

Trauma in the curriculum

by Sue Clifford MBE

In 'Trauma and attachment in the classroom' I explored the impact of early years' trauma on a child's attachment behaviour and how that impacted on their ability to manage in the classroom. Now I want to explore the curriculum in more detail and hi-light some of the specific areas that may be triggers from the past that cause traumatised children to be re-traumatised.

Adoptive parents know how important it is to understand as fully as possible the traumas that their children have suffered during the time before they became part of their family. Children develop behavioural responses to survive the environment and experiences they encounter, so knowing what their life was like before they knew them helps parents to understand their behaviours and how their brains have been hard-wired. If they understand their child's response to particular situations they have a better chance of managing difficult or challenging behaviours, are less likely to re-traumatise and more likely to be able to re-frame experiences and help their child to develop more appropriate responses.

Understanding their child's early life experiences will also help parents to understand which developmental experiences they have missed. They can then re-parent them to give them those experiences of play, cooperation, trust, relationship building, sharing and safe exploration of their environment that are so vital to their development.

It takes many years for a child to recover from early years' trauma, even if they were taken into care shortly after birth. For many children placed for adoption they have had several months or even years of abuse and neglect in a dysfunctional family before moving into foster care, and several more months or years before coming into a permanent family. Even if they are placed into their adoptive family before they are school age, their past will impact upon their learning as they embark on school life.

It is vital, therefore, that a child's teacher has as full as possible an understanding of their early life experiences. In my experience, however, many teachers will listen intently to what adoptive parents tell them about a child's early life but may not have any real understanding of how this has affected their development:

- They may not understand that an adopted child is usually several years behind their peers in their social, emotional and behavioural development.
- They may not make the connection that particular elements of the curriculum which are appropriate for most children of a particular age are not appropriate for a child whose development has been compromised.
- They may not realise that there are many areas of the curriculum that are trauma triggers for your child.
- They may not realise that some elements of the curriculum are outside the experience of your child whilst within the experience of other children of the same age.

Parents need to help teachers to be able to stand in their child's shoes and feel what their child might have felt living with abuse, neglect, threat and uncertainty. Building up a good rapport with the school, the head teacher and the class teacher will help to manage the sometimes unrealistic expectations that the school has of what a traumatised adopted child can manage. Sharing information and an attitude of collaboration will help the teacher to manage the curriculum with the minimal amount of trauma for the child. However, it must be emphasised that any information is shared confidentially and must be treated as such by everyone working with the child.

A meeting held with the class teacher at the beginning of each term to discuss the topics to be taught during the term can help everyone to spot possible trauma triggers within the curriculum. Strategies can then be developed to manage these triggers sensitively without alerting the rest of the class that your child is different or giving away details of their history. Possible ways of managing difficult topics within the curriculum might be:

- Developing a signal system between the child and the teacher or class teaching assistant if the child needs to leave the room during a particular lesson.
- Setting a task with alternative ways of approach so that the child can complete the work like everyone else but using different parameters to other children without their history being compromised.
- Having the child sent on a pre-arranged errand during a particular topic so that they just happen to be out of class for very sensitive subjects.
- Preparing the child in advance so that either the parent or teacher has discussed with

As a parent of nine adopted children, and having supported many others, I have had many years of helping to steer my children around some of the trickiest parts of the curriculum. Each child is different. Their history is different and even within sibling groups they will all respond differently to particular topics. Areas of the curriculum which you might expect to trigger trauma responses may or may not affect a child and other areas of the curriculum which you think will be all right can produce the most profound responses. In this article I outline some of those areas which have given rise to difficulties for my children in the hope that this will prompt the reader to consider carefully all that the child is taught. Even if you don't realise in advance that there might be a problem, at least you can spot changes in behaviour and think 'curriculum' as a possible reason.

Biographies

All schools, at some point, will teach children about biographies and family trees. For children with multiple families this is difficult and confusing, as to who to include. It will also remind the child of their dysfunctional history and the trauma they have lived through. One of my children was given a piece of homework in year 3: 'When I was a baby – a special time in my life'. His teacher was mortified when I explained how much abuse and neglect he had suffered. She had already been told of his history but had not made the connection between that and the task she had given to him. For another one of my children the topic of biography was set in year 11 as part of his certificate of achievement – a qualification he was doing as an alternative to GCSE English.

We generally get agreement that a biography-type assignment can take in any part of their life they choose, or that they can make up the biography they would like to have had. This means that there needs to be some advance planning.

Other aspects of early childhood which cause problems for traumatised children

Fairy Stories

A year 3 topic looking at different genres of literature for our youngest child was that of fairy stories. She was asked to pick her favourite fairy story and write about why she liked it. She explained to the teacher that she had never read any fairy stories and had never had any read to her. She was not believed by the teacher, who thought she was avoiding doing the work. I then asked her teacher who she thought would have read her any fairy stories when her birth parents, who she lived with for the first 4 years of her life, were permanently drunk or high on drugs and their only concern was where was their next fix or their next drink coming from. Again this was a teacher who knew the history of the child but had not engaged with what it really meant.

Toys

It is taken for granted that from the time they are born all children will have been given toys with which to play. However, many adopted children who have spent significant time in their dysfunctional birth family would not have had such. It is then traumatising to a child when the topic of a lesson in class is to talk about their favourite toys when they were little.

Baby photos and the development of the child

Throughout primary school the topic of how we develop is revisited and covered at different levels depending on the age of the child. Within this there will be discussions about what the different stages of development are and how a caring mum looks after her baby. There may also be requests for children to bring into school pictures of when they were a baby. This often happens around the ages of 4 to 7 and also again at the end of year 6 where baby photos are used for presentation in the leavers assembly. If your child doesn't have any baby photos they will feel left out and may be ridiculed by their peers.

In all these cases, an additional flexibility built-in at the outset can avoid the problem, although your child may still need support as they tackle the topic as originally intended.

Special days and anniversaries

Primary schools will often make a big fuss with class activities and displays at key celebrations such as Mothers day, Fathers Day, Christmas and birthdays. Adopted children are not with their birth parents. They may or may not have some understanding about why that is. They will also be struggling to make sense of their relationship with their adoptive parents and may well have a distorted view of the role of parents. It is traumatising for them to be expected to celebrate mothers day and fathers day when to them parents are abusive and not to be trusted.

Birthdays and Christmas are likely to have been times of great trauma in their birth families. They may not have been given any presents. They may have been given gifts which were then taken away afterwards. For some of our children gifts were brought and wrapped in order to impress social workers and the following day they were returned to the shop, unopened.

Christmas is a time when many dysfunctional families are in crisis and children end up being taken into care. Future Christmases only serve as a reminder of events that happened in previous Christmases.

Gift-giving times are also those when we have to accept that we are worthy of receiving a gift. A child with low self-esteem will find their self-view severely challenged at these times, causing additional insecurity and trauma.

Some things to watch out for in particular curriculum areas

Literacy

Many different fictional books will contain trauma triggers for our children. One of our children was very upset about a book which referred to one person beating another – this is what happened in her birth family.

Another very good book which has caused problems for many of our children and which is studied in many schools in year 6 is 'Goodnight Mr Tom'. For one of our daughters in particular, she was the oldest child in her family when her younger sister was killed in a car crash caused by the adults in the car being drunk. She believed (wrongly) that she was responsible for her sister's death and the book invoked in her big feelings when she read the story. Apart from abuse from his mum, being evacuated to a stranger and then returning to his abusive mum, Willie is locked up by his mum and told to look after her new baby. The baby dies in his arms.

Other books that mirror too closely events that have happened in birth families and in the early lives of adopted children can also be trauma triggers. Consider 'The Suitcase Kid' by Jacqueline Wilson, where a child is constantly on the move as divorced parents continue to argue with each other.

It is vital that adopters are aware of the books their children are studying in school so that potential problems can be averted before they arise.

History

There are many aspects of history that might cause difficulties. The study of World War 2 with stories of children being evacuated and moved to other families resonates with children who have been moved from family to family with no control over what happens to them.

The story of Anne Frank hiding in a small dark place to avoid being discovered by the Nazis and being in fear for her life is an important part of the curriculum. However, it is the same experience as some of my children have had hiding under beds and in cupboards to escape the threat of parents who have beaten them or beaten each other.

Citizenship and PHSE (Personal, Health and Social Education)

Topics such as relationships, drugs, alcohol use and sex education are covered in these lessons. Children who have difficulties making relationships with others, or whose lives have been adversely affected by drug and alcohol use may struggle to engage with these topics. They may well be reminded of their past life and all of its traumas. For the sexually abused child who may not have realised that what was happening to them was wrong, the sudden realisation, through learning about what is and is not appropriate, may provoke an intense shame reaction.

Lessons about the roles of the emergency services and in particular the role of the police in helping and supporting within the community may well be at odds with our children's experience. For some of our children, where the police attended the motor accident that killed their sister, they saw the police as being the reason they were removed from the care of their mum and stated to me that they '...hated the police'. Another one of our children, who witnessed that her parents had no respect for the police, has grown up with no respect for them either.

One of our children, as part of her Global Citizenship Award, needed to learn about Road Safety and the programme of learning included some very graphic footage of road accidents. Fortunately in this case school were aware of her history and agreed that rather than watching the video, she could design a poster about road safety.

Another, recently, has been considering post-traumatic stress as part of her college course. She has had sufficient preparation from us to understand that she suffers PTSD, herself, as well as developmental trauma. However, this didn't stop her having to leave the room, to the dismay of her friends and tutor.

Science

One of our sons has always been very scared of loud noises and chaos, both trauma triggers for him. When we started visiting secondary schools to choose an appropriate one for him, we visited the science labs where teachers and students were showing off their prowess in creating chemical reactions which produced loud explosive bangs. Our son's reaction was to cover his ears and run sobbing from the room. It has taken some time for him to be comfortable with science experiments.

Art

One of our children's schools has a programme of cross-curricular work where they use famous paintings to explore different aspects of the curriculum. Some of the pictures they have used have been particularly inappropriate given her history. In particular the picture 'The Scream' by Edvard Munch was one that was used. This was so traumatic for her to look at that her teacher suggested that instead exploring the picture, she could use the computer to research the artist and the reason behind the painting. This suggested that he was reflecting the screams he could hear from the nearby lunatic asylum to which his partner had been sent. Our daughter was even further traumatised.

Another problem with art lessons is that children are expected to manage using the paints and other equipment at an age-appropriate level. However, for children who have never had the chance to experiment with paints and other art materials at a younger age, this presents them with problems and often they are in trouble for making a mess and experimenting with the equipment.

Religious Education

One of the stories which caused immense problems for at least one of our children is the story of Moses from the Old Testament of the Bible. His birth mother (admittedly by force of circumstance) must deny knowing him. So Moses is abandoned by his Mum and then adopted by the Princess of Egypt. The Hebrews are abused by the Israelites and Moses, who is a Hebrew, kills an Egyptian who he saw hitting a Hebrew. Moses is later called by God to free the Hebrews from Egypt and this is achieved as God sends plague after plague against the Egyptians. Finally God gives Moses the 10 commandments with rules such as 'Do not steal', 'Do not kill' and 'Honour your father and mother'.

The themes of rejection, adoption, abuse, murder, stealing and the expectation that you should have respect for parents even if they have abused you proved to be very traumatising for our daughter.

As can be seen the curriculum is a minefield of trauma triggers which can easily dysregulate vulnerable children. It is vital that to know in advance what is to be taught in school and prepare the child as much as possible. Even seemingly innocuous subjects can cause problems so keep an open mind and think outside the box to check whether what is known of a child's history could explain why challenging behaviours are being triggered by what they are learning at school.