

Trauma-Informed Practice and Young People at Risk of Exclusion.

Outcomes and Permanent Exclusion It has been well documented that children and young people who are permanently excluded are more likely to experience further adversity when compared to their peers. According to the Timpson Review, just 7% of permanently excluded children go on to achieve good passes in GCSE English and Maths¹. One third of students who completed Key Stage 4 by accessing alternative provision become NEETs (not in education employment or training)². Whilst exclusion may not directly cause crime, there is a degree of correlation between permanent exclusion and the likelihood of involvement in violence and criminality. 23% of young offenders sentenced to less than 12 months in 2014 had been permanently excluded³. Children and young people with SEND are also 6 times more likely to be permanently excluded than their peers⁴. It is clear that reducing rates of permanent exclusion is likely to be in the best interests of the young people as well as our communities at large.

Factors in disruptive behaviour Each child/young person and their circumstances are unique. We should not pathologise children/young people by interpreting any and all unexplained behaviour as being due to trauma or indeed any other condition. Instead, we should aim to 'hold trauma in mind', as a possible factor. There may or may not have been disclosures from the family around potentially traumatic events. The absence of a disclosure does not mean that trauma is any more or less likely to have occurred. Some families may not wish to disclose historical information as they might be keen to make a 'fresh start'. We also know that the experiences in the first 1001 days of a child's life can have later impacts on behaviour and well being⁵. Some families may not be aware this is the case or inclined to discuss it. Although each child/young person is different, statistically, children at risk of exclusion are more likely to have SEND or mental health needs. It is important that these are thoroughly explored and provision is put in place to support children. The Timpson report argues that children developing a sense that they 'belong' and are accepted within schools is crucial⁶. These relationships with staff and peers can be vital in improving the mental well being of children/young people. It is also possible that parents/carers have their own mental health needs or potentially their own trauma. This is likely to influence their behaviour and how ready they are to engage with schools. It may or may not be the case that trauma is a factor in influencing how ready families are to be accepting of outside assistance. In either scenario, tactful, empathetic perseverance and relationship building can help families to feel that they belong in the school community.

Behaviour as communication We believe that 'disruptive' (or dysregulated) behaviour is often communicating an unmet need. Stress levels are increased when we feel trapped, powerless, unsafe or lacking in connection to others. They can also increase if we feel a sense of shame. If stress levels rise then this affects our brains and bodies and can lead us to behave in ways that might seem 'unpredictable' or 'irrational'. We might be more prone to outbursts, quick to anger, be agitated or anxious. We might have difficulty concentrating or develop a sense of persecution and hypervigilance. We might be withdrawn or very reserved. We might even display signs of fight, flight or freeze responses. See the window of tolerance for more information (document 1.a). We believe that these behaviours should act as an indication that a young person is experiencing something in their environment either at school or at home that they perceive makes them unsafe, powerless, trapped or lacking in connection to others. We should not view such behaviour as deliberately difficult, provocative or unhelpful but instead explore ways we can support our children and young people to cope. For some children and young people, this may be their only way to articulate their feelings. This is why we should treat the behaviour as a communication. Look for our guide on helping to regulate emotions for more info on supporting children and young people.

Empathise despite frustration Before discussing some practical ways to provide support it is important to recognise and validate the frustrations that dysregulated behaviour can cause for educators. Several waves of intervention may have been tried including support from educational psychologists, extra pastoral support or additional help with literacy and numeracy. Settings may have drawn upon collaborative enterprises with schools in their geographical area. SEND needs should have been extensively investigated and interventions developed and put into place. If dysregulated behaviour continues it can be very tempting to conclude that there is nothing that can be done for this child. It can be very tempting to be persuaded by a utilitarian argument that there are 29 other children/young people in the room requiring support. It is tempting to give more support to those students who do not disrupt learning and who are 'easier to teach'. However, despite these frustrations, no child is born 'naughty'; they are a product of their environment. We must aim to fix the environment for those at risk of exclusion by ensuring they feel a sense of belonging in their relationships with staff and peers and that school is 'for them'. Dr Karen Treisman describes every moment and interaction as a potential intervention⁷. Each moment is a 'ladder'; an opportunity to create the safety, trust and connection that a child may be lacking in their environment; but it could be a 'snake'. The more 'snakes' a young person experiences, the more likely they are to become a child at risk of permanent exclusion. The child may be facing a whole world of struggles with mental health or other things happening in their life. Some young people in this situation may be in the care system for example (see document 13). As a result, they may not place as much emphasis as educators do on homework, whether they have the right stationery/uniform, or tasks they've been asked to do in a lesson. Empathising with this is a 'ladder moment', a chance to build connection and therefore belonging. See a child differently and you see a different child⁸. The same principle also applies to encouraging families to engage with school or other offers of outside support.

How to support a young person There can be no 'one size fits all' approach as each child is unique. However, some of the following trauma-informed ideas and principles based on positive relationship building may help to assist children and young people at risk of exclusion:

Regulate, relate, reason; It may be that the child/young person in front of you has not developed the ability to regulate their emotions. They may not be physically capable of regulating. This could be because they did not have these formative experiences or conversations with significant adults during their childhood development. It may be that when we are expecting children and young people to behave in particular ways, we are actually expecting things from them that they may not know how to do or cannot do. Whatever an individual's unique circumstances, adopting a regulate, relate, reason approach can help the young person to process and understand their experiences. This is particularly useful when a child/young person is 'dysregulated', not in control of their emotions or operating outside of their window of tolerance. We must work to 'ground' a child/young person in their present moment and enable them to calm themselves with support from us. Once calmer, we can then relate to them by using a calm tone of voice, short sentences and validating and affirming how difficult they must be finding things. Naming the emotions they are experiencing also helps us to empathise and relate to their experiences. With enough patience, it is likely that a young person eventually re-enters their optimal zone of arousal (see the window of tolerance). We can then begin to reason with them and encourage them to reflect on their actions, applying any sanctions at this stage. If we attempt to reason with dysregulated young people too early, or apply sanctions and consequences when they are emotionally dysregulated this can be problematic. It is likely to escalate the situation. The child/young person may not even be capable of reason or reflection at this moment in time so any 'lecturing' they experience does not actually register on any level. As a result, the child/young person does not learn from the experience and instead is likely to believe that we don't 'get/like them'; another 'snake' moment of disconnection. See [here](#) for more information.

For those children who engage in 'disruptive' behaviours but never appear to lose control of their emotions, there may be other factors at play. For these children/young people, it is important to reflect on whether 'attention-seeking' behaviour may in fact be 'attention-needing' behaviour, as Dr Karen Treisman argues⁹. It may be that they need the relation phase of the above process as they have a need for connection. These children and young people may need support to develop healthy relationships with staff and other students.

References

1. *The Timpson Review of School Exclusion*, 2019, available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/807862/Timpson_review.pdf
2. Timpson, 2019
3. Timpson, 2019
4. Timpson, 2019
5. WAVE Trust, 2014, *1001 Critical Days: The Importance of the Conception to Age Two Period*, available at: <https://www.wavetrust.org/1001-critical-days-the-importance-of-the-conception-to-age-two-period>
6. Timpson, 2019
7. Cherry, L., 2020, *Recovery Resonance Resilience: Season 2 Episode 3 Dr Treisman on trauma informed, culturally infused, trauma responsive services*, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=osiOfICFEso>
8. Shanker, S., 2019, *See a child differently and you'll see a different child*, available at: <https://self-reg.ca/2019/02/05/see-a-child-differently-and-youll-see-a-different-child/>
9. Treisman, K., (2018), *'Becoming a more culturally, adversity, and trauma-informed infused, and responsive organisation'*, Moving Towards Being and Sustaining a Trauma-Responsive Barnardo's, presented at the NEC, Birmingham: 1st-3rd May 2019, London: Winston Churchill Memorial Trust