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# Understanding and Responding to Traumatised Children in a School Context

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Compiled by Judith Blaney, Education Officer, Key Assets QLD  
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## Foreword

Children and young people who have experienced complex or developmental trauma include those who are victims of abuse, chronic neglect and family violence. These experiences generally cause children and young people to present with behaviours that can appear to be unpredictable, confusing and challenging for staff in schools.

The purpose of this document is to provide a brief overview of the impact of complex and developmental trauma and to outline some supportive response strategies. This guide has been written primarily for education staff but could be useful for anyone involved with the child.

For those who are victims of complex and developmental trauma, their perception of the world is likely to be that it is not a safe place. They tend to focus on survival, shut down their feelings, stop trusting and believing in others, and cease relying on others to protect them.

The effects of trauma continue long after removal from the trauma context. Amongst other things, such trauma undermines self-confidence, destroys self-esteem, generates feelings of being worthless and unlovable, can cause the young person to be in a constant state of arousal and tension which in turn restricts ability to concentrate and learn, reduces capacity to regulate emotions and can generate a perception that anything new is a threat.

For numerous reasons, including the inability to focus due to more pressing concerns in their lives, these young people often have a history of poor school attendance and reduced academic attainment. As educators, we need to provide an empathetic, supportive, safe, and predictable environment, flexible in response to the needs of traumatised children and young people.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'J. Blaney', is located at the bottom left of the page.

## Understanding and Responding to Traumatized Children in a School Context

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### Common presentations:

- Aggressive, non-compliant, withdrawn, avoidant.
- Difficulty concentrating, problem solving and organising narrative material ... reduced cognitive ability due to neglect and/or hyperarousal.
- Hypervigilant – readily distracted by extraneous stimuli.
- Inability to understand cause and effect and to see themselves capable of achieving goals ... developmental delays due to restriction and excessive control.
- Poor concentration and ‘working memory’ ... can be overwhelmed by memories of abuse.
- Reduced capacity to listen and retain information ... trauma and attachment disruption impact on these areas of language development in the brain.
- Difficulty managing strong feelings ... present as reactive, impulsive, disorganised, thoughtless. Have difficulty controlling anger and impulses as they have become accustomed to reacting quickly with little time to think. Often become angry due to something that triggers feelings of shame, fear or sadness.
- Suspicious and rejecting ... severe disruptions to attachment make it difficult to form trusting relationships with adults.
- Anxious and fearful ... instability and disruption to living and care arrangements creates a sense of fear and uncertainty around new situations, unpredictability and changes in routine.

## Understanding and Responding to Traumatized Children in a School Context

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### Common presentations (cont):

- Controlling ... seek power and control as they have had no control over what has happened to them. May try to control others in order to reduce feelings of being out of control and to prevent others from connecting.
- Difficulty initiating and maintaining peer friendships due to being possessive and controlling.
- Intense shame responses to perceived failure or insults and being disciplined ... abuse/neglect generates feelings of being intrinsically bad and worthless. Feelings of overwhelming shame can present as avoidance behaviours (won't attempt a task for fear of not succeeding) or an aggressive or attention-seeking outburst.
- A range of eating, sleeping and toileting problems ... stealing, gorging or hoarding food; disturbed sleep patterns (night time may be associated with danger and more intrusive thoughts/feelings); bedwetting and soiling.
- Often exhibit motor restlessness. This does not necessarily equate with reduction in attention.
- Rocking, scratching, self-biting, picking at sores/fingers, head banging, chanting/self-talk ... bizarre/regressive behaviours in an attempt to self-soothe.
- Not motivated to achieve and difficulty with making and carrying out plans ... have an internalised sense of self that expects failure and a future with little hope.

## Understanding and Responding to Traumatized Children in a School Context

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### Common subconscious and thought processes:

1. My life has been unpredictable. I don't trust adults. (I need to be vigilant, to know where you are and what you are doing).
2. I have food now but that doesn't mean it will always be there. I didn't always get the food I needed so sometimes I take it. (Asking for things makes me look vulnerable and has caused adults to be angry with me. I need to be strong, not weak).
3. When you tell me I have done something wrong I feel like you are saying that I'm bad. (I feel ashamed and rejected. To protect myself I might become angry and refuse to listen).
4. Things have happened to me that I don't understand. I need to be in charge so I know what is going to happen. (I need to protect myself by controlling my environment and the people in it).
5. When you tell me I have to do something, I feel like you are trying to take away my control. (I feel threatened and can become angry).
6. I feel overwhelmed when there is a lot happening around me. (I need to get control back. I might tell others what to do, withdraw or contest adult direction).
7. When you don't give me attention I feel rejected. (When you are talking to or helping someone else, it feels like they are more important to you than me).
8. I don't know why I feel and act the way I do. (It is easier to not deal with my feelings than to risk being hurt even more).

## Understanding and Responding to Traumatized Children in a School Context

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### Suggested response strategies:

1. Keep in mind that many children with abuse histories are functionally much younger than their chronological age.
2. Be empathetic in response. Empathy generates feelings of being understood and valued and will reduce defensiveness. Eg. "I know you are hurting and that affects your behaviour." "That must have been hard for you to do. You did well."
3. Maintain a high level of physical presence, support and supervision.
4. Always remain calm. Seek help and composure time for yourself if needed.
5. Offer assistance ... "I see you need help with eg. picking up the paper you have thrown" in preference to being directive and giving warnings. Warnings and second chances often cause escalation, as disrupted attachment reduces the desire to please adults.
6. Provide consistent rules, boundaries and routines. Abused/neglected children generally respond well to this as they have little internal structure.
7. Provide short, clear and sequenced instructions with repetitions to support listening, memory and processing difficulties.
8. Make use of well positioned clocks eg. "We are half way through writing. We will finish when the big hand is on 12" "We will go to lunch when the little hand is on 1." to encourage task completion. This provides visualisation of progress and an end point.
9. Display a visual/pictorial timetable in the classroom so the student can track the day.
10. Reduce anxiety by forewarning of any changes in routine.

## Understanding and Responding to Traumatized Children in a School Context

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### Suggested response strategies (cont):

11. When there is a relief teacher, consider placing the child in another class for the day with a teacher who has an established connection.
12. Develop a safe space and/or person the student can access if a situation is stressful or threatening.
13. Create spaces in the class with tactile activities eg. Bean bags, soft toys, squeeze balls, plush rug, to allow simultaneous class involvement and self-calming.
14. Help develop peer relationships by finding an activity the child is good at and enabling others to be involved.
15. Integrate emotional literacy activities into the curriculum to assist students to recognise, name and manage feelings.
16. Facilitate opportunities for self-monitoring eg. Likert rating scales, feeling pictures.
17. Do a daily or weekly 'check-in'. Review eg. "What is the best thing you remember from yesterday/last week?" "What would you like to be the same/different?"
18. Recognise early warning signs of heightening behaviour and bring this to the child's attention in a range of verbal and non-verbal ways eg. Agreed signal that 'cool down' time is needed, "I can see that you are anxious. Would you like to ... or ...?"
19. Provide close supervision and support during lesson transitions for specialist lessons.
20. Develop an understanding of specific factors that influence a student's behaviour. Note behaviours and intensity of reaction and triggers that may have contributed to the trauma-based behaviour.

## Understanding and Responding to Traumatized Children in a School Context

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### Suggested response strategies (cont):

21. Work together as a staff to develop and maintain a consistent response plan. Have in writing to ensure accessibility by all staff.
22. Provide close supervision in the playground or set up alternative supported social interaction at break times. The open space and unstructured time of the playground can be overwhelming.
23. Respond to inappropriate behaviour by giving clear and calm directions with an adult controlled outcome eg. "You threw a stone at Jack so you need to sit here with me until we decide that you can play without hurting anyone".
24. Set limits on unacceptable behaviour but be aware of the difficulty in acceptance of these limits due to intense shame evoked by discipline. When there is a problem, say "I see you are not ready to do... Sit quietly for a bit and then try again." If non-compliant, try to use a natural consequence eg. "Since you did not ... you have no time left for (favoured activity)".
25. Where possible, give consequences with a relational or educative outcome eg. "When you are calm I would like you to apologise to ... for swearing at him and I'd like you to help him to..."
26. Provide positive and descriptive reinforcement when something is well done.
27. Provide 'time-in' in preference to 'time-out'. Time out means rejection and reinforces the self-perception of being unlovable. Try keeping the child close to you and support them to complete the activity, saying how good it is when they can cooperate and join in.
28. To avoid engaging in power battles in response to oppositional behaviour, provide choices so there is a feeling of having control eg. "You can finish that work either sitting down or standing up." "You can do that activity now or at lunchtime."



## Understanding and Responding to Traumatized Children in a School Context

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### Suggested response strategies (cont):

29. Acknowledge good decisions and choices eg. "You cooperated well in that group activity. You took turns and shared the resources." "That was a good decision to not hit... Well done."
30. Structure opportunities for modelling and practising desired skills and behaviours.
31. Provide small challenges with achievable goals.
32. Have regular relaxation times during the day.
33. Consider playing background 4/4 music. It is proven to reduce stress and enhance concentration.
34. Have connecting activities in class eg. Footy tipping, large class puzzle, class lunches.
35. Use acceptance to reduce defensiveness and opposition and separate the behaviour from the child. "I know it is hard for you to manage your anger and you will need to ... but come and sit with me until you feel calmer and I'll help you to..."
36. Try reflection eg. "I wonder if you were angry yesterday because you were worried about ...?"
37. Take time for self-reflection eg. "What is the behaviour telling me?" "What hurt or need is being expressed?" "How appropriate are my responses?" "Who can I talk to about how I feel?"
38. In secondary schools encourage identification of a consistent adult with whom the young person can form a trusting relationship and hence touch base with at regular times in the day or when they feel there is a need to do so.

## Understanding and Responding to Traumatized Children in a School Context

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### Suggested response strategies (cont):

39. Have a plan of action in the event of outbursts of extreme anger (for when responsive practices are not enough or not enacted soon enough). Detail who is to do what, when and where. Include the carer and child in the planning so there is ownership in the decision making. Remember that when highly aroused, the child will not be able to think clearly or rationally. They are also likely to be frightened by their own lack of control which further heightens their emotions. They will not be able to respond to logical requests until calmer.

#### Key components:

- Safety – move others away
- Avoid confronting, demanding and cornering. Physical restraint is a last resort.
- Remain calm and speak in a soothing tone.
- Provide time alone or stay quietly nearby whichever is best for the child.
- Wait for the child to calm. The child may require the reassuring presence of the carer to become fully calm.
- The child may need to go home for the remainder of the day rather than return to class. This can avoid behaviour escalation and resultant suspension.
- Assist the child to understand what happened. Only do this when the child is calm and responsive ...possibly the next day. Acknowledge the child's feelings, recount what you know, check that the child has heard and understood, listen to their story without argument and be prepared for them to blame others for their own behaviour.

## Understanding and Responding to Traumatized Children in a School Context

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### Suggested response strategies (cont):

#### Key components (cont):

- Try to establish understanding of the relationship between the behaviour and the consequence. Eg. if property has been damaged, contribute to the repair of it; if someone has been hurt, apologise and make restitution by doing something for that person. Give a clear statement about the consequences.
- Use suspension as a last option. If given, provide a structure and purpose that helps the child to learn about safe behaviour.
- Support the child to reflect on their behaviour and the resultant consequences eg. Other children might be frightened and not want to play with them
- Debrief with others who were involved in or witnessed the incident, reassuring their safety
- Assist reintegration into the class and encourage other students to be empathetic and accepting

Compiled by Judith Blaney, Education Officer, Key Assets QLD, May 2013 with acknowledgement of the following references:

1. Calmer Classrooms, A guide to working with traumatised children - Child Safety Commissioner Victoria 2007
2. Making Space for Learning, Trauma Informed Practice in Schools - Australian Childhood Foundation VIC 2010
3. From Isolation to Connection, A guide to understanding and working with traumatised children and young people - Child safety Commissioner Victoria 2009
4. Child Development and Trauma Department of Human Services Victoria 2011
5. A Trauma Sensitive Approach for Children Aged 0-8 Year Literature Review - Funded by the Australian Government Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs 2012



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**“We are committed to working together with our children, our fostering families, our placing authorities and other significant partners to strive for excellence, to build resilience and a sense of belonging for all children growing up in foster care.”**

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**Jim Cockburn**  
**Founder and Core Assets Group Chairman**

Key Assets, part of the Core Assets Group