

Discussion Paper 1

Responding to children who have experienced abuse related trauma – Ideas for school based treatment



Introduction

This is a short discussion paper that outlines some key ideas about how to respond to children who have experienced abuse related trauma. It synthesises and integrates the research and literature about the impact of trauma and brain development.

The first SMART discussion paper encourages readers to share with each other different examples of strategies that schools are using to support children who have experienced chronic traumatisation.

The paper is divided into two sections. The first describes the SMART PRACTICE framework for supporting children at school who have experienced abuse. The second section poses a series of questions that readers can answer and use for further discussion or reflection.



Section 1. SMART PRACTICE

SMART PRACTICE is an 8 point framework of intervention which is tailored specifically for the school environment. Its aim is to support children stabilise the effects of and then begin to recover from the impact of chronic traumatisation. It suggests a range of strategies and techniques which you can apply to assist children at school.

The key to supporting children who have experienced abuse related trauma is to create a relational environment in which their experiences directly address the delays and difficulties that have resulted from the trauma. In general, these environments aim to

- foster a sense of predictability in children's routines,
- connect children to relationships with peers and adults who are supportive and consistent,
- keep children calm,
- build children's memory and cognitive functions as a way of them understanding their experiences of abuse and their effects,
- contain and influence children's behaviour,
- support children to shape their internal emotional reactions associated with fear, anger, shame and disconnection.

The SMART PRACTICE framework enables individuals to build on strategies, skills and resources that many schools already employ to support children and facilitate their learning. SMART PRACTICE also offers some additional ways of responding for school counsellors, teachers and other welfare personnel to add to their existing collection of ideas, resources and skills. The SMART PRACTICE framework is based on the most up to date evidence base about intervention with traumatised children and their networks.

SMART PRACTICE involves being



The acronym PRACTICE has been chosen deliberately. Firstly, PRACTICE is a framework for action. It reflects a contemporary understanding about the impact of trauma on children’s brain development.

Secondly, PRACTICE reflects the extensive practice experience that school counsellors, teachers and welfare personnel have in supporting vulnerable children and young people within their school environment. Finally, PRACTICE recognises that these strategies need to be applied consistently and persistently to be of value.



Predictable

Traumatised children experience change to routines and their environment as a potential threat. The familiar is safer for traumatised children than the unfamiliar. Key strategies to enhance *predictability* include

- Create an environment that is predictable and familiar;
- Build a reliable routine of activity that traumatised children will experience as familiar over time;
- Always prepare traumatised child for what is coming up next;
- Establish a supportive pattern of one to one communication with traumatised children that explains the immediate and short term future;
- Be particularly sensitive to times of transition.



Responsive

Traumatised children often find it difficult to remember and apply rules and consequences. The challenging behaviour demonstrated by traumatised children can evoke reactions in others which further escalate their stress and disconnection. Being responsive to traumatised children relies on understanding the meaning and purpose of the behaviour. Key *responsive* strategies include

- Understand the purpose of the behaviour in the context of the way that children deal with and manage stress or change at school;
- Use low stress opportunities to constantly reinforce rules;
- Sanction misbehaviour but stay connected with children;
- Track, record and acknowledge examples of when children abide by the rules;
- Provide feedback and implement consequences using neutral body language and tone of voice;
- After an issue has been resolved, go back to traumatised children and talk it through with them again positively to reinforce the rules.



Attuned

Traumatised children are not attuned to the way they feel because

- they experience feelings as separate to themselves,
- they have a limited vocabulary of feelings that they can describe and express,
- their responses tend to be reflexive (from the limbic lobe) rather than thoughtful and planned (controlled by their cortex),
- they transfer the emotional reaction from a previous traumatic experience into a current situation without any awareness that they are doing this.

Traumatised children need help to tune into the way they are feeling. They need help to learn to link their perceptions and experiences to their feelings. Key *attuned* strategies include

- Help traumatised children to develop an enhanced vocabulary about feelings;
- Identify ways to support traumatised children to name and know the way they are feeling;
- Find ways for key school staff to be aware of and track children's feelings on a regular basis.



Connecting

Traumatised children often feel disconnected from their feelings, their memories and their own sense of identity because

- they are used to having their feelings ignored,
- they spend a lot of time feeling stressed or overwhelmed which reduces their brain's capacity to understand experiences,
- their memory of experiences are unstable,
- their experience of relationships has been conflictual and disempowering.

For change to occur, traumatised children need repeated exposure to people who will understand and acknowledge the legitimacy of those feelings. As children experience these sort of experiences, they are able to trust their feelings and rely on a pattern about how these feelings can be managed. Key connecting strategies include

- Provide opportunities for key school staff to regularly reflect back to children the way they seem to be feeling;
- Support traumatised children to experience validation of their feelings, memories and thoughts;
- Identify ways to help children experience relationships as consistent over time.



Translating

Children's memory capacity is disrupted by trauma. Their episodic and narrative memory functions are disrupted. They find it difficult to generate stories about their day to day experiences or make sense of their past. They feel separate from their past and present and have no 'starting point' for the future. Traumatised children need help to strengthen their memory capacity. They need support to practice remembering events and experiences. Key *translating* strategies include

- Create regular opportunities to review with children what they have done during the day or week;
- Help children write/tell real life stories which include them in it;
- Use a range of creative mediums which record children's memories and experiences;
- Build stories with children that project them into the future with qualities that they know about themselves in the present.



Involving

Traumatised children have poor internal working models for forming, maintaining, understanding and being in relationships with friends because

- they feel disconnected and different to others,
- they have often not experienced a positive relationships with peers,
- they can find it difficult to tolerate the feelings of others and therefore do not know how to respond,
- they are particularly prone to feeling humiliated in social exchanges because of their previous experiences of shame,
- they often use unhelpful behaviour to engage with peers because they have few alternatives.

Traumatised children do not feel involved with others. They also do not know how to become involved. They stay on the periphery of social networks and are unable to access their support or opportunities for fun and positive experiences. Key *involving* strategies include

- Facilitate children to become part of a group that shares interest, not necessarily social ability;
- Engage children in practicing co-operative rather than competitive games;
- Assist children to rehearse social experiences;
- Role model positive social exchanges with children;
- Focus on harmony and relationships as part of normal school activities.



Calming

Traumatised children live in a constant state of elevated stress. They experience the unfamiliar as threatening. For many, they rarely feel calm and peaceful. They have little understanding and experience of what calm is. Traumatised children can find it difficult to shape or change their own feelings of distress. Traumatised children do not feel calm. They also do not know how to easily calm themselves down. Calming children's environment can make it easier for them to manage. Giving traumatised children regular opportunities to relax enables them to experience their minds and bodies in a different way and over time will decrease their degree of stress. Key *calming* strategies include

- Build regular opportunities for relaxation into every day;
- Use music and other similar activities that help children to practice different rhythms;
- Focus on physical activities that helps children to relaxes their body as well as their mind;
- Be aware of your own stress levels and apply strategies to keep yourself relaxed and resourced.



Engaging

Traumatised children have poor internal working models for relating to adults because

- they have had experiences of adults not knowing or meeting their needs,
- they do not understand how to trust,
- past relationships with adults have felt unpredictable,
- adults have hurt them in the past,
- they are unsure about how to have any control or influence over adult behaviour or communication.

Traumatised children have received messages about relationships with adults that reflect the agenda of those who have abused them. These messages undermine the confidence that traumatised children have in all adults. Traumatised children need repeated opportunities of positive exchanges with adults to change the lens they carry about how relationships are experienced. Key *engaging* strategies include

- Build a consistent reference point for children that can act as interpreters of experiences and sources of support;
- Engage in daily and repetitive exchanges that communicate continuity no matter what;
- Give messages to children that explain relational concepts such as trust, care and support;
- Build and maintain engaging strategies over time and across different settings at school.



What are some examples of these PRACTICE strategies?

Example 1. Predictable

Set daily and weekly timetables that are available to traumatised children in ways they understand. For younger children, build a visual timetable that they can carry with them or keep on their desk.





Example 2. Attuned

Play feelings bingo with the class. The game encourages children to identify feelings and name them.

Instructions for Feelings Bingo

- Each student is given a bingo sheet.
- Ask each student to circle feeling they have experienced today. For the purpose of the game, decide on a number between 3 and 6 they need to circle. Usually younger children circle fewer faces.
- You need to prepare a separate sheet to become the master sheet.
- Call the faces at random and ask students to mark off those they have circled. Once they have marked off all the faces, the child yells “Bingo”.
- You can decide on the prize!





Example 3. Calming

Develop and use a checklist to support children to identify and remember strategies that they know will help to calm them down.

Calming Strategies Checklist

- Tick the strategies you like to use or would like to use to help calm yourself down.

| | | | |
|--------------------------|-----------------|--------------------------|------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Running | <input type="checkbox"/> | Self Talk |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Deep Breathing | <input type="checkbox"/> | Knitting |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Drawing | <input type="checkbox"/> | Drumming |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Writing | <input type="checkbox"/> | Spending time alone |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Painting | <input type="checkbox"/> | Spending time with others |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Loud Music | <input type="checkbox"/> | Read |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Quiet Music | <input type="checkbox"/> | Count |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Sleeping | <input type="checkbox"/> | Watching fish/sitting at the beach |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Walking the dog | <input type="checkbox"/> | Pottery/modelling |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Yoga | <input type="checkbox"/> | Talking to yourself |

- Put a cross against the strategies that just do not work for you.



Section 2. Questions for reflection or discussion

1. What have you found to be effective in supporting children in your school who have experienced abuse and family violence?
2. What is an example of a strategy that you have used that has worked really well? What are the reasons for its success?
3. What are the three factors that schools should consider in developing and implementing strategies for supporting children who have experienced abuse related trauma?
4. What parts of the school network have you drawn into strategies for supporting children who have experienced abuse related trauma? What resources have these people offered to you and the child in question?
5. What is the most important piece of advice that you would want to share with your colleagues about how best to support children who have experienced abuse related trauma?
6. What do you think about the SMART PRACTICE framework?
7. Is your school using any of the strategies that are suggested in the framework?