still, behaving respectfully etc which may stretch his or her capacity to cope. Teachers are then faced with a child who is apparently refusing to conform to the basic requirements of the school setting. In this situation, escalation can occur very quickly and a child can come to be seen as a problem or be punished for behaviour that is a normal reaction to very abnormal experiences.

### **Basic Guidelines for Working with Traumatised Children**

1. Children who have been traumatised need to feel safe. Find out what helps this particular child to feel safe and relaxed.
2. Provide children with regular sensory breaks to help them to manage their hyper-arousal. Rhythmic
3. Be prepared to talk about the traumatic event if the child brings it up. Be aware, however, that discussion of personal issues can occur in classes, and teachers may begin inappropriately to take on the role of other professionals such as counsellors. Teachers need to be clear about the extent of their role and know when and how to refer on.
4. Ensure that there is consistency and predictability in a child's daily routine. Where there has to be change prepare the child and explain why change is necessary.

5. Be comforting and nurturing, including providing physical comfort if appropriate. Be sure, however, not to be intrusive as these children's personal boundaries may have been repeatedly invaded.
6. Be clear about expectations and limits. Use praise and reward rather than punishment. Make sure reward is immediate; traumatised children do not have a sense of extended time. Some young people may experience emotions, physiological responses etc., that can provoke difficult behaviour in the learning environment. It may be appropriate to develop mechanisms in advance that allow young people to withdraw from the classroom situation, if they need to. This can prevent an escalation of the problem and will protect the young person, teacher and other pupils.
7. Talk with the child honestly and openly. Be wary about over protecting children by withholding information - truth may be easier to deal with than fantasy.
8. Be aware of re-enactments of the trauma by the child. This is normal but sometimes a child may have had an experience which has reactivated the original trauma. Be particularly alert to sensory triggers that may provoke aggressive or frightened responses that cause difficulties. Certain common phrases such as "look at me when I speak to you" may be experienced as very threatening for a traumatised child. Often these children are trying desperately to regulate their own arousal and direct eye contact can stimulate an extreme response.
9. Be prepared to cut short activities that are obviously upsetting the child and reminding them of the original trauma. Teachers should be alert to the effects of some of the activities or materials they may use.
10. The original trauma will have left the child feeling powerless. Try wherever possible to give the child some sense of choice or control. Being directly ordered to do something may reactivate the original trauma particularly if this involved abuse. Be aware, however, that choice needs to be managed carefully for these children as they can struggle with even very simple choices such as what to eat or drink. If they are not prepared for choices they may find themselves overwhelmed with fear of making the wrong choice and therefore having to deal with shame and exposure.
11. Within the school setting provide opportunities for young people to have immediate successes in learning. Ensure young people have time to settle down in the classroom. Make an effort to identify and work with their existing skills. For these young people, it will be particularly crucial to design learning sessions that include a variety of activities.

**This handout draws heavily on material published by the Child Trauma Academy. Numerous articles and booklets are available to download from their excellent website [www.childtrauma.org](http://www.childtrauma.org).**