

Child Development and Trauma Impacts for Practitioners

Children are different and each develops at their own rate. For some children and adolescents the trauma and stress of being homeless or experiencing family violence can affect their development.

	Babies	Toddlers	Pre-Schoolers	Primary Schoolers	Adolescents
Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grow rapidly • Learn they are separate beings from their parents • Learn through senses, environment and imitation of others • Begin to regulate emotions and self soothe through attachment to primary carer • Develop motor control and brain development in orderly sequence • Fear loud or unexpected noise, strange objects, situations or persons • Need to feel sure that someone will take care of them • Learn to trust others and be secure in the world • Learn language skills through interaction • Learn mobility and gross motor skills • Learn to express positive and negative emotions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are curious about their world and other people-want to explore and learn. • Separation anxiety may begin to increase • Like to play alongside, rather than with, other children • Are not developmentally ready/able to share • Become more independent • Like routine • Can have difficulty changing from one activity to another • Are easily frustrated • Have tantrums • Increased memory for people, books and events • Active and unaware of danger/risk • Brain continues to develop best with close, frequent, positive interaction with a main caregiver 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Begin to play with other children and for longer periods of time • Are curious about everything and will ask lots of questions • Greater awareness of self • Increasing desire for control • Use imaginative play • Will copy adult behaviours • Can communicate using simple sentences • Communicate their wants more clearly • Increasingly independent eg want to dress themselves • Enjoys helping with simple tasks eg washing up 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Friendships are important • Greater awareness of their role within family • Develop relationships with family members and other adults • Improved communication skills • Improved memory for events • Enjoy playing games with teams • Developing a sense of the rules in games • Creative- enjoys making and drawing things • Can manage an increasing range of tasks independently. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Puberty brings about huge physical and emotional changes • Increased importance of peer relationships • Increased sexual awareness • May struggle with self identity • Increased desire for independence • Peer relationships become more important • Developing own identity separate from family • Increased self awareness • Increased risk taking • Swings between child like behaviour and the desire to be treated as adult

Trauma impacts on health, emotional and social wellbeing and learning across all developmental ages and stages

Potential Impacts of Trauma	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Failure to thrive • Feeding and sleeping problems • Avoidance of eye contact • Inability to be soothed • Increased startle response • Separation anxiety and clinginess • Regression of acquired skills • Passivity, withdrawal, lack of initiative, disinterest • Increased tension, irritability, reactivity, and inability to relax • Reduced capacity to attach to caregiver • Reduced capacity to manage emotional states or self soothe • Lowered immune system • Failure to reach developmental milestones 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not understand that adults may be too tired, stressed/distressed to play/interact with them • Find it difficult to learn new skills when feeling unsafe • May be unable to settle and play • Sound, sights and smells may trigger fear responses • Eating, sleeping and settling problems • Fearful of strangers • Distress at separation with caregiver • Lack of inhibitions with strangers • Increased irritability and tantrums • May become very quiet, passive or appear to be disinterested in anything • Little eye contact with others • May become overly upset to minor events • Regress and lose known skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty with separation • Reluctant to attend familiar places such as kinder • May revert to toddler behaviours eg thumb sucking and bed wetting • Eating and sleeping may become disrupted • May become difficult to settle • Nightmares • Language skills may revert to toddler levels • Changes in established behaviour • May become aggressive or withdrawn • More easily upset by events • May find playing co-operatively more difficult • Increase in tantrums 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Undiagnosed health issues may become more apparent • Become withdrawn or aggressive • Act out in school or the playground • Reluctance to go to bed • Difficulty sleeping • May have nightmares • Lack of concentration • School work may suffer • Withdrawal from previously enjoyed activities and friends • Anxiety/depression / mood swings • Feels responsible for family situation • Takes on adult roles • Headaches and stomach aches • May be bullied or display bullying behaviours to siblings or friends • May display overt sexualised behaviours 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong emotions including anger, sadness, guilt and anxiety • Reliving or re visiting traumatic events • Change in desire to be with family • Acting out /risk taking/self harming • Loss of interest in previously enjoyed activities • Depression/anxiety/mood swings • Return to childlike behaviours • Seek support from peer networks • Self medicating with drugs, alcohol and intimate relationships • Disturbed sleep • Self absorbed • Impact on education • Impulsive decision making • Feel responsible for family situation and take on adult role
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Tips	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respond to needs in a timely and consistent way • Maintain good routine for playing, sleeping and feeding • It is not possible to spoil a baby by responding to their crying or distress • Short periods of time for play • Recognising babies cues and cries eg when they are tired, hungry and ready to play or upset • Engage with baby through eye contact, gentle touch and calm voice • Need stimulation through touch, taste, sights, sounds and smells • Enjoy simple games eg peek a boo 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Often want the parent very close and enjoy books, singing, pretend games. • Quiet, cuddle- time can be very calming for parent and child and have minimal cost. • They may also just want the parent or carer close by while they play • Need to explore and have new experiences with parental supervision • Outside play can be stimulating, allow lots of running etc. It can improve a toddler's sleeping and mood • Distraction can help a toddler before frustration becomes overwhelming • Clear simple instructions are easier for toddlers to follow than long instructions with multiple steps • Consistent routine, rules and predictability help toddlers feel safer. This can be a challenge for parents in crisis; accessing support can make a big difference • Many parents find themselves wanting to loosen the rules for children during/after a difficult time but this can be more unsettling for young children and make it harder to resume these boundaries later on 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May need more adult attention • Maintain routines as far as possible • Prepare children for changes in the day transitioning from one place to another with lots of reassurance • Allow children to draw/play to explain what they cannot say in words • Encourage parents to talk to childcare staff about what has been happening for the child. It may help to explain possible changes in behaviour 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide the opportunity for the child to talk about their experiences • Explain what is happening in age appropriate language • Accept that children might perceive the situation differently to parents • Encourage parents to contact the school to see how they are doing • Re establish normal activities to the best of family's ability in the circumstances. • Seek support for the child 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide opportunities for the adolescent to talk about their experiences • Provide reassurance • Discuss feeling of distress and anger and let teens know that this is normal • Respect their emotions and reactions • Support them to gain perspective of the situation • Be honest • Encourage teens to make time for fun • Explain that friends and other family may react differently to the situation • Encourage them to maintain communication with their school and teachers • Encourage regular routines, ie school • Promote ways to deal with stress, ie, exercise, healthy eating • Make time for family activities • Seek professional help if they are struggling to cope
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