

Early Trauma: Warning Signs and Strategies in the Classroom

Children who have experienced loss or trauma in their early lives often find the school situation intimidating and sometimes frightening. Emotionally they are usually less mature than their peers. Maternal deprivation, abuse and neglect often affect the development of executive functioning skills. Executive skills are the thinking skills necessary for a child or adult to function at the level of his/her intellectual capability. These are the skills that control behaviour inhibition, emotional control, self-organisation, planning, initiation, shift, working-memory and self-evaluation. These skills begin to develop at the baby stage and continue developing through adolescence and adulthood. For a variety of reasons, these children may have missed out on the attachment patterns necessary to develop certain neural pathways and they now need support and consistent strategies to enable them to



develop their executive skills, and thus be able to function to the best of their intellectual ability.

LAC often experience a desperate need to control their own lives, and this inevitably involves their environment. This need for control stems from an acute fear of a repetition of the trauma they experienced early in their lives. They can feel an overwhelming sense of shame and have little self-esteem. They may be hyper-vigilant, never being able to concentrate fully on the task in hand. Triggers, perhaps not even known to the children themselves, can cause a reaction of fight/flight or freeze – an early survival strategy that only makes sense in terms of their history.

What to look out for in the classroom

- The emotional age of many of these children is not representative of the school year in which they are working. Although some can cope academically, they may have difficulty maintaining friendships. Playtime is sometimes exceptionally hard for them.
- For some children, leaving their primary care-giver can be especially difficult. They may have experiences of losing people close to them, and lack the secure knowledge that their mother or father will come back for them.
- Lunchtimes can be traumatic. Food issues can sometimes be traced back to very early neglect and abuse. Toilet problems, too, can be an issue.
- Some children have heightened sensory perceptions so busy classrooms, full of bright displays, fluorescent lights and hanging mobiles can affect them. Conversely, some children may need extra stimulation.
- Some pupils may appear to be coping well and are able to portray an image of confidence, working hard to please their teachers and peers. Deep down, they may be quite traumatised, suppressing unpleasant memories and desperate not to be rejected again.

Strategies in the Classroom

- An open mind and an empathic approach are the stepping stone for helping LAC. They will need more support to conform within the school setting and to be able to follow school rules.
- Certain topics, like sex education and some PHSE lessons can be particularly challenging for LAC. It is important that these lessons are planned in advance with carers.
- Photos or small items from home may help to develop security. Notes from home in the child's lunchbox can also be beneficial.
- The development of a secure attachment in school is key to the child's performance at school.