

A Psychological Guide for Professionals: Adversity in Childhood Child & Family Psychology and Therapies Service

All children are different. How they develop and mature will depend upon the complex interaction between their genes and their environment. Some children will be lucky - their environment will nurture their development and they will be supported to fulfil their full potential. For others, their environment will neglect even their most basic needs - and in some situations their environment will significantly impact upon their development.

This information has been put together for people who care for, or work with, those young people who have experienced adversity in their lives. It provides general information about what children need in order to develop and what we should expect to see if these conditions are in place. It then goes on to describe the conditions in which a young person's typical development can be disrupted and what the possible effects of this disruption might be. It describes how their subsequent behaviours might make you feel and what you can do to try and make a difference to that young person. It ends with some suggestions about what we might expect of these young people longer term.

What do children need to develop normally?

We now know that a stable loving relationship with a primary caregiver is crucial to a child's development. Within the context of this relationship a child needs the basic essentials such as safety, shelter, warmth and food. They also need boundaries, predictability and routines as well as play, stimulation, affection and praise. All these factors are crucial to the child's developing sense of who they are in the world and how they relate to themselves and others.

What should we see if these conditions are in place?

If the above conditions are in place, then over time, we should expect a child to complete a number of developmental tasks in relation to the development of their self. We would, for example, expect them to manage their own physical needs in relation to eating, being able to toilet themselves, sleeping and sexual behaviour. They will learn that they can trust other people and therefore be able to learn from them, thus developing a sense of what is right and wrong. They will be able to manage the boundaries imposed upon them and over time begin to take more responsibility for their behaviour. They will begin to understand their emotions and become better at regulating them. They will also learn to empathise with others and will, in these circumstances, grow to like who they are.

When is normal development disrupted?

However, children's development can be interrupted when the above conditions are not in place. This disruption can occur in the context of domestic violence, abuse and neglect, parental drug and alcohol misuse or parental ill health, loss and multiple care placements.

What happens to children in adverse circumstances?

When children experience these neglectful, abusive experiences their development becomes disrupted. Of course each child is different. However, it is possible to list a number of potential responses to these events. For clarity, these have been separated into behavioural and then emotional responses. The two are, however, intrinsically inter-linked and the complexity of each individual cannot be underestimated.

Behavioural Responses

Often, children who have experienced such adversity will demonstrate a number of difficult and challenging behaviours that will be all too familiar to you. These behaviours are therefore not listed here. Different ways of understanding these behaviours are however suggested but by no means represent an exhaustive list.

Displaying difficult behaviours may be the young person's way of avoiding becoming attached to anyone else, of loving anyone else, or needing anyone else. It therefore serves to protect them. They may also try to protect themselves in other ways. For example, they may avoid talking about their experiences, deny their feelings, lie, or attempt to control other people's behaviour. One way in which they may attempt to control other people's behaviour stems from their desire/need to re-create the circumstances of the past. They may be challenging those around them to reinforce their perception of themselves as difficult, naughty, unworthy etc.

They may find it difficult to respond or accept discipline and may not be able to learn from it as discipline may be interpreted as abuse or rejection.

Emotional Responses

On an emotional level these young people may be experiencing a number of different emotions. These can be both confusing and terrifying as they are often unable to understand or control them and often they are functioning at an emotionally immature level. Some of these feelings may include shame, guilt, rage, humiliation, worthlessness, anxiety, mistrust, isolation and despair.

How might this make you feel?

How you might be feeling about the child is often a good clue to what the child is feeling. **It is not their primary intention to make you feel like this.** The effect is a by-product of their attempts to cope. For example you may be feeling:

- ***Weariness and Frustration*** – These feelings can be the result of coping with the child's needs for continual feedback, commentary and guidance, and their limited capacity to retain this.
- ***Anger and Anxiety*** – These feelings can be the result of feeling threatened or 'under attack' at being provoked, manipulated or 'pushed around' by the child.

- ***Sadness, Despair and Hopelessness*** – These feelings can be the result of identifying or being in touch with the child's experiences, and of recognising that the child is able to change only at a very slow pace.
- ***Guilt*** – This feeling can emerge if others struggle with not having rescued the child earlier on, or being unable to 'fix' the child.
- ***Achievement & Pride*** – Having a child with these difficulties progress in their development and accept the care and relationships offered by others can be a rewarding experience for carers.

What can help?

Of course, each child is different. A number of general guidelines are however listed below:

- Building self-worth by providing positive expectations, responsibilities, and opportunities for fun, play, success, praise and rewards.
- Providing clear, consistent and predictable expectations. Being 'on top of' the child by having 'tight' boundaries and being quick to guide her/him.
- Providing repeated guidance/direction about how the child is doing and what they need to do next
- Not expecting the child to be able to learn via 'thinking about what they've done' or reflecting upon how others feel, without adult guidance or explanation.
- Teaching the child about empathy and social skills by briefly and simply explaining the impacts of their behaviour upon others.
- Using the adults' behaviour, thinking and emotional self-regulatory skills as a model for the child.
- Empathising with the child's struggles and intentions, and being calm and compassionate, rather than being reactive to the emotions evoked by relating to the child.
- Accepting and containing the child's problems, and showing them that the problems reflect their history and that they need not be experienced as shameful.
- Having realistic expectations about the pace of change and celebrating small achievements; being mindful of the extent of the child's difficulties and the limitations of their resources.

- Patience, acceptance, curiosity and empathy
- Being curious about the child's difficulties and open to finding solutions together
- Being accepting and validating of the child's emotions and provide opportunities for soothing and nurture
- Meet the child where they are at developmentally. If they are supported to progress through each developmental stage (even those of younger children if they have been missed) they will continue to make progress at their own pace
- Seeking support from other adults to debrief and reflect, and having some time off.
- For more information please see: <http://ddpnetwork.org/uk/>

Will things ever improve?

The way in which each child is able to negotiate each developmental stage will be dependent on the conditions in which that child is living. It is important to remember that these children's coping strategies were developed for survival under traumatic circumstances. They will decrease as safety and new learning increases. If the fundamental conditions to promote healthy growth and recovery are in place then a child has a chance. However, even with all of this understanding and thoughtful responsiveness by carers, the extent of these children's difficulties means that progress is likely to be a slow process but progress nonetheless.

We hope that you have found some ideas in this booklet that you would like to try out. In our experience, change can be a difficult process for everyone in the family, and things can get worse before they get better. It can be hard to keep going, but many families tell us that it is worth persevering.

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