

# safe *enough to learn*

Recognising children who have suffered trauma in the early years and responding to their needs is vital, says **Jennifer Jones...**

**A**sk any adoptive parent or foster carer to name their main concerns and I guarantee that getting their child's school or nursery to understand the difficulties their children face in the educational environment will be mentioned. Working in partnership with any parent or carer is important, but for those whose children have experienced disturbed attachment and early trauma, it's essential. This article aims to give some understanding of the challenges these children face and provide some helpful advice to supporting them.

## What is trauma?

The definition of trauma is an external event in which there has been an actual or perceived threat to the life or personal integrity of self or others, combined with a response to the threat which includes fear, helplessness or horror. In real terms for children, this will include those who have witnessed domestic violence, been physically abused, or neglected, whilst the significance of pre-birth trauma, such as drug or alcohol abuse is also becoming more widely recognised. Many of the behaviours displayed by traumatised children are a direct response to their early experiences. Babies and young children who are shown little love, are not interacted with and who don't have their basic needs met, grow to believe that the world is a place filled with people who don't care.



**It can take many years to undo the imprint of early traumatic experiences, and as this trauma often spills over into educational settings, a joint working approach is essential**

JENNIFER JONES

In certain cases the best option for children is to be removed from their birth parents care and placed with foster carers, and whereas this would provide the child with those things they've missed it also teaches them another lesson: that you can be taken from everything you've ever known and made to live with strangers. Adults know that removing a child from its neglectful or abusive parents is a long and difficult process, but that it is sometimes the right thing to do.



## Planning the day

Transitions periods and even the smallest change can be unsettling for a child who has never experienced security and stability, and who may have traumatic memories of change. Consider how you organise the day so that routines help build a strong sense of security and familiarity. Think about the most stressful times of day for the child and try to make yourself, or an assistant, available to offer additional emotional support.

However, placing yourself in the child's shoes paints a different picture. I'm not saying that children should remain in that environment, simply that we need to give huge amounts of consideration to the loss that the child will feel when they're taken from the only parents they've ever known.

The journey for many of these children doesn't end there; many experience multiple foster placements, probably never feeling safe and always unsure of what might happen next.

They learn that people disappear from your life as quickly as they arrive. As an adult in these circumstances, you would learn to be wary of new people and probably not waste your time getting too attached to them. You might be hypervigilant and always watch out for danger or threats to your wellbeing. You would probably become quite self-reliant and resist the help of others.

However, the common belief is still that these children should be grateful now that they have wonderful foster carers, or even better a new adoptive mummy and daddy. Believing that this is enough to make everything okay is unrealistic and does not validate the child's feelings.

### Encouraging communication

A first step to helping these children is to recognise the behaviours and understand their cause. Also remember that the children may be functioning at a lower emotional age than their chronological age: they'll often communicate at the emotional age they need to be in that moment, so you may find you have a child who acts very mature one minute and very babyish the next.

Following on from this we must attempt to teach the child to recognise the feelings they're experiencing. One way to do this is through the use of empathetic listening, whereby you comment, or wonder out loud about the child's behaviour,

## Recognising trauma

**Children who have experienced early trauma will have developed a range of strategies to enable them to survive. The behaviours you may see include:**

- Being superficially charming
- Being indiscriminately affectionate with strangers
- Being overly demanding or clingy
- Asking persistent nonsense questions/incessant chatter
- Lack of cause/effect thinking
- Pseudo maturity
- Abnormal eating patterns
- Poor peer relationships
- Poor impulse control
- Avoiding eye contact
- Telling lies and/or stealing
- Low self-esteem
- Showing increased shame levels
- Having difficulties with organisation

Dealing with such behaviours in the nursery can be draining and frustrating. When in this situation I always recommend trying to think about why and how this behaviour would have developed. For example, a baby or young child who craved attention but didn't receive it consistently could have learnt that talking incessantly and being demanding or clingy was more likely to result in some attention. On the flip side, some children may have given up in favour of self-soothing activities or shutting down.



## find out more

Jennifer Jones runs Inspired Foundations, which provides support to both parents and professionals who live or work with children with attachment and trauma difficulties. Visit [inspiredfoundations.co.uk](http://inspiredfoundations.co.uk)

e.g. "I can see that you're getting quite close to my face when you're talking to me, I wonder if that's because you need to know I can see you. I can see you because as a practitioner it's my job to know where you are". It should be remembered that these are comments, and not questions, so don't expect a response from the child as that can add to their already anxious state.

### Be approachable

Giving a child strategies they can use is also helpful. Let them know that if they need attention from you they can come right out and ask for it. Allowing a child to feel comfortable with saying things like "I'm scared you won't be able to see me and keep me safe if I play outside" or "I'm worried that if I'm last to sit on the carpet at snack time there'll be nothing left for me" are huge steps in their development and feelings of trust that people will listen to them. Encouraging a child to say these things doesn't mean you have to start sitting them on the carpet first or having someone outside with them all the time, but it does give you the opportunity to explain things to them, for

## Hidden anxieties

As well as the children who 'act out' it's important to recognise the needs of children who have learnt to internalise their feelings. These children will have just as much fear, aggression, grief and shame but will keep it locked inside, as their fear of rejection drives them to conform at all costs. You'll often find that you're met with a blank or expressionless face and witness behaviours that could be described as 'odd'. Professionals often say of these children, "I know something isn't quite right, but I just can't put my finger on it".

When trying to help these children you'll need to monitor them very carefully to build up a picture of their feelings throughout the day, bearing in mind that any changes will be very subtle. After you have done this you can then aim to add in extra support around these times, but most importantly acknowledge how the child may be feeling, for example, "I've noticed that you get very cross with people just before story time; maybe you would like me to ask Sarah to sit next to you at these times to help you feel better".

example, that you always have enough fruit in the nursery so there will always be enough for everyone.

### Consider your sanctions

Many traditional behaviour approaches focus on rewards and sanctions – where love, affection and praise is conditional on good behaviour. For children who already see themselves as 'bad', and 'unworthy', strategies like this only serve to reinforce this image of themselves. The popular technique of 'time out' compounds their sense of wrongness and shame. Imagine how being 'sent away' might affect a child who has already been rejected and abandoned numerous times in their life? The use of 'time in' (where a child is brought towards the adult) is a better option, and re-affirms that whilst what they have done may be unacceptable, they are not.

### Adapting activities

When planning nursery activities there are certain topics of which you should be mindful, because of the difficulties they may cause such children. For example, topics including work about families may be upsetting for a child struggling with their grief for their birth family. The adoption statistics released by the

Department for Education for the year ending 31st March 2010 show that the average age of a child adopted from care was three years, nine months. These statistics also show that 72% of children who were adopted were under four years-old. Bearing this in mind we're talking about feelings that will be very raw for a lot of these children, and indeed their parents or carers who may also be struggling to understand their behaviour.

We all experience fear of varying degrees and about different things, and we all know how hard it is to concentrate when we feel anxious – imagine being scared of heights and being asked to write an essay whilst balancing on a tightrope. This is the reality for these children, only their fear is of people, of life, of being forgotten and abandoned. Only by calming their fears and building up trust will we give them the confidence and safety to learn.

Many settings have policies for dealing with 'looked after children' but it's important to remember that a child's needs do not change overnight should they be adopted. For those working with children, simply being aware of these difficulties is a great achievement given the time constraints faced, but I would always urge further training or research where possible.

