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what you don't know will harm them



Marion Allen,
adoptive parent and
educational consultant

FAMILY Futures offers a multi-disciplinary therapy programme for children who have experienced early trauma and are exhibiting challenging behaviour. The agency has supported traumatised children in schools for seven years as an integral part of the therapy. It involves liaising between children, parents, therapists, teachers and other professionals and includes school observations, meetings with staff and delivering training on the impact of trauma. This article, written by Marion Allen, adoptive parent and educational consultant, highlights some of the needs and problems experienced by these children as they try to access education.

Teachers, teaching assistants and parents have contributed to the thinking, and their quotes are italicised.

Know what you are dealing with

Family Futures believes that the key to a child's success in education is knowledge for parents and those professionals working with him. Education ministers, governors, head teachers, SENCOs, teachers and teaching assistants all need an underlying knowledge and understanding of the impact of

trauma in order to plan and inform their way of working with traumatised children.

It has been proven early trauma can affect a child's neurological, psychological, physical, emotional, social and sensory development.

Children can struggle to self-regulate, their breathing, heart-rate, sensory integration and sleep patterns can be affected, they can struggle with executive functioning skills (the skills that underlie problem-solving and learning) and they can have specific dietary needs and hormonal imbalance.

They can be easily triggered into the primitive brain reactions of fight, flight or freeze. They can struggle under a shadow of shame, have extremely low self-esteem and can be controlling, angry and manipulative, behaviours that stem from their anxieties and fears. In contrast, their fears can manifest in compliant, people-pleasing behaviours that can mask their internal anxieties.

“The teachers need to understand that this child is actually different, that things that work for other children may not work for this child.”

Adoptive parent and teacher

With knowledge of how the impact of the child's in-utero and/or early trauma manifests itself for the particular pupil, teachers have the tools to interpret the behaviour. The child's behaviour is his language and teachers and parents have to become detectives.

"Understanding and empathy – understanding where she is coming from and being able to read into her behaviour what is going on under the surface."

Primary teaching assistant

Guesswork

Family Futures promotes supportive guesswork as the pupil is often unable to verbalise his feelings and concerns. For these children, a 'thumbs up or down' response can save the pupil from having to speak something that may be difficult for him. On establishing the difficulty, one can then provide a solution.

"I could see that she was struggling so I asked her, 'Is your tummy feeling wobbly about going to Family Futures?' She was able to agree so we went out in the playground and kicked a ball around."

Primary teaching assistant

Think toddler

It is highly likely that the traumatised child will, at times, be functioning much lower than expected for his chronological age. The phrase 'Think toddler' is an essential way for parents and professionals to view their child's behaviour and to decide on a strategy that will be supportive for the child rather than punitive.

"For me as a parent, the 'Think toddler' was the key. It was my light bulb moment. It takes all the anger out of your response as a parent – it diffuses the anger and you realise it is not their fault; they are not deliberately doing this to make a personal attack on you."

Adoptive parent

"He's not just a naughty child seeking attention."

Primary teaching assistant

Fear

Most traumatised children do not have an internalised sense of safety and thus their behaviour arises out of the fear they are experiencing. Sometimes this fear is so great that the child is constantly living within their primitive brain. It may be that attendance at school is actually too hard for him at the current time – he may need to spend more time at home with a trusted adult; alternatively part-time education may be appropriate. As an example of this, Family Futures promotes part-time education for newly placed siblings to ensure that each sibling has uninterrupted quality time with their parent.

"If I didn't know about her anxiety and the need to keep in control, I would think of her as at best irritating and at worst deliberately naughty"

Primary teaching assistant

This fear could be as straightforward as being scared that their perpetrators could arrive at school. One set of siblings was able to express this fear during a therapy session. Social Services and Family Futures knew that the likelihood of this happening was almost non-existent, but the child's perception always needs to be the first priority. We arranged for the office

staff and teachers to be shown a photograph of the perpetrator in the presence of each child, with the adults reassuring the child that they would never allow this person onto the school premises.

Of course, for some adopted and looked after children (LAC), this fear is real and it is crucial that all staff including office staff are aware and trained in relation to any information they give out. School also needs to monitor the publication of any photographs and check the need for anonymity with parents/ carers and, for LAC, Social Services.

This lack of the perception of a safe base can lead to fear on school trips. It might be that it is really not in the child's best interest to join the trip and this needs to be considered. If it is considered that the trip is appropriate, then preparation needs to take place. It is important for the child to be included and to succeed. For day trips, it could be helpful for the parent to take the child on a preparatory visit beforehand; visiting virtual tours on the website can also help to prepare the child. Incidentally, for trips abroad, planning needs to be in place to ensure the recently adopted or LAC pupil has a passport and that this is located well in advance.



"I feel we are providing effective education but we could not do that without information. Without it, we would have been fighting in the dark."
Primary teaching assistant

Staying calm

Fear is also the root of anger, as well as controlling and manipulative behaviour. It is important that adults demonstrate regulation of their affect and that they do not enter into confrontational situations with the pupil. Confrontation is likely to lead the child into a primitive brain reaction or into shame. Any of these reactions are likely to be unavoidable for the pupil and are not in the child's best interest.

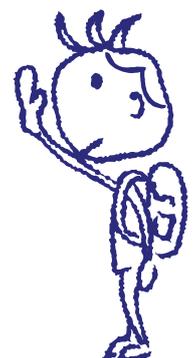
"I think the most important thing to convey to others working with the pupil is that you need to be as calm as possible."

Secondary teacher

Ultimately, though, inclusion and demonstrating to the child that he is liked, respected and valued is fundamental to the child's success. For many, their early life experiences have left them with no self-esteem and an inner belief that they are not worthwhile. It is important to build a relationship with this pupil, to give him time and space to see that he is liked.



"We have to be her champions to show that she can't do rather than won't do."
Adoptive parent





"The impact of school support is huge - the child and parents feel sure that the people who work with her understand and that they are on her side. She feels that others believe in her and really care about her, that she is worth fighting for. Slowly, she starts to believe that people are there to help her and she starts to feel safer."

Adoptive parent

Staff mentor

Appointing a member of staff to act as a mentor, greet the child on arrival at school (or possibly at the bus) when times are hard for him, checking in with the child, giving the child special tasks of responsibility, commenting positively when passing are all ways to show the pupil that he is valued. The child's heightened anxiety can lead to hypervigilance, a learned survival strategy. This hypervigilance can prevent the child from focusing.



"Her hypervigilance manifests in an inability to settle. She has to stop when children walk past her and cannot stay on task if anything else is going on - she has to stop and check that out."

Primary teaching assistant

Strategies can include having an assistant to help the child settle, ensuring that the sitting position is in a place that the pupil can see everything, providing a quieter and calmer environment, and verbalising the child's need to show you understand. Ultimately this helps the child to understand his own difficulties.

"It helped to know why I felt I had to look at everyone on the bus before I could choose a seat."

Male secondary student

Curriculum

In the knowledge that the adrenal system can be affected by early trauma, certain curriculum issues may trigger his anxiety level to rise. Sex education, the visit of a police officer, drugs talks, lessons on growing up and babies, a visit from Barnardo's, the HPV vaccination can all be triggers.

Family Futures feels that it is important for these children to partake in these lessons to help them to

normalise these issues but preparation needs to take place. Sharing curriculum plans with parents, lending parents resources so they can work with the child first in a safe setting, ensuring that there is an extra trusted adult accompanying the pupil in these lessons are important. The child could have a secret code to allow him to exit the class if he is finding it difficult or feels he needs to disclose information about his early life or ask an inappropriate question.

Internal struggles

Cognitively, the traumatised child can struggle to inhibit his behaviour, to control his emotions, to move his mind set away from something that has happened before, to start tasks independently, to plan and organise, to use his working memory, to organise resources and to self-monitor i.e. see himself and his work as others see it. These children can sometimes repeat the same response – they can have the wrong answer to a problem and persist in using this perceived solution. Often, because of their emotional dysregulation, something that they can manage one day proves too difficult another day. They sometimes need tasks that present a low challenge to them. They often need extra scaffolding and structure. Longer projects and coursework needs to be divided into smaller chunks and the completion of each of these chunks monitored by the teachers. They also need the success criterion for the task in hand so they know exactly what they need to do to get it 'right'.

Processing and working memory difficulties can mean that they find it hard to hear, understand, remember and process instructions – shorter succinct instructions are more achievable for them. They may be able to manage straightforward calculations in mathematics but cannot isolate and process the important information when using and applying mathematics. They need strategies to support them in these fields. Highlighting, mind-mapping, visual organisers, prompts etc. can all be used successfully.

Understanding that the child's brain networks may not yet be as developed as others' of their age and pinpointing where these weaknesses are so as to provide the appropriate support is crucial.

"I understand her problem initiating tasks. I'm like that with a passport form."

Primary teaching assistant

Validating their feelings, weaknesses and successes can also be helpful.

*"I know you find that hard. However, you can..."
"I can see that you're struggling with this. How can I help you?"*



Social struggles

Socially, these children tend to struggle. If a child has not established a secure attachment with their primary care-giver, secondary attachments can be difficult. On top of this, if a child is struggling to inhibit his behaviour, he is likely to act and say things that can upset or provoke others.

"It's important to help other children with her. The social side is probably more important than the academic. I try to help her be a part of society and that starts in the classroom. I help the other children to understand her difficulty, at the same time validating their feelings."

Primary teaching assistant

Some older pupils will align themselves with the pupils who are seen as most challenging. This can be a survival strategy with the traumatised child needing to associate with pupils whom he perceives as the most threatening – needing to avoid becoming a victim again. It can be helpful to organise classes and groups which constitute pupils who can manage and who will, in their actions and responses, role-model appropriate behaviour. Others sometimes act the clown – again, another survival strategy.

Regulation

An understanding of the child's sensory needs is also crucial. Some children are sensory-seeking and use movement to help them to regulate. Frequent short breaks, especially those that incorporate movement can help. One teenager uses music to help her regulate her affect. Wearing one ear-piece enables her to focus on the task in hand whilst still being able to listen to teachers' instructions.

Some children need to 'fiddle'. Contrary to belief that this affects the child's concentration, it actually allows them to focus. It is important to supply the child with material that is acceptable to teachers and parents.

Food issues

Many of these children have food issues due to neglect or even the use of food in their early life as a threat or controlling feature.

"This often comes to light in the secondary environment when pupils have more autonomy in their choices. I haven't met a LAC who hasn't had some form of food issue."

Secondary SENCO

Careful monitoring needs to be in place alongside strategies that support the pupil in managing – ensuring the pupil has a packed lunch and no extra funding for food, for example, and ensuring close communication between home and school.

Communication

Good and regular home/school communication is essential to support both the child and the parent.

"Communication is the key. I think it's about linking up with the carers and students and making them all feel secure and helping them to trust you. Letting them know that, 'everything isn't going to be perfect all the time but we can support you'".

Secondary SENCO

Some schools use home/school books but it is important that these do not contain information that will shame the child. Email communication works better for some teachers and parents and sometimes it is possible for the parent and mentor or teaching assistant to meet each morning. It is important that teachers know if there has been an incident in the morning as this may affect the

rest of the day for the pupil. Some parents feel very unsupported and lonely.

"It's very hard to do this all on your own as a parent"

Adoptive parent

"As a parent, it is so important to be heard, believed and listened to."

Adoptive parent

"I know I can phone his parents instantly and they can phone us. If you put that in at the beginning, everyone is joined up in supporting the pupil."

Secondary SENCO

One school has recognised the dearth of information among the general population.

"We hold evenings to educate parents on subjects like executive functioning skills."

Special school teacher

Finally, working with a traumatised child can be a challenge and the potential of vicarious or secondary trauma needs to be recognised within the education system.

"I think it is important for the staff to know not to take anything personally. There are times when I think 'maybe she doesn't like me' but then the next day she is calmer and that re-boots my battery."

Teaching assistant

"The most important thing to convey to colleagues is that the negative behaviours are not the result of poor teaching or discipline in their classroom. It comes from the child and they need to be patient and understanding and not take it personally."

Secondary SENCO

Secondary trauma

Vicarious trauma can manifest in a variety of symptoms and management staff and governors should be aware of these and locate appropriate provision of support and supervision for staff working with traumatised children.

In summary, traumatised children are likely to be living in a heightened state of anxiety and every day provides new and frightening challenges. Their difficulties at times seem insurmountable to them and if they are trying to function within an environment where they are not understood or where their actions are misinterpreted, their trauma will be reinforced. They deserve respect, care and support in all areas in their lives and the most effective way of providing this is with knowledge and understanding.

"The training gave me an insight into the ways in which the early years are so important in a child's development and how difficulties at this time can have a wide ranging impact later on. This knowledge will benefit me and others in caring for several children within our school."

Independent preparatory teacher

Knowledge is empowerment. If parents are empowered they can then empower the teachers and this leads to the children being empowered.

"Education is the most powerful weapon we can use to change the world."

Nelson Mandela

In this context, education is the most powerful weapon we can use to change the world for our traumatised children. ■

