

## Understanding what the child has experienced

Many children living in out-of-home care have experienced abuse and neglect from parents, family members and other significant adults in their lives. They may have missed out on the reliable and attuned caregiving that is needed for healthy childhood development. This can make them seem younger emotionally and physically<sup>3</sup> than their age.

Children who experience abuse and neglect can develop deeply held assumptions about how adults might behave and treat children. These children might expect all adults to be unsafe and untrustworthy. You should expect they may feel this way about you initially.

Responding to childhood trauma is complex and often difficult. As professionals, we must seek to understand the reasons behind a child's behaviour, and our engagement must focus on them seeing that you are safe, trustworthy and reliable. These key considerations inform the engagement planning process outlined here.

## Behaviour as a symptom

Children can display complex behaviours as a result of past experiences and relationships. For adults these behaviours can be stressful. Adults can experience these children as being high-risk, resistant and oppositional. These perceptions make it hard to see what is going on inside the child's mind and body, and what they need from adults to help manage their distress and recover.

<sup>3</sup> Australian Childhood Foundation; Centre for Excellence in Therapeutic Care, May 2020. Practice Guide, Creating a balance between empowerment and limit setting in therapeutic care.

## Key considerations

### 1. Showing that you are worthy of their trust

Traumatic childhood experiences can make relationships and the world feel unsafe. Children living in out-of-home care have often only had negative or abusive relationships with adults. This can make it difficult for children to engage with us because they may see all adults as potentially threatening and untrustworthy.

Studies show that therapeutic gains cannot begin without the child first experiencing trust in the relationship<sup>4</sup>.

#### Implications for practice

- When children feel threatened, they learn adaptive behaviours to cope or keep safe. It's helpful to think about the challenging behaviours we see – rejection, anger, withdrawal and even violence – as ways they have learnt to protect themselves from perceived danger.
- We can think about 'resistant' behaviours differently. By understanding that those behaviours, and even characteristics of the child's personality, have evolved to keep them safe from a dangerous world. We can read signs of resistance to forming a connection as indicating the child feels unsafe, and trust needs to be developed.
- It's reasonable to expect children in out-of-home care to have had many professionals coming in and out of their lives. The child – and their carer – might not see value for them in developing a relationship with yet another person. It's up to you to show them how you can help.

### 2. Dealing with self-soothing behaviours

Children try to make themselves feel better using learned self-soothing behaviours. Dr Bessel van der Kolk – a psychiatrist and author specialising in post-traumatic stress – tells us that when it comes to trauma, 'the body keeps the score'<sup>5</sup>. This means that mistreated children experience danger as sensations within their bodies that they might not understand or be able to describe. They are primed to sense danger even when it no longer exists and will act out emotionally as well as physically.

These children's brains are responding to perceived danger instinctively, without conscious thinking. We cannot rely on just talking to soothe children in a fearful state. We need to think about how we can help them to control or regulate their body's threat-activated responses.

Many children with this type of stress response develop ways of soothing themselves that are problematic. They might use risky behaviours such as aggression, violence, substance use or developmentally inappropriate sexual activity. Others might turn their painful feelings inwards: using self-harm, social withdrawal, disconnection or dissociation as ways of coping.

<sup>4</sup> Beaton, J, Thielking, M. Chronic mistrust and complex trauma: Australian psychologists' perspectives on the treatment of young women with a history of childhood maltreatment. *Aust Psychol.* 2020; 55: 230–243. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ap.12430>

<sup>5</sup> Taylor, M (2014) Not in Isolation, The importance of relationships and healing in childhood trauma